



# University of Limerick

## Department of Sociology Working Paper Series

*Working Paper WP2013-04*  
*May 2013*

Micheal O'Flynn<sup>1,2</sup>, Martin J. Power<sup>1</sup>, Conor McCabe<sup>3</sup> and Henry Silke<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, University of Limerick

<sup>2</sup>Open University, Ireland

<sup>3</sup>Equality Studies Centre, University College Dublin

<sup>4</sup>School of Communications, Dublin City University

***Class Politics in Post-Boom Ireland: A Burgeoning Resistance?***

# ***Class Politics in Post-Boom Ireland: A Burgeoning Resistance?***

Micheal O'Flynn, Martin J. Power, Conor McCabe and Henry Silke

*In this paper we outline the features of an emergent resistance in Ireland. We examine its stunted development in the context of the period of speculative expansion known as the 'Celtic Tiger'. We draw attention to the speculative nature of the Irish boom period, to the character of the subsequent crash, to the conditions that have enabled the financial interest to effectively close ranks, transferring private debt to the general population. Whilst acknowledging the apparently low level of resistance to all of this, we reject the notion that the population has meekly accepted all of the related cuts and impositions. We show that the apparent submission to the austerity agenda is quite deceptive, that forms of resistance are emerging everywhere, not least in education, and that these represent the potential for the development of a mass movement against austerity in the years ahead. Amidst relentless attacks on services, and on the living standards of the population, we trace the development of several different forms of resistance that have emerged, along with the continuing efforts to pull its various strands together to produce something worthy of the Irish working class.*

## **Introduction**

The economic crisis in Ireland (beginning 2007/8) has been characterised by relentless attacks on public and private sector workers. The neoliberal and neoconservative assaults on education have certainly intensified. This fits with the overall response of the Irish government<sup>1</sup> to the economic collapse, which from the very outset, has worked to offload the burden of debt from the financial sector onto the shoulders of the general population. The immediate response to the banking crisis was to socialise private debt, and thereafter, to implement cuts to services and introduce new taxes and levies on the general population. This has had an enormous impact on the wider economy and society. While the government has justified its actions in terms of ‘tough choices’ made in the ‘national interest’, the result has been a continuous worsening of living standards and prospects for the general population. Each austerity budget takes more money out of the economy. It is diverted away from necessary state investments, such as in education, and from essential services. With each austerity budget the rate of unemployment has risen, with the official rate reaching 14 per cent by 2011 (*The Economist* 2011). Given that the population has been unjustly burdened with debts that it did not incur, many wonder why there is so little sign of resistance. That question is the concern of this paper.

## **Activism and Resistance against Neoliberalism/Neoconservatism**

To acknowledge a low level of resistance is not to write off Ireland as a potential site of mass resistance. On the contrary, the task of this paper is to

---

<sup>1</sup> The parties currently holding office in Ireland (April 2013) are Fine Gael (right-wing Christian democrats) and the Labour Party. The parties holding office when the economy collapsed were Fianna Fail (centre-right nationalist) and the Green Party. The parties holding office during the most reckless years of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ were Fianna Fail and the Progressive Democrats (Thatcherite). Sinn Fein (centre-left republican) has never held office in the state. The Progressive Democrats no longer exist and the Green Party has been eviscerated.

outline the features of an emergent resistance, as the population gradually begins to respond to the disastrous influence of vested interests in the financial and property sectors, which has been so destructive of political, economic and social life in Ireland. To this end we begin with a brief historical sketch of Ireland's economic collapse.

### ***Background to the Property Crash***

Through most of the twentieth century housing policy in the Republic of Ireland has been underpinned by extensive government support for home buying. Direct government support for home ownership included grants, tax deductibility for mortgage interest, and subsidised sales of social housing to tenants (O'Connell 2005). The lack of regulation in the private rental market (including of security of tenure), meant that the only real long term option open to most was to buy; this 'elimination of alternatives' (McCabe 2011) made buying a property with a mortgage the only real option for the majority of people. The speculative activity that followed meant that home buyers would be saddled with ever larger mortgages which, as will become apparent in the following section, has inhibited the propensity for mass resistance. As David Harvey (2009) reminds us, 'debt-encumbered homeowners don't go on strike'.

Until the 1980s lending to lower income buyers was dominated (with 30 per cent of total mortgages) by the local government sector, while lending to middle to higher income buyers was dominated by state subsidised building societies (Norris and Coates 2010 p.6; Fahey et al. 2004; Murphy 1994). Local government mortgages were strictly constrained to about three times the borrower's incomes and stayed below average house prices. It was difficult to get a loan greater than two and a half times income from the building societies (Baker and O'Brien 1979). According to Norris and Coates (2010 p.7) the acute fiscal crisis in the early 1980s led to the abolition and scaling back of most of

the direct public supports for home ownership and forced local government to radically scale back local government involvement in mortgage provision to only 2 per cent of mortgage loans by value (Norris and Winston 2004). The proportion of housing stock owned and maintained by local authorities has fallen from 18.4 per cent in 1961 to 7.2 per cent by 2006 (Kitchin et al. 2010 p.35). While commercial banks had been active in the Irish market since the seventies it was only following the withdrawal of fiscal subsidies for building societies in the mid-1980s that banks began lending on a significant scale. Between 1985 and 1987 the commercial banks percentage of the mortgage market went from 8.3 per cent to 36.9 per cent (Norris and Coates 2010 p.8). By the year 2000 this market was transformed radically into a liberalised and flexible market, dominated by commercial interests, and awash with international credit. In this period a second ‘elimination of alternatives’ forced home buyers into the arms of the deregulated commercial banks.

In the late 1980s the commercial mortgage sector was deregulated (as part of a wider process of financial liberalisation). This included the abolition of quantitative restrictions on credit growth; the lowering of banks’ reserve requirement ratios; the dismantling of credit controls and the removal of all restrictions on interest rates (Norris and Coates 2010, p.7). The Building Societies Act (1989) allowed building societies to operate in wholesale money markets and gave them the freedom to develop a wider range of property and financial services and facilitated their conversion to public limited status (Murphy 1994). During the 1990s three societies became PLCs while only two remain mutualised (Norris and Coates 2010, p.7).

After entry into the Euro zone in 1999 the Irish banks increasingly borrowed from foreign banks to fund speculation, mainly in property. Between 1999 and 2008 the volume of inter-state banking rose from 31 billion euro to 150 billion

euro. At the same time the banks channelled up to 60 per cent of domestic bank deposits towards property speculation (Allen 2009, p.48), which was not confined to the Irish market.

Asset-price inflation saw the cost of an average house go from three times the average wage to twelve times in a decade (Preston and Silke 2011a, Preston and Silke 2011b, Silke 2012). The cost of owning a home would eventually exceed the capacity of workers to buy. With the eventual slowing of construction, coupled with the collapse of finance capital across the Anglophone world, investors and speculators began to panic.

In the space of a few years residential properties in many parts of the county had lost close to half of their market values. Asset-price speculation came to an abrupt halt as banks all over the world began to worry about their loans and refused to fund any more speculative activity (Murphy and Devlin 2009, p.6). With the economic collapse, investors in property went bankrupt, which meant that they could not repay their loans. The Irish banks had borrowed heavily to fund this activity, and ended up owing tens of billions to European banks, without any means of making good on their loans.

### **The Socialisation of Private Debt**

On 29 September 2008 a meeting to discuss the government's approach to the bank crisis took place between representatives of Bank of Ireland and AIB, the Irish Central Bank, and the Department of Finance. It was held at Government Buildings. The details of the meeting – even who was exactly in attendance – are still subject to controversy. One thing is certain. In order to combat the problems faced by Ireland's banking system, the government moved to 'guarantee all the liabilities – the customer and interbank deposits, and also the vast majority of bonds – of the six Irish banks' (Ross 2009, p.193). On Tuesday

30 September, Brian Lenihan outlined in the Dáil the bare bones of the Credit Institution (Banking Support) Bill. The government would guarantee ‘deposits and debts totalling €400 billion at six Irish-owned lenders in a move to protect the country’s financial system... the liabilities amounted to almost 10 times the value of the national debt of about €45 billion’ (Irish Times 2008). The apparent rationale of the government was that the Bill would allow Irish banks access to the ‘short-term funding that enables Irish financial institutions to fund their day-to-day operations [and which] had become scarce in the global banking system since the collapse of US investment bank Lehman Brothers’ (Irish Times 2008). The bill was passed by the Dáil at 2am on the morning of Tuesday 2 October, by 124 votes to 18. The Seanad (the lower house) sat all night and passed the bill at 7.40am. It was signed into law at 3.30pm by President Mary McAleese – just shy of 33 hours after the release of Brian Lenihan’s press statement. The Minister for Defence, Willie O’Dea, told the readers of the Sunday Independent that weekend that ‘in the case of a problem [under the guarantee], the first call will be on the bank’s funds, on its shareholders, on their assets, capital and funds. This is a very significant buffer as the estimated total assets of the six financial institutions exceed their liabilities by about €80bn’ (O’Dea 2008).

The problem was that while the expected income from these loans had collapsed – because of the commercial and residential property crash, coupled with the deepening recession in the economy – the money owed by banks to investors in bank debt was guaranteed. The gap between the money the banks could salvage from its loan portfolio on one hand, and the money the banks owed to its external creditors on the other, was now the responsibility of the Irish taxpayer. That which 24 hours previously had drowned in its own debt had been miraculously brought back to life. The Irish government had reanimated a corpse. It had created a zombie.

The point to be stressed here is that the 2008 Irish bank guarantee was not designed to protect the national economy, the state's citizens, or even the majority of Irish businesses from the effects of the crisis. Instead, its purpose was to protect that section of Irish society which drew its power, and continues to draw its power, from the very fault lines which were exposed by the crisis in the first place. The state's role as a conduit for international finance; as a tax haven for both domestic and foreign enterprises; the promotion of construction and land speculation as entrepreneurship; and the development of services to exporters rather than the development of actual exports – these were the deep-seated problems which exacerbated the crisis in Ireland.

The two-year period between the bank guarantee and the EU/IMF intervention was a time when the controlling forces within Irish society revealed themselves in a way that had not been seen for decades. The scale and depth of the crisis made it impossible for the nature of their wealth to remain underneath the radar. The crisis brought clarity to the actual focus of the State's economic and political system. What we see during those two years are the consequences of the empowerment of financial dealers and property developers, the glorified *Maître d's* who meet and greet multinationals as they arrive on our shores, aided and abetted by the main political parties who are unable, or unwilling, to see any alternative.

There appears to have been no question but that the government would move to safeguard the financial interest and the interests of developers. As we have pointed out, the immediate response of the government to the banking crisis was to guarantee loans made specifically for speculative purposes. The government also moved very quickly to set up schemes like the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) – a 'bad bank' specifically designed to save the skins of property developers and speculators at public expense (Allen 2009, pp.140-

145). When faced with a decision about whose interests to defend the government would appear to have never wavered.

It is clear that the government could have acted very differently. In order to get the country through the crisis the state could have quarantined the above loans, and those used for tax avoidance measures, such as the debt encouraged by section 23 (a key tax relief scheme for those investing in buy-to-let properties), while at the same time guaranteeing deposits. Instead, it decided to transfer responsibility for all loans onto the shoulders of the state; cut back on funding for education, health, pensions and welfare; increase tax on personal income and expenditure; and appeal to patriotism and a sense of duty. Its decision to borrow tens of billions of Euro to prop up dead banks and section 23 loans plunged the ‘real economy’ (the part of the economy that provides jobs) into free-fall.

The financial crisis was global in nature, but Ireland’s almost fatal exposure to it was not a fluke or simple bad luck. Similarly, the reaction of the government was not because of moral failings, alcoholism, dysfunctional leaders, a lack of interest in the media or a lack of an ‘ear for strategic political advice’ (Burns 2011). On the contrary, the government’s reaction to the bank crisis made sense – once it is seen that the logic was to cushion Ireland’s financial vested interests from the fall, with the plan to guarantee everything the most direct and secure way of providing that protection. At the same time, the economic and social myths which had built up over the previous fifteen years, of a prosperous land and a classless people, simply vanished. Ireland was a democracy, to be sure, with open and free elections, but it was far from governed in the interests of its people. Large swathes of the population appear to have realised this. Yet only to a very limited extent has the widespread discontent been translated into resistance. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) has organised

demonstrations. However, since the trade union leadership has been unwilling to take a stand in the interests of workers it is routinely heckled by its membership. As such, the latest march organised by ICTU (on February 9<sup>th</sup> 2013) did not have any trade union officials waiting to address the crowd when they reached their destination, Dáil Éireann (the principal chamber of the parliament). As a result, most of the marchers simply turned around and went home. Five years into the crisis and the population seems no closer to organising the kind of general strikes that have been witnessed elsewhere (in Greece for example). The obvious question is, why?

### **Organisation of the Resistance**

A view that is widely held in post-boom Ireland (and abroad) is that the population has meekly accepted all of the cuts and impositions put upon them by their government. *The Economist* (2011) remarked that the ‘fiscal adjustment has, so far, been accepted by Irish people with surprising stoicism, despite a rise in unemployment to 14 per cent’. The government likewise commended the population for its ‘maturity’, and in April 2009, with apparent pride, the Minister for Finance Brian Lenihan declared that ‘the steps taken had impressed our partners in Europe, who are amazed at our capacity to take pain. In France you would have riots if you tried this’ (Irish Times 2009). However, the apparent surface calm can disguise growing tensions beneath.

An incident that took place on Wednesday September 29 2010, and the popular reaction to it, may suggest a discontent that is yet to find a means of political expression. On that morning television and radio stations all ran with the same story: a 41 year old man had driven a cement mixer truck half-way into the front gates of the parliament buildings. Having blocked access he cut the hydraulic brakes and some electric cables, which meant that there would be considerable delay in removing it (RTE News 2010). The symbolism of this action was clear;

here was a troubled builder using some residual equipment from a collapsed construction industry to cause a mornings inconvenience to the politicians responsible.

Perhaps anticipating that the mass media would simply dismiss the action as 'deranged', the driver made sure to spell out his motivations, literally, and in giant letters. He painted the words "Anglo Toxic Bank" (complete with the Anglo Irish Bank Logo) across the drum of his mixer truck (RTE News 2010). Whatever the merits or demerits of the action, the motivation was quite clear; the protest was directed at a government that had facilitated lending institutions and speculators at every turn, creating the biggest property bubble and the biggest financial crash in Irish history. It was directed at a government that redirected money previously earmarked for public investment and public services to cover the debts of private banks and private developers; so it was an illegal expression of a very legitimate and widespread discontent.

Though this was an isolated incident, the sentiments could not be described as isolated. After all they were expressed in opinion polls, and materialised in the general election results in the months that followed. The general discontent of the population was certainly evidenced when the Fianna Fail-led government was unceremoniously thrown out of office in early 2011. This was to be expected since the party could not expect to bail out its financial backers and also keep its working class and public sector vote on board. This 'riot in the ballot box' decimated a party that had dominated Irish politics since the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 2007 general election Fianna Fail won 78 out of a possible 166 seats, making it the largest party in the state. In 2011 Fianna Fail was down to 20 seats. As would be expected (in the wake of the economic collapse) there was somewhat of a breakthrough from the left, with a significant shift in support for the Labour Party, which was still perceived as a party

attendant to the interests of workers. The Labour Party, perhaps benefitting from the fact that it was not in government for the most reckless years of the Celtic Tiger period, almost doubled its seats from 20 seats in 2007 to 37 in 2011 (ElectionsIreland.org 2011). The rise in the support for Labour rested on working-class goodwill, coupled with claims to represent an alternative, and promises to stand against the parties of austerity. In this vein, in the run up to the 2011 general election, Labour leader, Eamon Gilmore, insisted that the Labour party would ‘not agree to having child benefit cut anymore and Fine Gael need to drop their plans to cut child benefit’. Fully aware that this was in tune with popular sentiment, the claim featured on the party’s election posters, which read ‘Protect child benefit, vote Labour’ (Browne 2013). Though the Labour Party leadership has reneged on this promise, along with virtually all of its pre-election promises, the votes for Labour did in fact signify a shift to the left, which is further evidenced by the drop in support for Labour as it reneges on each of its election promises (See RTE News 2013b). On top of the Labour vote, and the rise of Sinn Fein, which is broadly perceived to be a left-wing party (from 4 to 14 seats), there were five far-left politicians elected to office in 2011 (ElectionsIreland.org 2011). Though the latter are seasoned socialist campaigners, they have not yet managed to work together in a manner that the situation now requires. There was a concerted effort in 2010 to create the ‘United Left Alliance’. This involved drawing several different left forces together, such as the Socialist Party, the People before Profit Alliance (an umbrella group with considerable Socialist Worker’s Party membership), Socialist Resistance, the Workers and Unemployed Action Group (WUAG), and the Irish Socialist Network. The Worker’s Party and the Communist Party of Ireland were not included in the initial plans, and did not come on board thereafter. Though the project attracted considerable numbers of people, including many new activists, they were quickly repelled as the sectarian practices of the parties comprising the Alliance prevented the emergence of a

healthy, vibrant organisation. The problems that emerged at this time have been examined in some detail (see Derwin 2012).

In spite of the above issues, socialist representatives such as Joan Collins, Joe Higgins, Seamus Healy, Richard Boyd Barrett and Clare Daly have provided a very visible opposition, in the interests of the working class, which is desperately needed. Each has taken every opportunity to highlight what government policy will mean for workers, for the unemployed, for the vulnerable and those forced to emigrate. The new left opposition is also significant in that it is quite upfront about its intention to use its seats in parliament as a platform to appeal directly to the working class and to build a resistance on the streets and workplaces across the country and beyond.

In 2012 the far-left was able to effectively facilitate and encourage mass opposition to the post-boom taxes (such as the ‘household charge’) imposed on the population. The fact that homeowners were required to register for the ‘household charge’ tax, provided those liable with an opportunity to resist government policy, resulting in the emergence of a nationwide campaign, which now opposes austerity more generally (for further information see [nohouseholdtax.org](http://nohouseholdtax.org)). The injustice of imposing the same flat charge on mansions and granny flats, the same charge on ultra-high-net-worth-individuals and the unemployed, was clear to all. So much so that the population did not require much encouragement to resist the government and boycott the charge. Aided by a well organised campaign, half of the people liable for the charge joined the boycott, despite letters threatening prosecution. The household charge was quickly followed by the imposition of a so-called property tax the following year. The left parties (those to the left of the Labour party) have sought to channel people’s anger at the imposition of this tax (and other proposed bailout charges) into an ant-austerity movement, with the ultimate aim

of fielding a slate of anti-austerity candidates in the next election. The growth of the campaign against household and water taxes (CAHWT) is significant since it demonstrates a discontent, which has not yet found a coherent political expression, and has not yet managed to consolidate workers as a class capable of acting collectively as such. The potential for such action was evidenced at the CAHWT demonstration in Dublin April 13<sup>th</sup> 2013, which attracted over 5,000 protestors (O'Brien, 2013). A considerable measure of the anger was directed at the Labour Party, which consistently refuses to act in the interests of workers. Admittedly, this campaign is only a response to the *consequences* of a much more significant imposition, the socialisation of private debt. The campaign is a resistance to one particular imposition, which has been foisted on some (but not all) of the population, but can nevertheless be used to build resistance to austerity. It does not in itself represent any challenge to the continued dominance of finance capital.

Ireland has not produced much in the way of organised resistance to the socialisation of private debt, particularly when compared with Iceland, where the population forced the government out of office, forcing a repudiation of its responsibility for private gambling debt, and even jailed some of the bankers that destroyed the economy. The bankers had left Iceland in an impossible situation. But as Paul Krugman (2011) argues, 'Iceland's very desperation made conventional behaviour impossible, freeing the nation to break the rules. Where everyone else bailed out the bankers and made the public pay the price, Iceland let the banks go bust and actually expanded its social safety net'. It was clear that no matter the path taken by Iceland it could not avoid a collapse in living standards; but by refusing to placate international investors the burden on the population was limited, the rise in unemployment was limited, and the social safety net was maintained relatively intact. There has been no such confrontation with the banking sector in Ireland; Irish bankers have not even

been stripped of their generous salaries. Richie Boucher, the Chief Executive of Bank of Ireland, received a pay package of €843,000 in 2012 – despite the bank posting a pre-tax loss of over €2.1 billion (Reilly, 2013). Though the dominance of finance capital is still reflected in policy, it has not yet received a level of scrutiny appropriate to its influence and effects. There are however a number of campaigns that are seeking to change this situation.

One organisation set up to campaign specifically to agitate for the repudiation of private debt is Anglo Not Our Debt. This group of activists has successfully highlighted the unjust and illegitimate nature of Ireland's repayment of private debts run up by the defunct Anglo-Irish Bank and Irish Nationwide Building Society. The campaign has worked to prevent the government and the corporate media from glossing over the fact that the general population bears no responsibility for the debts of private banks; that the debts are the responsibility of the private borrowers and lenders associated with the private institutions concerned. The campaign has continued to highlight the injustice and unsustainability of the agreed repayments to bondholders, and organises protests, publicity events and educational events on the issue all across the country, to counter the relentless spin the issue (for further information see [www.notourdebt.ie](http://www.notourdebt.ie)). Similar efforts have been made on the part of a protest group that emerged in a rural part of Co. Cork in early 2011. The 'Ballyhea Says No' group is characterised by a sense of urgency and a level of doggedness that is inspiring to all lucky enough to witness it. Somehow a group of people in a rural part of Ireland, with no other political agenda, took it upon themselves to start a campaign, which has kept up a sustained and dignified protest, marching the streets every Sunday morning since March 2011. The group is tireless in its efforts to uncover the naked injustice of the on-going payments to bondholders, and in its efforts to counter all related propaganda disseminated by the state and the corporate media (for further information see

thechatteringmagpie14.blogspot.ie). Their weekly marches have been covered by media all across the world, but apart from occasional guest appearances on the *Tonight with Vincent Browne* show, they have been virtually ignored by the Irish media – only reported reluctantly, such as when the group went as far as the head office of the ECB in Frankfurt to voice their opposition to the policy of forcing the responsibility of a European banking crisis onto the general working population of Ireland (Kerrigan 2012, pp. 208-09).

The foisting of private debt onto the population has given rise to a number of laudable initiatives like this, all aimed at facilitating the emergence of a political consciousness and militancy appropriate to the development of a mass resistance. These initiatives are part of an emergent battle of ideas, which has to be waged against the parties of austerity, and the various institutions representing the financial sector. Activists know that working class consciousness advances through mass activity in campaigns that are rooted in working class issues. However, the process also requires the political development of the working class, which does not happen by osmosis, but through self-education, through the development and dissemination of ideas appropriate to self-emancipation. To that end a number of initiatives have emerged in recent years, such as Irish Left Review, Look Left Magazine and Rabble (see [irishleftreview.org](http://irishleftreview.org); [Rabble.ie](http://Rabble.ie); [lookleftonline.org](http://lookleftonline.org)). These are significant developments. The work being carried out by activists involved in Dublin Community Television (DCTV) is another arm of the process. Programmes like the Live Register and Dole TV provide alternative analyses that challenge the consensus of corporate and official sources (see [dctv.ie](http://dctv.ie)). Similarly, educational groups, such as Praxis, have emerged with the view to facilitating the general working population, the unemployed and the marginalised in their efforts to reclaim the power to create, legitimise and take ownership of knowledge, rather than be subject to knowledge disseminated by

elite institutions and 'experts' (see [praxiseducation.weebly.com](http://praxiseducation.weebly.com)). Groups like 'The Provisional University' build on these efforts, working to further activist research, to facilitate autonomous education, to promote discussion and to strengthen social movements (see [provisionaluniversity.tumblr.com](http://provisionaluniversity.tumblr.com)). Other interesting groups have emerged in the wake of the crisis, such as Unlock NAMA, which began with the task of demystifying the workings of the National Assets Management Agency (NAMA), demonstrating how public money is being used, but not necessarily in the public interest (for further information see [unlocknama.org](http://unlocknama.org)). Unlock NAMA dared to suggest that given the public responsibility for the management of assets and loans, local communities in which the associated properties are situated might rightfully have some say in how they are used - perhaps for youth groups, for child care, or some other benefit to the population. The activists involved made efforts to settle the issue, but in an unorthodox way. They began by identifying buildings controlled by NAMA, occupying them for the day and holding public talks on related issues. The question of ownership and control of NAMA buildings would be made clear as the activists were inevitably ejected (see [unlocknama.org](http://unlocknama.org)).

Most of the above groups and initiatives emerged at around the same time as the Occupy Movement, the first Irish contingent of which was set up outside of the Central Bank on Dame Street in Dublin in early 2011. Though the project ended in disarray, it did bring people together. As one of the key activists Helena Sheehan (2011) explains, participants quickly began organising a series of sixties-style teach-ins. Those involved referred to these sessions as Occupy University, which involved focused attempts to bring some clarity to the situation. Talks were given on the global financial system. Attempts were made to draw lessons from earlier social movements. There were discussions on the media, on trade unions and on all manner of topics relevant to the system to

which people found themselves opposed and to the movement they hoped to build. Sheehan (2011) remarked on the ‘sincere sharing of knowledge and earnest interaction, pursued with a purity of purpose’. In the space of two months there were 78 talks and workshops organised, amid all the hustle and bustle of a busy street (Sheehan, 2011), with all speaking, listening and organising with the view to changing society.

Many were surprised with the widespread levels of support that the Occupy Movement initially enjoyed among the general public. But perhaps there should be nothing really surprising about this. The majority of people were (and remain) opposed to the use of public money to pay for the failed gambles of property developers and bondholders. The current Fine Gael/Labour government was only elected on the basis of promises that the interests of the population would be put before the financial interest.

The conclusion that mass resistance is required to bring about change has not taken hold, despite the laudable efforts outlined above. This appears to be somewhat of a puzzle given widespread realisation that every successive austerity measure is a covert bailout for the financial sector. Though there are rumblings within particular areas, such as in education (which has experienced a relentless attack since the crisis began), and indeed among other workers in the public sector, resistance is still relatively understated. In that context we can only outline the emergence of an embryonic resistance in the remainder of this paper.

### **Activism and Resistance within Education**

Along with resistance to neoliberalisation, resistance to its effects in education, to the relentless attacks on public education, has been constant, if sparse, over the years. Academics like Professor Kathleen Lynch for example have

consistently written about the resultant inequalities in the Irish education system and wider society even during the Celtic Tiger boom period. The same cannot be said of the public sector unions however, with Allen (2000) describing them as having acquiesced to various governments throughout the Irish Social Partnership arrangements - arrangements which have been described as corporatism operating primarily in the service of Neoliberalism (see Boucher and Collins 2003 for a discussion). However, it is noteworthy that the voices of dissent have grown somewhat louder since the onset of the economic crisis.

Some unions – such as Unite – campaigned for and delivered a No vote from its members in relation to the Croke Park Agreement in 2010. In addition, it is significant that a number of public service unions campaigned for a No vote on the Croke Park 2 Public Service agreement, highlighting the detrimental impact that Croke Park 1 has had on the Irish education system. At the United Public Service “No 2 Croke Park 2” Rally on 11th March 2013, speakers from the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI), Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI), and the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) expressed their resounding rejection of the Croke Park 2 Proposals. In particular, Dr Mary Gilmartin (IFUT) highlighted the worsening of pay and employment conditions for academic staff the 3rd level sector since the beginning of the crisis. Dr Kevin Farrell (TUI) spoke of the negative effects for lecturers and students in the Institutes of Technology from the additional lecturing hours required under Croke Park 1. Dr Gilmartin called for all efforts to demoralize academic staff to be resisted, and she stressed the importance of public sector workers building a united front so as to protect the Irish education system. Such calls were obviously heeded by some as on March 26th 2013, the TUI which represents just under 15,000 secondary school teachers and lecturers voted overwhelmingly (86 per cent) to reject the Croke

Park II proposals (see RTE News, 2013 for a fuller discussion of TUI proposals in the event of government legislating for pay cuts in the public sector).

We would argue that a potentially very significant moment in the resistance to the neoliberalisation of education in Ireland came when a young teacher, Evelyn O'Connor, made an impassioned speech when accepting the Irish Secondary School Teacher of the Year award in 2012 (a recording of the full speech is available at <http://www.thejournal.ie/teachers-permanent-non-permanent-evelyn-oconnor-teacher-of-the-yea-502993-Jun2012/>).

O' Connor (2012) raised the issue of tenure for 'new' entrants to the profession, stating that despite "receiving this award for teacher of the year, I have no idea if I'll have a job in a year's time" and how "because of a bizarre bureaucratic nightmare. ... even though I've been teaching for 9 years, it'll be at least another 5 years before I qualify for any kind of job security. Moreover, she highlighted how the state has taken away the allowance for career guidance teachers, abolished language support for foreign-national children and reduced special needs hours in schools throughout the country. In effect, she argued that such "cutbacks make me worse at my job through no fault of my own". Her most damning critique however was saved for what she saw as a string of broken promises from the current government. She argued

"When we elected this government they proclaimed that "even in our country's crisis, we can make progress in education and protect frontline services". They promised to "recruit, train and support the highest calibre of teachers". Well I don't feel very supported and nor do the talented and experienced teachers up and down the country whose jobs are disappearing. Not to mention the new entrants to the profession who thanks to pay cuts will become like second class citizens in our staff rooms".

O' Connor's speech captured the fears and anxiety that non-permanent teachers now face, when she argued that "we are afraid to even say these things out loud because the government will try to use our complaints as an excuse to make things even worse for all teachers. We're afraid that if we make ourselves visible we might lose our jobs". However in a very visible act of defiance O' Connor (2012) proudly proclaimed that she was "tired of saying nothing and ... tired of being afraid. Non-permanent teachers have to stop going quietly because our students and our schools are suffering".

It is not too much to suggest that large sections of the working population are likewise tired of saying nothing, tired of being afraid, tired of watching injustice heaped upon injustice, and tired wondering why their fellow citizens have not yet developed an effective means of resistance. The conclusion that action is required has been reached by many people, but the various struggles that have emerged are still separated from one another, and the problem of how to bring the various struggles together to collectively confront the political and economic establishment has yet to be resolved.

## **Conclusions**

The manner in which the economic crisis unfolds in Ireland is only intelligible when close consideration is given to the class relations involved, particularly to how the dominant economic groups operating within the country realise their income. But the reasons why resistance in Ireland is so slow-burning are far more obscure, particularly given the increasingly brutal attacks on living standards. It does have to be acknowledged that the anger and frustration of all those currently exploited and the oppressed has been spread across the globe with the return of mass emigration (Socialist Voice, 2010). The issue of involuntary emigration, which has been exasperated by government policy, has not yet been sufficiently politicised. It may be possible to extend some of the

other strands of causation for this apparent inertness back to the religious, authoritarian cultural heritage of the population, or to the weakness of the indigenous industry/dependence on foreign direct investment for employment, or to the consequent atomisation of the working class, or to the decline in trade union membership, or to the general mal-development and general dysfunction of organisations representing the working class, or to various other historical developments and conditions. All of this is debateable. In the end, the resistance will have to be built. The Irish working class has to get to know itself once more, on the streets, and through the discovery and resolution of the obstacles to collective action, to the development of the necessary analyses, strategies and tactics that further the universal interests of the working class.

### **References:**

Allen, K. (2009) *Ireland's Economic Crash: A Radical Agenda for Change*, Dublin: The Liffey Press

Allen, K. (2000) *The Celtic Tiger: The myth of social partnership in Ireland*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Baker, T. and O'Brien, J. (1979) *The Irish Housing System a Critical Overview*, Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.

Boucher, G. and Collins, G. (2003) 'Having One's Cake and Being Eaten Too: Irish Neo-Liberal Corporatism', *Review of Social Economy*, 61(3), 295-316.

Browne, V. (2013) 'Labour's way is yet another confidence trick', *Politico: Social and Political Issues*, <http://politico.ie/irish-politics/8842-labours-way-is-yet-another-confidence-trick.html>.

Burns, J.F. (2011) 'Green Party Quits Irish Government', *New York Times*, January 23.

Derwin, D. (2012) *Ireland: Shock, Austerity, Sinn Féin and the United Left Alliance*, *Irish Left Review*, <http://www.irishleftreview.org/2012/07/10/ireland-shock-austerity-sinn-fin-united-left-alliance/>.

ElectionsIreland.org (2011) 'General Election of Friday 25 February 2011', <http://electionsireland.org/results/general/31dail.cfm>.

Fahey, T. et al. (2004) *Housing, Poverty and Wealth in Ireland*, Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.

Harvey, D. (2009) Marxist Geographer David Harvey on the G20, the Financial Crisis and Neoliberalism, *Democracy Now*, [http://www.democracynow.org/2009/4/2/marxist\\_geographer\\_david\\_harvey\\_on\\_the](http://www.democracynow.org/2009/4/2/marxist_geographer_david_harvey_on_the).

Irish Times (2009) 'Europe 'amazed' at steps taken in budget – Lenihan', <http://www.irishtimes.com/business/europe-amazed-at-steps-taken-in-budget-lenihan-1.754167>

Irish Times (2008) 'Bill allows state to take stake in any financial institution given aid', *Irish Times*, October 1.

Kerrigan G. (2012) *The Big Lie: Who Profits from Ireland's Austerity*, Dublin: Transworld.

Kitchin, R. et al (2010) A Haunted Landscape: Housing and Ghost Estates in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, Working Paper Series. No. 59. NIRSA, (59), pp. 1-66.

Krugman, P. (2011) The Path Not Taken. *New Your Times*, October 27, 2011

McCabe, C. (2011) *Sins of the fathers: tracing the decisions that shaped the Irish economy*, Dublin: History Press Ireland.

Murphy, L. (1994) The Downside of Home Ownership: housing change and mortgage arrears in the Republic of Ireland, *Housing Studies*, 9(2), pp. 183-198.

Murphy, D. and Devlin, M. (2009) *Banksters: How a Powerful Elite Squandered Ireland's Wealth*, Dublin: Hachette Books

Norris, M. and Coates, D. (2010) *How Housing Killed the Celtic Tiger: Anatomy, Consequences and Lessons of Ireland's Mortgage Boom and Bust, 2000-2009*, Cambridge edn. Dublin: UCD.

Norris, M. and Winston, N. (2004) *Housing Policy Review: 1990-2002*, Dublin: Dublin Stationery Office.

O'Brien, T. (2013) Thousands attend anti-austerity protest in Dublin, *The Irish Times*, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/thousands-attend-anti-austerity-protest-in-dublin-1.1359805>.

O'Connell, C. (2005) 'The Housing Market and Owner Occupation in Ireland', in: Norris, M. and Redmond, D. (eds.) *Housing Contemporary Ireland: Policy, Society and Shelter*, Institute of Public Administration.

O'Connor, P. (2012) 'Teacher of the Year criticises the "injustice" of system and "teacher-bashing"', <http://www.thejournal.ie/teachers-permanent-non-permanent-evelyn-oconnor-teacher-of-the-yea-502993-Jun2012/>

Preston, P. and Silke, H. (2011a) Ideology, Reflexivity and Innovation in Journalism? Role of the News Media in Ireland's Property Bubble and Financial Crash, IAMCR Political Economy Section.

Preston, P. and Silke, H. (2011b) Market 'realities': De-coding neoliberal ideology and media discourses, *Australian Journal of Communications*.

Rielly, G. (2013) Bank of Ireland CEO received total pay of €843,000 last year, <http://businessetc.thejournal.ie/richie-boucher-pay-2012-838056-Mar2013/>

Ross, S. (2009) *The Bankers: how the banks brought Ireland to its knees*, London: Penguin Books

RTE News (2013) 'TUI votes to ballot for industrial action if Croke Park proposals are imposed', available: <http://www.rte.ie/news/2013/0403/379532-asti-exams/>

RTE News (2013b) 'Opinion poll shows Labour Party support dips below 10%, while Fianna Fáil benefits', available: <http://www.rte.ie/news/2013/0316/377026-millward-brown-opinion-poll/>

RTE News (2010) 'Protests at gates of Leinster House', available: <http://www.rte.ie/news/2010/0929/136139-dailprotest/>

Sheehan, H. (2011) Occupying Dublin: Considerations at the Crossroads, *Irish Left Review*, available: <http://www.irishleftreview.org/2012/01/19/occupying-dublin-considerations-crossroads/>

Silke, H. (2012) Journalism, Ideology and the Markets: The Irish Media and the Property Crash, *Look Left*, 2(12), 7-9.

Socialist Voice (2010) Starve, emigrate—or fight! Socialist Voice, available:  
<http://www.comunistpartyofireland.ie/sv2010-09/01-fight.html>

O'Dea, W. (2008) 'The 1am call that brought the news we were fearing',  
*Sunday Independent*, 5 October.

The Economist (2011) Pig no more? How the Irish are hoping to escape from  
the euro crisis, *The Economist*, Oct 22nd.