

Ireland: Homeless worker dies in a Dublin waste truck

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A 43-year-old Polish worker, Henryk Piotrowski, was crushed to death last month in a Dublin bin lorry. Piotrowski, homeless and a heavy drinker, appears to have sought shelter in one of Dublin city centre's commercial waste bins late one night, possibly following a violent assault.

When the bin was emptied into a waste disposal truck, Piotrowski suffered multiple injuries. He died some time later from asphyxiation. His body was discovered when the truck was emptied at a recycling plant the following morning.

The circumstances of Piotrowski's life and brutal death are deeply tragic. His fate expresses in a particularly cruel form the impact of the Irish and European ruling class's austerity policies on the most vulnerable sections of working people.

Poland held a referendum on joining the European Union (EU) in 2003. Such was the social cost of 15 years of capitalist restoration that accession to the EU, promoted by all the main parties as the panacea to all social ills, was supported by 77 percent of voters. After 2004, large numbers of Polish workers fled high unemployment and poor living conditions to work in western Europe.

Many travelled to Ireland, which was at the time in the midst of a boom. While the foreign direct investment-based growth rates of the 1990s were already over, the so-called Celtic Tiger economy was increasingly based on a rapidly expanding property bubble.

From being an historic source of migrant labour, Ireland, temporarily, became an attractive destination for workers from all over the world. By 2006, there were nearly 420,000 foreign workers in Ireland—a figure that subsequently climbed to 544,000 in 2011. Of these, around 122,000 are Polish.

Henryk Piotrowski was one of those who moved to work on the building sites. Without much money or English skills, workers like Piotrowski were the first to be dispensed with when the property boom collapsed from 2007 onwards. Unemployment soared to over 14 percent, much of the increase accounted for by building workers. Some migrants managed to find other work, some left Ireland in pursuit of other opportunities. Those with least support ended up in the worst accommodation or on the streets.

Current estimates suggest that up to 20 percent of Dublin's homeless people forced to sleep rough are from eastern Europe. Every night, some 1,450 homeless people are put up in emergency shelters.

Recent figures also bring out that one aspect of the ever-deepening economic crisis is a sharp increase in homelessness affecting all sections of working people.

Homeless advocacy group Focus Ireland warned of a 23 percent increase in people seeking their advice between 2010 and 2012. Each month, an average of 18 families are now losing their homes in Dublin alone—double the rate of a few years ago. The group's recent annual report noted, "The toxic mix of severe unemployment, funding cuts to some vital services, and a growing shortage of affordable housing is keeping people trapped in expensive emergency homeless accommodation."

According to the Irish Central Bank, by June 2013, there were nearly 143,000 mortgages (nearly 19 percent) in arrears, of which almost 98,000 were more than 90 days in arrears and 29,000 more than 180 days. Financial Services Ombudsman Bill Prasifka warned that the mortgage crisis was generating a "tsunami" of complaints to his office, and the danger of mortgage arrears was "the defining issue of our time".

The total value of the imperilled mortgages was put at

around €2 billion, a fraction of the huge sums poured into Ireland's ruined banks and Europe's financial system via successive multibillion EU-led bailouts, paid for by drastic social cuts.

Along with everything else, the government has cut funding for organisations providing support for homeless people. The Dublin Homeless Network, an umbrella group of 20 charities, warned earlier this year that 20 percent cuts from the Health Service Executive (HSE) grant since 2010 had led to staff cuts, wage freezes, and increasing working hours over a period when demand for hard-pressed services has soared.

Focus Ireland's Mike Allen warned that continued HSE cuts would soon force organisations to close outright. The organisation also warned of a 72 percent collapse in spending on social housing, from 2008, at a point when 5,000 people were homeless and nearly 100,000 households were on housing waiting lists.

Henryk Piotrowski seems to have been homeless for some years. Press reports portray him as particularly vulnerable, someone whose life had fallen apart. His world had become a daily round of homeless shelters, food kitchens and frantic efforts to acquire alcohol.

Charles Richards of the Mendicity Institute in Dublin, a homeless charity set up in 1818, and who had frequently assisted Piotrowski, told the *Irish Times*, "he was a chaotic alcoholic and his family life was in disarray. He was estranged from family. We contacted his brothers, but he wouldn't engage with them. We located his daughters on Facebook—he could see they were healthy and surrounded by friends—but Henryk felt there was no way back to his family."

"He was almost permanently drunk...there were times when he detoxed. When he was sober, he was miserable, introspective and quiet. Drink was an escape from that."

Alice Leahy of another homeless charity, Trust, said, "Like so many others he was often in an awful state.... We dressed his feet, which were in a dreadful state, and he had a cup of tea and a shower. He went on his way and said thanks."

Migrant workers have also become the target of state victimisation, as the government has sought scapegoats from the economic disaster. Since 2010, 9,043 non-Irish nationals from the EU have been refused social welfare if they failed to meet a "habitual residency" requirement.

In the months before his death, Piotrowski had been staying at a homeless hostel offering stable accommodation to a number of unemployed migrant workers. The *Financial Times* reported it had seen a letter from Dublin City Council closing the hostel and urging migrants to "seek reconnection with their country of origin". In July 2013, the service was closed, forcing its residents into the discriminatory homeless regime. While homeless Irish nationals can get accommodation in a homeless hostel for six months at a time, non-Irish migrants are forced to telephone every night in search of a bed.

This is why Piotrowski, a tragically disoriented individual, was begging on the streets at 10 p.m. on the last night of his life and why he sought refuge in a skip.

Ireland, meanwhile, has reverted to being a place people leave in search of life opportunities. Figures published in August reported that 397,500 people emigrated from Ireland since the onset of the financial crisis in 2008, while 277,400 returned or moved to Ireland for the first time. Since April last year, the net outward migration amounts to 10 people per hour.

The callous treatment of migrant workers and the return of mass emigration from Ireland are among many symptoms of a society in profound crisis. They are also further markers that objective conditions in Ireland and Europe are reaching a point where mass movements seeking to fundamentally alter the conditions facing millions of working people are imminent.



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