



**Contribution from Lily Kerr, Workers Party of Ireland Trade Union Section,
to the PAME Seminar Athens, 17th June 2022**

Dear comrades,

I bring solidarity and greetings from the Workers Party of Ireland and from Irish workers and militant trade unionists to this important Seminar. We wish to thank PAME for the invitation and opportunity to attend the PAME Congress and the International Seminar. We believe that it is only by sharing our experiences, knowledge and solidarity at an international level, can we learn and more effectively organise against the real enemy of Labour, the capitalist system.

We also take this opportunity to extend our solidarity to the LARCO workers who are fighting to prevent the sell-off of this major enterprise and for the protection of their jobs and rights.

We know that it is socialism which provides an alternative, a new social order which will bring about the emancipation of the working class and the peoples of the world. However, comrades, that does not mean that we can afford to, or indeed should, wait until the overthrow of this corrupt system, before we demand meaningful rights and social progress in the workplace and in wider society.

We must champion the cause of workers, women, the young, the old, the vulnerable and all those who are excluded and marginalised under capitalism if we expect them to fully engage in the class struggle. We must place their demands at the centre of our industrial and political actions.

Comrades, we know that in the medium to long term, only by militant actions and organisation can we hope to achieve and consolidate any real gains and rights for those who most need them. We must organise in each of our countries, in our trade unions, in women's organisations and at all levels of civil society. We must engage with those workers and professions that are populated by lone workers, such as those who deliver care at home to the elderly, the sick and disabled. This work, and these jobs and skills, are predominantly jobs carried out by women, and are all too often

unremunerated, underpaid and undervalued or involve precarious employment with zero-hour contracts and usually with no employment rights. My own work as a trade unionist involved representing workers in the provision of health and social care where increasingly the public sector is under attack.

Comrades, the working class are still suffering as a result of the harsh austerity measures demanded by the European Union, and administered without restraint or regard for the impact on the working class, by national governments, whether right-wing, social democratic or composed of the new social-democrats.

It is the role of class-conscious militants in the trade union movement to politicise and raise the class consciousness of all workers in preparation for the struggles ahead. In Ireland we have so called “left wing” parties, trade unions and others, lamenting the decision of the UK to leave the European Union, claiming it is a major blow to workers’ economic and human rights. We, comrades, must challenge the myth that the European Union or indeed the ruling class conferred workers rights on us from any sense of decency, morality, or out of any consideration for social justice. Every gain and achievement, every piece of legislation that granted even limited or modest forms of progress, social or economic rights, was fought for and won by workers themselves through vigorous struggle.

Comrades, in Northern Ireland the Regional Executive failed to function for three years (and it is still failing to function). During that time, elected representatives continued to be paid, while public sector workers suffered a pay freeze for over a decade. Health service workers took strike action. Workers in public utilities, education, transport have taken industrial action. Workers are exposed to the so-called “fire and rehire” practice, which became widespread during the pandemic and through which companies dismiss staff only to re-employ them on inferior terms and conditions. The British Government has stated that it is considering using agency workers to break strikes.

Capital has used the pandemic to generate massive profits for share holders and others, whilst at the same time inflicting serious damage to the living and working conditions of the working class. The governments and employers claim that this is on the grounds of flexibility, affordability and to save jobs. In fact, these developments are about maximizing profit and trying to break the strength of militant trade unionists.

Public health, education and social security systems have been under attack and the erosion and elimination of hard-won workers' rights, social gains and achievements have all formed part of this agenda. Poverty and destitution are rife across the world and multi-national corporations and monopolies exploit unemployment levels to sweat an already over-stretched work force and weaken terms and conditions of employment. They create divisions amongst workers and stir up racial tensions.

The growth of nationalism, racism, fascism and xenophobia are a constant reality, as is virulent anti-communism and state repression of trade unionists, all of which represent a threat to workers and the unity of workers. We support the demand of trade unions and mass organizations in Kazakhstan and all over the world for the immediate release of political prisoner Yerzhan Yelshibayev, a leader of the unemployed movement.

Comrades, the war in Ukraine has provided capital with another pretext to attack the working class. Energy and food prices have risen so much that workers are having to choose between heating and eating, they are unable to pay for petrol to take them to and from work, many cannot afford to turn on their cookers to prepare hot meals, whilst energy companies are making billions in increased profits. Meanwhile, the natural resources and infrastructure which supply the energy and other utilities are in the hands of private companies and individuals and price increases are driven by profiteering and delivering dividends to shareholders.

During the worst days of the pandemic workers kept society going at great risk to themselves and their families. They were temporarily and disingenuously hailed as heroes by employers and governments. Now they are again treated with contempt by those same governments and employers. Companies refuse to honour collective bargaining agreements, governments do nothing to support the workers, and in many cases threaten anti-trade union legislation to support the monopolies. In the past number of months, we have seen P&O Ferries sack 800 workers without warning by Zoom, and employ agency staff at £1.80 an hour to replace them. University Staff are currently taking industrial action against cuts to staff, pay and pensions. Many public sector workers are taking industrial action because pay increases are not keeping pace with unprecedented levels of inflation.

The capitalist class and their allies in government seek to lay blame on the pandemic and the war in Ukraine for high prices and low pay. They claim they cannot afford to put in place systems to deal with persistent and rising levels of poverty but are quite happy to spend billions of pounds to provide weapons and other forms of lethal destruction that kill and injure men, women and children and lay waste to infrastructure, ecosystems and environments in proxy wars across the world.

The devastating war in Ukraine is the result of increasing inter-imperialist rivalries. The victims are the Ukrainian and Russian working class. The US, the EU and NATO serve to escalate international tension, imperialist aggression and war. Comrades, we know that imperialism, as the highest stage of capitalism, is the enemy of peace and social progress. Peace requires social, economic and human rights for all and these conditions can only be met through the construction of a socialist society. We demand an end to all wars and oppression. We demand that utilities, transport and other essential services be taken in to public ownership. We demand a comprehensive programme to deliver well paid sustainable employment with full employment rights, which should include affordable child care, equal pay and an end to the gender pay gap, and allows women who sadly still bear the responsibility for looking after children to return to the workplace.

We demand an anti-poverty strategy and an end to health inequalities, a strategy for a comprehensive programme to deliver public housing to deal with the waiting list for homes and the immense homeless problem across the countries. We demand quality health, education, social care and social security systems that serve the working people.

Comrades, only a socialist society can deliver real change for working people and we must fight together to secure that change. The class-conscious labour and trade union movement across the world must work together, through collective organisation of the workers and coordinated action, to achieve those goals.

Thank you, comrades.