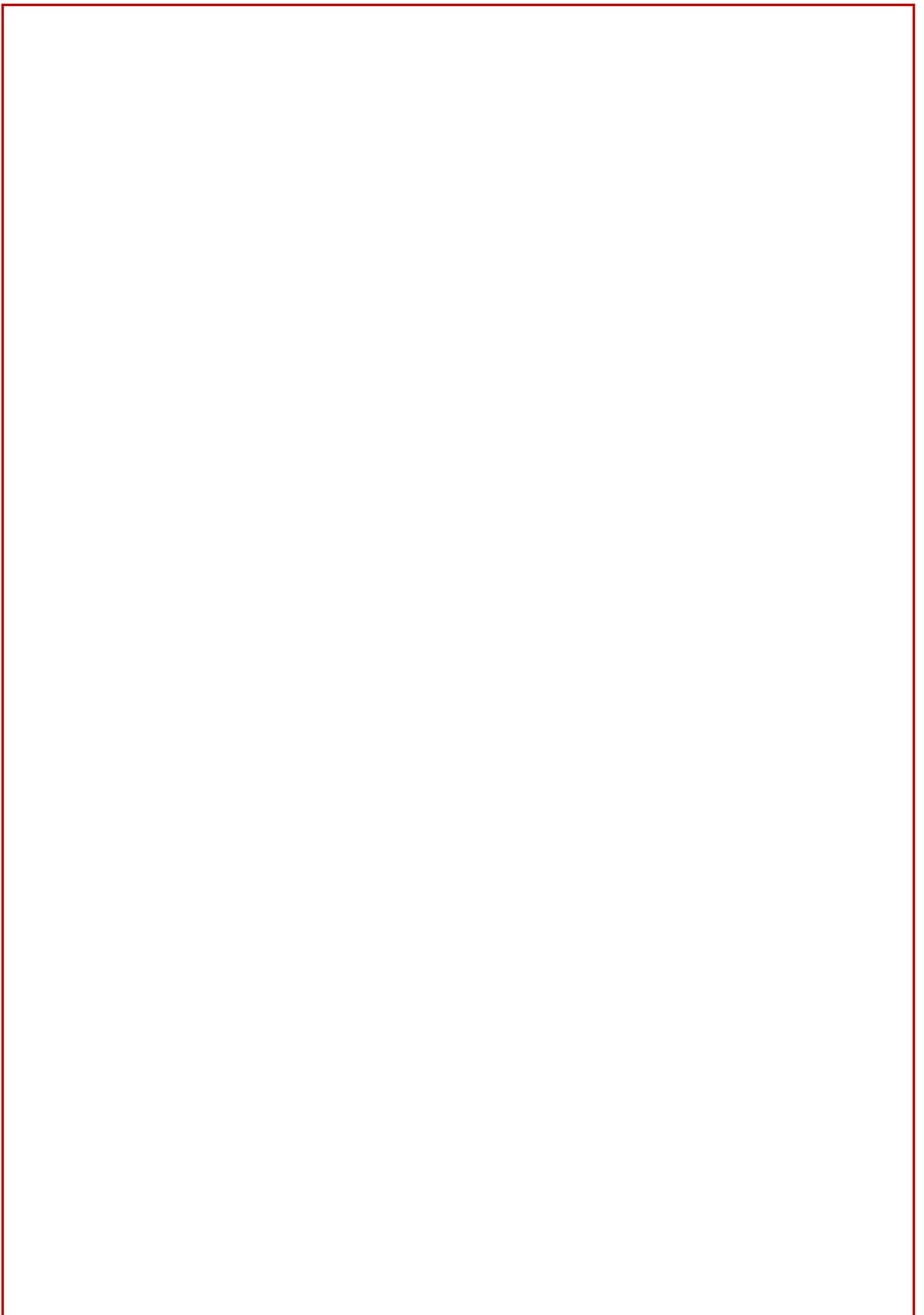


Workers Party Assembly Manifesto 2016



Standing Against Austerity







Standing Against Austerity - for a Socialist Alternative

The Workers Party is committed to the primacy of a secular, democratic society based on principles of equality and justice. We stand for the creation of sustainable, well paid jobs, fulfilling and dignified work in safe and healthy conditions. This is one of the key tasks of government. We reject low-pay and precarious employment, the dismantling of work-place rights, the privatisation of public assets and restrictions on trade union freedom. We demand a real living wage.

There is sufficient wealth and enough resources to tackle our most pressing issues. Yet the gap between the rich and working people grows relentlessly wider. The problem is that this wealth and these resources are held in the hands of too few people and are not being used productively to create the growth and jobs we need. Income differences between top earners and those on the lowest wages are now higher than at any time since records began.

Austerity is ideological

Austerity is not an accident. It is not neutral. Austerity is ideological. It is an inevitable consequence of the failed system in which we live. Everything in our society is measured by profit and is built on inequality, exploitation and waste. Those who produce the wealth of the country, the working people, do not own it. The problem must be tackled at its root by challenging the ownership and control of the economic system.

Austerity has been used to make working people pay for a crisis which is not of their making. It has been used to wage war on the public sector and to prepare large areas of it for privatisation. It has caused immense suffering to the working class. Our ideology is founded on the politics of class. It follows, therefore, that ending austerity is a priority.

Unambiguously socialist

The Workers Party recognises that real, fundamental, transformative change requires a break with the present system to create a world where the working class controls its own destiny and which maximises human potential, dignity and development rather than a system driven by the relentless pursuit of profit for the benefit of the few. We are unambiguously socialist, secular and anti-sectarian.

It is in this context that the Workers Party demands an economic strategy which defends working people and the role of the state within the economy. It is within this framework that the Workers Party puts forward its platform of progressive policies and demands in this Manifesto.

Introduction

This election is not about the European Union - although the major parties here will want to turn it into a pre-referendum debate to divert attention away from their collective record over the past five years.

This election is about the failure and the refusal of the Executive Parties, in particular, to bring forward and implement the political, social and economic legislation to allow progress, stability and an improved quality of life for all.

This election is an opportunity to pass judgement on the record of those parties which have been running the Assembly and the Executive for the past five years.

It is an opportunity to confront and condemn their joint programme of reductions in public services, continuing austerity measures and cuts to social welfare under the guise of welfare reform.

The election will also be an opportunity to vote against the introduction of water charges, the run-down of health and social care services, tax breaks for big businesses, the sell-off of public assets, the planned rise in university tuition fees, continued discrimination against women, the refusal to legislate for same sex marriage, the on-going damage to the environment and the continuance of the Executive's self-serving agenda - all of which are certain to be features of the new Assembly if the same old parties are returned to power.

On May 5th The Workers Party will be offering the electorate an alternative to austerity, cuts, regressive social policy and inequality.

Our agenda is based on a socialist programme of publicly funded initiatives which places people above profit and which uses our resources to protect, encourage, develop and enhance our citizens, their quality of life and their environment.

Failure and Refusal

The story of the last Assembly is one of failure and refusal.

The Assembly's failure to take decisive action on the economy has resulted in the erosion of our manufacturing base with the loss of thousands of skilled jobs from Gallaher's, to Michelin to Bombardier.

Its failure to guarantee good employment practice and safeguard workers' rights has resulted in the retention of Zero Hours contracts.

Its failure to address pressing social issues has resulted in increased levels of poverty, an increase in fuel poverty and a growing housing crisis.

Its failure to implement key aspects of the Good Friday Agreement includes the failure to promote and develop integrated education.

It has also failed to deliver on infrastructure and public projects.

Work on the upgrading of the A5 road has yet to start.

Plans for a national stadium came to nothing and the upgrade of Casement Park has turned into a debacle.

Long promised reforms to Northern Ireland's licencing laws failed to materialise.

Major development plans for Belfast City Centre were so badly mishandled that they did not stand up to a legal challenge.

The Assembly's refusal to keep pace with the rest of the UK and Ireland has seen a repeated refusal to legislate for marriage equality despite the overwhelming support of the people of Northern Ireland.

Successive Ministers refused to lift the ban on gay men donating blood despite the scientific evidence.

The Assembly still refuses to trust women to make their own decisions about their own bodies and their own fertility.

Stormont House Agreement and the 'Fresh Start'

The Stormont House Agreement and the resulting 'Fresh Start' was an arrangement between the DUP and Sinn Fein to maintain their respective positions and retain their hold on power.

The only people to benefit have been the main Stormont parties and big business. The 'deal' allowed Sinn Fein and the DUP, supported by Alliance, to present a united front while offering big business a massive tax break at the expense of everyone in Northern Ireland.

The Sinn Fein / DUP coalition washed its hands of its responsibility for welfare cuts and handed that power back to Westminster and the Tory party to deliver the cuts.

The 'Fresh Start's' only major economic initiative was the reduction in Corporation Tax. Not one single new job is guaranteed but it will cost ordinary people more than £300 million to implement: money removed from the block grant.

To pay for that we can expect:

- the selloff of public assets like the Belfast Harbour Estate, Translink and other public utilities.
- the loss of 20,000 jobs in the public sector on top of the 60,000 that have already gone in the private sector.
- increased university tuition fees
- the introduction of domestic water rates and charges for other public services and utilities

The Welfare Reform component of the 'Fresh Start' deal comes with no new money to offset the worst effects of the cuts - despite the assertions of Sinn Fein in particular. There will be a time limited percentage based offset and after that people receiving benefits will be on their own, consigned to poverty and destitution.

Public services will be cut further. Fewer people will be expected to provide fewer services. Working families, people with illness and disabilities, students, young people and people in receipt of benefits will all be made to pay for this 'Fresh Start'.

The main parties at Stormont have bought themselves time to get themselves and the Assembly through to the elections in May.

The grim reality is that the people of Northern Ireland will be paying the cost of this deal for years to come.

The Economy

Welfare Reform

The report which was supposed to find ways to lessen the worst effects of welfare reforms has noted that similar cuts to benefits elsewhere in the UK has already led to deaths and suicide.

That is the reality of what the Assembly is happy to call 'welfare reform'.

The report 'hopes' that a 'monitoring and protection system' will avoid some of the worst consequences of this policy in Northern Ireland. The worst consequences being death and suicide.

The Stormont Executive abdicated its responsibility to address cuts to benefits, and its responsibility to the people of Northern Ireland, by choosing to secure its own position at the expense of the most vulnerable members of our society.

The DUP and Sinn Fein coalition, which has been running Northern Ireland for the past five years, shamefully traded its responsibility to the people of Northern Ireland to secure its own future.

The proposed mitigation measures, working with a fund of just over £500 million will, in effect, benefit those eligible for additional support for only one year. Not all claimants will be eligible to be considered and those that are can expect their shortfall to be compensated by a 75% top up of their loss for a period of twelve months only.

The mitigation report also recognises the inevitable increase in the use of food banks and a rise in fuel poverty as a result of the benefit cuts.

On top of that there are, of course, the 'worst consequences'.

Before people cast their votes on May 5th they should reflect on what that means and who is responsible for it.

Corporation Tax and Foreign Direct Investment

The Assembly's only substantive plan for the economy in Northern Ireland hinges on the lowering of corporation tax - at a cost of anywhere between a £300 and £500 million reduction in the block grant - and the compensatory rise in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) which they hope it will attract.

It is worth noting that this tax break for big business was not a policy forced on the Executive here, but was the home grown initiative of the DUP / Sinn Fein coalition supported by all the main Assembly parties.

Despite the fact that not one new job is guaranteed by this strategy, despite the fact that its adoption will result in redundancies and the sell-off of public assets to pay for it, and despite the continued scepticism and warnings from economists and academics, the main Assembly parties have doggedly pursued the lowering of Corporation Tax like an economic holy grail.

The Workers Party has previously warned against plans to lower corporation tax, highlighting amongst other dangers, the likely development of a 'name plate' culture in which businesses set up office-only operations to avail of lower tax rates: a *Lichtenstein on the Lagan*.

We have also referred to the obsessive reliance on lower corporation tax as an *economic one-trick pony*. That pony is now also lame given the Chancellor's announcement that corporation tax is to be lowered throughout the UK.

Whatever economic advantage the Assembly erroneously believed existed is now gone and so too is the £300 - £500 million from the Northern Ireland block grant.

A direct relationship between lower levels of corporation tax and increased FDI remain unproven and a number of major corporations, some of whom are considering investment in Northern Ireland, are on record as saying that an educated and skilled workforce, a strong research and development culture and advanced infrastructure are the determining factors in making investment decisions.

The Assembly's flawed pursuit of lower corporation tax is further compounded by its failure to make priority investments in any of the areas which potential investors identify as the deal makers.

Economic Strategy

It would be hard to overstate the short-sightedness of the Assembly's economic policy. Nor would it be hard to predict its impact on working people, their families and on young people seeking employment.

Currently one person in five of working-age in Northern Ireland is living in poverty. A similar figure applies to people of pensionable age and the number of local children living in poverty is nearer to one in four.

Against this background the Assembly's '*rebalancing*' of the Northern Ireland economy is shorthand for savage cuts to public services and the privatisation of health, education and public utilities.

We have witnessed the outworking of that particular strategy over the lifetime of the last Assembly. It has meant

- fewer teachers in schools
- fewer bus and train services
- longer hospital waiting times
- cuts to community projects
- reduced funding for the arts
- low pay, zero hours and temporary contracts and “internships” with diminished workers’ rights
- more women in low paid, part time work
- thousands of redundancies
- fewer services delivered by fewer people
- tax reductions for big businesses, and
- selling off public assets

While the Assembly promotes its lower Corporation Tax / FDI model on one hand, it cuts the budgets for further and higher education and training on the other. While it seeks to attract hi tech and manufacturing investment it fails to invest in the development of a skilled workforce to deliver it and declines to upgrade and develop the local infrastructure to support it.

The current economic strategy is increasingly played out off stage. Economic rabbits are pulled out of hats at press conferences with seemingly little or no engagement with the relevant work sectors, the existing workforce or their representatives.

The next Assembly must radically alter its approach to economic development and how that is achieved.

The Workers Party calls for the urgent creation of an Economic Forum to address these issues and centrally plan a development strategy.

The Workers Party is not alone in recognising the urgent need to re-think Northern Ireland’s approach to economic development and to the failed market led culture which has dominated Assembly thinking.

A number of research institutions, academics, trade unions and some business organisations have identified the need for a radical root and branch re-appraisal. These commentators, including Tom Healy, Director of the Nevin Economic Research Institute, identify the need for a new departure involving a plan to develop local industry and services drawing on the undoubted strengths of the local economy and workforce and with a focus on research, innovation and skills and greater equality of social opportunity.

The Workers Party believes that the Assembly must be interventionist. It must take responsibility for, lead and co-ordinate a Northern Ireland wide economic development plan which at a minimum:

- addresses the major upgrading and development of our infrastructure, including a publicly owned electricity grid, takes significant steps away from our dependency on fossil fuel to energy renewables, updates our water service, re-invigorates our public housing stock and upgrades and integrates our railway and transport systems
- recognises the role and utilises the skills, experience and commitment of workers, their representatives and the broader civic society in developing, implementing and progressing a Northern Ireland Economic Development Strategy.
- harnesses the experience, skills and talents of the public sector to modernise services and to develop local public enterprises.
- establishes a Northern Ireland public investment bank to fund development initiatives and infrastructure modernisation.

A fundamental pre-requisite to this approach is a recognition by the Exchequer at Westminster that Northern Ireland requires legacy and infrastructure capital funding to allow it to embark on sustained and sustainable economic growth.

That the Assembly has not embarked upon this type of public focused and financed approach to economic development is testament to its blind faith in market forces and its dogged determination to dismantle Northern Ireland's public sector.

Education

Northern Ireland's education system impacts on every aspect of life here. It determines the quality of our workforce, the abilities of our population, our levels of comprehension and understanding, our ability to communicate and greatly influences how we relate to each other individually and collectively.

The Workers Party recognises the centrality of education and is committed to ensuring opportunities for lifelong learning.

Education will face a number of crucial tests in the next Assembly.

Tuition fees for third level students will almost certainly be increased significantly as the Assembly seeks to claw back the money it has lost by lowering corporation tax.

There is no shortage of models, variations or proposals for how third level education should be funded and there is no shortage of people, many of whom benefited from a debt free education themselves, who now wish to pull the ladder up behind them and turn education into a commodity.

The Workers Party in the next Assembly will stand for a publicly funded education system, free at the point of access, free of tuition fees and free of future debt. We see further and higher education as an investment in young people, the economy and society: not as a commodity or as a means to reclaim the public money used to bail out banks and financial institutions.

Integrated Education

The Workers Party is committed to a democratic, egalitarian, secular, integrated education system including integrated teacher training.

The Good Friday Agreement was very clear about the Assembly's responsibility towards Integrated Education - it was to encourage and facilitate its development.

During the term of the last Assembly the Sinn Fein/DUP Coalition deliberately sought to substitute and promote a 'shared' education agenda. This is little more than a political fig leaf to justify the continued segregation of our children into religious and political tribes and offers no alternative to those parents who want more for their children

Shared education is not integrated education.

Section 64 of the 1989 Education Order requires the Department of Education in Northern Ireland to "*encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education*". This position was further underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

Promoting shared education instead of integrated education is like building invisible 'peace' walls between yet another generation of our school children.

This is much too important an issue to be left to the Executive alone.

The Workers Party will call for the establishment of an Independent Commission tasked with the responsibility of mapping out an Integrated Education Strategy.

The alternative will be an unchallenged assault on one of the most progressive initiatives in a generation.

Health and Social Care

Health and Social Care Services must remain publicly funded and free at the point of delivery. These principles are far from safe and secure.

Creeping privatisation is now being underpinned by proposals to include the NHS in the remit of the Transatlantic Trade & Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiated in secret between the European Union and the United States.

Despite the fact that our health and social care services have been through several reorganisations over the past forty years, and millions of pounds have been squandered on new structures - each one having a detrimental effect - report after report indicates that health inequalities have not improved.

Monitoring reports make it clear that *'...the absence of a whole systems approach in Northern Ireland has resulted in Health Inequalities persisting at the same level or worse for the previous ten years'*. NI Health & Social Care Inequalities Monitoring System (DHPSS)

The Public Health Strategy NI, Investing for Health NI, and the various reviews carried out by Sir Michael Marmot, Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health at University College London, all make the crucial point that *'...social and economic issues must be addressed to improve health standards and deal with health inequalities'*.

Health inequalities have a number of root causes, but poverty, unemployment, low pay, educational under-achievement and the lack of decent public housing all feature as key factors.

All of these factors are compounded by an austerity culture.

The Workers Party believes that developing a cohesive health and social care strategy, which tackles existing health inequalities and guarantees a proper level of funding to meet the health and social care needs of our citizens should be a social and political priority for the incoming Assembly.

We can continue to ignore our health needs and watch hospital admissions grow out of control, patients die on trolleys and the system go into melt down, or we can address the problem. Much of what is wrong with public health can be put right by taking a new direction.

The Workers Party believes that a properly funded health service designed to deliver quality health outcomes is central to a humane and decent society.

There must be direct democratic engagement with working people, both as patients and users of the service and the workers who deliver the service to develop a cohesive health and social care strategy, including community care, which tackles existing health inequalities and accords a proper level of funding to meet the needs of all citizens as a political priority. There must be an end to “creeping privatisation”, to the outsourcing of health services and jobs to the private sector. Vested interests, including the vested interests of private healthcare, must be confronted and challenged. The Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive have to reinstate Health as the number one priority within the programme for government.

Mental health services

Northern Ireland has higher mental health needs than other parts of the United Kingdom. Much is as result of the legacy of ‘The Troubles’

The Ulster University’s Bamford Centre quantified the problem in recent research, noting that in any 12-month period in Northern Ireland, one in four people displayed symptoms of mental illness.

Factors contributing to these rates include persistent levels of deprivation in some communities and the legacy of Northern Ireland’s troubled history.

The Workers Party is calling for a minimum 30% increase in funding for Mental Health, Learning Disability and Children and Family Services in Northern Ireland and the development of service models which are considerably less dependent on hospital based delivery.

Northern Ireland suicide rates more than doubled between 2005 and 2013.

The suicide rates in the most deprived areas are more than three times higher than in the least deprived areas: 24.9 per 100,000, compared to 7.6 per 100,000. Cuts to public services, ‘welfare reform’, redundancies and a lack of opportunities will compound these problems.

Home treatment and crisis response teams need to be prioritised and resourced to maintain people in the community and support service users in their recovery.

Similar services must also be developed to meet the needs of pregnant women and mothers, children and young people, people with a learning disability and older people.

Care of Older People

It is important to understand that for many older people their first choice, where that is possible, would be to be cared for and supported in their own home.

Once that principle is accepted, we need to ensure that not only is that service provided but that it is provided to the highest possible standard in the most innovative, flexible and inclusive manner possible.

Supporting older people to live in their own homes and communities should be a social care priority. It must be resourced and supported with research, best practice and provided by a workforce which is trained, well-paid and encouraged to excel.

For many older people locally provided residential care will always be a preferred option. It is important that our health and social care services retain the capacity and the expertise to provide that service.

Recent proposals to close NHS run residential care services met with robust and co-ordinated opposition. The Workers Party supports the retention of residential care services by the NHS.

Older care in the community must never become a cliché or a soft option. It is neither. Trusts and Trust staff must seek to provide not just good care but the best care. Northern Ireland can and should become an exemplar for the design and delivery of the care of older people.

Domestic Violence

There were over 28,000 reported incidences of domestic violence in Northern Ireland last year. The PSNI responds to a domestic incident every 19 minutes. While some advances have been made particularly in supportive workplace initiatives and in multi-agency co-operation there is no Assembly commitment to provide a comprehensive programme of support, awareness and challenge to attitudes of gender based violence. In particular, the Assembly should ensure that people subjected to domestic violence have immediate access to legal protection and fast track benefits.

Rural Development

Farm safety

The Workers Party supports the initiatives being run by the Health & Safety Executive in Northern Ireland (HSENI) and the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland (DARDNI) to tackle health and safety issues, and believes these programmes should be extended and enhanced.

Farming Subsidies & Payments

Changes to the Common Agriculture Policy are having an adverse effect on many farmers and farm incomes. The introduction of the Basic Payment Scheme will present problems for many farmers and their families.

The Workers Party urges a simple, consistent and coherent approach to applying for subsidy in Northern Ireland and clearer guidance and support offered to farmers to facilitate applying for and receiving payments to which they are entitled.

We also call on DARD to cooperate fully with the Ulster Farmers Union to resolve all outstanding issues regarding the new payment and to make the transition process smoother so that farmers will receive what they are entitled to in an efficient and timely manner.

Renewable Energies

The Workers Party supports the development of wind generators, solar panels and other forms of renewal energy. All projects however should be environmentally sensitive and be the product of meaningful consultation with local communities. Co-operatives and ventures involving many stakeholders ought to be established to maximise the renewable energy potential here.

We support the nationalisation of the electricity infrastructure so that the electricity grid can support renewable electricity and provide a good deal for all electricity consumers.

Planning

Planning in the countryside in Northern Ireland is a longstanding problem.

We call for an urgent review of rural planning policies. We must address the basic needs and the fundamental rights of those living in the countryside to make sure that they all have access to a good standard of living, at least comparable with those living in the town.

Public Transport

Public transport in Northern Ireland is particularly important for the social well-being of all residents in the region and for the economy. No part of the country should be inaccessible simply due to the lack of public transport links to the surrounding area.

All residents must have easy access to the public transport system. Regular public transport links to all of the hospitals with all regular towns in their catchment areas must also be established.

TTIP

The Workers Party is actively campaigning against the introduction of the Transatlantic Trade & Investment Partnership (TTIP) deal between the USA and the EU. This deal is bad for farming, bad for food standards, animal welfare and bad for farmers.

Environment

Northern Ireland's environment is at risk.

It is at risk because it is being treated as a commodity which can be bought and sold, used and discarded: but that's not how the environment works. It is a delicate eco-system which needs protection, support and renewal.

That requires a strategic commitment, central planning and co-ordination.

Just two current examples serve to illustrate the dangers to our local environment, the lack of joined up thinking and the potential knock on effects to public health and well-being.

Licences have been granted for explorative drilling in Greencastle Co Tyrone and Woodburn Forest in Carrickfergus Co. Antrim, the former for gold deposits the latter for oil.

At Greencastle the drilling company wants to mine in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and use cyanide in its extraction operation. There are only eight AONBs in Northern Ireland and 'Discover NI' the official tourist website for Northern Ireland describes the area where the cyanide based gold mining is due to take place as *'wealthy in archaeological heritage and folklore... with narrow glens and deep valleys, sandy eskers and mysterious lakes - the area is a mystical place'*.

At Woodburn Forest at Carrickfergus the drilling operation is for oil. The licence has been granted by the Department of the Environment, the land used for the drilling leased by NI Water and the bore hole, which will use a cocktail of chemicals in the

extraction process is only a few hundred meters from the Woodburn Reservoir which supplies drinking water to large parts of Belfast and beyond.

The environment is not safe in the hands of the hands of the current Assembly.

Poverty Strategy

Child poverty, fuel poverty and the poverty of the working poor all continue to increase. More families are forced to rely on in work benefits, more homes are under heated and the dependency on food banks to feed children and families increases year on year.

It is impossible to divorce these harsh realities for Stormont's austerity agenda. Previous piece meal, uncoordinated and ineffective initiatives have failed to address the underlying causes. Only a long term, cross departmental, multi-agency strategy can begin to address and eradicate the current levels of poverty.

A positive first step would be the introduction of a realistic living wage of at least £8.50 per hour.

Food Waste

Given the current dependence on food banks the Workers Party is demanding the immediate introduction of legislation to force supermarkets to donate leftover products that are still safe and useable to food banks and to charities which provide for human and animal welfare.

Racism

Racism and violent racist attacks on people and their homes remain a problem in Northern Ireland.

In April 2015 a 43% increase in racist hate crimes in the space of eight months was recorded by police in Belfast. Despite the statistics the issue of racism is still divorced from the mainstream political and policy agenda.

The continuing legacy of sectarianism has had a further negative impact on the implementation of an anti-racism strategy.

The Assembly should immediately implement a central strategy to tackle this problem.

Homophobia and Transphobia

The hurt and damage inflicted by racist and sectarian attacks are no less real when the targets are member of the LGBT community.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual people are full citizens of Northern Ireland, contributors to this community and have every right to expect the same level of protection, support and legal safeguards as everyone else.

Gender Equality

Gender equality remains a major issue in our society. Women remain under-represented in politics, the media, the senior civil service and at the highest levels in workplaces.

More women than men work part-time and there is still a very significant full time gender pay gap. The highest proportion of workers on the minimum wage are women.

The impact of austerity has disproportionately adversely affected women. There are high levels of violence against women, including domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse. One in every three women experience some form of violence in their lifetime according to a recent United Nations report. Women are denied reproductive rights.

The Workers Party demands that the issue of gender equality is placed firmly on the agenda in the next Assembly.

Abuse of Animals

The Workers Party has opposed the cruelty and suffering of animals bred in so called puppy and kitten farms and calls for an end to this outrageous practice.

The Workers Party calls for tighter regulation and registration of breeding establishments, rigorous enforcement procedures and tougher sentences for those who abuse and neglect animals.

We also condemn the barbaric practices of “badger baiting” and hunting with dogs, the commercial mass production of animals in a manner which causes suffering and the abuse of animals by large commercial companies which put profits before animal welfare.

We support the promotion of the “Five Freedoms” adopted by the World Organisation for Animal Health and national societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

10 Things the new Assembly should do in its first 100 days

In its first one hundred days the new Assembly can demonstrate its commitment to inclusiveness, social progress and a pluralist society by adopting legislation on the following issues.

A Bill of Rights

Integrated, secular education

Housing

A woman's right to choose

Civil Marriage Equality

Childcare

Civic Forum

Fracking

Blood Ban

Votes at 16

A Bill of Rights

The Workers Party has campaigned for a Bill of Rights for more than four decades. It has still not been delivered despite promises, consultations and numerous reports. We continue to make that demand.

The Workers Party's attachment to the concept of a Bill of Rights is not based on sentiment or on some abstract philosophical position. We are committed to the primacy of a secular democratic society based on principles of equality and justice.

We believe that the purpose of a Bill of Rights is to establish and guarantee the relationship between citizens and the state. We believe that a Bill of Rights must form the cornerstone of democracy as the guarantor of the civil liberties of all citizens and of the political rights of all political parties, groups and individuals prepared to work through the democratic process.

The Assembly must introduce a Bill of Rights without further delay. It must enshrine fundamental principles constituting a clear statement about the nature of any political institutions established and operated in Northern Ireland.

Integrated, secular education

The last Assembly's 'shared' education strategy is bogus. Shared is not integrated.

As a political and social priority the next Assembly must establish its commitment to a united society by establishing an Independent Commission tasked with the responsibility of mapping out an Integrated Education Strategy.

Housing

It is incumbent on society to ensure access to a safe, secure, habitable, and affordable home with freedom from forced eviction.

There are serious problems in relation to the provision of social housing and levels of homelessness have remained at historically high levels in Northern Ireland since 2005/6.

With mounting pressure on social housing and large scale savage attacks on benefits, there is a real danger that homelessness in Northern Ireland will rise to crisis levels.

It is already a matter of shame that in a period of a few weeks earlier this year four people in Northern Ireland lost their lives

sleeping on the streets. This is the legacy of our main political parties.

Over the years there has been a steady and gradual privatisation of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

The NIHE must be maintained as the primary and public housing body in Northern Ireland for both the provision of new homes and as landlord of public sector tenants.

The Assembly should reinstate the NI Housing Executive as the lead housing agency.

A woman's right to choose

It is quite clear that Northern Ireland is still dominated by socially conservative voices and that these are having an adverse and traumatising effect on local women.

The Assembly does not trust women to make choices about their own bodies and their own fertility.

We recognise that women have the right to control their own bodies, including their fertility, and to pursue all reproductive choices.

This is fundamental to any reasonable concept of gender equality in order to achieve full political, social, and economic equality with men.

We also oppose the paternalistic attitude that regards women as second class citizens incapable of making their own decisions and strongly condemn those who engage in anti-choice harassment and abuse.

We support a full programme of secular sex education for schools, free access to contraception, proper health and social care for pregnant women, the provision of appropriate free and quality child care facilities and adequate support for single and low income parents.

The Workers Party believes in a woman's right to choose and supports the provision of free and safe abortion in her own country which will include practical facilities to support women seeking an abortion and quality post-abortion care.

No one should vote for a candidate or a Party that does not trust women.

The Assembly should recognise a woman's right to choose and secure the extension of the Abortion Act 1967 to Northern

Civil Marriage Equality

Despite the overwhelming support which legislation for same sex marriage enjoys throughout Northern Ireland, despite Northern Ireland now being the only part of these islands which continues to deny that right and despite several attempts to introduce legislation in the Assembly, no equal marriage statute has been adopted.

Equality of rights for all citizens must be non- negotiable and the Workers Party will continue to stand firm on this issue.

However, the narrow-minded and fundamentalist use of the Petition of Concern by the DUP has raised issues that should be of concern to all people in Northern Ireland.

The Petition of Concern, like the requirement for designation by MLAs as “unionist” or “nationalist”, is the embodiment of the institutionalised sectarianism that continues to hold this society to ransom.

The Workers Party has long been opposed to the abuse of the Petition of Concern and calls again for radical changes to the way in which the Assembly operates.

The Assembly must legislate for marriage equality in Northern Ireland and clearly signal that all citizens are treated equally.

Childcare

In Northern Ireland women still bear the major role of unpaid primary carer. The current system is totally inadequate for working class families.

The Assembly should adopt a state funded childcare strategy which provides accessible and affordable high quality childcare centred around the needs of children and the needs of working parents and parents in education and training.

Civic Forum

The Civic Forum for Northern Ireland was created under the Good Friday Agreement as a consultative body consisting of members of various bodies in civil society.

Unionism and nationalism wasted its potential.

An effective Civic Forum could have contributed greatly to creating a culture of active citizenship necessary to overcoming sectarian and other divisions based on race and sexual

orientation and developing an awareness of what we, as citizens, have in common.

The Assembly parties acted quickly to undermine and then kill off the Civic Forum. The Civic Forum was a positive step towards enhancing civic participation in Northern Ireland outside the immediate control of the sectarian and tribal blocs.

It had the potential to provide access to political debate and input from those marginalised and disenfranchised by the prevailing sectarian political agenda, providing a voice for women, minority groups, the labour and trade union movement and the voluntary and community sector.

The Assembly should prioritise the reinstatement of an effective Civic Forum, properly funded and resourced.

Fracking

The Workers Party stands firm against the idea of fracking. Fracking is highly dangerous and we must endeavour to unite to stop the progress of fracking anywhere in Northern Ireland. The Workers Party is opposed to environmental degradation and damage whether it is fracking in Fermanagh or drilling in Antrim in the name of profit for the few. We support a ban on fracking and the “Stop the Drill” campaign.

The Assembly should demonstrate its opposition by banning fracking in Northern Ireland

Blood Ban

The decision to impose a lifetime ban on blood donations by gay men never had any medical basis. However, successive Health Ministers have taken over five years and used thousands of pounds of taxpayer’s money in a now unsuccessful battle to maintain the ban.

The same legislation which pertains in England, Scotland and Wales should now be adopted in Northern Ireland and the incoming Health Minister in the new Assembly should act quickly on the advice currently available from the Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs.

Votes at 16

Sixteen year olds in Northern Ireland can leave school, work full time, leave home, pay taxes, get married and join the armed services: but they can’t vote in elections.

If Northern Ireland is to be a fully participative democracy the involvement, and active participation of 16 and 17 year olds is essential to that process.

Research has shown that this age group is even more likely to vote than 18-24 year olds. At a time when voter turnout continues to fall that is an encouraging sign.

16 and 17 year olds in the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey have voting rights and Scotland also extended that right during the independence referendum.

The Northern Ireland Assembly can and must extend the democratic franchise to 16 years olds.

