

Oration of Ciara Ní Mhaoilfhinn, Deputy Chairperson of the Communist Party of Ireland's Dublin District Branch, at Arbour Hill Cemetery, on the occasion of the CPI's annual Connolly Sunday commemoration.

Delivered on May 9, 2021.

Today we gather in small numbers, socially distanced, for the annual James Connolly commemoration in a very changed world. One where separation, isolation, anxiety, and loss weigh heavily on our people. The COVID-19 pandemic didn't introduce uncertainty and precarity to our lives, these things have always existed for a large proportion of people, and predominantly women in our society and the world over. When the Proclamation of the Irish Republic declared that it would guarantee equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, there existed the possibility of an Ireland where women would flourish alongside men, as creators of their own destinies. With that promise in mind, women undertook countless vital actions, alongside men, in the fight for independence. But as is so often the case, following the signing of the Treaty and partitioning of the country, counter-revolutionary forces reacted by entrenching a system of patriarchy through religious and political measures, which resulted in decades of severe oppression for women in Ireland, none more so than working-class women.

During the revolutionary period of 1916 to 1921 there was a promise of an Ireland that could have seen women make genuine progress towards equality. When Connolly said over a century ago that "The worker is the slave of capitalist society, the female worker is the slave of that slave" he highlighted the double oppression

that women face in a capitalist, patriarchal society. The equality that has been gained since is the equal right to be exploited by capital, with the added burden of domestic and care work still predominantly falling onto women. In that respect, equal rights on paper have not delivered a more equal society for working-class women. While a small section of women from the privileged classes may indeed have benefitted from legal equality, they are a minority and often their achievements have been made possible by the exploitation of working-class women, particularly migrant women.

Despite the severe repression of women throughout the past century in Ireland, they have continued to struggle against the institutions that oppress them, in particular the Catholic Church. One of the most shameful legacies of this past century is the scandal of the Mother & Baby Homes. The Church and State engaged in a campaign of abuse spanning decades and visiting unimaginable misery onto the women of Ireland and their innocent children. We stand here a mere 23 years after the last Mother & Baby Home closed its doors and through the tireless campaigning of groups of women who suffered in these institutions, finally have a report into the abuse that took place. But what now for the survivors, what redress will be made to the women who endured this abuse? It is likely that this will drag on, like so many of the issues related to the Mother & Baby Homes.

It has been 8 years since the mainstream media picked up on Catherine Corless' disclosure of the possibility of a mass grave in Tuam and yet there has been no action taken to exhume the remains of the children who were essentially, disposed of, by the Bon Secours nuns. Campaigners continue to fight against a proposed property development at the Bessborough home in Cork, with the developer

cynically arguing that An Bord Pleanála should not take into account planned legislation that would protect the area, citing the housing crisis as a justification for ignoring the demands of the women resisting this development. The continued mistreatment of these women, purposefully preventing them from finding some closure, is reprehensible.

There have of course been a number of other successful campaigns in recent years. Through struggle the women of Ireland have overcome some of the repressive policies to win a greater proportion of rights, none more inspiring than the campaign to repeal the 8th amendment in the 26 counties. While the demand for free, safe, legal abortion was not realised, which has unfortunately limited the capacity for this constitutional amendment to change the lives of all women by restricting access to those in the middle- and higher-income brackets, it could be considered the strongest challenge to the Church/State relationship to date.

A similar campaign for reproductive rights had been ongoing for many years in the 6 counties, with a change in the law being passed a result of political stalemate in Stormont. There have been several challenges to this law allowing terminations from the religious zealots in the DUP, which thankfully have been defeated. This contest is a microcosm of how reactionary forces try to claw back the hard-won rights of women and reminds us that in a capitalist, patriarchal society, we must continuously strive to maintain the rights we have won, as well as demanding more.

So along with the Marriage Equality referendum in 2015, we had reason to be hopeful that the permeating tentacles of the Catholic Church were finally being

wrought from the institutions and services with which women must engage in our everyday lives.

A campaign for public ownership of the new maternity hospital has shown that we must continue to confront the obsequious Church/State relationship in the 26 counties. There are many issues in relation to women's health care that should be cause for concern in a patriarchal society, but to add to this the extra burden of religious teachings in medical treatment, after winning a victory for women's bodily autonomy, would be handing a triumph to the forces of reaction.

The new and much needed maternity hospital will be paid for by the State, but its operation will be licensed to the Sisters of Charity, which raised the question of what reproductive health services would be available to women at the new maternity hospital. It was recently reported that religious teachings would have no influence on the operation of the hospital, but it still begs the question as to why control of the hospital would be given to a private religious order when the people will pay for its construction? The women-led campaign is continuing to demand public ownership of the new national maternity hospital.

These are only a small number of the struggles women have waged and won; but women have been pivotal in almost every struggle, most notably the civil rights movement in the 6 counties, and the Right2Water movement in the 26 counties. We repeatedly see women being written out of history, their contributions being downplayed and marginalised, but this is beginning to change. We often look to past struggles to learn and understand how best to engage in current campaigns, so it is

imperative that we include the contributions of women in our history. We must also remember that any greater rights gained by women do not diminish the rights of others in society, so we must struggle together as one united working-class against all forms of oppression.

Ní saoirse go saoirse na mban!