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HORSESHOE THEORY – AN ESTABLISHMENT FALLACY

By Kevin Creagh

In the last week in Irish media circles, much has been made about how, apparently, the far-right agitators that threatened and intimidated TDs outside the Dáil, are the same as their counterparts on the left. The argument goes that, by virtue of protesting, both sides are no different and both sides are lawless, violent thugs. They should both respect the rule of law and be docile.

Far-right fascists have attacked migrants in encampments and on the streets, burned down hotels used for Direct Provision, burned cars belonging to anti-racist TDs, protested outside TDs' homes and even threatened to murder one TD's wife. Of course, given that the working-class leftwing protest against racism, austerity, workers rights and more besides, this comparison falls down immediately. Predictably however, this doesn't stop the usual suspects at the Independent and the Times, along with well-known radio personalities and commentators, from hammering the same tired argument home until the news cycle shifts again and a new attack on workers and the left can materialise.

This is known as the Horseshoe Theory and it's based on the oversimplified idea that the far-left and far-right are the same.

The definition is as follows – *The horseshoe theory asserts that the far-left and the far-right, rather than being at opposite and opposing ends of a linear continuum of the political spectrum, closely resemble each other, analogous to the way that the opposite ends of a horseshoe are close together.*

Again, digging deeper, this is a way for the political "centre" (read the political establishment) to discredit the left and the organised working-class, to inevitably side with fascism. We only need to look at the reaction of An Garda Síochána to understand this. When workers and the left protest outside the Dáil, barriers are erected on Kildare Street and the Public Order Unit are never far away. When flashpoints occur as a result of fascist violence, there are calls to ban protests outside the Dáil completely.

Fascists are usually given a free reign and for the most part, treated with patience and respect. Gardaí use soft tactics and are often seen laughing and joking with fascists in a relaxed manner. During the summer, when fascists were entering libraries, destroying books and intimidating staff, it was the left – workers, migrant groups, trade unionists and anti-racists who were counter-protesting. These activists on the left were threatened with charges related to breaches of the peace and breaches of public order. All the while, fascist were escorted in to libraries to destroy books and hurl abuse at workers.

When comparing the Gardaí's response to the left and to working-class protesters, it's night and day.

A recent illegal eviction in Waterford was recorded by activists from tenants' union CATU. Usually, when someone is being illegally evicted, the Gardaí say it's a civil matter and therefore nothing to do with them. Oftentimes however, just like in Waterford, the Gardaí are seen blocking protesters, threatening them with public order offences and arresting activists. The Gardaí act as hired security for landlords to ensure an illegal eviction can take place. They protect the property of wealthy individuals over the welfare of citizens. This happens regularly.

The question must be asked then, if fascists and the working-class left are considered to be one and the same, why are the responses from the strong arm of the state so different?

One way to answer this is to look at which side is seen as a threat to establishment. The far-right are supporters of free-market capitalism and neoliberalism. While the foot soldiers of fascism are usually from the poorest sections of the working class, known as the lumpen proletariat, the leaders and more prominent members of Ireland's fascist movement are usually middle-class and are often small business owners, what Karl Marx called the petit bourgeois. They believe that profit is more important than the needs of the majority and as such, look to scapegoat refugees as a way to protect their financial interests. Elements of the Irish far-right have spoken out in favour of the eviction ban and against strikes. They are explicitly anti-working class. The left and the working class more broadly, at a minimum, want to make acute changes to society for the betterment of everyone and, in the case of the radical left, want to fundamentally change the capitalist system we currently live under. We are a threat to the status quo, even if change sought in the medium-term is small.

Comparisons of the far-left and far-right have been plentiful recently. One incident often discussed to "prove" that both sides are the same was the Jobstown protest in October 2014. Shockingly, the mainstream narrative is that Jobstown was a violent protest led by an unruly mob. This is far from the truth.

At that time, Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection Joan Burton, along with her advisor Karen O'Connell, were blocked by a sit-down protest on their exit from the Jobstown area of Tallaght for several hours. Burton was in Jobstown that day at an official event and an organic protest against her was organised by the community. Jobstown is one of Ireland's most deprived areas. During the deep austerity of the 2011-2016 Fine Gael/Labour government, the area was hit incredibly hard. Burton's role as Minister for Social Protection had a devastating impact on the community of Jobstown. Their anger was justified.

The lead protesters, including current People Before Profit TD Paul Murphy, were arrested in a string of dawn raids and charged with false imprisonment of Burton and O'Connell. In court, it was found that several Gardaí committed perjury and lied about the incidents of the day. Burton was also caught lying, claiming she feared for her safety but video evidence proved in court that she sat in the back of the car calmly while her advisor described angry working-class protesters as "the fucking dregs".

So why, almost a decade on, is this incident of organic and anti-austerity anger still talked about? Why is it apparently comparable to fascists intimidating TDs, assaulting migrants or committing racist arson attacks? The simple answer is this: working-class people are not supposed to fight back. However, when the far-right protest against vaccines, Trans and non-binary people or against refugees they're told by the establishment that they have legitimacy. Just last week, Tánaiste Micheál Martin claimed, a day after the government announced more tax cuts for the wealthy, that rising levels of immigration into Ireland would result in a tougher budget. The government will scapegoat refugees deliberately and fuel anti-immigration sentiment while hoarding money (more than €16bn in this case) ahead of addressing issues like housing, health or workers' rights.

The establishment will paint working class protesters and the left as just as bad as the far-right because the ruling class choose not to distinguish between genuine working class anger and anger fuelled by lies and conspiracy theories. As mentioned already, the left and the working-class aren't supposed to fight back but because they do, they are seen as "just the same". Our anger isn't justified because it threatens the establishment.

Workers, migrants, trade unionists, housing activists and other leftwing groups fight for housing for all, universal healthcare, refugee rights, workers' rights and more. The far-right, very openly, agitate for more church control, the death penalty for doctors who administer abortions, the hanging of TDs they deem

“treacherous”, the assault of refugees, migrants and people from the LGBTQ community and much, much more.

Fascism is capitalism in crisis. Fascism is a means by which capitalism can be preserved. It grows when the political centre fails the working-class. While, thankfully, we are not at a point where the ruling class feel it's appropriate to lean into fascism, some elements of the establishment have given the fuel to enable them to grow. The working class and the left have bravely stood against this at every opportunity, fighting for Socialism, fighting with and for working people, migrants and minorities.

We are not the same.

The RED Network (incorporating Rebel Telly) are a network of radical socialists within the political party People Before Profit, a 32-county people power movement on the island of Ireland.

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