

Cian Morrison Coláiste an Chraoibhín, Fermoy, Co. Cork

Feuds in Fermoy as Anti-Refugee Protests Continue

On the 30th of November 2022, 63 asylum-seekers arrived in St Joseph's Convent, Fermoy. On arrival, the refugees were met by protesters. These protesters were using megaphones to shout their opinions, positioning themselves directly outside the convent. The protesters claimed that the convent was housing single males, but St Joseph's Convent has confirmed that all the adult males were fathers who were living with their children.

The protests continued, led by Derek Blighe, who has been organising and taking part in protests all over the country over the past few months. He has a YouTube channel with over five thousand subscribers. He uses his channel to spread his opinions and to organise protests. He also livestreams these protests. In his livestream, "Fermoy", Blighe and his followers film themselves marching through the streets of Fermoy, holding up signs that read: "Are our children safe?", "No public consultation, why?" and "Google U.N replacement migration."

On the 19th of January, a protest organised by Derek Blighe took place outside of Christ Church in Fermoy. It was advertised as a peaceful protest, but at around 6pm a man was assaulted on Oliver Plunkett hill. It is believed that this man was a plain clothes member of An Garda Síochána. Before the assault, the assaulted man was being questioned by protesters. It has been claimed that the "Garda" tried to swat a phone out of one of the protesters' hands. In response another protester ran up and punched him in the face. He did not need any medical attention, but the Gardaí have launched an investigation into the assault.

In a video titled "Gardaí attempt to instigate violence at peaceful protest" Derek Blighe spoke about the event. He showed footage of the man seemingly trying to knock the phone out of the protesters' hands and claimed that he was trying to

instigate violence. Blighe also claimed that the masked woman who allegedly carried out the assault was not a member of the protest. Some of his followers wrote in the comment section below the video that they believe that the woman was sent by the Gardaí to make the protests look violent.

Many of the locals in Fermoy do not support the anti-refugee protests. 24 activists from Fermoy and the surrounding areas have formed a new local network named 'Fermoy for All'. It was created to help support and welcome asylum seekers to Fermoy. Volunteers from 'Fermoy for All' have visited the refugees in the convent multiple times, to assist the families in finding a school and a GP and to help them settle in Fermoy. Kate O'Connell is one of the activists who set up 'Fermoy for All.' As 25% of the population of Fermoy was born overseas, Ms. O'Connell has said that "solidarity is ultimately what the town is about".

Kate O'Connell organised a rally on the 3rd of December 2022 to show support for the refugees and to show that they are accepted in Fermoy. Over 200 local people showed up. They stood outside of Christ's Church, holding up signs that had phrases such as "Fascists out, Immigrants welcome." At this rally Ms. O'Connell, said that "The protest outside St. Joseph's Convent was not organised by local people, it was organised by those who want to sow division and spread hate. My message here this morning is that Fermoy welcomes refugees, welcomes asylum seekers, and welcomes people of colour."

Despite all that has happened both the pro and anti-refugee groups are increasing in numbers. On the 3rd of March, another protest took place in Fermoy. This was organised by Blighe, himself from Rylane, a small village an hour's drive from Fermoy town. It was all livestreamed on his YouTube channel. In this livestream you can clearly see that the turnout for his protest was quite large. Does this mean that the town of Fermoy is no longer a safe place for refugees? This story has by no means reached its conclusion.