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Ireland and pandemic

Ireland nationalizes hospitals – “It can be done”

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One of the most perplexing aspects of the pandemic lies in the apparent inability of the manufacturing industry in the most sophisticated economies ever known to humankind to switch decisively away from making and delivering stuff we don't need towards provision and distribution of ventilators, surgical masks, ICU equipment, test kits etc.

Instead of the car industry shutting down because of the stock market crash and collapse of supply lines, factories could be re-tooled and the 171,000 skilled workers transferred and speedily re-trained for far more urgently-needed products.

The most technologically advanced sector of car manufacture in the UK is focused on motorsports. It employs 38,000 workers. Why isn't this substantial bank of engineering and electronic skills being put to immediate constructive use?

We know that a transformation on this scale could be done, and done quickly, because it's been done before.

One difference on that occasion was that it was the means of waging war the ruling class urgently wanted, not equipment for the preservation of life.

Japanese airplanes bombed Pearl Harbour on December 7th, 1941. By Xmas, the US economy had been put on a radically different footing.

"It is not enough to turn out just a few more planes, a few more tanks, a few more guns, a few more ships than can be turned out by our enemies," President F.D. Roosevelt told the country in a radio broadcast on December 10th. "We must out-produce them overwhelmingly, so that there can be no question of our ability to provide a crushing superiority of equipment in any theatre of the world war."

In 1939, the United States army ranked 39th in the world in terms of military power. The country had not been involved in major conflict since the end of World War One. Its dominant ideology anathematised foreign intervention. Now, suddenly, the president was setting staggering targets and a giddy change of direction for military production. He dispatched a flurry of orders to owners of industry, trades union leaders, newspaper editors, party bosses, state legislators, etc. - your country needs you to stop what you are doing and join in a mighty effort to equip America to prevail in a global conflict.

The US went on to produce 60,000 aircraft in 1942, 125,000 in 1943, plus 120,000 tanks and 55,000 anti-aircraft guns in the same period - and trained a vast force to use them.

Industries were not asked or urged to meet these targets, but directly instructed. Managers and workers were effectively conscripted.

Roosevelt decreed that all car manufacture was to cease "right now." In 1941, the US manufactured more than three million cars. Between Roosevelt's speech and the end of the war in 1945, 139 rolled off the production lines. (Not a

misprint: 139.)

General Motors was told to switch immediately to making airplane engines, guns, trucks and tanks. Chrysler was to specialise in fuselages. Ford began frantic re-tooling. The average Ford car, the Model T, had some 15,000 parts. The airplane Ford was now instructed to make - the B-24 long-range bomber - had 1,550,000. By mid-1942, six months after Roosevelt's speech, B-24s were trundling off the line at a pace of one every 63 minutes.

It can be done.

Shipyards turned out vessels at such a rate that by the autumn of 1943 all Allied shipping sunk since 1939 - US, British, Australian etc. - had been replaced. In 1944, the United States built more planes than the Japanese managed to do during the entire course of the war.

By the end of the war, more than half of all industrial production in the world was taking place in the US and around 80 percent of this was war production.

America was transformed at a pace and to an extent which would have been dismissed just months previously as beyond the range of possibility. It was this, more than any other factor, which was to win the war - the production of what was needed for victory in the quantities and the time required.

It was this which set the US on the road to becoming the world's super-power.

As many as 16 million men and women were recruited, trained and shipped off to war. Half as many again, 24 million, poured into the defence industries back home - many earning more than they would previously have dared ask for.

Eighteen million women entered the workforce. African Americans and Latinos were brought in for the first time. Union officials policed production.

At the beginning of the war, Gulf Shipbuilding employed 240 men. By 1943, the number had risen to 11,600. The Alabama Dry Dock company went from 1,000 workers to 30,000 in 14 months. In Connecticut, the medium-sized Mattatuck Manufacturing Company switched overnight from making upholstery nails for furniture to cartridge clips for Springfield rifles - three million a week.

The American Brass Company, known for plumbing parts and decorative devices, began producing brass rods and tubes for weapons. The Chase Brass and Copper Company made more than 50 million cartridge cases and mortar shells and more than a billion bullets.

And so on. Patterns of production changed out of all recognition. It can be done.

A union official in Alabama recalled factories clanking and whirring around the clock. "For the workers, it was seven days a week, 12-hour days, 10 hours on Saturday, eight hours on Sunday, on and on, in and out, over and over and over and over again.

"The one thing was to produce material to win the war."

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The economy boomed to dizzying heights. The Depression disappeared in the slipstream of rocketing manufacture. The US was to end the war as the most powerful economic and military force in the world, and with a society different in dozens of ways.

The massive movement of African Americans from the South into Northern industrial centres like Chicago and Detroit generated a cultural as well as an economic shift. New sounds eddied out. It was thus that Motown was born.

Capitalist society had changed but had not been overthrown. Some things stayed the same. Jim Crow still skulked. Women remained oppressed. The gulf between the rich and the rest yawned wide. But many of the changes which happened were to prove irreversible. Things hadn't quite returned to normal. "Normal" was gone.

It wasn't that everything changed for the better but that everything changed, some of which was for the better and which we managed to retain.

What had generated this altered state was that the imminence of an existential threat had smashed into the consciousness of a relatively enlightened leadership of the US ruling class which responded as rapidly and appropriately as capitalist thinking allowed.

This is not an exact model for moving forward now. But it has lessons for now which it's useful to think on.

Can we match the soaring leap in production of armoured cars and ships and 'planes under Roosevelt with a hike the likes of which has never been witnessed in production of ventilators, masks, protective clothing, testing units and whatever else the NHS tells us we need?

Can we switch en masse into new areas of manufacture appropriate to the scarifying age we live in?

Can we create comprehensive high-quality, home-based education system for now and for future generations?

Can this generation mimic or even outdo the shift in attitudes and assumptions in the US in the 1940s?

Yes, we can. It can be done.

Who will argue now that the future of our society, even of our civilisation, is contingent on ceding power to a super-clever elite rather than on the sweat and genius of the working class?

What class of people would now dare deny a nurse's pay claim? Or insist that our public services must give way to private enterprise, that need must wait on greed, the market let rip through every aspect of our lives?

In face of the coronavirus pandemic, eternal orthodoxies have become old hat.

Ideology has been twisted back into shape.

However things work out in the coming days, weeks, months, years, struggle will continue at ever deeper levels. It is through the experience of struggle that we will shape the world anew. The defenders of the old order haven't gone away, but have hunkered down to wait for their hour to come again.

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If we steady ourselves, keep focus on the obdurate truths of class conflict, evident through the fog of fear and confusion in and around us, we will better see the outline of the terrain on which we will have to fight.

We will have socialism or barbarism, Rosa Luxemburg warned. Her truth has never loomed so large.

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