Desmond Greaves Summer School – The EU and Working Women

The EU and Working Women is a fairly broad subject and one which could lead us down several roads – many of which will involve speculation and what iffery about Ireland’s membership of the European Union. We could reasonably ask ourselves why is it that we as a nation seem to accept without question the assertion that the EU has “given” us so many rights – in the case of women we are told that we should be grateful to the EU for the granting of equality legislation which is underpinned by European Court of Justice rulings.

And maybe there is some truth in this. Maybe also it is true to say that membership of the European Union has placed a limit on the capacity of women to achieve true equality in the area of work. Equally it is true to say that as a Trade Unionist I see grave dangers in the granting of rights and the manner in which this is done by the EU – when this is viewed as a remote benefactor.

Workers – women workers included – own those rights for which they have fought. They have a sense of that ownership and they understand those rights. Rights which are simply granted and not won are less owned and this is an issue for women when we consider that the law makers are traditionally men – so we have those rights which they have granted us but who knows then what we could have won in a struggle?

I was very fortunate to grow up in a household where Desmond Greaves was regularly spoken about and his writings often quoted and this is one of the reasons why I was so pleased to accept the invitation to talk to you today. I grew up knowing that in his writings you could find a Desmond Greaves quotation for any and every eventuality.

His warning over the dangers that the European Union and common market could serve to erode our national identity and thereby create a platform for the far right, who have their own notions about what our national identity should be, are worth noting when we consider the position of women, migrants or any other marginalised grouping within the European Union.

He warned us that the EU was essentially a project which was designed for advancing the interests of big business and he was not wrong because there is no doubt that a common market makes movement of goods and money easier and this is a benefit to international business because they can go where wages are cheaper to manufacture and they can move their money around to ensure it only lands where the tax regime is favourable.

Workers cannot do that – a worker on a modest income is limited in where they can shop. They do not have the facility of moving their money around to avail of a more advantageous taxation system.

When Greaves told us that nationalism “is dangerous and unwelcome to the powers that be in the era of transnational capital and the common market” – he could foresee the potential negative impact of the suppression of national sovereignty.

He could see that the interests of big business are served when we set aside our national identity and all gather behind one flag, one currency, one set of rules and laws.

His fears that this would create a vacuum which could be filled by far right rhetoric and hatred were well founded and there is no doubt a danger in subsuming our national identity.

And so why is there so much enthusiasm among Irish feminists for the EU? Why is this seen as such a positive force in the lives of Irish women? In order to understand this we need to go back to 1973 – on the day when Desmond Greaves was celebrating his 60th birthday my parents were welcoming their first child into the world and Ireland had just joined the EEC.

My mother had recently left her job in the civil service which she was not allowed hold after her marriage and their daughter was born into an Ireland which was different in many ways from the Ireland we are living in now.

The catholic church held a position of power and a virtual stranglehold on working class communities. According to a survey carried out in 1973/4 on behalf of the Catholic Church over 90% of Irish people went to Mass on a weekly basis.

The same survey found that 71% of those surveyed believed that sex before marriage was always wrong. According to the Irish Left Review “legislation was passed or defeated on the whims of Catholic interests, social norms and conventions were passed down from the pulpit to the worshippers in the pews, and most shamefully, thousands of women and children were forced into what was essentially slave labour.

This was the Ireland of 1973 in which there were just under 288,000 women working representing a mere 27% of the workforce. Thirty years later that figure had risen to 42% - this can be attributed to a number of factors including the benefits brought by EU membership. It is also true to say that the nature of work has changed since 1973 – traditional industries had declined and we have seen a growth in sectors which were relatively small in 1973.

By 2003 the numbers employed in the services sector had risen from under half a million to over 1.2 million. So in 1973 the young O’Reilly child would have been born with limited prospects of finding work – and if she met a nice man when she was older no real need to find work anyway!

The Church was a formidable force in Ireland in the 70’s and with a small percentage of female workers it can reasonably be argued that we needed the intervention of a powerful force to face down the church and there is no doubt the politicians fearful of a “belt of the crozier” could have found some solace in declaring that Europe was imposing the equality legislation on Ireland.

 I am the second generation of working mothers in my family and in 1973 I when I was born it was by no means the norm for women to work but my mother left her job in the civil service when she married and took up employment in the private sector.

From then until now we see that female participation in the workforce has increased and it is easy to draw a straight line from this to the introduction of equality legislation which underpins the concept of equal pay for work of equal value and measures such as paid maternity leave.

It is also easy to understand that promoting equality by using the Equal Status and other acts has had a dramatic impact on the levels of female participation in the workforce.

There is no doubt that there is a considerable weight of evidence to support the notion that Irish women have been among those who have benefited the most from our membership of the European Union – Irish women’s participation has increased from 27% in 1973 to 42% today.

However the true measure of the value of the European Union and the common market for women is in how it reacts in a crisis.

In an increasingly neo-liberal climate the struggle for all workers is becoming harder – and as James Connolly said “the worker is the slave of capitalist society and the female worker is the slave of that slave”.

Therefore as we deal with the recession is it impacting equally on men and women workers alike? Or are Irish women bearing the brunt of cutbacks and austerity?

So what has membership of the EU brought for Irish women? How have these benefits manifested themselves? What impediments exist within the EU to support or hinder the advancement of working women today? And have these measures served to spread the burden of austerity or to shield women from it?

It is hard now to imagine having to leave work on marriage. It is almost impossible for us to envisage a society without the influences of the EU Equal Pay Directive or the EU Equal Treatment Directive.

Both of these directives have served Irish women well and the work done by lawyers and activists such as Mary Robinson on the transposition of these directives into Irish law has meant:

* The removal of the marriage bar
* The introduction of paid maternity leave
* The introduction of the Equal Pay and Equal Status Acts
* The maternity leave protection act which protects women workers from dismissal for being pregnant
* Equality in the social welfare code
* Equal access to vocational and other forms of education

So 40 years after joining the EEC what is life like for Irish working women in the EU? Certainly we have maternity leave which is among the highest in Europe.

We have legislation which underpins our right to equal pay for equal work and yet we still have the gender pay gap which is narrowing while we are all getting poorer.

According to the Synthesis Report published by the European Commission in 2012 when the available evidence is examined we can see that this narrowing of the gender pay gap has three contributory factors – wage components of pay packets – typically men earn more or higher bonuses than women and these are being reduced significantly while basic pay for both genders is being reduced at the same rate.

Sectoral segregation – this means that unemployment and wage reductions are being hardest felt in male dominated sectors such as construction.

Lastly equal pay policies, however there is no clear indication that would allow us to separate out the actual part that policy played.

Ireland was the first EU country to declare itself officially in recession in August 2008 and the second country to have a structural adjustment programme imposed by the IMF/ECB/EU Troika.

And so we have looked at what happened to women working in Ireland in the thirty years following our joining the EEC – how would all this equality legislation and transposition of directives serve to protect women from the ravages of the “crisis”?

According to Ursula Barry and Pauline Conroy in the Untold Story of the Crisis women in Ireland have fared far worse than men in this economic crisis.

They point out that the measures imposed on Irish people and directly attributable to the Bailout from a gender equality perspective have “an unacknowledged yet significant negative impact”.

And as we are struggling under the weight of the measures imposed on us by this crisis – and to some extent by the EU we see that the advances made by women in the labour market may have been little more than window dressing.

We see that while female participation in the workforce has increased overall there are wide variations across sectors. Barry and Conroy say there is “a highly segregated labour market.

Women account for over 60% of those employed as personal service and sales workers and only just over 5% of those employed as craft and related trade workers, a little over 16% of those employed as plant and machine operatives and only around one third of those employed as danagers and administrators”.

This tells us a story about those rights which we were granted and perhaps speaks volumes about those rights which we need to fight for. Women are over-represented in those areas where Trade Union density is traditionally low – in the services sector for example and this is reflected in their terms and conditions of employment and the precarious nature of work in this sector.

If you are an Irish woman in work today you are three times more likely to be working part time than your male counterpart.

This is lucky to a certain extent because one of the effects of the bailout has been to see a contraction of service provision such as homehelp – there has been no consequent contraction in the need for these services and someone has to be providing them.

Women in part time employment very often have to combine their work with a combination of caring and child rearing responsibilities. This is another way that the crisis has impacted on the female worker in the EU.

In 1973 Irish women would have shouldered the lions share of the caring and child rearing responsibilities – in modern Ireland she is still doing that but now she is fitting it in around her part time job.

As I said at the beginning the topic of women working in the EU is a broad one. I have presented some data which I have to thank Dr Ursula Barry most sincerely for. It is clear that there were immediate benefits to Irish women on joining the EU but the real measure of the protections available are those which serve to shield us from the worst impacts of the crisis.

I am not suggesting that feminists and campaigners in the 1970s were necessarily wrong – in fact I think that they were right to look to Europe as a place where they could start the fight for equality.

However I think it is also true to say that while we must continue this fight we need to be aware that Europe has changed. We have seen that the rights granted to us by membership of the common market have limited value in protecting women from the ravages of the crisis and so it is time to look at where we can best exercise our power – and to where we have the best chance of winning those rights which will serve to offer real and lasting equality.

We have to continue this struggle here in Ireland and we have to recognise that Greaves was right when he said that big business fears nationalism more than socialism – reclaiming our national sovereignty will see us reclaiming the power to win in real battles for working women.

Much has changed since the 1970s – the EU has changed since the 1970s and has become dominated by right wing neo-liberal powers.

This does not mean that we give up – but it does mean that we must work to change the nature of the EU so that it works for working people and not for big business and more importantly we must work to make our own country one which has protections in place which will ensure equality for our women workers and for all working people.

And the best way to do this is to join a Union and get organised!