Transcript (part 1)

**Jo:** [00:00:00] I started getting this sentence coming to me all the time like a few years ago, which was 'a bird flies on two wings'. Which is really about theory and practice. You are thinking about your condition, you're looking at the world around you, you're developing an analysis together. It's a collective process. You are learning about other struggles, what's worked, what hasn't worked. We're inspired by these things. And then we can struggle together from our own context, from our own history, from our own conditions.

**Anna:** Hello, welcome to the Organisers in Conversation podcast. I'm Anna.

**Becks:** I'm Becks.

**Anna:** And we are from Seeds for Change. And in this podcast, uh, we get different organisers together to talk about different political questions involved in our organising. And today we're gonna talk about political education. Um, so we have two wonderful guests with us, Jo and Amy, who are thinking about and practicing political education as part of their organising. Do you wanna introduce yourselves?

**Amy:** Um, yeah. Hi, my name is Amy. I am a trade unionist, decolonial Irish language organiser based in Brighton.

**Jo:** Hi, I'm Jo. I work with the Solidarity Economy Association, which is a small worker led cooperative. And also I'm organised with the Kurdistan Solidarity Network and involved in various kinds of grassroots, uh, political and community organising.

**Becks:** Great, thanks. Great to meet you both. So we're talking about political education as part of community organising in this episode. And yeah, I guess our starting point was thinking, like, how hard it feels in our own organising to prioritise the time for like, thinking together about what it is that we're doing, why it is we're doing those things. And like, how thinking can feel like some kind of like, luxury, or like wanky pastime activity.

Um, and yeah, thinking how, like, where that's the case for me with like a part-time job, no children, really low rent, and like all manner of other things about my context that make it easier. Like how hard it can be to prioritise those things in a context where you're struggling for survival alongside trying to organise for survival.

And then I guess I was thinking that, like, there's nothing unique about that. Like, I think examples that you will be bringing will be around political education that people are doing in the context of being in an occupied country, in the context of guerrilla warfare. Um. And yeah, I was reminded of a thing that a friend once said of like, how it's kind of a caricature of English activist culture that, like, there can be a massive split between people who are doing thinking and people who are doing *doing*. And you've got some people who are like writing articles, reading each other's articles, being on podcasts, listening to each other's podcasts. And other people who are sitting in meetings, are in their communities, are campaigning. But like, the two activities are often like really compartmentalized.

Um, and I guess it fitted with like a feeling that we've both had for a while of like... It feels like a lot of community organising models at the moment in Britain sort of rest on an assumption that like, being involved in collective activity is like, *automatically* politicising. That the experience of having power together, of like, making visible what the power structures are in society, in the point of like challenging your landlord or whatever it is, in having conversations around that, you just kind of automatically develop your analysis of the situation and your kind of understanding of like what your role is politically.

Um. And yeah, I guess we've kind of had a feeling as well that like, it doesn't quite feel enough. That those things do happen, but that to rely on those things without doing things more consciously and deliberately to organise how we do thinking together, I guess, means that we're like missing the, some of the opportunities that doing those things could create. And like, that feeling all the more urgent at the moment, given the power of right wing narratives, far right narratives that are like kind of taking over.

Um, so yeah, in this episode we've invited you to talk about what groups are doing in different contexts to do political education together in a way that's more conscious and more deliberate. What the limitations are of leaving that, that process of [00:05:00] political education, just kind of, to chance. And what feels challenging about doing political education as part of organising in like, the current context in Britain or Ireland. Um, and examples you've got of groups that are navigating those challenges well.

And maybe to kick us off, it'd be interesting to hear just like, for you two, what do you mean by political education? Something else we were thinking about in thinking about this episode is like, the phrase 'political education' can immediately conjure for people this idea of sort of self elected experts coming in to tell other people what their analysis should be. Um, and we're kind of assuming that you don't mean that and we don't mean that. But yeah, it'd be great to hear from you, what *do* you mean?

**Jo:** I mean, in some ways it, this could be a very wide answer, I think. Because the, the form could be so many diverse things or, or kind of like, many things sort of in synthesis or in like relation with each other. From kind of reading groups to like discussing together to workshops or kind of more *education* in the sense that... revolutionary movements historically and today, use political education as a way of building the understanding of their membership and the understanding of the current conditions, the context that we're in, how we got into this situation, who are *we* actually.

Which, um, you know, oppressed, um, especially colonised peoples, like the Kurdish people, um, we're gonna talk about the Irish history as well, the black liberation struggle, um, indigenous movements in Latin America... Like, there is this, um, being detached from who you historically are and kind of assimilated into another way of being. And I think that political education for such movements is like obviously a very important thing, like to, to regain, to re-understand like who we are and what we, what have we lost and how do we struggle to get that back.

Um, also on this island, I think that we've been very detached from our culture and who we are for like, a very long time. Um, mostly people don't know their culture here. People don't know their history very well. We know what we learn at school, like the history of who was in power at what time and what wars happened when, but we are not learning like what we lost and when we lost it. And you know, like our culture isn't capitalism. Like we, we had a culture before that. There's many different forms of, of things like that that have been lost.

So I think wherever you are in the world and whatever position you are in, uh, there is this sense that we need to build a collective... so I, I see political education really as like a *collective* thing. And there can be somebody giving like a lecture that people listen to because that person has a great deal of experience. Or it can be, and usually it's a mixture of these things actually, like discussing together, this is my understanding, this is my life, this is my experience. Ah, you have the same experience. That's interesting. Why is that? Let's find out together, like, when these things changed, where these experiences are coming from.

You know, in the sort of sixties and seventies, people talked about consciousness raising groups. So I would see that as a form of political education. Um, in Solidarity Economy Association, we publish a lot of kind of explainers, graphics, short videos to try and bring kind of complex ideas, I guess, into more of a popular understanding. I think in a way that's also political education. So it can be many different things.

**Amy:** Yeah. I think political education for me is about building a shared understanding of a problem, a shared analysis of what's happening. And fundamentally, it needs to be any form of education that gives us the tools, the knowledge, the tactics we need to liberate ourselves. Because the fact is we're we're literally not getting that in other formal modes of education. In fact, we're getting the opposite. I think the collectiveness of it is absolutely crucial. I'm very much a believer in collective intelligence rather than individualised models of knowledge holding or knowledge sharing.

Um. On, on what Jo said about, um, the role of political education in reminding us of who we are and where we've come from, and I'll speak about this a bit later when I talk about the hedge schools, the Irish anti-colonial educational matrices that developed in the 17th and 18th centuries. But there's a great line at the end of Brian Friel's play 'Translations', which deals with the very, very violent and disruptive process of mapping, of the creation of Ordinance Survey maps, and of the renaming of places in Ireland by the [00:10:00] British military. Uh, and at the very, very end of the play, Máire, one of the protagonists, returns to the hedge school and she says, 'I, I set out on a journey, but I forgot where I was going. So I returned here.' And I think that is quite a useful thing when, when we think about political education, although like context can change and our, our struggles, we can move on or we can drift apart. But being able to return together to a shared place of learning and consideration, it keeps us rooted. It's, it's always something that we can return to as organisers, as humans.

**Becks:** Yeah, so we were gonna ask you about examples that you know of, of like movements that put high priority on political education. Um, so maybe hedge schools is a good starting point. Um. Tell us about them.

**Amy:** Yeah. So the hedge schools, I guess, like at the time that they were in operation, so 17th and 18th century Ireland, I don't think there would've been an explicit consciousness that these were political education forms at the time, but certainly I draw a huge amount of inspiration and they, they were massively, um, influential in the struggle for independence.

So for, for a bit of context, um, from the 17th century onwards when the Cromwellian reconquest of Ireland had concluded, uh, and expulsions from land of, of Catholics over to the west of Ireland had been completed. And the Protestant ascendancy and the Protestant parliament in Dublin was consolidated. There was very much, there was like a religious divide in Ireland, which also had quite like a racial and civilisationalist character. Um, and of course, you know, there were racial characteristics assigned to the Gaelic population: animalistic, wild, hard to control, verging on subhuman. Aggressive. Um, penal laws were enacted to consolidate the rule of the British crown in Ireland. And there were various things around the practice of Catholicism being banned, the Irish language being forbidden to be spoken. Uh, people couldn't travel abroad to receive education. Irish people couldn't own certain types of horse, certain types of weapon, things like that. Um, but very much there was, so there was no like policy of forced conversion. It was very much something that was achieved through legislation. Um, very, very oppressive legislation. Um, access to universities was forbidden for Catholics.

So you've got this context of expropriation, expulsions from land, impoverished peasantry, famines. We're all aware of the great hunger in the 19th century, but there had been waves of famine for about 200 years prior to that, as is often the case in colonial contexts. Um, and so then you had this learned class that still existed and that was highly educated, speaking Latin, speaking Greek, and very much aware of the level of oppression that they were facing.

And so they started up hedge schools among the peasantry. And these schools would take place in barns, in kitchens, in caves. And they were operating both outside of church control, the, the Catholic church being a provider of education at that time, from the pulpit, if nowhere else, um, and also operating outside of the British imperialist state. Politically, they, although there may not have been like an active sort of movement building consciousness happening in every hedge school, they played a really, really vital role in the sense that they provided literacy to the peasantry, enabling the peasantry to read pamphlets published by the the United Irishmen, enabling people to participate in agrarian movements, the land war. Um. To push for, for land reform, which ultimately did contribute to that sort of consciousness raising in the long struggle for Irish independence. Which still isn't complete given the settler colony that exists in the north of Ireland. Um, I have to get that in there, sorry.

**Anna:** It's gotta be said mate. [Laughter].

**Amy:** I mean, there were, they were just absolutely prolific throughout the country. There was one hedge school, there were 9,000 at the height of the movement. So that's on average, one hedge school for every parish and parishes are tiny. Um, ' cause Catholic parents, they wouldn't send their children to national schools. The, the hedge school master and then what came to be known as Scoláirí Bochta, Poor Scholars, so these would be kind of talented students who would emerge, they would be sent to travel the country to learn from other hedge school masters and set up their own schools. And they kind of became a symbol of resistance and continuity among the peasantry in a context of, um, colonial oppression.

It was really only the famine that brought the hedge schools to an end. When the Irish language and Catholicism - the Irish language in particular, Gaelic ness and the Irish language - came to be very closely tied with poverty and famine. Um, and I think that link [00:15:00] between poverty and famine and quite a lot of internalised colonial shame, I think we're still dealing with that in Ireland today. Um, yeah, I think we're still dealing with that in Ireland today.

**Becks:** I feel like that thing about shame is gonna come up later and I can't quite formulate what I want to say about it now. But yeah, it just feels interesting, the way in which it's like, simultaneously like a barrier to political education *and* like, one of the things that's kind of unpicked and dismantled in the process of doing political education. And that feels very relevant to why, like, it can feel hard to prioritise.

**Jo:** I'm sort of only seeing it hard from sort of relatively privileged populations though, to be honest. Like, within like very poor, um, often illiterate Kurdish women, like a lot of older women, for example in northeast Syria which is like, yeah, Rojava or West Kurdistan is the word that, Rojava comes from this. Of course, like the region now is bigger than just the Kurdish majority places. But also in Southeast Turkey or North Kurdistan, like, the older women are often like the most committed and militant and have, you know, they're fully kind of convinced by the, the movement and the struggle. And they're often illiterate. And there's not this like aversion to political education that I see from a lot of like English leftists. So I think, yeah, something to think about there.

**Becks:** Mm-hmm.

**Amy:** Where do you think that comes from? From the more elite classes among the left.

**Jo:** I think if you... Yeah, if you're, you've been dispossessed of everything, like your whole identity and like your people and everything and the fabric of reality that you know is at stake... like, you are also like thirsty to understand, who are we, why, why is it like this? How do we overcome this? And I think there's quite a lot of like, yeah, guilt and shame, um, that come up wrapped with being in a more colonial identity. Um. And a kind of a fear of what it would take to win. What would it take to be successful? What is commitment? Like, what is to take responsibility to do the work to like, try to really understand things? The level that we would have to maybe change the way that we're living. Um, you know, and the embeddedness of individualism in our personalities through the way that we've been socialised, like intergenerationally on this island as well. Like, white folks on this island. It's quite a lot of stuff to overcome.

**Anna:** Yeah. I was just thinking about language as like, the epitome of like... a type of knowledge or thing that people hold that colonial powers would like try to eliminate. And like, that's just so illustrative, isn't it? Like the thing that people have that's how they understand themselves collectively. That that's something that would be targeted and like attacked in like colonial contexts. And that's, yeah, whether that's like a literal language or whether it's like a language of class or a language of like how people see themselves in a community. Changes...

**Amy:** Schemas.

**Anna:** Yeah.

**Amy:** Ways of viewing the world.

**Anna:** Yeah. Like changes how people think about themselves and think about each other.

**Amy:** Yeah. I mean the, like speaking the Irish language today, I mean, I know Kneecap, that film has been really, really, really well received. Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's been so important and I think we are kind of witnessing some sort of like Athbheochan na Gaeilge 2.0, sort of a Gaelic revival 2.0. Because we've got, you've got these things like Kneecap, these, these films, these sort of working class expressions of Irishness, but also internationalist, you know, you've got like the multi-ethnic Irish working class coming together to eskew the language handed down to us by our colonial oppressors. And that's kind of a thing that often migrants to Ireland will have in common. Like if they've come from Nigeria, if they've, you know, so many different places. And it's a thing that can tie Irish people and new arrivals to Ireland or second, third generation arrivals together. Which is really fantastic.

Um, I think speaking the language, I think it allows us to free our minds in a sense, and also to sort of develop counter narratives about who we are and what exactly we're trying to overthrow.

**Jo:** Yeah. We don't even have a record of how much linguicide has been experienced on this island, right? Like, we still have the Welsh language. Thank God. Like, you know, Cornish has been somehow revived to the level it's at now, but I think it's still very marginal as a [00:20:00] language. Um, Scottish, Gaelic, like, I don't know how much that's kind of, especially in the younger generations, I just don't really know. Um, but how many other languages were there? Like we just don't even know. You know, this was all a Brythonic speaking island and we've no idea, like, what even the names were for places which have like Anglo-Saxon names or Norman names and things like that now. Um. I think it's interesting as well how I, I understand that in, in the Irish context, like, the language is strongest in Belfast.

**Amy:** Mm.

**Jo:** Or in like the, the parts of the north which are still occupied by Britain. Whereas it's like being taught in schools in the Republic of Ireland, but it's like people kind of somehow reject it?

**Amy:** Mmm.

**Jo:** This is also a really interesting question, right?

**Amy:** I guess it's about a feeling of something huge being at stake. You know, when you've got people who are still living in an occupied north of Ireland, I guess it feels that so much more is at stake. So much more of their identity perhaps is tied to the language. I think in the south, I think part of the kind of, the nation building process or the kind of state craft process of the Irish Republic definitely involved - and it was fostered by the British - part of that process involved adopting the status of white dominion and then white sister country of the United Kingdom. And I think part of being able to drink that Kool-Aid, surely, because how, how can you, how can that be the case when you've come from really, really violent uprisings, violent repression, how can you suddenly turn around and believe that everything is fine? And we are, we are 'white', we are... in inverted commas.

Um, so I think, yeah, like part of what the state has asked us to do has been to turn our back on the things that remind us of the colonial past. And part of that is the Irish language, but very much also another part of that is to turn our back on the Irish travelers. And the assimilationist... and often using the language of genocide that the project that the Irish state undertook from the sixties onward of assimilation, um, starting with the Commission into Itinerancy, um, which yeah, recommended forced assimilation through, um, forcing travelers into housing, but also separating young traveler children from their families and resettling them with settled families. Incredibly violent, incredibly racist. Um, and I think we are still, we're still trying to overcome all of that. I don't even know if we're trying to overcome it. I mean, the Irish state very much is still leaning into assimilationist policies when it comes to the traveling community in Ireland.

Um, but I think, I think like a working class internationalist politics of Irishness, which is not about lineage and which is not about passport, but which is about *being in a place*. Because this was always the way that Gaelicness was defined. It was never about heritage. Because Gaelic society was actually quite fluid in the sense that Vikings would get involved and Normans would get involved, you know, and it was all quite, um, it was sort of more fluid and less boundaried in that way.

Um, and I think that's something that Irish people can still very much tap into. I think you can definitely feel that on the ground in working class communities in particular, that if you are here, if you're living here, you belong here. If you wanna get involved, you belong here. And it's not... It's very much like an identity that can intersect with other things. You can be Gaelic and a million other things at the same time.

**Jo:** On language as well, about the Kurdish context. Like, um, a lot of similarities really with what you're saying about the Irish language. The Turkish state, but not only the Turkish state, kind of all of the states where the Kurdish, like the historical, you know, Kurdish majority part of the world that we call Kurdistan has been divided between like Turkey, Syria, Iran, Iraq. They've all had big oppression in different kinds of ways on the language. There's a humongous number of people in prisons of Turkey only for like singing in Kurdish, teaching Kurdish. Um, I have friends that were tortured in Syria during the time of the regime for teaching Kurdish, and Kurdish language rights work. And then yeah, of course changing the names of the places, forbidding people from calling their children Kurdish names, like this kind of stuff.

And in relation to education as well, there was a project, a friend of mine wrote, uh, one of his essays on that I had the pleasure of proofreading and I learned a lot from it. It was about the Send Your Girls to School campaign, which was done in Southeastern Turkey, which is North Kurdistan, with the support of kind of international NGOs. Cause it sounds really good, right? Like 'send the girls to school!' They were like, oh, there's not enough girls going to school. Uh, we need to [00:25:00] educate the girls. And then the thing is that they then go to the state schools where they're only allowed to speak Turkish. They're not allowed to say anything... like there would be, you know, abuse if you, if you speak in Kurdish, if you express a Kurdish identity.

And actually it's the women who traditionally hold, you know, we say 'mother tongue'. It's always the women that hold the language, the culture, the, you know, intergenerationally. So yeah, I thought this was a really interesting case. Like, how something which seems to align so strongly with our values, of like educating girls, can then be like a system of assimilation and like furthering of colonialism.

**Amy:** Very much also tied to the, the whole thing around educating women in Afghanistan and how that was then used to get American military personnel and sort of ideological control of the population. Yeah.

**Jo:** So it sounds like we're saying that political education definitely doesn't come from the state. [Laughter].

**Anna:** Shocker.

**Jo:** It comes from the grassroots, is rooted in the community. I was politicised on the anarchist left and obviously there's lots of different parts of that. Um, many of the parts which I first came to view and understand politics and movements and kind of campaigning and activism and all this kind of stuff. Um, there'll be like kind of workshops, and things like that. Often about like one topic. Sometimes they are, they can be sometimes more towards what I would call political education, but there is often like more of an aversion to theory, which is seen often as like Marxist. And kind of a big focus on action. And lots and lots of tactics, but not a lot of strategy. Not a lot of kind of tying together all of the things, looking at the bigger picture, how do these things fit together? What do we mean when we... I think anarchists have like some of the most radical visions. Like a world without a state, a world without capitalism.

This is really aligned with the Kurdish movement as well, it's what really attracted me to it. But there you have like a strategy, like a much bigger picture, like a lot of different political education work going on at lots of different levels. And also through, um, learning about and being more in touch with, I guess, different parts of the Kurdish movement, or like Kurdish communities and assembly, I met lots of different organisers from other parts of the left that I hadn't been in contact with before. And it's really interesting because I was seeing, I met for the first time anti-state communists. Which a lot of anarchists I think don't know even that they exist. Um, very aligned indeed, like anarchists and communists can often like, be for and against all the same things. But they have like different aesthetics and different like, ways of organising, like anarchists love camping, or like the bits of the anarchist left that I've been involved with, like, love camping. The communists hate camping [Laughter]. Like they'll have like different food. They'll have, like, it's really interesting.

It's like there's nothing actually very substantially different here, but these people are not coming together and they've developed, like, different subcultures. But actually if we're all struggling for the same thing, like, we need to be in touch with each other. Yeah, we need these relationships. Um, so I'm very proud now to have comrades from all different types of, you know, left kind of affiliations, um, and from lots of different parts of the world of course.

Internationalism we haven't talked about yet, which is obviously very, very important in all of the things that we're talking about because we're not talking about the liberation of one country. Like, that can't be done anyway. But we're talking about a systemic change that is like a shift in the whole of the world system, which is about, like, the rich tapestry of life and coexistence that we can have without systems of domination.

So I, I started getting this sentence coming to me all the time like a few years ago, which was 'a bird flies on two wings', which is really about theory and practice. Which is praxis. Which political education to me is like, the kind of heart and soul of really. It's how it all comes together. Because you are, you know, you are thinking about your condition, you're looking at the world around you, you're developing an analysis together. It's a collective process. You are reading and you are learning about other struggles historically, here in the countries of Britain, in other parts of the world. Like what's worked, what hasn't worked. We're inspired by these things. We learn about how people in other parts of the world, who have different positions within the world system are struggling against it. And then we can struggle together from our own context, from our own history, from our own conditions. And then we learn and then we adapt to the learning, right. So this is 'the bird flies on two wings'.[00:30:00] '

**Anna:** I read Pedagogy of the Oppressed last year by Paulo Freire. And um, it took me a very long time to read. Um, but it was amazing, like, yeah, this Brazilian revolutionary educator sort of thinking about how oppressed people could like, develop their own pedagogy or like way of learning about the world. And like, I'd heard about this book for like years and years, as like... I dunno, I thought it was about like a theory of education, or it's like referenced in universities. But it's kind of a book about like revolutionary strategy. Like that's how seriously he's taking this question of like education, thinking about it as revolutionary strategy.

And like, this concept of 'conscientização', I had to write out the syllables. Um, but like something about consciousness, like learning, 'learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions'. But what he says is like, this is a way for people to become like more fully human. And like, oppressed people are like on a journey of perceiving more and more like the contradictions of, of reality, the reality that they're living in. And like, the more that we perceive them, the more human we are. And the more we're able to like act in the world. And act against like a reality that oppresses us. And like, I dunno, I was just like, thought that was so amazing. Like, he's not thinking about it as like a separate thing at all, like, that there's like education and then there's like a separate thing we do that's like political activity. Or that they're like two things running side by side and we do like a bit of this and a bit of that. He's saying like, they're the same thing.

And like, whenever I read about like the miners' strike, for example, in Britain, or like watch things about that, or like just like to imagine... It just seems so implausible to like imagine that people acted with this absolutely like implicit solidarity and militarism and like staked so much on this thing. Like, it's hard to imagine that happening in England. It feels like a different time in history or like... But then, to think about that as like, well these people were acting from something. Like they could see something about themselves. Not just the men that were on strike, but the women and like the people that were involved in that. Something was like, illuminated to them about themselves. They could see it in a different way. And like, they... I can imagine that they were like, more fully human. Do you know what I mean? Than like whatever we are now in England. I dunno.

And like, yeah, just something about that thing of like, it's just, it's not separate at all. It is the same thing. I dunno, like I want that in my life. I want to like, have that time to like learn with people about who we are. Like the thing you were saying Jo, about like, who are we actually? How did we get here? And like, England, like we are not in, living in a context of colonisation, but we're living in *something* that's hard to understand. And I feel like I wanna understand that.

**Amy:** I mean, to a certain extent, like, I do believe that capitalism, I mean, when we go back to the time of the enclosures, which maybe Jo will want to say more about... Like, the sort of collective land rights and how they were stripped from people through the process of enclosure, expropriation, and people being driven to the factories. You know, *so* much was lost. And so much of people's, I suppose like, concept of themselves, self-concept, was colonised. I'm not trying to draw a parallel between what happened in the UK and sort of like racialising dynamics of colonialism elsewhere. I'm certainly not trying to draw parallel between those things. But certainly the idea that there has been no loss of anything, no loss of personhood, no loss of connection to the land in this country is, is really, really misguided, I think.

Um, and what you said on being more fully human, I wrote down something that Freire said, earlier today 'cause I was, I was flicking through some notes that I'd made. Um, and he had said that colonialism only succeeds when those invaded become convinced of their own inferiority. I guess you could sort of draw a parallel there between the logic of dehumanization that underpins all forms of racism, I guess.

**Jo:** Yeah. I think you just said, we are not living in a time of colonisation, and I would be like, aren't we? I think that's a, that's a good question to walk with. Um, to kind of explore, I think. Because what the... In the Kurdish movement, they would talk a lot about like the world system. And that is a system which is colonising everyone. Um, people living on this island, especially kind of English white people, have more of an active role in shaping and influencing that perhaps. [00:35:00] Um, are also at the same time victims of it, often unconsciously. And like learning to see that and how we can cut ourselves from this like in a collective way, this is a also a very important part of political education, I think. Which is also perhaps why it's so uncomfortable for a lot of people that we may be organised with.

There is a very, very long history of workers political education here, right? Like in England, in all of the countries of Britain. Which I think is possibly at a weaker point now, I, I'm not... maybe Amy would know more, being more connected to like unionism. Um, if you've seen much of a, especially in younger people, a continuing tradition of that. I think we're seeing a bit of a revival in a lot of ways of like militant unionism. Maybe with political education going with that as well.

**Amy:** Yeah, absolutely. I think it's quite variegated. I think the, I think the story is quite variegated across the UK. I mean, I can only speak for the unions that I've been a part of, um, which was PCS, the Public and Commercial Services Union, and currently UCU, the Universities and Colleges Union. Um, certainly I do think at times, and I make no secret of this, I do disagree often with UCU's strategy at the national level.

However, you can definitely see a lot more sort of grassroots stuff happening, either against or outside of unions. I mean, in, the various different waves of strike that have happened, there have been so many teach outs often connected with union activity, but drawing in people who, for whatever reason, either have never been exposed to that type of working class education or class consciousness before coming along to a teach out, to read together, to dance together, to discuss what community means and what our workplace could look like together. Um, I think the camps for Palestine were also a really, really great example of that. And yeah, often taking place very much outside of and in opposition to, or maybe sometimes without the formal sanction of, union bureaucracy.

Um, yeah, so I certainly do think that there is a resurgence of, we'll say like a working class militant consciousness among young people. Whether the trade union movement as it currently exists is best placed to harness that or whether it will ever be in a position to, to kind of, to meet the needs of, of the working class and to actually facilitate working class organisation, I don't know. I want to say that I have faith in the trade union movement. I've been a trade unionist since I was knee high. My mother was a trade union rep. I've been going to picket lines all my life. Um, and so it's disappointing to have to say this, but ultimately I'm saying this from, I suppose like a, a position of love and care and commitment to the trade union movement. And sometimes when we love and care and are committed to things, we have to be able to call out their faults. Um, so yeah. TBC perhaps on that one, Jo. [Laughter].

**Jo:** Because there's also like a rise of like base unions, right? Like a kind of re-imagining what unionism could be. Sort of in these social unions, um, that are focused more on like renters, bringing renters together.

**Amy:** Absolutely.

**Jo:** And there is like a lot of consciousness raising going on within that kind of stuff. And then also more kind of, that have a bigger kind of base, I guess, in more marginalised parts of the, like grassroots in society, like Voices of the World and things like this that are like unionising much more precarious workers and finding new ways of doing that. Like, I think there's different approaches to unionism, which maybe, I don't know, come along with different approaches to consciousness raising, political education.

**Amy:** Absolutely. Um, in my time doing tenants organising with the London Renters Union, that was certainly, there was a huge emphasis on political education and coming together to discuss collectively, and from kind of a consensus building approach to, to discuss, you know, who are we, who is our enemy? What is our strategy? How do we approach, how do we approach movement building? Um, who is our community? And one thing that I really took from my time organising with the London Renters Union was the emphasis on that kind of deep organising and the building of sustainable long-term relationships.

I suppose coming from, if anyone is familiar with the concept of kind of radical friendship, and I think it goes back to as well being able to recognise the full humanity of our neighbours, particularly in a context where... I mean, I was living in East London where we currently are, where due to the perniciousness of various forms of racism, but particularly Islamophobia, often we're living in a context where our Muslim neighbours are being constructed as not fully human. And so how can we, [00:40:00] how do we, how *must* we organise in ways that try to overcome those narratives that we receive from the state. Um, yeah, I think those building of those long-term relationships through a lens of kind of radical friendship.

Which kind of relates to the Muintearas group that Jo and I are building in Brighton, this word  *Muintearas*, it's kind of hard to translate. It comes from *muintir*, which means, it can mean a few things. It can mean 'family' in a, like an extended family sense. It can mean 'people' as in, the people who are connected to me or community. Um, it can also mean 'nation'. So like the official word for nation would be *náisiún*, but when we say *muintir na hÉireann*, we, it means like 'people of Ireland'. But in kind of like a non nationalistic sense.

So  Muintearas, it's a group that we've set up. We get together, um, and we read. Um, I guess it came from my relatively long history doing sort of language organising in Ireland and in the UK, but kind of feeling that often when we think about the Irish language, it seems to take place in relation to the Irish state. Or often we, we relate to the language through state structures, either, whether that's state education or state funded bodies, which often do, you know, really good work. Okay, don't get me wrong. Um, but how it's kind of like the state is like a bit of a container really.

And how can we ever say that we're liberating ourselves if the container is the racist racial state that oppresses Irish travelers, that oppresses migrants, um, that doesn't offer citizenship to children who have been born there if they don't, if their parents were born in the wrong type of place. How can we really say that we can liberate ourselves and cut, cut the tie that is the English language to British colonialism in an ongoing sense, no matter what, how good the work is that we're doing, if the container that is happening in is the violent pernicious Irish state? It's really never going to get us where we need to get to. So I was trying to imagine what it would look like to come together to build internationalist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist ways of preserving and sharing our Irish language.

Because it's not just about a language, it's, as we've kind of already mentioned, it's a way of relating to the world. It's a way of conceptualising ourselves and our history. And even like at the kind of grammatalogical level, within the language, there are certain structures and ways of speaking that simply don't exist in the English language. Like for example, we don't have a verb 'to possess'. We don't have a verb 'to have'. Things are just 'at' us. So there's this, I think it kind of gives us a bit more of like a, kind of, almost like a transient, you know, and not individualising, or not individualistically possessive understanding of property. Um, which I think can be really powerful when we reflect on it.

Um, and so I got together with some other people and we started essentially just meeting up to, to speak the language together, but I wanted to do more. Um, and fortunately I had the, the absolute fortune of meeting Jo at one of those meetups who told me that she was involved in the Kurdish Women's Movement, the Kurdish movement in general, and the role of language defence in that, which really, really inspired me. And I thought, right, yes, this is the catalyst that I needed. This is the inspiration that I needed.

Um, and so yeah, we started it up. Um, so at the moment we're getting together, we're reading the writings of James Connolly. Lots of his writings are published. For example, you've got The Reconquest of Ireland, you've got Labour in Irish History, um, and you've got Religion and Nationalism? Um, and so yeah, it's about getting together, reading, reflecting, going slowly, trying not to... Um, I certainly, and I think a lot of other people who I organise with, I often find myself almost having this like knee jerk feeling that I need to go fast and to be productive and to be like grinding out, you know, what are our aims? What are our objectives? What's our strategy? What's the timeline? It's like, well, no, actually, we don't need to organise like that. We can come together and it can be a nourishing space for us for the time that we are in that space and for afterwards.

Um, and yeah, it'll grow organically. But yeah, it's important that I think particularly when we look at, across the world, all of the various different forms of fascism that are currently coming to power. Not least in Ireland with, um, very, very sad... it makes me feel very, very sad... far right anti-immigration protests that are taking place and often drawing on, like, you'll see St. George's crosses being [00:45:00] brandished by people alongside the Irish tricolor. It's muddled, um, and it's upsetting, but it's because there is... the, the far right in in the UK is influencing the movement.

Um, yeah, and I guess just feeling that I had a responsibility as an internationalist, not only as an Irish person, as an internationalist, first and foremost, to address that. Or at least to step into that conversation and try to develop a different understanding of what it means to be Irish, to be Gaelic in 2025. Although we draw on the Gaelic or Irish radical tradition, we don't conceptualize Irishness or Gaelicness... I mean, I prefer Gaelicness because it doesn't seem to be as confined to the Irish racial state as Irishness. Um, so all are welcome, anyone is welcome to be Gaelic and to be multiple other things at the same time. We're trying to build, I suppose, an internationalist approach to Gaelic identity.

**Jo:** De-colonial internationalist understandings of Gaelicness...

**Amy:** And anti-colonial. I don't know if we can even, I mean, I don't know if anyone can claim, can we really claim that anything can be truly decolonial? I think it's quite naive to suggest that any particular action can be decolonial. I think the best that we can aspire to is to be anti-colonial in the sense that we're pushing against the forces of colonialism as they continue to grow and change.

**Jo:** I wonder about political education as in understanding, okay, Gaelicness and the history of the loss, of the uncovering that which is lost as a process of decolonisation.

**Amy:** Mm-hmm.

**Jo:** Like, of the people engaged in that study and that work.

**Amy:** As in reconnecting to their loss of self?

**Jo:** Yeah. And the loss of the history, the culture, the language, the hundreds and hundreds of years of struggle.

**Amy:** Mm. Even in more concrete terms like loss of collective property rights and the imposition of English common law and individualised property rights, which I think is, is like a huge dimension of cultural imperialism as it exists in Ireland that is overlooked. Probably because it goes to the very root, I mean, to just, to get rid of those property rights would be to thoroughly upend the economy. Yeah.

**Jo:** And it's really interesting to be reading the writings of James Connolly, who was an internationalist...

**Amy:** Feminist...

**Jo:** Irish. Yeah. And like nationalist from this, like, not narrow nationalist, but kind of actually internationalist, anti narrow nationalism, you know, national liberation struggle perspective. Writing in 1910.

**Amy:** Mm.

**Jo:** Uh, really in a way that feels very relevant and aligned in lots of different ways, as well as being like, very much of its time, like some of the things that he's criticising and writing about. So it's really fascinating.

**Amy:** Yeah. And very much having like a very strong materialist analysis and saying that, you know, even if we do achieve some measure of self-government in Ireland, without dismantling the structures of capitalism and capitalist imperialism as they exist on the island of Ireland, we will still continue to be controlled from elsewhere. Yeah, it's been very...

**Jo:** He would've been anti-state if he'd lived long enough to see it.

**Amy:** Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah, and it'll be exciting to see what we'll read next. There's a lot of good stuff from Anna Parnell and the Ladies Land League, for example. Um, I think Irish people are still really, really suffering. And it comes up in a lot of different forms of literature, like in the literature of, in Joyce or in even more contemporary Irish writers, like this question of who are we and not knowing who we are. And that always being defined by our colonial overlords. Um, that we're some sort of like broken, uh, flawed version of British people.

**Jo:** Really brings us back to the Kurdish context in a lot of ways. There's also not a word in Kurdish 'to have' as well.

**Anna:** Wow.

**Jo:** I see a lot of similarities because I'm learning Kurdish and I'm learning Irish. I do see actually an interesting amount of similarities. There's another important word in Kurdish, which is *xwebun*, which is really about being who we really are. For which we have to also know ourselves, right? So this is also a word used a lot by the Kurdish women's movement in relation to political education. Um, it really speaks a lot to the earlier segment on understanding who we are in this also collective way. It's not like an individual, you know, going to a therapist to understand who we are. It's really something which is collectively developed and doesn't end. You know, the developing of who we are and our self knowledge and understanding. And *being*, our self being.

**Amy:** It's in a process of becoming, always, I think identity. It's never fixed, it's always becoming. It's Stuart Hall who said that. I can't take the credit for that. [Laughter]. ​[00:50:00]

**Anna:** Thanks so much to Jo and Amy for a brilliant conversation, and we'll be back in part 2, where we hear more from Jo about the Kurdish context, including the huge role of political education in the trajectory of the Kurdish Revolution. We think more about the idea of collective self knowing, and how this differs from the individual identity we are taught to hold. We discuss the rise of far-right ideology, and the ways political education can help us understand together the histories we've been cut from. And we talk about commitment, comrades, and the need to take time to develop an analysis together, from which we can act. See you for part two.