Adapted from *The Irish Times*. Saturday February 25th 2017. https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/why-we-must-pay-attention-to-ireland-s-spring-of-discontent-1.2987999 (Accessed 15th April 2019).

Why we must pay attention to Ireland's spring of discontent

Niamh Hourigan

Sat, Feb 25, 2017

Concerns over downward social mobility mirror conditions behind Brexit and Trump.

The book charts his deep anger in coming to terms with downward social mobility. I was thinking about the book this week as the discontent that has festered within the Irish workforce over the winter became increasingly evident in prominent industrial disputes at Tesco and Bus Éireann.

At the heart of both these conflicts is the same issue. Management want to dismantle the long-term pay and conditions of workers to deliver greater "competitiveness" and "flexibility", while workers believe these changes will inevitably lead to downward social mobility for themselves and their families.

Given the substantial changes to pay and conditions experienced across the Irish workforce since 2010, it is surprising there hasn't been more widespread strike action in recent years.

When Ireland entered a bailout programme in late 2010, the absence of pickets on the streets stood in marked contrast to the robust protest response of Greek citizens.

Ireland lost fewer work days to strike action than any other European state in 2011, and the major Irish unions took no part in the union-led and Europe-wide anti-austerity protests of 2012.

Our reputation as poster boys and girls for austerity appeared to be well-earned at that point.

However, the campaigns against household and water charges dramatically changed the dynamics of protest across the country.

While the largest Irish unions remained aloof from these campaigns, two smaller unions, Unite and Mandate, were at the forefront of the development of the Right2Water campaign in particular.

It is significant therefore, that these two unions, Mandate and Unite, have been at the centre of the two disputes which hit the headlines during this stormy week at the end of our winter of discontent.

Having landed a body blow against the last coalition government through their successful protests against water charges, they are now at the forefront in resisting employers' pressure for downward social mobility within their workforce.

Strange places

Our Government, rife with leadership battles and enmeshed in its own troubles over Garda whistleblowers, has treated these disputes as isolated problems.

However, they would do well to consider whether Mandate and Unite have once again captured some element of the public mood that has escaped them, moods which in neighbouring countries have taken their political elites to very strange places indeed.

Downward social mobility is the movement of an individual or social group to a lower social status, and can be caused by declining pay and conditions, job loss, family breakdown or other factors.

As Steinbeck's novel conveys, the consequences for the individual and their community can be devastating as the downwardly mobile become angry and frustrated.

In April 2015, long before the US presidential election, a report by the MacArthur Foundation in the US found "substantial pessimism about the potential for social mobility among the American people".

Almost 80 per cent of people surveyed said "middle-class people falling into a lower economic class" was most likely to happen, while only 14 per cent believed people in the lower economic classes could rise to the middle class.

This pessimism, particularly among workers who did not have college degrees, appears to have been justified.

While Barack Obama did deliver an economic recovery, it was a recovery for the highly educated – 99 per cent of the jobs created by his administration were for those with college degrees.

Not surprisingly, Donald Trump, quick to recognise and exploit the anxiety felt by those fearing downward mobility, won overwhelming support among whites without a college education last November.

Flashes of anger

While Ireland has witnessed little of the right-wing populism that featured in the Brexit and Trump campaigns, there are frequent flashes of anger at highly educated and "Dublin-based" elites emerging who are stacking the rules of the game to suit themselves.

This anger is evident not only in industrial disputes but in the election of Independent rural TDs tired of hearing the mantra of "cost effectiveness" being used to cut services and supports from their communities.

Even the gleeful contempt for experts in Danny Healy-Rae's speech on climate change in the Dáil played well to a rural home crowd fearful of the impact of climate change policies on their own livelihoods.

As our winter of discontent gives way to a stormy spring, it is critical the issues at the heart of the Bus Éireann and Tesco strikes are not treated as isolated problems.

The tragedy of Brexit and Trump is not just the outcomes of the votes, but the massive social divisions generated by these campaigns.

While some of this division is linked to outright racism, a considerable proportion is also linked to very justified anxiety about downward social mobility among the lower-middle and working classes.

We can't change the outcomes of these votes but we can learn lessons. Britain and the US were in the vanguard of embracing neoliberal policies in the early 1980s, policies that prioritised cost-effectiveness, flexibility and competitiveness above all else, and these two societies are now at the forefront of populist reactions to them.

At the end of his novel, Steinbeck says: "When a condition or a problem becomes too great, humans have the protection of not thinking about it but it goes inside and what comes out is discontent."

We have the luxury of ignoring these relatively isolated incidences of discontent at the moment but if we do, they may evolve into something much more destructive.