



2018 - Happy New Year?

As another year ends the reality for working class people - employed, unemployed, students or pensioners - remains the same.

Commentators, conservative economists, newspapers columnists and political pundits are queuing up to explain away wage freezes, welfare cuts, poorer public services and higher unemployment. They blame everything and everyone one but never the economic system we live in.

We are told that an ageing population places more demands on public services, that that is why they struggle to cope and we need to manage our expectations.

We are told that the economy can't afford pay rises for workers and we're told that tax cuts for the rich will bring jobs for the many.

We're constantly reminded that "*we're all in this together*" and that in 2018 will all need to "tighten our belts" - even further!

For ordinary working class people and their families 2018 looks set to be another year in which they bear the brunt but get few of the benefits.

Eroding public services

Public services in Northern Ireland, like health and social care, are under pressure because they are under resourced and often lack strategic direction. We still run a service which waits for people to get sick, places little emphasis on health and well-being and continues to ignore the relationship between employment, education and housing and a healthier society. And well into the 21st century we still look to institutions as an appropriate response to the needs of older people.

There is not an increased 'demand' for health and social care. There is an increasing need. The deliberate use of the word demand by commentators and many politicians attempts to turn public services into commodities rather than the services they are designed to be.

According to this narrative the reasons services are failing are not under investment, poor strategic planning or increasing privatisation - but people demanding more and more. Thus, the groundwork is already laid for further cuts and less money.

GP services say they are overwhelmed by patients turning up when they re-open after the holidays. GPs are private contractors and choose to close down for four days over Christmas. Is it really a surprise that sick patients who have been waiting for them to re-open turn up when they do? If GPs were NHS employees instead of private businesses there would be a primary care service available over the holiday period.

Wealth gap continues to grow

2018 is likely to be yet another year when the books are “balanced” at the expense of working class people. The 2008 capitalist crisis is still being bailed out ten years later through welfare cuts, wage freezes, price hikes, reduced and privatised public services and by unemployment and precarious employment.

Constantly we are told that ‘*we are all in this together*’ - no we are not!

Across the UK, the top 1% share of income has increased from 5% in the 1970s to 13% today.

Recent research shows that the wages gap in Northern Ireland continues to widen. The top 10% of households alone receive 24% of all income.

45% of households here have zero savings.

The introduction of Universal Credit, increasing unemployment, rising prices and the growth of people in employment needing additional benefits is increasing poverty, placing a strain on mental health and affecting the health and well-being of thousands of people.

Capitalism in the 21st Century

This is neither an accident nor a natural phenomenon. This is the outworking of a system based on capital, production for profit and wealth accumulation. This is what 21st century capitalism does. It builds, enhances and protects the few at the expense of those who produce the wealth, the public services they need and the social supports they require.

We have had neither an Assembly nor an Executive in Northern Ireland for almost a full year. Wages, well-being, welfare and public services were not important enough to focus minds and form a government. Political posturing, vanity projects and undiluted sectarianism were given priority over the needs and well-being of working class people.

Capitalism has able lieutenants in the main parties at Stormont.

The immediate political priority in Northern Ireland remains the establishment of the Assembly and the Executive.

There are a number of measures which could be taken to improve public services, value staff and help alleviate the burdens currently being carried by working class people throughout Northern Ireland

The introduction of a Living Wage and the abolition of Zero Hours contracts would directly benefit many low paid workers and provide much needed job security.

Scrapping plans to lower Corporation Tax would free up hundreds of millions of pounds for investment in public services and job creating infrastructure projects.

The introduction of integrated education - one of the commitments of the Good Friday Agreement of twenty years ago - would not only signal a major step forward for current and future generations but would also free up duplicate millions.

A socialist society

All those measures are important, urgent and necessary but working class people will only have the rewards they deserve when capitalism is replaced by a socialist society.

Making that happen remains the on-going priority for the Workers Party in the coming year.