



The party in the flats

Relationships between housing movements and the political party form in the 1970s Irish rent strikes

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Abstract

The complex relationships between housing movements and the political party form have not been theorised or explored in depth. This article investigates the potential role of political parties in both politicising housing struggles as well as in undermining the autonomy and militancy of grassroots housing action. It draws on theories of the relationship between political parties and mass movements using the concept of the 'party as articulator', which identifies the party's key functions as unifying social forces, politicising mass movements and providing continuity and stability over time. These perspectives are applied to the mass rent strikes which took place in Ireland in the early 1970s. We highlight the failure of any single party to fully carry out the role of articulator which arises from the fact that none possessed both organic roots in the tenants' movement while simultaneously articulating radical demands and politicising the rent strikes. The article also investigates the tension between grassroots housing movements and parties oriented towards electoral politics. It demonstrates that, in the case study, the weakness of the institutional left in Ireland meant that it was not possible to fully co-opt and demobilise the rent strikes by redirecting them towards electoralism. The article's overall contribution is the development of a framework to understand the specific activities through which political parties might contribute to generalising and politicising housing movements.

Keywords

Rent strikes, organisation, Ireland, housing, political parties

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1. Introduction

There are many challenges which must be faced to build the type of radical, autonomous, mass movements required to address housing injustice. These include maintaining autonomy in the face of pressures towards co-option by the state as well as building radical political forces that identify links and create common cause with other movements. There is an acknowledged potential for housing movements to evolve in a reformist direction and end up contributing to the stabilisation of the status quo because struggles over everyday, material issues, such as housing, do not necessarily or spontaneously develop a coherent analysis of the roots of exploitation (Gann & Sparrow, 2020; Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Historically, one response to this problem has been to call for an organisation united by a common radical ideology which is capable of intervening in and contributing to the development and politicisation of other social struggles, typically a political party (e.g. Lenin, 1902). However, the question of political party involvement in community and housing struggles is extremely fraught and is likely to conjure up images of factionalism and bureaucratic control, or what Rolf (2021, p. 171) describes as ‘the real historical conflict between independent grassroot organisations and political parties in housing and labour history’.

Responding to these issues, this article explores the relationship between housing movements and political parties including the potential contribution of the party form to politicising struggles for housing justice as well as the reverse scenario whereby parties may undermine autonomy and contribute to demobilisation. The specific research questions are: first, in what context and according to what model of the party could it contribute to stronger and more radical housing movements; and second, what explains instances where party involvement leads to a loss of autonomy and demobilisation. The paper draws on a substantial existing literature on the history of radical housing movements, which has touched on these themes without theorising the party and its relationship to mass organisations (Ealham, 2004; Poy, 2021; Rolf, 2021). It focuses on rent strikes as a form of often illegal direct action that challenges the norms of electoral politics (Moorhouse et al., 1972). The paper then draws on theories regarding the relationship between political parties and ‘mass organisations’, referring to those based on a shared position as tenants or workers, rather than ideology (e.g. Lenin, 1902; Nunes, 2021; Tronti, 2020). It explores the concept of the ‘party as articulator’ (Mohandesi, 2020), which identifies the party’s key functions as unifying social forces, politicising mass movements and providing continuity and stability over time, to understand how parties might ideally interact with mass movements. These perspectives are then applied to a case study of the 1970s rent strikes in Ireland which draws on interviews and archival research. We highlight the failure of any party to fully carry out the role of articulator, which arises from the fact that there was no single party which possessed both organic roots in the tenants’ movement and was simultaneously able to articulate radical demands and politicise the movement. The article also investigates the tension between grassroots housing movements and parties oriented towards electoral politics, but demonstrates that in the case study, the weakness of the institutional left in

Ireland meant that it was not possible to fully co-opt and demobilise the rent strikes by redirecting them towards electoralism.

This article and research on the history of rent strikes in Ireland upon which it draws is part of a militant research project undertaken with(in) the Community Action Tenants Union Ireland (CATU). For more on this project, see Tubridy (2024). By focusing on the party, we are not suggesting that this is the necessary endpoint of organisation, given that there are compelling arguments for other organisational forms in different circumstances (Kalisz, 2020). Instead, the focus arises from a recognition that parties have been and continue to be important actors in housing struggles and this situation merits analysis. More immediately, this work responds to CATU's need to consider its relationships with political parties, particularly given the strong possibility of a new left-wing government in Ireland led by Sinn Féin, which has made housing one of its central campaign promises. This will necessarily pose critical dilemmas for grassroots housing movements which will be forced to decide how to position themselves. More generally, this paper aims to contribute to the small but vitally important literature by and for grassroots housing movements that provides opportunities for knowledge sharing and reflection on strategic challenges (e.g. Ferreri et al., 2024; Wilde, 2019).

2. The politics of housing struggles and the role of the party

There is great variety in the politics of housing movements, which can adopt radical or reformist orientations. This requires caution given that some arguments that housing struggles are reformist derive from an incorrect assumption that struggles in the sphere of social reproduction can never fundamentally threaten the capitalist system (Gray, 2018c). There are, however, examples of housing struggles that end up contributing to the stabilisation of the system for various reasons, including co-option by the state. Madden and Marcuse (2016, p. 119), for example, show how the state channels 'system-challenging' housing demands into 'system-maintaining' forms to support continued capital accumulation. While less the case today, tenants' organisations in Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK) have often identified themselves as 'non-political'. This was generally intended as non-party political, but also, according to Bradley (2014), has left organisations open to co-option. In addition, housing struggles often represent short-term mobilisations by those aspiring to return to normality who do so once the immediate threat has been dealt with (Madden & Marcuse, 2016).

In terms of explicit demands, even radical forms of direct action such as rent strikes have adopted relatively modest, reformist demands (Ealham, 2004). Hampton's (1970, p. 273), albeit conservative, analysis of the Sheffield rent strikes in the late 1960s argues that the majority of tenants were acting in their own particular, sectional interests, meaning it was unrealistic to aspire to generalise their struggle. Hampton (1970, p. 273) writes: 'a tenants association is the local community acting in defence of their homes, and community feeling, as we have shown, is restricted to one's immediate environment. This is why attempts by local political activists to "widen the struggle" into an attack on their political enemies, or the

“capitalist system” in general, usually result in failure and disagreement.’ In their analysis of contemporary tenant organising, Sparrow and Gann (2020), developing Lenin’s concept of ‘trade union consciousness’, suggest that tenants’ unions could become characterised by ‘tenants’ union consciousness’ associated with the assumed adequacy of spontaneous experience of housing exploitation for political understanding and transformation. They (2020) suggest that this could lead to a situation where the political horizon of the movement would be ‘to combine in unions, fight the landlords and strive to pass necessary housing legislation’. They argue that such objectives, while important, are insufficient and could result in a single-issue approach to the housing question and a disregard for other interrelated forms of oppression. Although it is not an issue that Sparrow and Gann address, Lenin’s answer to trade union consciousness centres on the party, the idea explored in this paper.

There is an existing body of literature which touches on the role of political parties in the context of housing struggles, including rent strikes. This provides relevant insights including various examples of practical, material support and the provision of organisational and leadership experience (Wood & Baer, 2006). Sklair (1975, p. 287) describes how, in the UK rent strikes in the early 1970s, party activists provided valuable organisational skills and leadership and ‘consistently put the interests of the tenants before the interests of the IS [International Socialists], CP [Communist Party] or any other organisation’. Further valuable insights are provided by Quirico (2021) who describes the role of the Italian far-left political formation, Lotta Continua, in militant housing movements in 1970s Italy. She (2021, p. 154) describes how Lotta Continua’s analysis of the need for joint struggles inside and outside the factory became manifest in the effective ‘Take Back the City’ strategy. This was an ‘endeavour to connect up diverse and often sector-specific foci of mobilisation and, above all, to link each of these foci to an overall anticapitalistic project’. Elsewhere, Ealham (2004, p. 100) discusses the role of the *Conjunto Nacional de Trabajo* (CNT), the anarchist trade union, in rent strikes in Barcelona in the 1930s where its position in the trade union movement provided vital opportunities to ‘unit[e] the fight for community self-determination with the struggle for workers’ control of industry’ manifest in displays of trade union solidarity such as a three-day general strike.

Conversely, there are instances where party involvement has contributed to demobilisation, loss of autonomy and defeat. Rolf’s (2021) analysis of the Swedish housing movement in the 1920s and 1930s highlights tensions between the centralised, bureaucratic forms of tenant organising supported by the social democratic party and the use of direct action, including rent strikes, by autonomous tenants’ organisations. Further conflicts are described in Poy’s (2021) analysis of rent strikes in the early 20th century where, in New York, the Socialist Labor Party dismissed the tenants’ struggle as irrelevant compared to struggles in the workplace. In Buenos Aires, the Socialist Party failed to support rent strikes due to its electoral orientation and opposition to direct action. The British Labour Party also played a key role in suppressing tenant agitation in the 1960s and 1970s. This includes the St Pancras rent strikes in the late 1960s where Labour refused to support the withholding of rent and eviction resistance due to its electoral focus (Burn, 1972). Nevertheless, as the campaign developed the tenants shifted to supporting Labour who had promised to

introduce a new rent system if elected, but failed to follow through. As described by Burn (1972, p. 22), the tenants ‘had pinned their hopes and policies onto a one-party political bandwagon and it had broken down, leaving them completely stranded’. Sklair (1975) provides an equally critical analysis of the campaign against the Housing Finance Act in the early 1970s where ineffective parliamentary opposition diverted energy from more militant tactics. He (1975, p. 253) outlines the Labour leadership’s role in quashing support for extra-legal forms of opposition due to their belief that ‘parliamentary and constitutionalist methods [would] gradually bring about socialism’.

2.1 Political parties and housing struggles in Ireland

The left in Ireland has historically been extremely weak in electoral terms. Since the foundation of the state in 1922, parliamentary politics has been dominated by two conservative, right-wing parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. This has been attributed to the lack of a large urban working class, a conservative political culture associated with the power of the Catholic church and the importance of the national question, which has diverted attention from social and economic issues (Gallagher, 1982; McCabe, 2017). Although the situation has changed recently, the largest party of the left has historically been the Irish Labour Party which was formed in 1912 to give political expression to the trade union movement. From the outset, its politics were ‘labourist’ rather than socialist in the sense of pursuing the rights of workers rather than fundamental social, political or economic change. Throughout its history the party has consistently favoured the most incremental of reforms and has demonstrated its firm commitment to the institutions of the state (McGuire, 2015; Purseil, 2007).

There have been and continue to be an array of radical parties explicitly aiming to bring about a socialist transformation of Irish society. While mostly marginal in electoral terms, parties of the radical left have been influential in trade unions and other social movements (Milotte, 1984). These include Official Sinn Féin (OSF), which was previously a conservative nationalist party but shifted to the left in the late 1960s as it sought to build support for national liberation. It became the largest and most influential of the radical left parties from the 1960s to the 1980s (Hanley & Millar, 2010). During the twentieth century, there were also a series of orthodox communist parties aligned with the Soviet Union. The most recent iteration, the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI), was formed through a merger of the Irish Workers League and the Communist Party of Northern Ireland in 1970. From the 1950s onwards there have been a variety of Trotskyist groups including factions within Labour and others which united in 1971 to form the Socialist Workers Movement (SWM), now People Before Profit (PBP). PBP is currently the most electorally successful explicitly anti-capitalist party in Ireland (Crossey & Monaghan, 1996; Cunningham, 2015).

Parties of the radical left have been critical actors in housing struggles in Ireland (Tubridy & Breathnach, 2022; Tubridy, 2023a). The most well-known example is undoubtedly the Dublin Housing Action Campaign (DHAC) which was effectively a front for OSF and the CPI and which resisted evictions and carried out political occupations in

the late 1960s. This built on the Republican tradition of physical force and direct action while also reflecting connections with the New Left and the European squatting movement (Cullinane, 2010; McEneaney, 2019). According to Cullinane (2010), DHAC's campaign represented, for a time, a successful unification of armed struggle and political agitation and of the national and social questions. However, O'Connor Lysaght (1976) criticises the role of both OSF and the CPI in DHAC for refusing to allow the movement to grow lest it challenged their control, and for adopting a single-issue approach to the housing question which assumed that it could be addressed in isolation from any broader social and economic transformation. In comparison to housing movements under party control, there has not been any investigation of the role of parties in more grassroots and autonomous movements, which is the focus of this article.

3. Mass organisations and the party form

Thus far the article has outlined previous research on housing struggles which touches on the role of political parties. However, this literature has not substantially theorised the party form and its relationships to other movements. In fact, the so-called question of organisation and the potential role of the party in left-wing strategy is a topic of lively discussion for various reasons, including the failures of horizontalist, 'spontaneous' forms of organisation associated with Occupy, such as their short-lived nature, lack of clear demands and openness to co-option, in response to which there have been various calls for a return to 'the party' (e.g. Bevens, 2023; Dean, 2016). These are not new debates and echo Lenin's arguments regarding spontaneity in 'What is to be Done' (1902), where he argues against 'economism', meaning against a focus on supporting the spontaneous struggles of workers over immediate material conditions. Economism, he claims, 'reduc[es] the working class movement and the class struggle to narrow trade unionism and to a "realistic" struggle for petty, gradual reforms'. Instead, he argues for a revolutionary party that would coalesce the broad diversity of working class political struggles into one single movement: '[T]he all-round political agitation will be conducted by a party which unites into one inseparable whole the assault on the government in the name of the entire people' (Lenin, 1902). Although in a different historical context Tronti, in 'The Party in the Factory' (2020), makes a similar argument that the party is necessary to generalise mass unrest and make the shift from economic to political demands that benefit the entire working class, rather than specific sections thereof.¹

Aspects of these arguments are certainly valid, including the fact that mass unrest does not necessarily evolve in a socialist direction and that there is a continued need for the functions that parties used to perform including 'designing strategies and sustaining struggles through downturns in mobilisation' (Nunes, 2021, p. 174). However, Nunes (2021, p. 15) also notes that those making calls for a return to the party are 'frustratingly reticent' when it

¹ Tronti's position should be seen in the context of his later controversial departure from *operaismo* and rejoining of the Italian Communist Party, linked to his emphasis on the need for struggle for control of the state through the party and theory of the 'autonomy of the political' (see Anastasi & Mandarini, 2020).

comes to spelling out what this might mean in practice, including how evident flaws in dominant models of party organisation might be overcome. These include, particularly, parties' isolation from the majority of the working class and a consequent inability to make demands that resonate with popular feeling (McNally, 2019). In response, authors have outlined alternative models of the party and how it might relate to the diversity of social struggles through the idea of 'vanguard functions' (Nunes, 2021) the 'connective party' (Porcaro, 2011) and 'the party as articulator' (Mohandesi, 2020). In doing so, they broadly follow what Nunes (2021) describes as an 'ecological' understanding of the party, which involves recognising that parties are and should see themselves as one amongst many other organisations in a broader movement ecology, to which they can contribute by performing specific functions without dominating the political field. Here we draw particularly on Mohandesi's (2020) work to theorise the potential relationship between parties and housing movements, while also highlighting similarities with other authors' ideas.

Mohandesi's (2020) concept of 'party as articulator' understands the party as 'an organisation amongst others, one defined by its articulating function, as that which unites disparate social forces, links struggles over time, and facilitates the collective project of building socialism beyond the state.' In practical terms, this involves three specific functions including, first, drawing together social forces by building 'unity from below', which is achieved by creating opportunities for encounter and collaboration between different movements. Mohandesi (2020) continues that 'social forces only link up when there is something at stake, when their members see that allying with another force is essential to accomplishing their goals' and argues that success thus depends on the party having 'organic roots' in diverse social struggles: 'the more embedded a party, the more deeply it is tied to autonomous organisations, and the more compositionally diverse it can become, the more effective of an articulator it can be'. This emphasis on the party as facilitating unification is similar to Porcaro's (2011) concept of 'the connective party' as 'part of an ecology whose specific function is connecting different, autonomously existing initiatives.'

The second key function is that of politicising movements in a socialist direction by advancing a coherent political programme that resonates with the circumstances of a given movement. Similar to unification, this can also only be achieved through being embedded in and understanding the history of a specific struggle. This resonates with Nunes' (2021, p. 181) description of the role of the vanguard-function as 'not to explain to people what their desire is, let alone what it ought to be, but to listen to the stirrings of that desire, to incite it, to bring it out into the open; to help give it shape'. It also echoes Tronti's (2020, p. 163) account of political interventions in mass struggle as a 'moment of verification' for the party's programme, without which it will become disconnected and irrelevant. The final critical function identified by Mohandesi (2020) is to combat the erasure of working class history and provide continuity between different cycles of struggle by acting as a repository for historical memory and a durable network of activists. This is one role which is widely agreed amongst many different commentators (e.g. Cavanagh, 2019) and resonates, in particular, with Lenin's (1902) argument regarding the need for a party to ensure stability and transmission of knowledge between different struggles.

In the preceding section, we have outlined normative theories regarding the party form and its relationship to mass movements. Relating this to the politics of housing struggles, a shared concern is that of reformism, with the party suggested as a possible response to generalise and politicise mass unrest. The party also provides a possible response to the tendency of housing movements to dissipate after their immediate goals are achieved and the associated lack of continuity and memory (Gray, 2018b). While not claiming it as definitive, we find the concept of party as articulator to be a useful distillation of key points from recent writing about the relationship between parties and mass movements. The remainder of the paper considers the role of political parties in the 1970s Irish rent strikes. It investigates to what extent they have lived up to these idealised notions of what parties might contribute. Relating back to the literature on the role of parties in demobilising housing movements, we also explore what other models of the party are apparent. This case study was chosen as it represents Ireland's most recent mass housing movement. While it may seem anachronistic to investigate a past movement through the lens of contemporary theory, the idea is to learn from past movements through a discussion of what the potential role of parties might be as well as analysing if and why this has not been the reality. In addition, although there are very significant differences between the 1970s and the present, radical left political parties in Ireland have always been small and marginal in electoral terms, meaning there are important similarities between Ireland in the 1970s and the situation confronted today both in Ireland and elsewhere.

4. Methods

The empirical sections of this paper draw on evidence gathered as part of a wider collaborative project undertaken by the authors as members of CATU. The project involved oral history interviews with 30 people who participated in the rent strikes and extensive archival research. This paper draws specifically on a subset of those interviews with people who were also members of left-wing political parties, specifically two members of OSF, two members of the CPI and one member of the SWM. Although none of its members were interviewed, the analysis includes the role of Labour. The paper also draws on archival sources, including newspapers published by the four parties as well as those produced by other smaller left groups. Lastly, while the interviews had relatively even representations of cisgender men and women across the wider research project, all the party members interviewed were men, the significance of which is discussed later in the analysis.

The rent strikes which occurred in Ireland between 1970 and 1973 were a significant social movement in which tens of thousands of public housing tenants participated throughout the Republic of Ireland. The movement emerged in direct response to threatened rent increases, but there was a wider array of grievances including a lack of services and facilities in public housing estates and a desire for greater control over their management. The strikes developed through independent action by local tenants' associations around the country before coalescing into a single movement under the leadership of the National Association of Tenants Organisations (NATO). After the general election in 1973, NATO succeeded in negotiating a deal with the government which provided rent reductions, better

terms for tenants who wanted to purchase their homes, and recognition of NATO as the official representative organisation for public housing tenants (Tubridy, 2023b).

Despite its success, there are valid questions regarding whether the rent strike could have been extended or politicised. According to Mohandesi (2012), each cycle of struggle gives rise to new organisational forms that act as ‘gathering points’ for different sections of the working class, including progressive and conservative elements. This is an apt description of the tenants’ associations which sprang up in the 1960s in Ireland in response to housing and community issues, which often adopted conservative positions on anti-social behaviour, gender and religion.² The development of the rent strikes also involved the transformation of wide-ranging grievances into a relatively narrow set of demands for ‘realistic’ reforms. A NATO spokesperson, for example, described having succeeded in forcing the government ‘to remove the anomalies’³ in the rent assessment and tenant purchase schemes, which frames the issue as one of addressing irregularities in an otherwise equitable system. NATO did not seek to politicise high rents in council housing by linking them to private control of finance or extend its demands to control over public housing estates and there were limited links with other organisations or struggles. It also sought and won improved terms for those seeking to purchase their council houses which led to wholesale privatisation of public housing. The remainder of the paper explores what role parties might have played in combating reformism or opportunism or in exacerbating these tendencies.

5. ‘Organic roots’ in the rent strikes

In an article on rent strikes in the UK in the 1970s, Sklair (1975) describes how the tenants’ movement, which was comprised of ‘many small protests, located mainly in the provinces, and relatively autonomous working class activity,’ contrasts with a media narrative ‘of a sheeplike working class led by the nose into radical adventures by an extremist trade union movement, revolutionary left, or even Labour Party.’ This is also an apt description of the Irish rent strikes which were not initiated by any external organisation and developed through independent local action in response to a diverse range of grievances (Tubridy, 2023b). NATO also described itself as ‘non-political’, which was a common claim amongst tenants’ associations in the UK at this time (Bradley, 2014). Similar to such instances, this was intended to mean non-party political, (‘to prevent local Fianna Fáil parties, in particular, using tenants’ organisations as fronts,’⁴) although this interpretation was sometimes challenged as discussed below. This contrasts with the Dublin Housing Action Committee (DHAC), which was active during the late 1960s and was dominated by OSF and the CPI (Hanley & Millar, 2010). Nonetheless, the rent strikes were broadly supported by the radical left parties albeit with different levels of involvement, which contradicts the idea that the CPI and OSF were willing to be involved in other movements only when they were under party control (e.g. O’Connor Lysaght, 1976). In terms of practical involvement one senior

² See, for example, Ó Dochartaigh’s (1997) analysis of the politics of tenants’ association in Derry.

³ *Irish Socialist*, September 1973, p.3

⁴ *The Worker*, March 1973, p.3.

member of OSF was also a longstanding member of the NATO national executive, but stated in an interview that this did not reflect a wider connection with the party:

Looking at me on the executive you'd look at it and say it was part of a plan. It was not! Supporting this contention, there was relatively limited coverage in the main party newspaper, *The United Irishman*, certainly when compared to DHAC. There was much more obvious OSF involvement in the rent strikes which continued in Cork after 1973 which were undertaken by the 'multi-political' Joint Cork Corporation Tenants Council.⁵ The CPI seemingly had relatively extensive involvement in the NATO rent strikes with regular updates from several areas in Dublin published in the party newspaper, *The Irish Socialist*, which provided valuable publicity for the movement. One of the CPI members interviewed was also chair of the Ballyfermot Community Association, one of the largest tenants' associations affiliated to NATO. In contrast, there is less evidence of SWM participation which was attributed by the member interviewed to the party's workerist orientation, which aligns with the focus of other Trotskyist groups in Ireland at the time (Cunningham, 2015), and its focus on national liberation:

Our whole emphasis at that time was much more about the question of the North and trade unions.

The case of Labour is more complex as there were individual members involved but also evidence of varying levels of support. For example, in 1971 *Labour News Bulletin* noted that Labour councillors were adopting contradictory positions on the rent strikes.⁶ Despite the different levels of involvement between the parties, the members who were interviewed, far from being outsiders or entryists, were all deeply invested in the movement, often stemming from their own status as tenants. As such, the interviewees meet the requirement set down by Mohandesi (2020) regarding 'building organic roots' within mass organisations outside the party as a prerequisite for politicisation and unity with other social forces.

6. Unity from below

As noted previously, there were limited overt connections between the rent strikes and other political struggles, including the trade union movement, Republicanism or women's liberation. There were, for example, instances of conflict over the reluctance of trade unions to support the rent strike despite resolutions to this effect being passed by the membership.⁷ There was also antagonism between NATO and the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (IWLM) whose members, according to the NATO newspaper, came from the 'higher echelon' of society and 'carry out spectacular forays periodically and return quickly and speedily to the security of their wealthy husbands and homes'.⁸ The ideological side of this is discussed below, including the extent to which parties provided an analysis that identified

⁵ *Limerick Socialist*, May 1975, p.5

⁶ *Labour News Bulletin*, June 1971, p.2.

⁷ *The Tenant*, 5th September 1973, p.8.

⁸ *The Tenant*, 19th September 1973, p.7

connections in order to ‘show how different struggles are interconnected’ (Mohandesi, 2020), but here we focus more on instances of practical solidarity or ‘unity from below’.

One form of solidarity between the trade union movement and tenants’ associations were instances where trade union members mobilised to resist evictions through rank-and-file initiative, such as in County Clare in 1971 and Coolock in Dublin in June 1972. Another example from Ballyfermot provides an example of how such connections were developed through the embeddedness of party activists in different movements and the related role of the party as articulator. This instance arose due to the influence of one CPI member who was also chair of the Ballyfermot Community Association as well as an activist in DHAC and the plumbers’ trade union:

I ended up joining the Communist Party anyway and that's how I got involved in all these other things... I started getting interested in trade unionism. Through trade unions I got interested in housing.

The relationships and trust developed through these different involvements came into play in the rent strike when this interviewee used his connections to establish a system whereby unionised workers would assist with resisting evictions in Ballyfermot, providing an example of Mohandesi’s (2020) argument that social forces link up ‘when their members see that allying with another force is essential to accomplishing their goals’. There are, however, other examples of resistance to developing connections with other movements. These include another Dublin CPI member’s description of refusing support from other organisations due to the perceived necessity to keep the struggle ‘non-political’ and exclusively focused on tenants.

We didn’t want any offers in from anyone. There was no politicians involved because the minute we got involved with them... The IRA was there. They came down and they said they’d put in a few units from Derry and we said no. The Stickies⁹ were there. They wanted to put people in and we said no. It was too dangerous to become political because the minute they knew that any group was in beside us they’d exploit that situation so you have to keep non-political and non-sectarian... We were in there for the tenants, people getting robbed left right and centre and that’s what we kept it.

The avoidance of entanglements with other political forces evidenced here arguably illustrates a relatively limited, single-issue strategy. There are parallels with O’Connor Lysaght’s (1976) critique of the CPI’s role in DHAC, as based on the assumption that the ‘problem had its own particular solution’ which could be achieved in isolation from broader social and economic transformations. There are also clear similarities with Hampton’s (1970, p. 260) description of the rent strikes in Sheffield where tenants were unwilling to broaden the scope of the campaign to avoid ‘embarrassing political commitments’. At the same time, refusing support from armed Republicans was perhaps an understandable choice given that it would have led to state repression.

⁹ Official Sinn Féin

7. Politicising the rent strikes

All four parties, including Labour, sought, to a greater or lesser extent, to politicise the rent strikes by providing their own interpretation of the underlying issues. One common line of argument was that the reliance of local councils on private finance for public housing meant that higher rents were required to cover interest repayments and, ultimately, to provide a profit for financial institutions. This was typically followed by a demand for nationalisation of the banks.¹⁰ Aside from this, analysis of the commentary in party newspapers demonstrates that what were identified as the core, underlying issues derived largely from each party's pre-existing ideological commitments. This is clearly illustrated by the case of OSF who focused heavily on state repression of housing activism. For example, one of the first articles published in *The United Irishman* concerning the rent strikes described an attempted eviction in Clare where tenants were being threatened with legislation which had been introduced to criminalise squatting in response to DHAC's activities.¹¹ The article thus identified a shared interest between DHAC and the rent strikers and also reflected OSF's efforts to organise a civil rights movement in the Republic based on that in Northern Ireland, where it had been highly successful (Cullinane, 2010). However, the article does not directly mention the rent strikes and the reasons for the eviction remain unclear, much less providing an analysis of the core grievances with rent, housing conditions and social reproduction. It reflects a distorted interpretation which was likely to have little relevance to most tenants.

The case of the SWM is notable for providing more critical analysis than OSF or the CPI. Coverage of the rent strikes in *The Worker* repeatedly highlighted the need to broaden the struggle and build connections with private tenants and the trade union movement. In the latter case, the paper argued that 'the gap could be bridged more effectively through linking the demands for lower rents with those for higher wages'.¹² Its commentary also suggested that the movement should put forward political demands for democratisation of state services and institutions: 'we should raise demands towards tenants' control of estates, and of corporation and council services'.¹³ Another key focus was criticism of NATO's self-identification as a 'non-political' organisation which supposedly prevented it from providing an accurate analysis of the underlying causes of the tenants' grievances and meaningful opposition thereto: 'they must see that it is no longer possible to pretend that the fight against rent increases is non-political. It is a fight against the priorities of the present government and these are political priorities.'¹⁴ This point was echoed by smaller far-left parties such as the British and Irish Communist Organisation, Young Socialists and Limerick Socialist Organisation, who argued that 'a "non-political" organisation like NATO is... destined to remain nibbling harmlessly away within the framework of the present system'.¹⁵ These criticisms may have been justified but also reflect a lack of understanding of the movement, including how participants understood their own actions. This is illustrated particularly well

¹⁰ *Irish Socialist*, January 1970, p.2; *The Worker*, February 1972, p.8.

¹¹ *The United Irishman*, November 1971, p.2.

¹² *The Worker*, November 1972, p.6.

¹³ *The Worker*, February 1972, p.8.

¹⁴ *The Worker*, June 1972, p.8.

¹⁵ *Limerick Socialist*, April 1972, p.6.

by a letter from a tenant published in *The Worker* in response to these criticisms. The author stated that ‘the non-political, non-sectarian clauses in NATO’s constitution are merely phrases commonly used in organisations such as this. *Obviously it is political* [emphasis added].’¹⁶

Another important point is the contrast between the political analysis provided in newspapers and the attitude of party members who seemingly did not engage in ideological debates or seek to politicise the rent strike beyond the examples provided so far. Rather, the core contributions made by party members were relatively practical and related mostly to organisational and leadership experience. There are clear parallels with O’Connor Lysaght’s (1976) analysis of the CPI’s involvement in trade unions, although not necessarily limited to that party, which argues that ‘the Communists have acted simply as more efficient and militant trade unionists than the bureaucracy or the bulk of the rank and file. This is part of what is needed but not all’. The role of party members also resonates with Lenin’s (1902) criticism of how the economic strand of the Russian revolutionary movement envisaged that party members should engage with mass organisations. Lenin argues that their ideal type is ‘the trade union secretary’, who makes practical contributions through their experience and skill as an organiser and thereby ‘helps the workers to carry on the economic struggle’. He continues that, while valuable, this is not sufficient and that the socialist ideal should be ‘the tribune of the people who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression... to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation’ (Lenin, 1902).

8. Historical continuity

A final function of the party as described by Mohandesi (2020), amongst others, is that of providing continuity between different cycles of struggle. NATO as an organisation was, in fact, relatively durable in comparison with other housing movements, continuing in existence until approximately the early 1990s, at which point its social base had been eroded by the privatisation of public housing. Despite its longevity, until the beginning of the recent CATU project on NATO and the rent strikes its history had been almost entirely forgotten (Tubridy, 2024). This contrasts with the status of the four parties discussed above which, despite name changes and splits, all continue to exist in broadly the same form and, in principle, provide a framework for the transmission of knowledge and experience over time. In practice, there have been very few systematic efforts to record and share the history of the radical left in Ireland. For example, there are few comprehensive studies of the history of any of the radical left parties, with Hanley and Millar (2010) being a notable exception. The parties themselves have made limited efforts to tell their own history or ensure records are archived. Nonetheless, they have a level of continuity through their membership associated with the continued involvement of older members. Due to their continued connection to the social movement ecology in Ireland, it was easier to identify and recruit party members for interviews as part of the present project than those who participated in

¹⁶ *The Worker*, October 1973, p.6.

the rent strikes but had no further political involvement. While only on a modest scale, this attests to how these parties function as a ‘living archive’ (Mohandesi, 2020) that can help counter the loss of traditions of struggle over time.

9. The Labour Party

No examination of this topic would be complete without an account of the role of Labour and the relationship between the rent strikes and electoral politics. Labour had, in the late 1960s, shifted dramatically to the left with leader Brendan Corish famously declaring that, under Labour, ‘the seventies will be socialist’ (Puirseil, 2007, p. 238). However, the party’s ideology remained extremely incoherent and its elected representatives were overwhelmingly conservative rural TDs¹⁷ focused on local issues. Its overarching concern was with harnessing the radical energy of the period and redirecting it towards electoral success (Puirseil, 2007). In contrast to British Labour in the 1960s and 70s, the party did not condemn the withholding of rent or suggest that parliamentary politics was the only legitimate form of action (Burn, 1972). This is likely related to differences in influence rather than ideology given that Irish Labour could not credibly claim that it would address tenants’ grievances through state institutions. According to some of the other left parties, the lack of political analysis on the part of NATO allowed Labour to portray itself as on the side of the working class by calling for alterations to the rent assessment system, despite its fundamentally opportunistic and reformist politics. For example, an article in a tenant newspaper associated with the Limerick Socialist Organisation claimed that local Labour figures ‘have had a completely free hand to represent themselves as the political representatives of Limerick tenants and workers’.¹⁸

The general election of 1973 was a decisive point in the rent strikes in which Labour played a critical role. Before this, NATO had gained a commitment from the main opposition parties, Fine Gael and Labour, that, if elected, they would address the ‘unjust aspects’ of the rent assessment system and introduce a ‘fair national system of tenant purchase’.¹⁹ Action on these points was supported even by some right-wing TDs to encourage private homeownership and because the differential rent system, whereby tenants paid more rent if their income increased, could be seen as ‘a disincentive to the industrial growth of the community’.²⁰ Notably, nationalisation of private banks and building societies, identified as the cause of rent increases, had been adopted as Labour policy but was jettisoned in order to strike an election pact with Fine Gael (Gallagher, 1982). However, NATO called for its supporters to vote for the opposition parties who were then elected and formed a coalition government, and a settlement was reached in August 1973. According to its left critics, NATO had handed over the working class vote to Fine Gael and Labour and gained only limited concessions in return: ‘NATO in throwing in its lot with the National Coalition also

¹⁷ Members of parliament

¹⁸ *Southill News*, November 1975, p.8

¹⁹ *The Irish Times*, 19th February 1973, p.9

²⁰ *The Irish Times*, 23rd April 1972, p.23

threw in the towel²¹. Likewise, tenants' associations in Cork and Drogheda claimed that NATO had 'sold out' and continued their rent strikes independently.²² On the other hand, the settlement reached provided for immediate, material benefits for tenants and most interviewees still regarded it as a success despite contributing to the privatisation of public housing and the election of a conservative, Fine Gael-dominated government. This is clearly a complex and ambiguous case. Similar to the UK rent strikes at this time, there was significant pressure to engage with electoral politics (Burn, 1972). Similar to the situation in St. Pancras described by Burn (1972), the rent strikers in Ireland chose to engage with electoral politics. Unlike in the UK, the relatively stronger tenants' movement meant this could be leveraged to gain concessions rather than leading to defeat, but still required compromises and a narrowing of political horizons.

10. Discussion and conclusions

There is a fascinating existing body of research on, primarily historical, housing struggles that touches on the relationship between housing movements and political parties, but this has not been drawn out or theorised in depth. In response, this article has drawn on work by Nunes (2021) and Mohandesi (2020) to theorise the relationship between the party form and mass organisations. It has adopted the latter's concept of the 'party as articulator' as a useful framework to interrogate the role of parties in the 1970s Irish rent strikes. Mohandesi's (2012; 2021) flexible definition of the party as a specific type of organisation which performs the work of 'articulation', referring both to the articulation of political demands and the unification of social forces has been particularly helpful. This recognises that it is not solely through the involvement of conventional parties that such developments can occur, although in this case parties were the primary organisations attempting to realise these functions. A key issue which has been identified is the failure of any party to fully carry out the role of articulator, which arises from the fact that no single party had both the necessary organic roots in the rent strikes while also being able to push the movement in a more radical direction. Both the CPI's and to a lesser extent OSF's role was characterised by grassroots involvement and practical contributions but without substantive critical analysis and without the development of radical demands. Meanwhile, the SWM did provide critical analysis but, lacking organic roots due to its workerist orientation as well as its numerical weakness, it did not have a means to test or 'verify' (Tronti, 2020) its slogans, which seemingly had limited impact.

Another important example of the relationship between composition and analysis relates to the absence of female party members amongst the interviewees, which reflects the composition of the left parties in this period (Keenan-Thomson, 2010). Notably, while the parties investigated had, to varying degrees, taken up issues related to social reproduction such as housing, inflation and the social wage, these were not understood or analysed in terms of gender inequality and did not lead to the development of explicitly feminist

²¹ *Southill Star*, September 1976, p.1

²² *Limerick Socialist*, May 1975, p.5

demands. There was a general failure to politicise issues impacting women such as the lack of infrastructures of social reproduction in suburban estates. This is despite women playing a disproportionate role in the rent strikes as organisers and activists, reflecting their own understanding of housing, rent and urban development as inherently linked to gender inequality. It belies the extent to which any of the parties had organic roots that fully permeated the movement. This situation is in contrast to the innovations in Marxist feminism in Italy during the same period, which were reflected and articulated in struggles over housing and urban space (Gray, 2018a; Quirico, 2021).

While hardly a revelation for those familiar with the history of the Irish left, this situation reflects the lack of a mass party rooted in communities and everyday life while simultaneously advancing radical demands. These findings can also help develop our understanding of the conditions in which parties might perform an articulating function. While previous discussion of ideas such as ‘the connective party’ has focused on the absence of mass working class movements to which the party might address itself (Nunes, 2021; Porcaro, 2011), our analysis focuses more on the weaknesses of parties themselves. This relates to an evident tension between being embedded within a movement and maintaining the necessary distance to critically engage with it and push it in a more radical direction, which likely requires both political leadership and a strong and diverse base to overcome. This is particularly relevant given that the weakness of the radical left parties in 1970s Ireland, which accounts for their inability to deal with this tension, is shared by many far-left parties today. These also often lack a diverse base grounded in actual working class movements (Cavanagh, 2019; McNally, 2019). This shows that new ideas regarding party organisation are not a panacea that can sidestep existing structural weaknesses, even if they offer a useful ideal to aspire to.

Finally, the article has also explored the relationship between the rent strikes and electoral politics associated with the role of the Irish Labour Party. The findings reflect a similar tension between social democratic parties and grassroots housing movements as that documented by Burn (1972), Sklair (1975), Rolf (2021) and others but with important differences in the relative power of the institutional left. Specifically, the weakness of the social democratic left in Ireland meant that it was less possible to co-opt and demobilise the movement by redirecting it towards electoral politics. There are important similarities here with Nunes’ (2021, 2015) argument regarding the advantages of a balance of forces within the social movement ecology between its electoral and non-electoral wings so that the former does not come to dominate and subsume the latter. Overall, this article and other previous research on this subject has primarily highlighted the possibility of demobilisation associated with electoral politics and thus identified electoralism as a key challenge for grassroots housing movements. It is clearly the case that party control can emerge even where this is not directly linked to electoralism, a question which could be taken up in future research.

This article provides a corrective both to the position that ‘external’ party involvement could only restrict grassroots radicalism and autonomy as well as to a party-centric view that views mass movements over immediate material issues as lacking political development that can be provided solely by a conventional political party (e.g. Lenin, 1902). Instead, we argue that parties must engage with and support the development of organised social movements

and build their analysis from this foundation. We also argue that it may be beneficial for housing movements to strategically engage with political parties insofar as they reflect some or all of the characteristics associated with the concept of the party as articulator, including supporting the unification of social forces, developing a coherent socialist analysis adequate to the present moment, and acting as a repository of political experience. We believe that this could help address some of the potential weaknesses of independent housing movements, including single issue strategies or failure to learn from past experience. None of this is to say that parties are the only method of achieving these objectives. Where necessary, housing movements themselves should seek to develop their own capacities to articulate social forces and politicise housing struggles. Overall, ‘the party in the flats’ implies the value of ‘organisational ecologies’ as discussed by Nunes (2021), and recognition of the value of the specific functions that different organisations can perform in a particular context. It is an argument for the development of political leadership in the class, where people live their everyday lives, be it in the party, the union or the social movement.

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