

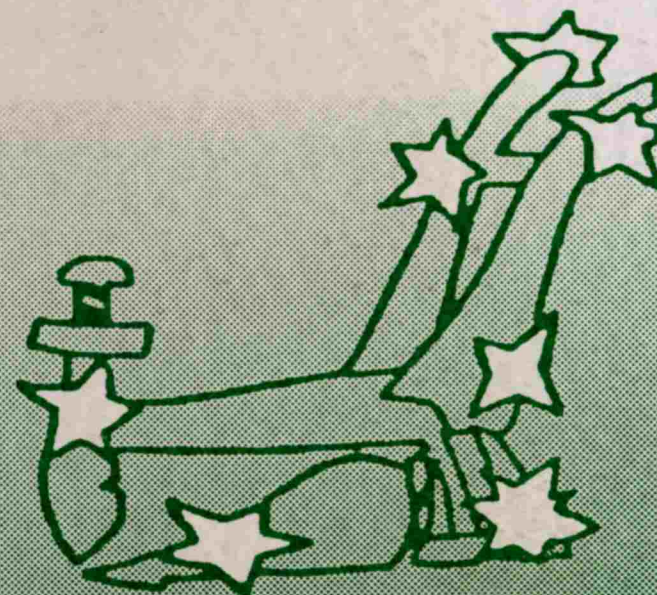
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# **The Irish Republican Congress Revisited**

By  
**Patrick Byrne**  
(Former Joint Secretary with Frank Ryan)

## **Living History Series**

**THE  
IRISH  
REPUBLICAN  
CONGRESS  
REVISITED**

**By  
PATRICK BYRNE**

**(Former Joint Secretary with Frank Ryan)**

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To the memory of:  
C. Desmond Greaves  
Patrick Bond

Inspiration for many years of  
THE CONNOLLY ASSOCIATION

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## FOREWORD

At a meeting on 27th February, 1933, in the County Museum, Letterkenny, to mark the centenary of the birth of Peadar O'Donnell, the Chairman, Kevin Monaghan, reminded the large gathering that as two of the speakers (I was one) had been lifelong friends and comrades with Peadar in the good cause, the time was opportune to obtain information from them about him because in a few more years they mightn't be around.

The story that Paddy Byrne, the other ancient speaker, has to tell in this pamphlet on the Republican Congress (1933-39) will provide an answer to many questions bearing on this period of Peadar's long life. There is little printed material on this phase of Socialism in Ireland. Modern historians and revisionists are given to dismissing it as a 'putch' arising from a split in the IRA caused by Peadar O'Donnell, George Gilmore, Frank Ryan and Michael Price, which collapsed after the Convention in Rathmines Town Hall in September 1934. This version is however, at variance with the facts, nor was the leadership confined to four well-known names in the Republican hierarchy.

The movement was nationwide from Shankill in Belfast to the coalmines in Castlecomer, from Dublin to Dungloe, from Waterford to the western seaboard of Connaught. Regional leaders, hardly mentioned, who initiated and built up the movement in the face of entrenched national chauvinism and clerical obscurantism, included Cora Hughes, Charlie Harkin, Charlie Donnelly, Bobby Walsh in Dublin; Victor Halley, Jack McGougan and Willie McMullen in Belfast; Frank Edwards and Paddy Power in Waterford; Pat Early, Pat and Margaret Gralton in Leitrim; John O'Byrne in Dundalk; John O'Connor in Tuam; Brian Corrigan and the McHughes in Achill, and so many others who fought the good fight for socialism in Ireland.

This pamphlet deserves a place in Irish social history and should be seen, not just as a milestone on the road to a Socialist Republic, but as a signpost for Young Ireland, showing the way to the future.

Nora Harkin

Dublin, June 1993



## PREFACE \*

'Writing in London, without access to written sources I must rely mainly on my memory of those exciting times and the wonderful people I had the honour and privilege of working with in the fight against Fascism and for a Socialist Ireland.'

This author's apology is hardly necessary. Patrick Byrne's memory is as clear as a bell. His account is as authentic as any of the printed sources and more so than most.

The Connolly Association, of which Patrick Byrne has been a member for many years, is proud to publish his story, and the more so from the fact that the Connolly Association began its existence as the London Branch of the Republican Congress and many of the *dramatis personae* were members, and some of them are happily still with us

This is a unique story.

C. Desmond Greaves

(\* Preface to the 1986 edition)

## THE IRISH REPUBLICAN CONGRESS REVISITED

At present there appears to be an awakening interest in the 1930's. The BBC has recently shown on television features detailing the rise of Hitler, the Second World War and the Spanish Civil War, in which survivors loyal to the Republic were free to speak about events in that dreadful conflict in which they were actively involved.

This renewed interest in the political and social conditions obtaining over fifty years ago may be due to the similarity that now exists to that depressing period. Then in Britain the unemployment figure exceeded three million, and the shadow of the great depression spread over the land. The Trade Union Movement was under great pressure; in Germany it had been eliminated by Hitler as Mussolini had earlier extinguished it in Italy. Poverty was widespread throughout Europe and the shadow of war loomed on the horizon. Great hunger marches became the order of the day.

In recent years I have been asked to speak to Irish and socialist groups in Britain, and recently in Northern Ireland, on the subject of the Republican Congress. This exciting period of my life is in the realm of history and is as far removed in time from the present generation as the Fenian movement is from mine. When I spoke in March 1985 in Manchester, held under the auspices of the Labour Committee on Ireland, a member of the audience, a professor of history, told me that it was my 'duty' to commit to writing a permanent record of the events I had tried to describe. He pointed out that there is very little documentation from the standpoint of the rank and file of the great radical movements of the past for the reason that the participants were seldom literate, and those who were, had not the time nor the means of recording the struggles in which they were engaged, so that too often what we read of Wat Tyler's peasant revolt, of the Levellers, the Corresponding Societies, the United Irishmen, the Luddites and the Chartists, has been absorbed from the unsympathetic scribblings of middle class hacks and hostile bourgeois historians.

Of the Republican Congress movement of the thirties, little has been chronicled. There are two splendid pamphlets by George Gilmore, a founder member who later shared the secretaryship with Frank Ryan. The subject is also referred to in Sean Cronin's 'Frank Ryan' and in 'Peadar O'Donnell - Irish Social Rebel' by Michael McNerney. Also, the files of the Movement's weekly paper, 'The Republican Congress' and other papers published by the Congress will provide a mine of information for the researcher on revolutionary movements of the period.

### EARLY DAYS

My earliest memories are of the Easter Rebellion in Dublin in 1916. I was just four years of age at the time and can clearly recall the panic and prayers within our house (a pub in Cork Street) and the continuous gunfire without. By Friday of Easter week, the British forces had the situation well in hand and the bombardment of the centre of the city seemed an act of gratuitous vandalism and vengeance on the people of Dublin. The city was in flames and I still vividly recall the red sky at night visible over the whole city at the weekend.

Some historians, who should know better, have reported that the Irish people, at least initially, were opposed to the rising. My own experience opposes this and I endorse the comments of the historian Desmond Greaves who exposed this myth in his excellent pamphlet '1916 As History - the myth of the blood sacrifice':

'A correspondent who lived on Dublin's Navan Road as a little girl told how she had seen a fleet of cars carrying wounded men and was extremely upset asking the local people what was wrong. 'Don't worry. They are great heroes and are fighting for Irish freedom.' she was told. They had been involved in the battle of Ashbourne. Again, there is ample evidence in the extensive literature for sympathy with the rebels amongst the people. There was a widespread fear that they would give in too soon and thus become an object of ridicule.'

Growing up in such a turbulent era, I naturally gravitated in time to membership of Sinn Fein, and its 'military wing' the IRA. The organisation in 1929 bore little, if any, resemblance to the present 'Provos'. The IRA was then a powerful, well organised and disciplined body. It was only two years since the leadership had included Eamon de Valera, Frank Aiken, Sean Lamass and other civil war leaders, who, deciding on a new approach had swallowed 'the oath' and taken their seats in the Dail as Fianna Fail. In June 1927, the Party failed only by the Speaker's casting vote to bring down the Cosgrave Government. In the general election of June 1932, they were successful in so doing.

Fianna Fail had received considerable support from the IRA in that general election campaign. Two days after taking office, talks were initiated between representatives of the de Valera government and the Army Council of the IRA about the possibility of fusing the two movements. They both drew their support from the urban and rural working class and small farmer community, and their aims were almost identical. The outcome, unfortunately, was inconclusive.

This was a time of great depression in Western Europe in general and in Ireland, North and South, in particular. There were a quarter of a million unemployed in the island out of a population of about four million. Conditions in the north were, if anything, worse than in the Free State. The shipyards were almost at a standstill; 20,000 workers in the linen industry were idle. In the slums of Belfast 8,000 children were reported by the Belfast Education Committee to be suffering from malnutrition.

The south was also having a bad time. There was mass unemployment in the crowded slums of Dublin, Cork, Waterford and elsewhere, there was stagnation in the countryside. Evictions from small-holdings and mass emigration were taking place on a scale unequalled since the 1880's.

The gathering storm of frustration and anger erupted in Belfast. The 'Irish Press' of 4th October 1932, reported that '10,000 unem-

ployed marched in protest against the scale of relief paid on certain distress schemes. Eight shillings a week for a man to support his wife and family.' On 12th October the 'Press' reported 'Cordon around Belfast'. Street fighting in widely separated areas. Revolver and rifle firing by police on huge crowds of unemployed, especially in the Falls and Shankill areas. John Geehan of Millfield shot dead. Samuel Baxter, of Regent Street, died of wounds received in an attack made on an armoured car that had become trapped in a trench. The 'Belfast Telegraph' stated:

'There was an exchange of mischief-makers all over the city. It was significant that for once, the religious question did not enter into the trouble. Youths from Protestant areas were to be found in Catholic districts and vice versa'.

In this situation, while the revolution was being served up on a plate in Belfast, what was the IRA leadership doing?

### BOYCOTT BASS

Because of some disparaging remarks the Bass boss, Colonel Grettin, was reported to have made about the Irish, the IRA leadership took umbrage and sent armed units out into the streets of Dublin, Cork and elsewhere to raid pubs, terrify the customers and smash perfectly good stocks of bottled Bass, an activity in which, I regret to say, I was engaged. I had joined my squad at a rendezvous in Tara Street and reported to the leader, Archie Doyle, whom I knew well and liked. He was a quiet, rather tall, angular man. I learned long afterwards, that together with Bill Gannon, they had assassinated Kevin O'Higgins, the then Free State Minister of Justice, at Booterstown, Blackrock on 10th July, 1927. HQ staff of the IRA denied any responsibility.

The Boycott Bass campaign was part of the Boycott British drive initiated by Cumann na mBan. Peadar O'Donnell scathingly described it as a 'heedless stunt' and Cumann na mBan leader Sheila Humphreys later admitted that it was a 'terrible waste of time and energy'.

### SPEED THE PLOUGH

Fianna Fail under the leadership of Eamon de Valera were now in power following victory at the 1932 general election, and endeavouring to implement the old Sinn Fein policy of self-reliance. At that time agriculture was largely based on cattle ranching. Fianna Fail would pursue a policy of 'Speed The Plough', break up the large underutilised estates, and give the soil of Ireland back to the people of Ireland. To a considerable extent, this policy succeeded. One spin off was that when war came in 1939, the country was self-sufficient in food, and as the ports had been returned in 1938, in a position to remain neutral.

The battle for the Land Annuities commenced in 1933. The Land Annuities were payments made twice yearly by farmers to meet the capital cost that had been involved in buying out the mainly absent landlords at the time of the Treaty. The new Free State Government had agreed to take over the collection of this tribute through the Land Commission, and the sum involved, some £5 millions (a considerable sum then) was duly transferred to London. The payment of these annuities had been bitterly resented, and when an agitation was launched to have them abolished in County Donegal, led by the redoubtable socialist republican leader, Peadar O'Donnell, the movement became nationwide. The Fianna Fail government, with the utmost reluctance were drawn into the campaign and legislation to end them was effected. This resulted in a cold, or economic, war with Britain which lasted for six years. Irish industrialists were hard hit, but the farming community, especially the big cattle barons, sustained enormous losses.

Nevertheless, despite the hardship caused by these punitive measures, the people remained loyal to Fianna Fail, but not all.

## THE RISE OF FASCISM

The Opposition Party in the Dail, then called 'Cumann na nGaedheal' developed a 'military wing' known as the Blueshirts. This was a Fascist organisation composed mainly of disgruntled ex-Free State officers, political opportunists, seasoned with lumpen proletariat elements, and led by a former Police Commissioner, Eoin O'Duffy. The stated aim of the Blueshirts was to restore 'law and order'. Lord Muskerry saw them as 'the new evangelists, who, in their uniforms of St. Patrick's Blue, would drive the reds out of Ireland as the Saint had driven the snakes.' The poet W.B. Yeats wrote marching songs for them and Ernest Blythe, a former Cosgrave Cabinet Minister, stated that the Dail was a 'miscellaneous assembly and not suitable for modern government.' At a meeting in West Limerick in 1933, the Blueshirt leader, Eoin O'Duffy, boasted that 'what the Blackshirts did for Italy and the Brownshirts did for Germany, the Blueshirts will do for Ireland'.

The 'March on Dublin' was planned for 13th August 1933. A general mobilisation of Blueshirts would converge on Leinster House (the Dail). At the last moment the march was prohibited by the Government, but already the city was swarming with Blueshirt gangs. The IRA leadership had remained withdrawn from the crisis, except to exhort their charges to avoid 'party politics', but great numbers of Republicans, socialists and Trade Unionists took to the streets and there were numerous clashes with Blueshirt demonstrators.

In February 1934, the IRA's Army Council issued an order that volunteers were 'not to take part in any action against fascist-imperialist organisations as this was not the policy of the army'.

This policy of isolation from the class struggle and non-resistance to fascism was causing great discontent amongst the rank and file of the Republican Movement. The crisis came at the Annual Convention of the IRA on 17th March, 1934 in Dublin when Michael Price called for the declaration of a 'Workers' Republic' as the policy of the Army. The

right-wing leadership was shocked. Sean Russell said that they were not interested in 'Party Politics'. Peadar O'Donnell believed that their aim should be the creation of a United Front that would rally all shades of anti-fascist and republican opinion. The Price motion was opposed by the Executive Committee, who won by a majority of one vote. Thereupon, Peadar O'Donnell, Frank Ryan, George Gilmore, Michael Price and others left the Convention and the Irish Republican Army.

This procedure was to be repeated at similar conventions all over the country. At the Dublin Brigade Convention, at which I was a delegate, a motion for the adoption of a socialist policy was opposed by Sean MacBride, who carried the meeting by a small majority. The dissidents, including myself, immediately withdrew.

## THE CALL FOR A REPUBLICAN CONGRESS

A special convention held in Athlone on 7/8th April, 1934 attended by 200 former IRA officers, together with a number of prominent socialists and Trade Unionists, resolved that a Republican Congress should meet to review the position over the whole social and political field, and to outline the forms of activity required to meet the needs of the country. This Congress would attract progressive workers in north east Ulster, drawn from sections of the working class who had held aloft from the national struggle. The areas of recruitment in the South would be amongst a) industrial workers oppressed by degrading conditions in the factory system, b) workers in the Gaeltacht areas of the west, where youths dug amongst the rocks with primitive tools and endured the degradation and dangers of the annual migration to the potato fields of Scotland, c) the small farmers and farm labourers, d) shop workers and domestic servants slaving for low wages, and e) the great mass of the unemployed.

This presented a full and urgent programme of work to be done. The Convention unanimously and enthusiastically resolved that:



'In order that these forces can be drawn together to forward their task, we, on their behalf, call for a Republican Congress and pledge ourselves to take up the work necessary to build it.'

A supporting call was received from a special conference of Trade Unionists in Belfast. This conference resolved:

'We are convinced that the horrors of capitalism, the menace of fascism and the question of Irish unity are inter-related problems, the solution of which can only be found in the solidarity of workers, small farmers and peasants, north and south.'

The Belfast statement called for a Republican Congress and was signed William McMullen (Chairman, Belfast Trades Council); William Craig (AEU); Murtagh Morgan (President IT&GW, Belfast); J. Swindbank (ETU); John Campbell, Daniel Loughran and Pat Hadden (Northern Ireland Labour Party).

The organising of Congress branches now proceeded throughout the country. A headquarters was established at 112 Marlborough Street, Dublin, and a weekly paper 'The Republican Congress' (north of the border bearing the title 'The Northern Worker') was launched. There was a new and wonderful spirit abroad, attracting especially the young. In fact, some of our more youthful members I recall especially Miriam James and Oliver Norton were so zealous that they were taking time off from school to do Congress work. I cautioned them against this and reminded them of the importance of education in the class struggle. Nora Connolly O'Brien in her last book, 'We Shall Rise Again', published in June 1981, wrote of the period:

'Then the Republican Congress came along, when there was a vacuum for a political movement in Ireland. It was purely Socialist as well. We wanted a new Party and we wanted the Republican Congress to be the next government. We had so many people that it would have been. Everything was Socialist

at that time. The Republican Congress was very strong. It was a grand time. Often I would travel up and down the country with Mick Price organising branches.'

In Dublin, where I was actively involved, five branches were established, corresponding to the IRA Battalion areas in the City. A sixth branch was later to be established consisting entirely of British ex-servicemen under the chairmanship of Captain Jack White, who had helped to train Connolly's Citizen Army in 1913. This branch was a direct result of a new approach to ex-soldiers which I had advocated in an article 'A Message to Ex-Servicemen', published in 'The Republican Congress' newspaper. One outcome of this 'message' was the presence of a contingent of British ex-servicemen marching behind the Republican Congress banner through cheering crowds of Dubliners in a demonstration against poverty and war. I had urged this new approach because of the disgust I felt when some time earlier I had seen some ex-servicemen being set upon for wearing their war medals and poppies pinned to their ragged coats.

## THE REBORN IRISH CITIZEN ARMY

Our past involvement with the IRA weighed heavily for a time on this new organisation. An attempt was made to create a 'military wing' by resurrecting the Irish Citizen Army. We 'dug up' some ICA veterans (Connolly's men) to give it legitimacy and colour. We still had stocks of arms. So, back to the hills and elsewhere, for more drilling and manoeuvres. On one occasion when entering Congress headquarters in Marlborough Street, I saw through an open basement window, a class of Congress workers engaged in rifle drill.

This addiction to the traditional 'physical force' side of the Republican movement had limited advantages in that our members were used to discipline and quick mobilisation, but it was disastrous because the struggle was not in a military stage. Amongst other things, it provided an escape route for opportunist Trade Union leaders who

were quite happy to see terrorism used as a substitute for legitimate industrial action. For example, on one occasion, when there was trouble on a construction site in a Dublin suburb, it was decided to take action against the contractor by carrying out some 'unspecified' demolition on the project. I was ordered to take the necessary action, so with five men - experts in the technique required, and armed - approached the scene of operation. Bill Scott, later to serve in the International Brigade, seemed to appear from the ground like a pantomime fairy: 'Get to hell out of it, Pat. The place is swarming with the Special Branch'. I immediately dismissed the squad telling them to separate and meet at headquarters. I learned afterwards that the proposed sabotage had been discussed at an open Trade Union branch meeting.

Other proposed military operations ranged from the assassination of a particularly obnoxious slum landlord; a proposal ruled out by the political acumen of Charlie Harkin, to a raid on a military installation (with inside assistance) for arms, some 600 rifles, due for dispatch to the Curragh. This daring enterprise had been set up by Kit Conway, who at one time had been a commandant in the Free State Army but had soon left to offer his sword to the Republic. This proposal had been rejected by the Council as being inappropriate to the prevailing situation. Kit was a born soldier and a leader to the backbone. On parade he was a strict disciplinarian. He worked as a bus driver in Dublin before going to Spain early in the Civil War. I met him one day in O'Connell Street shortly before his departure to join the International Brigade. He told me he had been to Dublin Castle to get his visa to 'go to Lourdes'. He acted with exceptional bravery in the defence of Madrid and fell rallying the Irish Battalion at Jarama in February 1937.

Eventually, realistic political activity replaced militarism and it was decided to give the IRA their guns back, or most of them, provided, on Peadar O'Donnell's insistence, that they would be ceremoniously received. They were; after a fashion.

## PREPARING FOR THE CONGRESS

Congress branches everywhere were to become the spearhead of working class political activity, especially in the Trade Union movement where they would employ for the first time in Ireland the technique of the mass picket. On one occasion this treatment was prepared for a large supermarket-type of store in Dublin, known as 'Bacon Shops'. It was of course, a non-Union house. The average wage for shop assistants was then 12/- a week. Several hundred of our members arrived on the picket-line, blocking the street and causing a massive traffic jam. Swarms of police descended on us and succeeded in arresting 200 of our members, including Charlie Donnelly. In his 'speech from the Dock' Charlie (later killed at Jarama in Spain) told Justice Little at the Dublin District Court: 'A picket becomes too large for legality as soon as it becomes large enough to be effective'.

They were all sentenced to one month's imprisonment in Mountjoy. The Republican Congress paper came out with a large poster: 'Little Man you've had a Busy Day' a popular song at the time.

Tenant Leagues were formed in the cities to protect the inhabitants, principally those living in tenements of stately outward appearance where once wealthy Georgian families had resided in the 18th and early 19th centuries. This was especially so in Dublin, Cork, Waterford and Limerick. There were also shocking conditions in less exalted dwellings in the back streets and alleyways of these cities and some larger towns. In the Dublin slums circumstances had little changed since the beginning of the century when it was reported that 'the death rate in Dublin was 27.6 per 1,000, the highest in Europe. Higher even than plague-ridden Calcutta.' In Waterford things were exceptionally bad. In both cities a measure of ecclesiastical involvement, as slum landlords, was uncovered.

Every week our paper 'The Republican Congress' carried now horror stories of life in the Dublin slums. 49% of the city's housing had been declared unfit for habitation. At this time I was chairman of the

Dublin United Tenants' Leagues. I have only space to give extracts from three reports taken from the Congress paper:

'Climbing a rickety stairs, I entered a small room over a vegetable store, or more properly, a stable in the vicinity of Parnell Square. There was no fire (in April!). There was one bed on which lay a married girl of 19, who was expecting a baby. The bedclothes were old coats. The husband, who was unemployed, was receiving 9/- a week outdoor assistance. Of this sum 6/- went on rent leaving 3/- for food and other necessities. On the day of my visit, they had been living on rice for two days, but this was now exhausted.'

Again:

'In the front parlour of a house in Coleraine Street live the Keogh family. The room is 8 feet square and contains two beds, a table and some chairs. At night eleven human beings pack into this den. In one bed seven of the children sleep. In the other, the parents and two children.'

And:

'Families of twelve are frequently found living in single rooms. In a house in Holles Street, 49 people are living'

The Tenant Leagues 'staffed' by Republican Congress personnel in Dublin and elsewhere organised rent strikes for better conditions. On one occasion the Third Dublin District Committee organised a rent strike affecting five streets in the Westland Row area for two months and won a 25% reduction in rent. At the same time the fourth District Committee won rehousing by the Dublin Corporation for the tenants of Magee Court, a collection of hovels in the Camden Street area. These rent strikes were most disturbing for the organisers. We told the tenants to withhold the rent, but not to spend it, a difficult injunction to lay upon people living on the borderline of starvation, but in most cases they did

so. We held meetings in alleyways and courts using a borrowed kitchen table or chair for a platform. Arrangements were made to mobilise support from neighbours, our branches and local Trade Unionists. Handbells with big clappers and in some cases, firework rockets, were distributed to local leaders to issue the call for assistance.

Our onslaught on slum conditions continued in our press. A story about a landlord with the unfortunate name of Wolf, provided the Congress paper with a poster reading 'Wolf Hunt in Townsend Street.'

A demonstration of tenants from all over Dublin was arranged to march on the Mansion House, the seat of the Lord Mayor Alfie Byrne. It was the largest assembly of its kind ever seen in the city: men, women and children, babies in arms and in prams turned up in the thousands at St. Stephens Green. However, in addition to the numerous witty and colourful placards bearing appropriate and inappropriate slogans, some contingents arrived carrying Papal flags (the Eucharistic Congress had been held two years earlier in the Phoenix Park), others marched behind the tricolour and one large party from the Liberties carried aloft with other flags, a faded Union Jack, probably a family relic of the Great War.

This display of flags upset some of our militant Congress workers. They were not going to march behind sectarian flags, others objected to the Union Jack, the presence of the tricolour was also resented. One girl described it as 'a capitalist dishcloth'.

In connection with the protest about the tricolour, it should be remembered that this was a period of great depression. Unemployment pay, for those 'lucky' enough to get it, was 15/- a week. For the near destitute, application could be made for National Assistance amounting to anything from 4/- to 10/- a week, subject to a Means Test. This meant that any claim would be assessed against income or savings of other members of the family, and the saleable value of the contents of the home. None of this diminished the ardour of Irish Nationalist political

opportunists in their periodic appeal, especially at election times, to the common people to remember their great national heritage symbolised in the national flag.

Still on this subject, I had attended, with Frank Ryan, a Socialist Conference in Belfast when a Northern speaker quoted Connolly's dictum, 'We have no room for illusions in our struggle, least of all for illusions about freedom...' and went on to say that the working class should learn to trample on the Union Jack and on the Tricolour. Trampling on the Union flag presented no problems to Frank; he had been doing it all his life, but to subject the sacred Tricolour to such treatment was another kettle of fish. But, he said, the Belfast comrade was right. I concurred. But in fact we were wrong. At this time, this was the attitude generally of Socialists to the 'national flag'. The French Socialists were the first to question this approach - why give modern day reactionaries a present of the flag which was born of revolt against tyranny? The French Tricolour was the flag of the Republic of 1793 and of the Rights of Man. The Star Spangled banner of America was carried at Valley Forge in 1776 and at Gettysburg in 1864. The Irish Tricolour represented the aspirations of the United Irishmen and Republicans in the struggles that followed.

To return to the march on the Mansion House, as the demonstration was being held under the auspices of the United Tenants' Leagues, I, as Chairman, decreed that all the flag bearers should form a colours party and head the procession behind the Republican Congress banner. Discipline prevailed, harmony was restored and the marchers - about 300 strong - proceeded via Grafton Street to Dawson Street where Charlie Donnelly and Cora Hughes confronted the Lord Mayor on the Mansion House steps.

At this time, there was great activity in Waterford on the housing front, led by Frank Edwards, a prominent local Republican. He was a teacher in Mount Sion Christian Brothers School. In the course of the campaign it came to light that a local church dignitary, Archdeacon Byrne, who was also acting Bishop of Waterford and Lismore, was a

trustee of some slum property in the city being investigated by Edwards and the local Republican Congress branch. The publicity arising from the case did not endear the teacher to the boss of the school, Archdeacon Byrne, where he worked. The good man decided that they must part. Frank was given the option of signing an undertaking that he would not be a member of any organisation of which the Catholic Church disapproved, or lose his job. Frank, as the Archdeacon well knew he would, refused to comply and was promptly dismissed.

Frank, in an article about him in Uinseann MacEoin's book 'Survivors' recalled an issue of 'The Republican Congress' which displayed on the front page a large red flag with the words of the song set by Jim Connell underneath. Frank commented, 'This caused nervous readers to protest that they were already under sufficient pressure from certain quarters without going out to seek it.' He wondered why Frank Ryan had taken such a bold stance. I was with Frank Ryan in Congress headquarters when the issue bearing the red flag arrived. I too felt that he was coming out a bit strong. He told me that at the time of the Truce in July 1921, he had been ordered to take his company of the East Limerick Battalion to the local creamery that had been taken over by the workers who had hoisted the red flag on top of the building. He was to evict them and take the flag down. He carried out his orders and had personally hauled down the offending standard. This had since weighed heavily on his conscience and he was now making atonement!

## ADVANCE ON ALL FRONTS

I have spent some time on the housing campaign for the reason that I was so closely involved in this aspect of our programme. Congress branches of course, did not confine their activities to tenant league agitation in the cities. In the countryside they campaigned for land reform, for the distribution of land under-utilised or non-utilised by the Land Commission to small farmers and landless workers, and for the creation of co-operatives. Congress was especially strong in Achill and along the western seaboard, where every spring almost the entire population took wing for the 'tattie fields of Scotland'. Working long

hours for short pay, they toiled in appalling conditions to bring home what they could save to see them through the winter. Brian Corrigan, a local Republican hero, was 'Our man in the West'. We were also strong in Leitrim and Kilkenny and we backed the striking coal miners at Arigna and Castlecomer.

It was the season of great hunger marches in Britain and the United States. In Ireland there was the great hunger march from Cork to Dublin. When the exhausted column, swelled by the Dublin unemployed, and a large Republican Congress contingent led by Cora Hughes, Nora McGinley and Bobby Walsh, another bright, fearless girl, reached the South Dublin Union (the Workhouse) in James Street, Dan Layde, the leader of the Unemployed Workers' Movement, stepped aside and gave the command 'Eyes Right' to the passing parade.

On 5th May 1934, the Northern Worker ('Republican Congress' in the South) reported:

'New Anti-Imperialist Formation Develops'. Congress Committees in Belfast will play such a role as no movement has attempted since the days of McCracken and Tone. The success attending the opening activities shows how ripe are the conditions. Amongst the most reactionary factors in the IRA has been, for years past, the leadership of the Belfast Units. The Congress Committees in Belfast must place their main emphasis on the progressive forces developing amongst working class organisations 'The natural and normal task for the Belfast workers in common with the workers in the rest of Ireland, is to lead the struggle for freedom. The coming in of a depth of representation from Belfast will push the working class back into the place from which it was driven out after the death of Connelly.'

I was frequently in Belfast at this time and could feel the change in the political atmosphere on the Left. I spoke at meetings in 'Shankill' territory and on one occasion addressed a meeting organised by the

Northern Ireland Labour Party in the Co-op Hall in York Street. I had no fear of my audience, but only of the police note-takers sitting openly at the press table.

In June 1934, for the first time, a contingent of workers numbering about 300, travelled from the Shankill and Ballymacarret areas of Belfast in a fleet of coaches to take part in the annual Wolfe Tone commemoration at Bodinstown, Co. Kildare. On arrival in Dublin, they went to Arbour Hill to lay wreaths on Connolly's grave and then travelled to Bodinstown to take part in the parade behind their banners reading 'Wolfe Tone Commemoration 1934 - Shankill Road Branch - Break the connection with Capitalism'. On the second banner was embroidered 'James Connolly Club, Belfast - The United Irishmen of 1934'. One of the men carrying this banner was John Straney, a milk roundsman in Ballymacarret. He was later killed in Spain at the Crossing of the Ebro, the last major offensive of the Republican forces in 1939.

The Republican Congress branches, numbering about 2,000, left the assembly field at Sallins to form the tailend (a position usually assigned to us by the IRA organisers) of the huge procession. We had reached the village when some Connolly scouts ran up to Frank Ryan who was leading our detachment: 'They are attacking the Northmen and won't let them leave the field.' Frank halted the parade and with the leading units raced back to their assistance. The Belfastmen had however, fought through the IRA picket who tried to prevent them, and already joined in behind our column. It appears that the IRA leaders had given orders that they were not to be let leave the field unless they folded their banners on the march. The Northmen, who took great pride in their banners, had no intention of doing this and had no difficulty in breaking through the 'thin green line'. The Congress column was reformed, including the Northern Contingent, and behind the Workers Union of Ireland Band (Jim Larkin's Own) marched proudly through Sallins Village to the rousing strains of 'The Red Flag'.



When we reached Bodinstown cemetery, we found the Tipperary Brigade of the IRA well-positioned to halt our advance. We were in strength too, with several thousand members, men and women, ready to meet the challenge, but to avoid unseemly scenes, Frank gave the order to retire. So, having left our wreaths on the roadside, we withdrew to Sallins. The Irish Times commented next day on the irony of Ulster Protestants being prevented by Tipperary Catholics from honouring Wolfe Tone. It was sectarianism but not of the religious kind.

The Congress appeal was gaining support within the Trade Union movement. Branches of The Workers' Union of Ireland, the second largest Union in the South affiliated. Their leader, the great Jim Larkin, frequently spoke on Congress platforms. Other unions pledging support include the Coal Miners, the Seamen, the Dockers, the Women Workers' Union (led by the veteran socialist, Helena Moloney), the Tramways Workers Union, the Printers, the Woodworkers, the Pasterers, the Garmentmakers and other smaller crafts unions. The IT&GWU in the North gave us their full support, but in the south the leaders stalled for time.

Within the Congress Branches, especially in Dublin, a new team of young leaders was developing. The greatest was Cora Hughes. Dressed in her Cumann na mBan uniform, showing to advantage her fair complexion and golden hair, she was a strikingly beautiful girl. She had taken her MA degree and an academic future seemed assured. For her Godfather was Eamonn de Valera. She was one of the instigators of the Congress Movement and many of us saw her as the Joan of Arc of our class. Sadly she contracted tuberculosis, believed to result from her close personal association with the poor she worked for in the Dublin slums. There was no cure in those days for this dreadful disease and Cora died in the summer of 1939, a tragic blow to her family and to our cause.

Other young leaders in Dublin, where I was mainly engaged, were Charlie Donnelly, a gifted speaker and a poet of great promise (killed at the Battle of Jarama in Spain 1937); Nora McGinley, Bobby Walsh,

Joe Leonard, Rosie Burke, Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Miriam James. Among the still youthful 'veterans' were Kit Conway, Jack Nalty, Dinny Coady (who sold papers at the Pillar) - all three later killed in Spain - Flann and Mary Campbell, Larry O'Connor, Robert Emmet, Joe Doyle, Tom O'Brien, another poet who later served with the International Brigade in Spain, Alex Digges, John Redmond, father of Sean Redmond, later Secretary of the Connolly Association in Britain, and Trade Unionist in Dublin, and so many others.

In Castlecomer there was Mick Brennan; in the Gaeltacht Brian Corrigan, Pat Hughes and Tony Lavelle, later killed in Spain, and in the North, Victor Halley, Jack McGougan and Dan Lyttle, all Protestant Socialists.

## A TIME OF HYMNS AND HATRED

The Movement now had to meet the full tide of fascist and clerical reaction.

In March 1933 the Revolutionary Workers' Groups, later to become the Communist Party of Ireland, established their head-quarters in Connolly House, a large four-storey house in Great James Street in the Smithfield area. Congress workers were glad to avail themselves of the printing facilities freely available there, to print leaflets, draw and social tickets and various forms of propaganda. One evening I was in Connolly House engaged in hand-setting some leaflets on an antique printing press on the ground floor that had once been used to produce Connolly's 'Workers' Republic' in 1913. This was situated behind the shop on the street front, at the windows of which were displayed posters, books, newspapers and items of a revolutionary nature on offer to the passing public at large. I had just completed a stick of type when the window was shattered by flying bricks and the noise in the street signalled that an attack was imminent. I dashed out to bolt the street door. There was a meeting in progress in an upstairs room where Paddy Flanagan of the NUR was addressing about 80 people. The noise of the mob outside was now loud and threatening. Our first concern was to

evacuate the people before the encirclement of the building could be completed. This was done by guiding them in the darkness (it was late March) across a back yard to a gateway set in a high stone wall. We then rejoined our other comrades now preparing for a siege, going about their allotted tasks while the din in the street and the hammering on the door (a stout affair) was reaching a crescendo. Jim Prendergast and Johnny Nolan were organising the barricading of the stairs with benches taken from the lecture room. Brian O'Neill was giving orders, armed with a great woodman's axe (I wondered at the time where he got it from). Brian was a leading member of the RWG, and a writer of some distinction. He was at the time the Irish Correspondent for 'Reynolds News', a progressive English Sunday newspaper. He was later to join the editorial staff of 'The Irish Press'. He is best remembered for his book, 'War for the Land in Ireland'.

To return to the siege, I was in a room on the first floor overlooking the street with Sean Murray and others. We had put out all the lights and opened the windows as wide as possible to lessen the danger from flying glass. We could see the mob outside filling the entire street. In between singing hymns and hurling abuse at us, they were chucking the books and papers they had taken from the shop window on to a Nazi-style bonfire blazing in the centre of the road.

Then bricks, bottles and missiles of all kinds came crashing into the darkened room, which we promptly hurled back. The mob was so dense we couldn't miss and caused a number of casualties - 27 I learned later were hospital cases. Some were beaten up on the stretchers before reaching the ambulances, by the mob under the impression that they were our people. Meanwhile, a hayloft had been discovered - there were still stables for horses in the area. Its contents were quickly piled against the door of the shop and any wood-work they could find was set alight. It was now midnight when Sean Murray of the RWG, later General Secretary of the Communist Party, gave the order to retire, which we did across the roofs to safety. Connolly House was left a charred ruin. During this commotion the police did nothing except look on, most of them, no doubt, in sympathy with the rioters.

Although I was never a member of the Communist Party, I admired and enjoyed the friendship of many of its leaders, principally Sean Murray, Brian O'Neill, Jim Prendergast, Michael O'Riordan, Johnny Nolan and Betty Sinclair of Belfast. Betty was to render me great service many years later - in the 1960-70's - when as General Secretary of the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster, I relied on her to come to Britain to address CDU rallies in London, Manchester and elsewhere. She was then Secretary of the Belfast Trades Council and her presence on a civil rights platform as 'a Protestant woman from Ballymoney, Co. Antrim' dealing with the Ulster Question was of immense value when addressing far from enlightened British audiences who were inclined to see things in sectarian rather than political shades.

Shortly after the fall of Connolly House I was again to experience mob violence. I was a student at the Workers' College, taking a course in Marxist Political Economy, Working Class History and Revolution in Theory and Practice. The College was sponsored by the Irish TUC. It was held in Madame Despard's house at 63 Eccles Street in North Dublin. The house was a great six-storey Georgian mansion that had seen better days. Dublin, it has been said is bounded on the north by the Eighteenth Century and there were so many great old houses of the period in that area, like Madame's. There were about 80 students taking the course, sponsored by their trade union or political affiliation. I was sponsored by Peadar O'Donnell.

Madame Despard was then a frail old woman but still possessing indomitable courage and determination. She had been a leading suffragette and a Republican, despite the fact that her brother, Field Marshall Sir John French ('Johnnie'), had been Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in France until December 1915, and later Governor-General of Ireland. She awarded a gold watch to the best student at the end of term.

Then one evening during a lecture on 'money' by Bill Joss, a veteran Scottish Socialist (known to us as Liam Joyce), the mob struck. The attack followed the usual pattern, hymn singing, swearing and

missile throwing. Leslie Daiken assumed command of the defence (in later years he worked as a Professor in Ghana University and was a confidante of President Kwame Nkruma). At the time, structural alterations were being carried out to the interior of the house, so we had plenty of ammunition to hurl at the crowd outside from the windows. On the roof however, there were five men, under the command of Joe Monks, armed with revolvers. Let Joe Monks take up the story from his book, 'With the International Brigade in Andalusia:

'The guns were only to be used if an armed party of Blueshirts attempted to come over the roofs; but we had carried up two buckets of half bricks to be used against the mob. A section of the mob had only finished a verse of 'Faith of our Fathers' before they began battering the hall door'.

Jo O'Donnell, Peadar's sister-in-law owned a nursing home on the opposite side of the street, was all the time telephoning Dublin Castle and eventually got to speak to the Government Minister Patrick Rutledge responsible for the Dublin Metropolitan Police. Help was on its way.

Meanwhile, Madame Despard fearlessly moved to a front window to see who it was that was battering on her door. The mob seeing the figure at the window raised a blood-curdling howl but Mickey Bleau, a Flanders veteran, interposed himself between Charlotte and the window. Bleau had armed himself with a broomstick handle, which accidentally broke a pane of glass and went through the window. A woman mobster mistook the broomstick for the barrel of a gun and her warning cries mingled with the crashing of glass into the area. Panic gripped the foremost mobsters at the door - they hurled themselves down the steps into the bosom of the mob and we on the roof, bombarded the steps with bricks which burst into dust on impact.

Mob orators rallied the fugitives outside Molly Bloom's window at no. 7 Eccles Street, but their chance had passed because the 'boys in blue' - the belated 7th Cavalry - had arrived. They came on motorbikes and sidecars; in black maria's and squad cars.

The Workers College had been receiving the full treatment from daily establishment papers and from the city's many pulpits during the Lenten season. It had been depicted as a Freemason Lodge and a meeting place for anti-Christ societies. Inside the door in the hallway was spread a large 'Sacred Heart' mat for the students to wipe their boots on. All, of course, barefaced lies.

## THE REPUBLICAN CONGRESS 29/30TH SEPTEMBER 1934

The Republican Congress was held on 29/30th September 1934 in Rathmines Town Hall. When I arrived on the morning of 29th I observed a mob developing in a roadway opposite the town hall, numbering about 200, behind a banner bearing the slogan 'God Bless Our Pope'. There was some apprehension amongst our members inside the town hall. Frank Ryan asked me if I had any 'stuff' (guns) - I hadn't. He felt that as a precautionary measure we should have some as mobs can swell very fast and could be dangerous later. So, with Larry O'Connor, Chairman of the Congress in Dublin, I went to Christy 'Sniper' Clark's house in Dominick Street, Christy, General Secretary of the Woodworkers' Union, was a quartermaster in the born-again Citizen Army. We returned with some stuff - 12 revolvers - to Rathmines. However, as things turned out, the mob failed to attract the numbers they expected and by the time the Congress started, like Alice's Cheshire cat, they had faded away.

I believed this was the first truly socialist conference to be held in Ireland since Connolly's death. There was a strong representation from the north. William McMullen, Chairman of the Belfast Trades Council, presided. There were delegates from all parts of Ireland, from the Shankill Road to Achill Sound. Migratory workers from the western seaboard expressed their grievances and their hopes in Gaelic, the only language most of them knew. There was a large number of fraternal delegates from Britain and the United States. All the resolutions were practical, dealing with unemployment, the land, housing, fuel, transport, fisheries, education, youth and the overall need for a socialist way

forward. There was a refreshing absence of nationalist and chauvinistic jargon.

On the central issue, however, the Congress was split down the middle. This was whether the Congress should resolve itself into a new revolutionary Socialist Party or remain as a united front of all progressive forces in Ireland against fascism.

Peadar O'Donnell, Chairman of the Republican Congress, in a letter to me of 27th June, 1986, provided the following definition of our aims:

'The central idea of the Republican Congress was that an identifiable working class vanguard should mobilise all the independence forces. The other view was that we should declare for a Workers' Republic. The details of the Congress you probably know better than me, but the essential feature of it was that it saw itself mobilising all the independence forces behind a clearly recognisable workers' vanguard. You will remember the depth of Belfast working class support.'

The Congress was attended by 183 delegates representing Congress Branches, Trade Unions and Trade Councils, the Northern Ireland Socialist Party, the Communist Party of Ireland, the Labour Party, the Irish Citizen Army, the Anti-Fascist League and other political groupings of the Left, the Unemployed Workers' Movement, north and south, and others. It soon became apparent that there was a deep cleavage on the issue of whether Congress should resolve itself into a new political party of the Left or continue with its united front aspirations. Feelings were strong and speeches heated. The whole atmosphere was charged with emotion. Roddy Connolly (James Connolly's son) in moving the motion for a new Socialist Party said that:

'The slogan of the Workers' Republic would be more effective because it made for clarity. It would give direction to the rising working class militancy as expressed in recent great

strikes in Dublin, Belfast, Waterford and Kilkenny. The slogan was not new. It dated from 1896 when James Connolly founded the Irish Republican Socialist Party. It was something the workers, small farmers and agricultural workers thoroughly understood.'

He spoke with great fervour and at one point was so over-come that he stripped off his coat, waistcoat and tie. Michael Price followed in support. He felt that delegates:

'Running great dangers in not being clear and emphatic in the declaration of the aims. They should declare unequivocally for a Workers' Republic.'

Nora Connolly O'Brien said that their way was clearly indicated, 'A Worker's Republic' was more than a slogan - it was something they were prepared to work for and fight for. It was the phrase 'Irish Republic' that separated us from the mass of anti-imperialists and from the masses of workers in the north. One of the greatest achievements of the Congress was that it had won to the Movement, many sections of the north that had been hostile and had kept away from the Republican movement. Our propaganda week in and out had showed the type of Republic we were fighting for was a 'Workers' Republic'.

Peadar O'Donnell in moving for the continuation of the broadest United Front strategy. He had always supported the concept of a Workers' Republic. He felt that:

'The conflict did not lie there, but in deciding the slogan of action demanded by the stage of struggle. The way forward was to create committees of workers and small farmers to conduct their struggles, and to express their political aspirations. In this way, Irish capitalism will be exposed. A republic achieved in that way becomes a Workers' Republic because the organs of struggle become the organs of government, to express the will of those who were the driving force to victory.'

Tommie Geeham (Belfast Unemployed Workers' Movement) supported the O'Donnell line.

'If we want to win the mass of workers we must not go on merely talking about the Workers' Republic. We must be with them every day in their struggles. We must mobilise the north and the south, Protestant and Catholic into one broad united front.'

When the vote was taken, the United Front resolution was carried by 99 votes to 84. Personally, I was deeply disappointed by the result I favoured the idea of a new Socialist Party, but I was committed to vote as directed by my Branch. Looking back, I think it was a great mistake and I was as shocked as my friends Roddy Connolly, Archie Heron, Nora Connolly and the other. And I was deeply hurt when Michael Price said to me, 'You have put the revolution back 100 years.'

From then on the movement lost momentum. Trade Union support melted away. The Connolly's, Price, Heron and some of the others retreated into the obscurity of the Labour Party. Nora Connolly took it very hard. In her last book, (referred to earlier) she wrote, 'The Communists did not want the Workers' Republic. They were all for a United Front, but this was something Russia wanted, not what we wanted.'

Although the Republican Congress movement had received a shattering blow, it did not succumb, as some historians would have us believe. A depleted Congress organisation carried on and was to receive a new infusion of life with the outbreak of the Franco/Fascist rebellion against the democratic government of Spain in July 1936. Before that event however, hostility to the Congress continued to grow, fanned by the establishment and clerical press and street orators. In April 1936, a Republican Congress contingent taking part in the annual Easter Commemoration parade to Glasnevin cemetery was subjected to attack by organised Fascist gangs all along the route. The 'Irish People' newspaper reported next day:

'Shrieking the most obscene abuse, the gangs of hooligans continued to attack the rear of the procession (the place usually allocated to the Left contingents) and did not shrink from pursuing them into the cemetery where they continued to hurl stones and tear up rails from graves for weapons transforming the necropolis into a bedlam of hatred.'

The main target of the mob was Captain Jack White of military lineage, his father was Field Marshall Sir George White, the hero of Ladysmith. He was a tall, well built man with clipped army moustache and used his blackthorn stick to advantage in close encounters with his attackers. Inside the cemetery he was badly injured by a blow of an iron cross ripped from a grave and it became necessary to get him away quickly. Fortunately, at this point the rosary started and this caused a lull during which time Tom O'Brien, a rising young poet, who later fought in Spain, and myself got him away. Captain White wrote afterwards:

'By the aid of two Republican Congress comrades, who know the geography, we left by an inconspicuous back gate. Slipping under a barbed wire fence, the Congress comrades and I dropped onto the railway, across a canal and soon emerged into safety and a Glasnevin tram.'

A meeting had been organised for the following day, Easter Monday, 13th April, 1936, in College Green Dublin. The list of speakers included Peadar O'Donnell, Chairman of the Congress; Willie Gallagher, MP for West Fife; Sean Murray, Secretary of the Communist Party of Ireland; Gene Downey, Charlie Harkin and myself in the Chair. There was a very large crowd in College Green that afternoon, the vast majority obviously hostile. The atmosphere was malevolent and laden with danger. There was no platform for the speakers (the owner of the lorry to have formed the platform having been warned that if the lorry appeared, he would disappear!) It was considered wise to get Willie Gallagher, who was not known to the crowd, away to safety. Peadar O'Donnell mounted a large lamp standard by the pathway in front of the Bank of Ireland, part of the



standard near the base being wide enough to give him a footing and keep his balance by holding on to the standard with his left arm. He addressed the crowd as if speaking to a body of known supporters; this was the signal for a volley of stones, bricks and bottles, which crashed against the wall of the bank behind us.

At this stage, the police stopped the meeting. Peadar, Gene Downey (later killed in Spain) and myself were taken into 'protective custody'. This involved being directed to Pearse Street Police Station - not in any vehicle but on foot between a line of Guards. Individual mobsters ran in to pelt and belt us on the way. We were detained in the charge room where we could hear the mob outside roaring for our blood in between singing hymns, 'Faith of our Fathers' being top in their charts.

Writing in the recently published book 'Skeff' (1991), Andree Sheehy Skeffington records:

'During the spring of 1936, the anti-red campaign gained strength, reaching a high pitch at a meeting organised by the Republican Congress on Easter Monday at which Willie Gallagher, Communist MP, was to have spoken in favour of a united front against fascism, Owen and I were mere observers, but what happened remained inscribed in our memories as an example of mob fury whipped up by propaganda. That Easter Monday College Green was a milling throng of people waiting for the lorry or float which was to serve as a platform. Suddenly, there was a determined movement round a lamp-post in front of the Bank of Ireland, and Peadar O'Donnell was seen shinning up it, then taking off his hat in greeting, with a big grin on his face. Immediately boos and whistles were heard and the crowd surged towards him, obviously taking him for Gallagher. He attempted to make a speech but was drowned with howls of 'Go back to Moscow'. Then stones and bottles started flying, one bottle smashing on the lamp-post above his head. The police moved forward to extricate him from the crowd, leading him, still in the

midst of insults, to the nearby Pearse Street Garda Station. Minutes later, Owen and I followed. Owen asked to see Peadar, fearing he had been hurt, but this was refused. 'Tell him I called then' said Owen, as if paying a social visit. Press reports the next day described the 'ferocity of the crowd' and their hymn-singing. ('Faith of our Fathers', 'Hail Glorious St. Patrick', 'God Bless our Pope' and 'Hail Queen of Heaven').'

Amongst other activities, the Congress continued to fight the slum tenants battles. On the night after the College Green rumpus, a meeting of delegates from Dublin Tenants' Leagues from all over the city was due to meet in the new Congress head-quarters in Middle Abbey Street. I expected that after the events of the weekend, few, if any, delegates would turn up. To my surprise and joy, there was a full attendance, and a vote of complete confidence in our leadership was enthusiastically passed.

## THE CALL FROM AMERICA

In 1935 our hopes had been raised by 'The Call from America' organised by George Gilmore in his tour of the United States. In June of that year, representatives of the major Irish organisations in the United States issued a call from New York to all sections of the Republican movement in Ireland to meet in conference to form a united front for the achievement of 'the unity and independence of Ireland as a republic'. It was not a Republican Congress call; it did not include organised labour in the project but this was subject to amendment later.

The signatories were John J. O'Reilly for the American Association for the recognition of the Republic (Fianna Fail orientated), Joseph McGarrity, Clan na Gael (IRA) and Gerald O'Reilly for the Republican Congress Leagues of America. The call was addressed to all County Councils and political organisations in Ireland. It was savagely sabotaged before it left the United States and few of the copies reached their destinations. George Gilmore told me later that his efforts had been hampered by some of its supposed sponsors. Documents pledging

support from prominent American statesmen and Labour and Trade Union leaders were stolen from his briefcase. In George's words, 'The James Bonds of the time did their dirty work'.

The response from the few County Councils and organisations that did receive the message from America was encouraging. The Donegal, Limerick and Clare County Councils endorsed it. The Clare Council's resolution called for a great Ard Fheis (convention) with the object of making one great serious effort to unite all sections of sincere Irishmen. This so upset the IRA leadership that a senior officer was sent from GHQ to discipline some local IRA people who supported it, and warn them that it was the work of the 'traitors of the Republican Congress'. A number of Fianna Fail branches initially reacted favourably until 'Dev' put the boot in. The response of the Trade Unions was good. However, in the face of Fianna Fail hostility and IRA obscurantism, the call disappeared into the sand.

## THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

Meanwhile a war for liberation in another country called for our moral and physical support. In July 1936, Franco commenced his rebellion against the elected government in Spain. The General Election of February that year brought the Popular Front to power. In a Cortes (Parliament) of 475 seats, the Popular Front held 278, made up of 146 Republicans, 98 Socialists, 21 Communists and 13 other radicals. Although the Communists had won only 21 seats, the press in general declared the result to be 'a triumph for the Reds', but the New York Herald Tribune of 6th September 1936, by no means a radical newspaper, summarised the election results as follows:

'The February elections were contested on the issue which is still the issue in Spain. Shall the Spanish Republic be retained on the lines of social and agrarian reform laid down in its founding and its constitution? Or shall it be discarded in all its fundamental elements. 75% of 13 million Spanish voters cast their ballots for the preservation and continuance of the Republic.'

The Republican Congress alone upheld the cause of the Spanish Republic and became the rallying ground for all who supported it. The Right now engaged in a carnival of reaction. The 'Republicans' of Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein, were at best silent, at worst just as reactionary as Fine Gael and their military wing, the Blueshirts.

In November 1936 the Fine Gael leader, W.T. Cosgrave, proposed in the Dail that Ireland should defy International Law and recognise the Franco Government as the legal rulers of Spain. De Valera demurred. From the Labour benches there was a 'deafening silence'. Even in Jim Larkin's Union, a militant socialist and Congress member was instructed not to speak at anti-Franco meetings. If that was the situation in Larkin's Union, what it was like in the other Trade Unions can be imagined. One of the few who had the courage to stand out for the Republican Government of Spain was John Swift of the Bakers Union. But William Norton, the Labour Party Leader, wrote to the Pope assuring His Holiness of his loyalty to the Catholic Church.

The Church was far from silent on the issue. From pulpits throughout the land emanated venomous denunciations of the Spanish Government. A 'Christian Front' was formed to administer 'muscular Christianity' to anyone supporting 'the Reds'. In October the Catholic hierarchy issued a pastoral letter upholding Franco and calling for church collections to assist him. On the Sunday following after-Mass collections totalled £43,000; the equivalent today of over £500,000.

Eoin O'Duffy, an ex-police chief and Blueshirt leader, decided to organise an Irish Brigade to fight for the Spanish Fascists. In Spain they were in action in one engagement when six of their number were killed by mistake, by their allies, the Moors. Today this would be called 'friendly fire'. They returned to Ireland shortly afterwards having won the distinction of being the only army in history to have gone to war and returned with more men than they had gone out. When it became known in Spain, that they were being recalled, they were joined by Irishmen deserting from the Spanish Foreign Legion; some tax dodgers and other undesirables who jumped at the chance to get back to Erin.

On our side, plans to raise an Irish Battalion to serve in the International Brigade were set in motion. This was led by George Gilmore. Unfortunately, Gilmore was in an air crash in Bilbao and suffered injuries that made it impossible for him to undertake this responsibility. Frank Ryan was the obvious choice to replace him. The Irish Battalion served with great heroism in the defence of Madrid, and suffered heavy losses at the Battle of Jarama in February 1937, including Kit Conway, Charlie Donnelly, Jack Nalty and many others. In all the Battalion - at full strength about 200 men - suffered 68 fatal casualties.

At this time, all over Britain, Committees were being organised to send food and medical supplies to the hard-pressed Spanish Republic being blockaded by the navies of Franco, Hitler and Mussolini. In Dublin, the 'Foodship for Spain' was established under the presidency of Father Michael O'Flanagan, a Republican priest who had been chaplain to the first Dail. The Vice-Presidents were; the Earl of Listowel; Professor Rudmose Brown; Maud Gonne MacBride, Rev G.S. Baker (C of I of Cork City), Lennox Robinson; Dorothy MacArdle; George Irwin; Seamus O'Sullivan and Peadar O'Donnell. I was appointed Organising Secretary on a salary of £3.10.0 a week for a seven day week and 12 hours a day.

Our headquarters was at 14 Sackville Street, off O'Connell Street. It was a large four storey building, badly in need of a coat of fresh paint. The rooms were large, but well suited for storing supplies to be sent to Spain. The office telephone was connected but there were no telephone directories. How long would we have to wait for them? In the event, ten minutes. Dinny Coady, who had been present during the inspection, had disappeared for that length of time, now appeared with a complete set. Naturally I did not ask where he got them.

I was sitting in my office next day when a boy about 14 years presented himself. He said that he had heard I was looking for a decorator and if so, my search was at an end. He was a painter by trade. He said his name was Brendan Behan. I gave him the contract and

within a week he and his mate, another boy, had transformed the premises. I paid him £50, to his great delight. Brendan, years later, told me that this was his first job and the first money he had ever earned.

The Committee got down to the task of raising money fast. Within a month I was able to bank £12,000. Our speakers addressed meetings all over Ireland including Belfast, where an active supporting Committee had been set up under the Chairmanship of Lord Antrim. Appeals were printed and widely distributed. I recall one of our slogans read 'Sixpence will buy a tin of milk, a bar of soap and a bandage'. It was difficult and at times dangerous work. Some of our collectors were beaten up and there was always the chance that our headquarters would get the same treatment as Connolly House. But, public opinion was changing. There was some admiration for the Spanish people holding out in Madrid and elsewhere, and the indiscriminate bombing of Guernica by the Nazis shocked all civilised people. The open intervention of German and Italian fascist forces on Franco's side, and the horrifying reports of refugees arriving in Dublin from Berlin and Vienna, brought into our funds generous donations from Jewish firms and the Jewish community.

Early one morning in March 1938 a convoy of lorries left Sackville Place for Belfast. We stopped at Dundalk where the local Congress branch, led by John O'Byrne, Chairman of the Trades Council, had arranged for hospitality and a public meeting which was most friendly.

On the dockside the next day in Belfast, we saw our ship being loaded. The dockers were friendly and made a collection for our funds. The ship beat the fascist blockade and docked safely in Almeira.

## THE CONGRESS ON THE OFFENSIVE

Congress activities meanwhile continued in other areas of class struggle. Local branches had been considerably reinforced by new members and were busy in the Trade Union movement and in the battle for better housing and improving conditions in the city slums. The Left movement was no longer in retreat. We held meetings and rallies when and where we liked.

On 17th January, 1937, a meeting under the auspices of the Congress, held in the Gaiety Theatre provided a full house of enthusiastic supporters. Father Michael O'Flanagan presided and the principal speaker, Father Ramon Laborda, a Basque priest referred to Franco as 'a bloodthirsty militarist and fascist', whose troops had murdered 25 priests when San Sebastian had fallen. A meeting to pay tribute to the Irishmen who had died on active service in Spain was held in the Engineers Hall, Dawson Street and in March, a national Congress rally in the Central Mission Hall, Lower Abbey Street, was attended by over 2,000 people.

A new Congress newspaper 'The Irish Democrat', was launched at a meeting in Dublin in March 1937. The speakers were; Dr. Owen Sheehy Skeffington; Sam Haslett, Chairman of the Northern Ireland Socialist Party; Sean Murray for the Communist Party and myself for the Congress, of which I was now joint Secretary with Frank Ryan. Ernie O'Malley, a republican hero of the civil war sent a letter of support. The Editor was Frank Ryan who had returned wounded from Spain.

Whilst he was home I went with him and other Congress friends to a meeting organised by the Labour Party in the Mansion House to launch a new edition of the works of James Connolly. Some troglodyte sitting behind us kept interrupting the speakers with shouts of 'What about the works of Jesus?' and 'What about the works of St. Patrick?' Frank stuck it for a while before turning round, grabbing the offender and shaking a massive fist under his nose, advised him 'to keep his bloody mouth shut or he'd give him the works of Frank Ryan'.

## SAVE THE WEST

Every spring, almost the entire population of the western seaboard would rise like great flocks of migratory birds and take wing for the potato fields of Scotland. This was a seasonal migration. The workers would return in the late Autumn with whatever they had saved to see them, and their families through the winter. In September 1937, fire broke out during the night in a bothy or cow-house in Kirkintilloch, Scotland and 19 young workers from Achill died. The bothy had been reasonably good, and cheap, accommodation. There was a lot of straw about and a cigarette end may have caused the tragedy.

When the news reached Ireland, there was such a to-do in government circles. Such indignation and crocodile tears. What could they now do for Achill and the west! Achill was touched by the Gulf Stream and had an ideal climate for the cultivation of tomatoes and exotic fruits; it must be covered with glass and a new industry created. In the event nothing was done, except by the Republican Congress who decided that the workers must be organised to secure better conditions for the migration workers of the future. Chairman, Peadar O'Donnell and myself, as press secretary, travelled by car to Achill in mid-winter. We held 12 meetings for the newly formed Irish Migratory Workers' Union during the first week. We opened an office in Castlebar and installed a permanent secretary. I was dispatched to Scotland to affiliate the Union with the Scottish Farm Servants' Union and the Scottish TUC, receiving great help from Manny Shinwell MP. We were warmly received by Brian Corrigan, a veteran Republican, and the McHugh family - all staunch Congress members. It was my first time in the west and I was fascinated to see all the women wearing red skirts and coloured shawls just like colleen dolls the tourists love; and everybody spoke Irish.

I returned to Achill last summer (1992) 53 years later. What a change! Not a thatched cottage or a donkey in sight but plenty of supermarkets, traffic jams and crowded beaches. No colleens in red skirts but some in mini-skirts and hot pants. None of them knew what

a migratory worker was. Some thought I meant the travellers or tinkers. An air of seeming prosperity everywhere and good luck to them, but what a pity the native culture, and the language, appeared to be extinct.

## FRANK RYAN

Early in 1939 it was clear that the fall of the Spanish Republic was imminent. Frank Ryan had been captured on 31st March, 1938, by Italian troops. He escaped the death sentence imposed by the Franco regime, largely due to the intercession of de Valera, who sent an emissary direct to Spain. He had been held in a condemned cell with 17 other Republican officers and every morning nine would be taken out to face the firing squad. Others would fill their places in the medieval military barracks in which they were imprisoned. He was transferred to Burgos jail where he remained until German military intelligence secured his release in July 1940.

He was taken to Berlin in the expectation that he would help in anti-British propaganda and in other ways. In this they were disappointed. However, they believed that he was an important political acquisition having links with the de Valera government and the IRA. In Berlin he met Sean Russell, Commander-in-Chief of the IRA who had travelled secretly to Germany via New York (the United States still being neutral) to seek support for the IRA. He underwent some training in sabotage techniques - it was planned to send him by submarine to a suitable place in Ireland with adequate supplies of radio equipment and sabotage material. Frank Ryan was to accompany him although he was not a party to whatever conspiracy was afoot, codenamed 'Operation Dove'.

On 8th August, Sean Russell, accompanied by Frank Ryan boarded the U-boat at Wilhelmshaven bound for Smerwick Bay on the Dingle peninsula, when about 100 miles west of Cobh Russell became ill and died in Frank's arms from a perforated ulcer. With Russell's death the whole exercise became pointless. Von Stockenhausen contacted Berlin and was ordered to return to base in Germany. For the

remainder of his life Frank bitterly regretted the decision not to land. He had been in poor health at the time and depressed from the treatment he had received in Franco's jails. Back in Berlin he continued to act as a sort of Irish envoy until his health seriously deteriorated. In January, 1943, he suffered an epileptic episode and became totally deaf. In June 1944 he died in Dresden-Loschwitz Hospital, when the allied armies were landing in Normandy.

Frank Ryan was a big, jovial, friendly man. People who knew him, as well as Michael Collins, have told me that they appeared to have been cast in the same mould. They were similar in appearance, build, manner, being hearty and extrovert, with intelligence and courage to match. In the fighting in Jarama Valley in February 1937, Frank received a bullet wound in the left arm and after a period in hospital, returned to convalesce in Ireland in the third week of March. Back in Dublin, he soon became deeply involved in the political arena. This was the period of the referendum on Dev's New Constitution and the furore in Britain about the abdication of King Edward VIII arising from his affair with the redoubtable Mrs. Simpson. It seemed an ideal opportunity to avail of the abdication crisis to proclaim a Republic but such a course would be at variance with the New Constitution. A great anti-coronation demonstration was organised for 14th May and all organisations opposed to accepting the new king were invited to participate, including the Republican Congress. Liberty Hall was selected as the focal meeting point. The demonstration was promptly banned by the de Valera government.

Despite the presence of hundreds of police, great crowds commenced assembly in Beresford Place. A strong Congress contingent proceeded down Lower Abbey Street to the rendezvous. At Liberty Hall the demonstration was spearheaded by the Dublin Brigade of the IRA led by the Commander-in-Chief, Tom Barry and at his invitation, joined by Frank Ryan. Columns of Guards (police) blocked the route



and immediately there was conflict, and fighting broke out over the whole area extending to the Liffey side. In the confusion a body of Congress workers became involved and one of their leaders, Nora McGinley succeeded in 'helping' a Guard to 'find' the helmet he had lost in the fracas it was in the Liffey where she had kicked it over the wall. Nora, an attractive young girl and Congress Executive member, was of sound Donegal Republican stock, she was later to marry Charlie Harkin. The main body led by Tom Barry and Frank Ryan came into confrontation immediately with massed police reinforcements who set about them with unrestrained ferocity.

Sheila Humphries, in charge of the Cumann na mBan contingent has described what happened:

'We marched straight ahead into a solid mass of police with batons drawn. I will never forget the savage way they batoned Tom Barry. I really thought he was finished. He showed the most extraordinary courage that night. We were marching directly behind the IRA and saw the whole thing'.

Frank Ryan with his wounded arm in a sling received the same treatment. He had been struck across the face and was bleeding badly. He was under arrest, but the officer in charge acceded to his request to defer taking him into custody until he had dealt with some urgent unfinished business (to speak at a meeting being held at the Smith O'Brien Statue in O'Connell Street). With Tadhg Lynch (also blood-stained) he addressed a huge meeting of demonstrators until continuous baton charges and some gunfire, eventually cleared the streets. The incident was given wide coverage in the continental and American press. The New York Times reported 'Dublin Republicans Battle Police in Anti-Coronation Rally'. De Valera was not amused!

We all pleaded with Frank not to return to Spain as the fall of the Republic seemed imminent, but he believed that his duty lay with the remnants of the Irish Battalion. He left Dublin on 5th June and arrived in Alicante on 14th. He was back in action when the Irish contingent,

operating with the British Battalion moved into the line near Gandesa to block the fascist advance on the Mediterranean and cut the Republic in two. On 31st March 1938, the Battalion, led by Wally Tapsell and Frank Ryan, marched along the road in bright moonlight, singing, to take up their position in the line when they were caught in an ambush by Italian troops supported by tanks. The Republicans lost 151 men, including Wally Tapsell and 167 taken prisoner, including Frank Ryan.

## CONCLUSION

With the fall of the Spanish Republic, and the outbreak of the Second World War five months later, the Republican Congress movement that had shown such promise and raised such high hopes, disintegrated. Of the entire Republican movement, north and south, the Republican Congress alone had opposed the march of fascism and supported the Spanish Republic. The Congress alone had made inroads into sectarianism in the north and won a measure of Protestant support unknown since 1798. The Congress recognised the futility, at that time, of the 'armed struggle' in the Republican ethos, which at its best was visionary and unrealistic, and at its worst, isolationist and reactionary. The Congress identified the needs of the working class and the way forward to achieve these aims through the democratic process.

The Republican Congress alone had tried to extend the Irish Revolution beyond the bourgeois limits set for it by consecutive governments and political parties masquerading as Republican, and to achieve, by the united action of all progressive forces of the left in Ireland, the Socialist Republic envisaged by James Connolly, and for which he gave his life.

'Then let us pray that come it may  
And come it will a' that.  
When Sense and Worth o'er a the earth  
Shall bear the Gree and a' that.  
For a' that and a' that  
Its coming yet for a' that  
And man to man the world o'er  
Shall brothers be for a' that.'

Robert Burns

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