

# James Connolly and the 1916 Rising

Irish  
Workers  
Group

# Class Struggle

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**O**n Easter Monday, 24th April 1916, James Connolly embarked on his last great struggle. As vice-president of the Provisional Government and Commandant General of the Dublin Division of the Army of the Irish Republic, he fused the Irish Citizen Army with the revolutionary wing of the Irish Volunteers, under the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), to strike a blow against British imperialism and proclaim an Irish Republic.

Exactly one week later the city centre of Dublin stood in ruins as the Rising was quelled by the relentless fire-power of British armed might. Its gunboats on the Liffey and its artillery pounded the walls of the half dozen points held by the rebels, centred on the General Post Office. Outside Dublin City, in the few centres that rose—County Galway, Enniscorthy and County Dublin—the officers in command reluctantly accepted the order to surrender.

## Citizen Army

Twelve days later Connolly was executed, the last of the captured leaders to die. The surviving Citizen Army and Irish Volunteer troops were arrested and deported to jails in Britain, interned until an amnesty could be forced from Britain's hands.

The Easter Rising took the world by surprise. The bourgeois 'Home Rule' party of Redmond ranted against the rebels. The *Irish Catholic* (published by Dublin capitalist boss of the *Irish Independent*, William Martin Murphy, who unleashed the Dublin Lockout of 1913) wrote after Connolly's execution: "What was attempted was an act of brigandage pure and simple ... no reason to lament that its perpetrators have met the fate universally reserved for traitors".

They were soon forced to change their tune. As execution followed cold-blooded execution and internment and deportation mounted, this apparently isolated rebellion registered more and more deeply in the minds and hearts of a down-trodden people. The 'Home

Rule' party was jettisoned in the 1918 Westminster elections as Sinn Féin, newly wedded to the Irish Republican Army, rose to express the sentiment of the working class and rural masses. Sinn Féin declared the first Dáil in Dublin's Mansion house in 1919, which was quickly followed by the War of Independence.

## Protracted Struggle

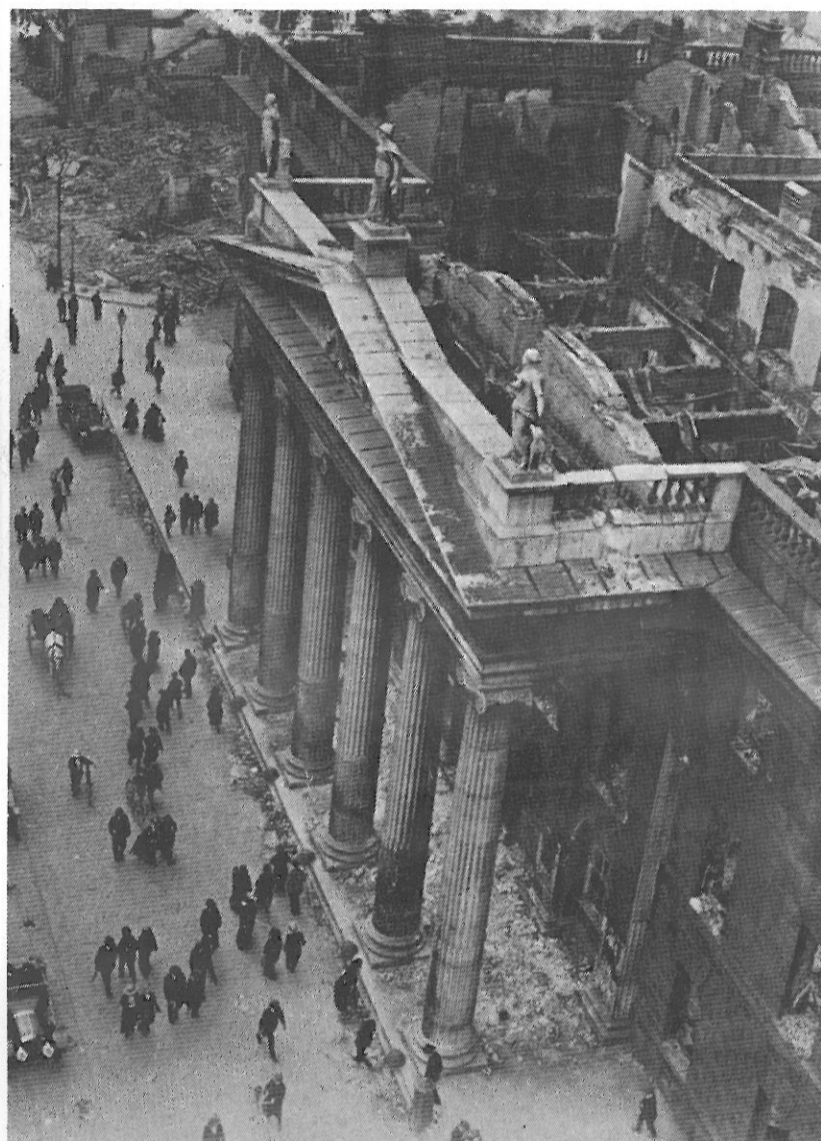
A protracted struggle, in which modern guerrilla warfare was born led to limited independence in a partitioned Ireland, by 1922. There followed a year of bloody Civil War in the 26-County Free State as the most conservative section of the Irish bourgeoisie, with English military backing, quelled the revolutionary wing of the republicans who rejected Britain's Treaty. The outcome was a formally separate state, in reality a deeply dependent semi-colony of Britain, presided over by a counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie.

Ever since, the popular memory of Connolly has been that of a national revolutionary and labour leader rather than a revolutionary socialist. In the article in this supplement on Republican Socialism we show how he worked out, early in his career in the 1890s, an original but flawed theory of the Irish national question which identified republicanism with socialism.

## Industrial Unionism

On his return in 1910 for his second Irish period he was preoccupied with industrial unionism and the kind of "political action" which he had come to see as necessary while in the USA. His identification of the cause of labour and the cause of Ireland was to assert itself again, however, in the major crisis that broke out—nationally and internationally—in 1914.

In that year he witnessed the rise of Carson in Ulster and the decamping of the Protestant working class to his anti-Home Rule crusade; the defeat of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union in February 1914 after seven months of bitter class struggle; the betrayal of the British pledge of



Home Rule by attempting to write 'temporary' Partition into the Home Rule deal and the attempt of the Redmond leadership to win acceptance of it in the Irish Parliamentary Party.

Most important of all, he witnessed the outbreak of the first World War in August with the betrayal in Ireland by Redmond and, internationally, by the leaders of the Social Democratic parties in western Europe.

The result of these events propelled him into merging the forces of revolutionary nationalism and of socialism to strike a blow against Britain, the major capitalist and imperialist power. Lenin had argued that the

war was one of rival imperialisms in which the lesser evil for socialists in all the major belligerent powers was the defeat of "their own" bourgeoisie. He explained how a new epoch had opened in which world capitalism would survive only through war, barbarism and the destruction of past gains.

## A Different View

Connolly took a different view of Germany which he saw not as an imperialist power but as a developing capitalist country obstructed by British imperial control of world trade

through its command of the seas. For him the military defeat of Britain would open the road to a new period of peace in which the as yet undeveloped forces of industrial unionism could grow and open the road for the socialist struggle.

It was a view which made it all the more difficult for Connolly to fight for the defeat of all of the competing imperialist powers in the war and to put the class war against capitalism to the fore in the anti-imperialist struggle.

Such a method would have seized on every opportunity created by the savagery and disillusion of the war among Irish soldiers and workers. It needed tactics to make the labour movement the most consistent and radical champion of national-democratic rights against Britain.

## Conspired at Insurrection

Instead of fighting among the mass of organised labour for such an action programme, he conspired at an insurrection without openly arguing for any course of action by the mass of workers on the issue. And he used the paper of the movement to repeatedly call upon the revolutionary nationalists to support an insurrection.

He was driven by the fear that any further delay in organising insurrection would only work to the advantage of Britain. The failure of a general strike to emerge anywhere in Europe, the betrayals of Social Democracy—all this was bad enough; but in Ireland the impending betrayal of Home Rule through Partition, the massive enlistment in the war, and the erosion of democratic liberties, left him believing that if the insurrection was not immediately organised it might never happen and Britain would win the war. *continued overleaf*

## Also in this supplement

**Connolly's World**

**Connolly's Republican Socialism**

**Connolly On Women**

## ON CONNOLLY'S SHOULDERS

His decision to join the Irish Rising in 1916 clearly marked the high point of his hope that through such action Labour alone would claim the mantle of revolutionary anti-imperialism and swiftly turn the tables against the native exploiters. Despite this tragic failure of his strategy he bequeathed a legacy on which socialism in Ireland could certainly be founded.

## Downtrodden

Connolly was one of the first to appreciate the significance of the changes taking place within the Irish working class. The downtrodden and unskilled labouring masses of town and country had burst onto the scene with the weapon of mass struggle to challenge the bosses and their system.

From the very beginning he strove to give this movement a socialist class consciousness and leadership. The great peaks of mass working class struggle of 1907 and 1913, the revolutionary idea of industrial unionism and the general strike, the formation of the Irish Transport & General Workers Union and his battle to found the Irish Labour Party; all these underline Connolly's clear sighted recognition that his class needed mass organisations on all the fields of battle if the capitalist class was to be finally brought to its knees.

But if such a battle was to be prepared for and won Connolly knew on whom he could and could not rely. Within the working class itself Connolly knew well that the privileged bureaucrats and union officialdom, especially of the skilled trades, were

at best unreliable and at worst open class traitors. He saw clearly, especially at moments of mounting class struggle; that their first instinct was for class peace rather than class struggle. Connolly's appetite and instinct for the fray of battle was a million times sharper than these jaded collaborators.

## Armed Self Defence

Against their opposition it was he, learning the lessons of the 1905 Russian Revolution who saw the need for armed self defence of the workers' struggles against the brutal repression of the Dublin Metropolitan Police and the British Army in 1913.

Finally, but not least, Connolly's shrewd

insights into the radicalising potential of women workers in struggle was exemplary. He drew attention to the way in which women workers quickly outstripped their male counterparts as the most intransigent defenders of class action against the bosses; how quickly they not only learnt the lessons of their class, but how prepared they were to break with the routine minded and more conservative male brothers when the situation demanded.

## Women

In putting an emphasis on organising women workers, whatever his general weaknesses on the women question, Connolly once more revealed his enormous capacity to learn from the action of his class and to apply what he learnt in a way which could add to the fire of its hatred and the clarity of its goals.

That is why the socialist movement in Ireland can stand squarely on the shoulders of James Connolly. ■

**J**ames Connolly was the founder of Marxism in Ireland. Throughout his whole life he fought to make its revolutionary doctrine of class struggle the touchstone of his political practice. Even where he failed in his bold and creative attempt to forge a new link between the struggle against imperialism and the fight against capitalism, his efforts were no idle theoretical speculation.

More than anyone else in Ireland or Britain he knew the depths of corruption and cowardice of the Irish bourgeoisie. So, too, the extent of nationalist sentiment among the Irish masses, and the opportunities it offered the employers to ensnare workers with patriotic phrase mongering. Connolly sought to arm the socialist movement and the working class movement with a theory and programme that could chart a way forward that would make the Irish working class the champion of national freedom while remaining the most resolute enemy of Irish capitalism.

## The Touchstone of 1916

**D**ublin's was one of many nationally-inspired revolts in that period, such as the suppressed Indian troops' mutiny in Singapore, the rebellions in French Annam and the German Cameroons and the bloody suppression of the defiant Czechs by the Austrian imperial government. Internationally, in the crisis-torn socialist movement, the 1916 Rising became in Lenin's words "the touchstone of our revolutionary views" and a bone of bitter contention. Lenin wrote in a fierce attack on Radek:

*The term 'putsch' in the scientific sense of the term may be employed when the attempt at insurrection has revealed nothing but a circle of conspirators or stupid maniacs and has aroused no sympathy among the masses. The centuries old Irish national movement, having passed through various stages and combinations of class interests, manifested itself, in particular, in a mass Irish National Congress in America which called for Irish independence; it also manifested itself in street fighting conducted by a section of the urban petty bourgeoisie and a section of workers after a long period of mass agitation, demonstrations, suppression of newspapers, etc. Whoever calls such a rebellion a 'putsch' is either a hardened reactionary, or a doctrinaire hopelessly incapable of envisaging a social revolution as a living phenomenon. (Lenin on Ireland, p. 32).*

Yet Lenin's arguments have, through the warp and weft of subsequent history, been treated as an uncritical celebration of the substance and form of the 1916 Rising. In fact, Lenin's analysis of 1916 was by no means uncritical. He wrote:

*The dialectics of history are such that small nations, powerless as an independent factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a part as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli, which help the real anti-imperialist force, the socialist proletariat, to make its appearance on the scene ... It is the misfortune of the Irish that they rose prematurely, before the revolt of the European proletariat had time to mature. (Lenin, Collected Works, Vol. 22, pp. 357-358).*

Was Lenin here stating that 1916 represented a "social revolution" as some have wished to imply? The Rising in no way aimed at putting an end to capitalism. It did not even pose any agrarian social overturn on behalf of landless farmers. Lenin analysed it, therefore, entirely as an expression of a national revolution, i.e. the political struggle for a seceded nation state. However, taken as a whole internationally, the social revolution by the socialist proletariat of Europe would inevitably be heralded by and combined with national revolutions which it was the duty of internationalists to support.

### Blanquist Insurrection

We stand four-square with Lenin in rejecting Radek's "putsch" allegation. The Rising, however, did reduce the task of revolution to mere insurrection, a method which Marx and Engels had criticised in detail in their writings. When contrasted with such events as the 1905 and 1917 revolutions in Russia, the 1916 Rising is seen to have been an undertaking initiated by a minority behind the backs of the masses, instead of being the peak of an open mobilisation of the masses by the revolutionary minority.

Consistent with the Marxist tradition expressed in the analysis of the revolutions of 1848, we believe that Connolly's role in the 1916 Rising may legitimately be characterised, and faulted, as *Blanquist*. August Blanqui coined the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat'—later transformed by

Marx—and was the inspiration of the June 1848 challenge to bourgeois rule. However, Marx rejected his abstract conspiratorial tactics. Trotsky wrote:

*Conspiracy does not take the place of insurrection. An active minority of the proletariat, no matter how well organised, cannot seize the power regardless of the general conditions of the country. In this point history has condemned Blanquism. But only in this. His affirmative theorem retains all its force. In order to conquer the power, the proletariat needs more than a spontaneous insurrection. It needs a suitable organisation, it needs a plan; it needs a conspiracy. Such is the Leninist view of this question. (The Art of Insurrection, in History of the Russian Revolution, p. 1020)*

Trotsky, writing at the same time as Lenin about the Dublin events, showed a perceptive grasp of the class relations of Irish society at the time but his general prognosis for the Irish revolution was proven to be plainly wrong by history—on one side. He argued after the defeat—"The historical basis for the national revolution had disappeared even in backward Ireland." Clearly he was wrong inasmuch as the subsequent years saw a renewed national struggle in the form of guerrilla warfare with mass support.

### Ultimately Compromised

That these forces ultimately compromised with imperialist partitioning the country into two states, both profoundly stunted from the standpoint of democracy and social development, lends a broader validity, however, to Trotsky's prognosis. He was recognising that modern imperi-

**C**onnolly served his political apprenticeship within the Scottish Socialist Federation (SSF), an Edinburgh based organisation linked to the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), the British Marxist wing of the 2nd International.

These organisations shared the general Marxist principles established by Marx in the Communist Manifesto and the First International. Central to them was the idea that, as a result of the development of capitalism on a world scale, the working class everywhere shared the same fundamental interest to overthrow capitalism and create a planned world economy.

### Second International

The programme of the 2nd International (1889-1914) thus reflected the confident belief that capitalist development itself was destined to expand everywhere, in the process creating the proletariat and its mass organisations. Thus one part of the programme—the minimum programme—concerned itself exclusively with day to day issues of immediate reform especially around wages and conditions, the fight for which strengthened the organisations of the class. The maximum programme, on the other hand, represented the ultimate demands, only realisable in a fully socialist society.

From this perspective, therefore, national struggles, understood by Marx as part of the bourgeois democratic revolution against feudal absolutism, were part of the minimum programme for socialists.



alism made it virtually impossible for a bourgeoisie in a backward society to free itself from imperialism and carry through the classical social tasks of the bourgeois epoch—independent industrialisation. Trotsky's prognosis was valid for Ireland in the general sense that there was no material basis for a bourgeoisie capable of developing as an independent competitor with the major powers.

The strength of Trotsky's article lies in identifying the significant role of the working class forces and his

prognosis that the future was theirs:

*The young Irish working class, taking shape in an atmosphere saturated with the heroic recollections of national rebellions, and clashing with the egoistic, narrow-minded imperial arrogance of British trade unionism, naturally swing between nationalism and syndicalism, ever ready to unite these two concepts in their revolutionary consciousness ... The experience (of an Irish national rebellion) in which Casement's undoubted personal courage represented the hopes and methods of the past, is over. But the histori-*

# THE WORLD OF James Connolly

The achievement of national unity, independence, universal suffrage and national economic development would clear the deck, so to speak, for the class struggle between worker and capitalist. The right of nations to self determination had been formally adopted by the 2nd International in 1896 as an inevitable step towards the class struggle within emerging capitalist states.

As such what is clear from this position is that the working class of the oppressed nation must not, apart from its formal commitment, involve itself in or seek to lead the National revolution. In this view national struggles while necessary historically have no progressive content in the fight against capitalism.

### Orthodoxy

The SSF/SDF maintained this orthodoxy on the Irish question, formally supporting political and legislative independence. What they and the leaders of the International failed to recognise was that where colonial oppression and absolutism still existed it was not simply the legacy of a precapitalist world.

Increasingly it resulted from the action of modern imperialist capitalism as the great powers fought to carve up the globe. National oppres-

sion was not inevitably disappearing with economic development but rather assuming an even sharper form as the epoch of imperialist rivalry unfolded.

### New Analysis

This new situation called for a new analysis which clearly understood the outbreaks of national struggles as symptoms of the growing crisis of imperialist capitalism, while still holding to the principle that the democratic struggle for nationhood was not in itself a challenge to the rule of capitalism in the colonial countries.

New tactics were needed to guide the proletariat whose tasks were not only to act but to fight for leadership in such struggles around its own independent banner. It fell to Lenin, during the period of the First World War, to elaborate such a position. Connolly's brave attempt to overcome the stale orthodoxy of the SDF/SSF on the Irish Question was, as we show in the article on Republican Socialism, deeply flawed from a theoretical and programmatic point of view.

Historical processes, according to the 2nd International were inevitably and rigidly determined by economic processes alone. In Britain especially, where Marx's work was largely unknown outside his strictly economic

*cal role of the Irish proletariat is only beginning. Already it has injected its class resentment against militarism and imperialism, under an outdated banner, into this uprising. That resentment from now on will not subside. (L. Trotsky, Writings on Britain, Vol.3, pp. 167-169).*

### Lowering the Red to the Green

Tragically, Connolly's overarching focus on the need for insurrection profoundly shaped his political propaganda during the war years. In the *Workers Republic* in January 1916 immediately after joining the IRB conspiracy, he answered at length the question—"What is Our Programme?". There we find nothing whatever with which the IRB could disagree—and nothing at all of a fighting socialist character:

*Markwell then our programme. While the war lasts and Ireland still is a subject nation we shall continue to urge her to fight for her freedom. We shall continue, in season and out of season, to teach that the "far-flung battle line" of England is weakest at the point nearest its heart, that Ireland is in that position of tactical advantage ... But the moment peace is once admitted by the British Government as being a subject ripe for discussion, that moment our policy will be peace and in direct opposition to all talk or preparation for armed revolution. We will be no party to leading out Irish patriots to meet the might of an England at peace. The moment peace is in the air we shall strictly confine ourselves, and lend all our influence to the work of turning the thought of Labour in Ireland to the work of peaceful reconstruction. (Labour and Easter Week collection, p. 139).*

In the middle of January 1916, fearful of precipitate action by Connolly, the IRB reputedly 'kidnapped' him for a few days during which Pearse told him of the plan for an Easter rebellion, that Casement was in Germany recruiting a brigade of Irish

prisoners of war and that Germany would supply arms and ammunition. From that moment he became co-leader of the rebellion.

The basis of his alliance with the IRB and the whole of his public propaganda in the lead up to 1916 show that he did not consciously seek to independently assert, let alone fight for at that time, a socialist programme. It was the abandonment of a principle long established since Marx, in 1850, referring to the working class, wrote: *But they themselves must contribute to their final victory, by informing themselves of their own class interest, by taking up their independent political position as soon as possible, by not allowing themselves to be misled by the democratic phrases of the democratic petty bourgeoisie into doubting for one minute the necessity of an independently organised party of the proletariat. Their battle cry must be: The Permanent Revolution. (The Revolutions of 1848, p. 330).*

### Connolly's Orientation

Connolly's orientation in the year before the Rising was certainly not consistent with this principle. Politically he dissolved the Citizen Army into the rebellion of the nationalist Volunteers led by the Irish Republican Brotherhood. He wrote in the *Workers Republic* in June 1915:

*In this battle, the lines of which are now being traced, it will be the duty of every lover of the country and the race to forget all minor dividing lines and issues and in contemplating the work before us to seek earnestly after the unity of progressive forces.*

Later he wrote, referring back to 1913:

*Out of that experience is growing the feeling of identity of interests between the forces of real nationalism and labour which we have long worked and hoped for in Ireland. Labour recognises daily more clearly that its real well being is linked and bound up with*

# Connolly

texts, this outlook powerfully shaped the views of the SSF/SDF.

Absent from it was any grasp of Marx's unique materialist method whereby all aspects of life—economic, political, social and ideological etc—were critically interrelated. Instead a reduction of Marxism to economic necessity alone led logically to making passive propaganda for the doctrinaire "truth" that socialism was inevitable.

## Trade Unions Ignored

Education of the few, not intervention in the living struggles of the masses was the order of the day for SSF members. Thus the trade unions were largely ignored because they were merely concerned with the 'bread and butter' issues of survival within capitalist society, rather than challenging it. An indelible strain of sectarianism was etched into Connolly's political character through this experience, only overcome in America when he was confronted by the mass industrial union struggles of the Wobblies.

Connolly was not so fortunate with another aspect of his political outlook created within the SSF/SDF milieu. For while he shared the strict economic reductionism of the SSF/SDF, he combined it with an outlook that separated economic processes, from culture, ideology etc.

*the hope of growth of Irish resources within Ireland; and nationalists realise that the real progress of a nation towards freedom must be measured by the progress of its most subject class. (Labour and Easter Week collection, p. 124).*

The whole weight of his propaganda in the period was of this tenor. And if evidence be needed from the Rising itself, there is the 1916 Proclamation, written jointly with Connolly and stating the aims of the rebellion.

It has not a single feature to rescue it from the category of radical democratic proclamations in general. It is certainly in no way a proletarian socialist document. Nor did Connolly independently state any other programme for his forces in the Rising.

He was, in fact, the most resolute leader in carrying out the insurrection, but the IRB were in unchallenged control, politically and militarily throughout.

Despite his articles on revolutionary warfare in Workers Republic in 1916, he seems not to have applied in Easter week the important lessons spelt out there.

These articles had drawn the lessons of Russia in 1905, Lexington 1775, Paris 1830 and Alamo 1821. In 'Moscow Insurrection 1905' and 'Street fighting—summary' the stress is on the importance of involving the city masses, at which no attempt was made in the Dublin Rising.

## Conclusion

Where then must Irish socialists stand on the 'touchstone' of the Easter Rising?

Firstly, we say that Connolly was wrong to lower the red flag to the green, to subordinate the working class programme to that of the revolutionary democratic petty bourgeoisie. The legacy of that error is still visited on the Irish working class

This meant that Socialists were invited to agree on economic facts alone, but not on important matters involving religion, the churches, the family and sexuality etc.

In this view the employer was the only enemy of the worker. Outside of that arena, issues were of a different order of priority or to be left to individual conscience.

## Processes

Marx and Engels had always recognised that while economic processes were decisive in history, political, social, ideological forces and institutions interact with them, posing a range of concrete problems to be tackled in developing the class consciousness and political armory of the working class.

In Ireland, particularly, it meant scientifically analysing the key issues of nationalism, religion, the land question, culture etc. in relation to the class struggle.

The SSF/SDF position was totally at odds with this. It tended to sever all connections between economics and politics.

Thus Connolly failed to see religion as a social process having roots not only in material life but intimately tied to the defence of the capitalist social order.

He saw it as a private matter, not to be discussed among socialists. Similarly on matters of the family, his background radically disarmed him, leaving this undoubted champion of women workers struggles opposed to divorce and defending the monogamous bourgeois family.■

in the appropriation by Sinn Féin of the mantle of Connolly in the name of an anti-imperialist programme which, even if fully carried out, would never bring the working class to power.

Secondly, we hold that, even had Connolly openly made propaganda for independent action by the working class, he still would have been wrong to organise an insurrection against British rule in the conditions of 1916 where by no stretch of the imagination were any significant working class forces prepared for revolutionary struggle.

And what of the Rising itself as a historic reality? Lenin and Trotsky, from an internationalist standpoint, and from outside Ireland, were powerless to intervene as a political factor in the Dublin of 1916.

## Decades Later

We, too, many decades later, are equally powerless to determine a different course on the part of the working class leaders in Dublin as the revolutionary ferment was maturing throughout the capitalist world.

We can make our critical assessment today only out of an understanding of the revolutionary programme enriched by a whole epoch of struggle since 1916.

Notwithstanding our criticisms, like Lenin and Trotsky we stand by the Rising and defend it as objectively a heroic and historically progressive blow directed at the heart of imperialism, a blow, therefore, for the proletariat and oppressed everywhere.

The tragedy of Connolly and the Easter Rising is that the founder of the Irish socialist movement, a heroic figure of renown to every Irish worker, confused rather than clarified, in the most testing moment, a crucial task that faced and still faces our class—the struggle for the Workers' Republic.■

# Connolly's Republican Socialism

**L**ike all Marxists of his time, James Connolly understood that the development of capitalist nation states had been a great advance for humanity out the world of feudalism and of absolute monarchies which had preceded capitalism in Europe.

But already by the time Connolly was setting out for Ireland, national movements for self-determination around the globe were confronting a new enemy—not the old order of feudalism but the new imperialism of the developed capitalist states themselves.

The leaders of the International continued to see colonialism as a harbinger of development and progress worldwide. They did not grasp the fundamental change that had taken place, nor the implications for socialist strategy and tactics towards national movements beginning to struggle against the European colonial powers. The class struggle of labour against capital was seen as the universal road for the proletariat in backward and developed countries alike. National struggles in this mistaken view had no progressive potential in the fight against capitalism.

## British Marxists

This was especially true among the 'Marxists' in the British Social Democratic Federation who shaped the early ideas of James Connolly. But it was not good enough for Connolly whose experience in the Irish ghettos of Scotland had convinced him of the burning relevance of national oppression to the Irish labouring masses.

He was driven into conflict with the orthodoxy of the SDF on the question of Ireland. His break with them was sharply expressed in the programme of his Irish Socialist Republican Party in 1896. Whereas the SDF had placed the issues of national self-determination and bourgeois democracy in the 'minimum programme' of reforms to be achieved under capitalism, Connolly placed Irish national freedom in the 'maximum programme' as an integral part of the achievement of socialism. How could Connolly justify this leap?

In essence he made a deliberate exception for Ireland from what he ac-

knowledgeed to be the correct, scientific, analysis of historical development. Elsewhere the development of nation states had meant the fullest development of private property, creating eventually the conditions for the class struggle for socialism. In Ireland, however, the struggle for nationhood was to be seen as a struggle against private property!

Deeply influenced by Irish nationalist historians, Connolly believed that Gaelic Ireland had been a democratic society based on communal ownership of wealth until the 1600s. In fact it was a system of several social orders in which an aristocracy controlled the productive wealth and exacted service from the mass of toilers. Marx analysed it in these terms 20 years before Connolly, but this has only been rediscovered in recent times and noted for the first time in Ireland in the IWG's book on Connolly. Building on this myth, Connolly held:

*The history of Ireland ever since the English invasion has been one long history of a conflict between common property, represented by the Irish and private property represented by the English. (The Harp, Vol. 2, No. 11, page 1.)*

*The Irish question has in fact a much deeper source than a mere difference of opinion on forms of government. Its real origins and inner meaning lay in the circumstances that the two opposing nations held fundamentally different ideas upon the vital question of property in land. (Erin's Hope, Edwards and Ransom, p. 172-173.)*

The consequences for Connolly's socialism were to identify the national movement with the interests of the toiling classes rather than, as he knew to be the Marxist position, with the interests of the emerging bourgeoisie. He developed the belief that Irish history had an inner dynamic towards socialism. The national struggle would recover communal property forms, and thus only a socialist society could embody the national principle in Ireland:

*There is only one remedy for the slavery of the working class and that remedy is the socialist republic, a system of society in which the land and all the houses, railways, factories, canals, workshops and everything necessary for work shall be owned and operated as common property much as the land*

*of Ireland was owned by the clans of Ireland before England introduced the capitalist system amongst us at the point of the sword. (Workers Republic 1898.)*

## Populism

A number of other sources and ideas reinforced Connolly's schema of identifying the national struggle and socialism in Ireland. In particular he inherited a mistaken belief that the world market imposed absolute limits on the further development of capitalism, and that therefore no new industrial capitalism could develop in Ireland. (Ironically, he overlooked the remarkable industrial development in the north-east!)

*...the thoughtful Irish patriot will throw rant aside and freely recognize that it is impossible for Ireland to do what those other countries cannot do with their great advantage—that is, to attain prosperity by establishing a manufacturing system in a world market already cluttered with every conceivable kind of commodity. (Erin's Hope, Ransom & Edwards p. 179.)*

This was a conclusion also reached by the Russian Populists in the 1880s about the prospects for Russia. Marxism in Russia was born in the struggle against such ideas, but in the British SDF Connolly's mentors had uncritically accepted as Marxist the entirely wrong idea that capitalist development is limited by the inability of existing markets to consume existing production (underconsumptionism). Marx had in fact showed how capitalist development is not limited in this way because it continuously creates new markets.

The significance for Connolly's programme was that an independent Ireland could only develop on the basis of socialism. It would have to 'skip over' the stage of capitalist development because this would be impossible. From this it was a small step to believing that radical Irish nationalists, who were in clear conflict with the constitutional reformism of the capitalist Home Rule Party, would inevitably place themselves in the camp of the labouring masses and of socialism.

Continued on the back page

# THE CONNOLLY CONTROVERSY

**WHEN JAMES CONNOLLY'S** part in the Easter Rebellion became known among socialists internationally in 1916 they were deeply unsympathetic if not outright hostile. Socialist and Labour leaders who knew him stigmatised him as having capitulated to nationalism.

The Irish Trades Union Congress and Labour Party, in which he had been a leading figure, deliberately distanced itself from him. Even in Lenin's oft-quoted defence of the 1916 insurrection there was no recognition of any socialist leadership in the Dublin events, let alone any mention of Connolly. It was a national revolt against imperialism, entirely progressive from an international viewpoint but not a socialist uprising.

Yet as soon as the militant nationalism took hold of the masses in the wake of 1916, Irish socialists began to claim Connolly once more as their own, and since then al-

most every political current claiming to be socialist has sought legitimacy in the legacy of James Connolly.

This striking turnabout cannot be explained by supposing that it took time for socialists to come to an understanding and appreciation of Connolly's role in 1916. Indeed, to a large extent, time has actually blurred the evidence of just how much Connolly did indeed fall in behind the nationalists of his day at the cost of postponing the fight for socialism.

The controversy about Connolly's role has, if anything, actually sharpened in recent years. No less than three new books in two years have challenged the accepted view of Connolly. The first full critique of Connolly's ideas, from the standpoint of the revolutionary communism of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, was not undertaken until the mid 1980s when it was pub-

lished by the IWG in 8 major articles, since edited into the book *Connolly: a Marxist Analysis* (by A. Johnston et al, IWG, 1990). The book refutes the notion that Connolly was an Irish Trotsky. It also refutes the view that the socialist Connolly 'became a nationalist' after 1914—as argued in Austin Morgan's political biography of Connolly (1988). There was no such fundamental discontinuity in Connolly. His action in 1916 was the outcome of a 20-year development of his ideas.

The anniversary supplement can only summarize the outlines of that development. The reader is urged to study the IWG book for a fuller—and critical—understanding of how Connolly evolved the ideas of 'Republican Socialism' inherited by the Irish left.■

The book is on sale in major bookstores or by post for £4.50 to IWG, c/o 12 Langrishe Place, D.1.

## Connolly's Republican Socialism

Connolly had been deeply influenced by his fellow SDF socialist and friend in Edinburgh, John Leslie. Leslie in turn drew inspiration from the writings of Fintan Lalor, the Young Ireland revolutionary of 1848. Lalor attempted to link the national question to the social struggle of poor peasants against the semi-feudal landlords. He recognized that the oppression of the peasantry could mobilize them as a revolutionary force both against landlordism and for national independence.

This was not the classic bourgeois revolutionary programme which focused on the rising industrial urban class. It was in fact similar to the Russian Populist Narodnik tradition mentioned earlier. It based itself on the peasantry whose possession of their land, Lalor wrongly believed, would mean that the development of capitalism could be avoided. The goal for Lalor was...

*not to resume or restore an old constitution but to found a new nation and raise up a free people, and strong as well as free, and secure as well as strong, based on a peasantry rooted like rocks in the soil of the land. This is my object (Readings from J.F. Lalor, Belfast Republican Centre, p.68).*

If Lalor's strategy had been taken up it could have become part of the means to rid Ireland of landlordism. But such an outcome would have accelerated the emergence of capitalism from among the peasantry itself, as witness the later development of the Irish farmer class. Lalor, of course, did not understand this. What is relevant is that he had conceived a solution both for the land question and the national question which seemed to exclude the industrial manufacturing bourgeoisie and the development of capitalism.

He was wrong on both counts. It was historically impossible to write the bourgeoisie out of the solution of the national question. This was even more true from the standpoint of a peasant struggle around the land. Except under the lead of either of the great modern urban classes created by capitalism, the peasantry has never been able to develop a general political programme and movement for its own emancipation.

Leslie, forty years later, sought to creatively apply Lalor's idea that the national question could be reduced to the social question of the most oppressed class. He did so, however, in conditions where a modern proletariat existed and the struggle for socialism was on the historical agenda.

Leslie drew the wrong conclusions. In describing Lalor as "the man who first pointed out the class nature of the Irish movement" he overlooks that Marx saw national independence movements as arising from the strivings for bourgeois capitalist development.

He therefore describes Wolfe Tone not as a classic Irish Jacobin and bourgeois revolutionary whose goal was an Irish bourgeois republic, but simply as a protagonist of peasant freedom from landlordism. He uncritically adapted Lalor's essentially wrong premise:

*That the enjoyment by the people of the right of first ownership of the soil is essential to the vigour and vitality of all other rights" (The Irish Question, p.5)*

*That the land question contains, and the legislative question does not contain the material from which victory is manufactured" (Readings from Lalor, p.73).*

Believing wrongly that bourgeois nationalism in the 1890s was "a dissolving view", Leslie inserts the working class of town and country as the leading class in place of the bourgeoisie, where Lalor had inserted the peas-

antry. Such a re-interpretation would make it possible for militants such as Connolly, at odds with the sterile SDF position, to conclude that Irish nationalism could be fully reconciled with the socialist struggle.

### Labour in Irish History

The most dramatic evidence of Connolly's confusion of socialist and national struggle is to be seen in his *Labour in Irish History*. Here he systematically re-writes history in a manner clearly at odds with Marx's general method and in contradiction of Marx's own analysis of Irish history. His purpose is to prove that the Irish national struggle has always been the struggle of the toiling classes against the alien imposition of private property. For Marx the essential dynamic and outcome of national struggle was the attempt of the bourgeoisie to develop private property and the conditions for exploiting the toiling masses!

He strips the Irish national bourgeoisie of any positive role in the struggle for its own nation state, either in the past or in the present. Instead he casts it as "an apostate", since its social and political goals have always been and remain the consolidation and development of private property in Ireland.

Connolly clearly perceives the profound difference between revolutionary nationalists prepared to struggle against colonial rule and constitutional reformers who repeatedly betray the potential for mass struggle and victory—the Irish 'republican' tradition. But he is wrong to believe that they thereby represent different classes. He wrongly assigns the revolutionary republicans to the camp of the working class (precursors of the socialist future) and the nationalist reformers to the camp of the bourgeoisie (champions of private property).

The heroic and revolutionary representatives of the bourgeoisie in the 18th century—Tone, McCracken, Emmet—are identified as champions of the interests of the toilers against private property, rather than what they actually represented—the struggle for a bourgeois republic based on the greatest freedom for private property to develop! Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen are correctly regarded as the founders of Irish Republicanism, a revolutionary brand of Irish nationalism prepared to take up arms to bring about the separation from Britain.

Connolly conveniently overlooks the origins of the United Irishmen out of the reform movement during Grattan's Parliament. Only when that period of constitutional action had failed were they forced to develop a conspiracy for insurrection against Britain. After their bloody defeat in 1789 such revolutionary nationalism remained marginal and conspiratorial throughout the 19th century, but a new and essentially reformist national movement soon developed which was at all points opposed to revolutionary action, led by the southern bourgeoisie—Daniel O'Connell, Isaac Butt, C.S. Parnell, John Redmond—and the Catholic Church.

The 19th century Fenian movement was the direct precursor of the radical republicanism of 1916. In *Labour in Irish History* Connolly fits them also into the camp of the working class, failing to analyse what class interests their programme really represented. Such a historical analysis led him finally and fatally to a misunderstanding of what class interest is really represented by the revolutionary nationalists of his own day, the IRB.

Contrary to Connolly's and Leslie's belief, the national movement of the bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie in Ireland in the 1890s after Parnell was

As the suffragette movement became a mass struggle for the vote for women in Ireland and Britain, Connolly, unlike most other socialists and trade unionists, took the women's side.

He used his power of mass oratory and the written word to help women win the vote. He became the socialist most revered and respected by the suffragettes, a fact shown in the number of times he was asked to speak on their platforms. And unlike many trade union bureaucrats who ran a mile from the suffragettes as they began to use violence to promote their aims, Connolly never condemned them—feeling that their oppression made these actions understandable. He staunchly defended suffragettes, Irish and British, who were imprisoned because of their militancy and fought inside and outside the labour movement for their release.

But it was in turning to the women of his own class that the quality of Connolly's revolutionary activism was shown at its best. At a time when most male trade union activists in Ireland and Britain did not go out of their way to organise women in fighting unions, Connolly did precisely this. Both in the USA and Ireland he strove to draw working class women into industrial unions for the unskilled and semi-skilled proletarian masses. There is evidence that owing to this experience in the US he fought against Larkin's policy of ghettoising working class women in women's unions. He so promoted working women to become stewards and union leaders that some of them who struggled alongside him e.g. Helena Moloney, went on to become formidable working class women leaders.

But despite his genuine sympathy for the unenviable plight of women, Connolly held views which were highly peculiar for a self-confessed revolutionary. While working with De Leon in America he objected to August Bebel's book *Women and Socialism*—a pioneering Marxist study on women's oppression, the family and sexuality. Twenty years after the initial publication of this standard Marxist classic, Connolly still condemned it as "an excrescence on the movement". His prudery

not dissolving. Events from 1896 onwards consolidated the hold of the Catholic Irish bourgeoisie in town and country over the masses as the farming class grew with the land settlements. Home Rule became the rallying cry of hundreds of thousands who looked to constitutional nationalist leaders.

Having decided in 1896 that any form of bourgeois national independence was impossible, Connolly had no tactics to break the working class from illusions in the nationalist bourgeois leaders. By 1912 he had to accept the prospect of peaceful Home Rule as an inevitability, and as a framework in which labour could develop on a 32-county basis.

His dramatic turn to planning a nationalist insurrection after 1914, sadly, did not mark any attempt to reassert an independent political strategy for the working class. After the trade union defeat of 1913, with the shelving of Home Rule and the threat of Partition, he was impatient to use England's war as Ireland's chance to strike against imperialism.

Mistakenly identifying the democratic programme of the radical nationalists with the class interests of the workers, he had no difficulty in placing himself and his Citizen Army forces at the disposal of the IRB conspiracy. The Proclamation of the Irish Republic which they co-signed was the manifesto of a provisional government of a bourgeois republic and in no way reflected the distinct interests of the working class.

The fusion of Republicanism and Socialism, the confusion rather than the linking of two distinct programmes, was consummated on Easter Monday 1916. He went into the General Post Office believing that these forces were opposed to the class interests of the Irish bourgeoisie and that it was no political compromise for the working class to lower the red banner to the green flag of insurrectionary republicanism.

## CHAMPION OF THE WOMAN WORKER

becomes clear when he goes on to add: "I consider that whosoever tells of the sexual action needlessly or in any other manner, but as a scientist would speak of his investigations or a surgeon of his operations, is acting indecently".

In his polemic with the Jesuit, Fr. Kane, answering Kane's suggestion that divorce would lead to women becoming the mistress of one man after another, Connolly responds by accusing Kane of a slander against "Irish womanhood". The concept of freedom for women to explore their own sexuality was entirely alien to Connolly. What he defends in women is their role as dutiful mothers and wives.

Connolly failed to understand the family from a class standpoint. He further departs from Marxist orthodoxy in identifying divorce as a bourgeois evil, not as a democratic right which socialists must fight for. Instead he contends that it was mostly the wicked capitalists who were clamouring for divorce! Not surprisingly he was appalled at the thought of 'free love' and was an ardent defender of monogamy.

### Unprecedented Explosion

And all of this during a period which witnessed an unprecedented explosion of struggle around women's issues. In Germany especially, a mass working class women's movement had been built which mobilised thousands to fight around the issue of equality and which championed the Marxist outlook of Bebel's *Women and Socialism*. Although considering himself a revolutionary, he never accepted the full scope of Marx's materialist method. He believed that there were some issues which socialists couldn't have a definite opinion on—issues outside the realm of political and economic factors—that were matters of personal belief exclusively.

For Connolly, Catholicism was one such case. He held that the tradition of Irish Catholicism contained a spiritual and ethical

heritage which could not be logically understood by historical materialism. He believed that Irish Catholicism in response to foreign conquest had kept alive the Celtic values of solidarity and communalism. He attributed to it a progressive dynamism that could be salvaged in a socialist Ireland.

In a separate but connected way he held that issues like the family and sexuality were external to the question of socialism. Ironically, this did not prevent Connolly from treating these subjects at great length in his own works. Of course it is possible to produce extracts from Connolly in which he criticizes the role of the church. But what he never does is go beyond this to draw any conclusions about the inherent nature of religion in capitalist society. This stands in stark contrast to the kernel Marxist idea that the dominant ideology invariably reflects the interests of the dominant social class.

Connolly's syndicalism caused him to encourage the suffragettes to involve themselves in the trade union organisation of women. However, he had no perspective of mobilising women in a specific struggle, using class action, for women's emancipation. While he saw the necessity for women to fight together against their oppression, he narrowed the horizons for organised women workers to the fight around economic issues in the unions.

In doing so, he showed himself to have dumped some of the prejudices that were the stock-in-trade for others who considered themselves socialists. But, well-intentioned though he was, Connolly's strategy couldn't confront in action the real depth and extent of women's specific oppression in a deeply oppressed colony.

We make these criticisms of Connolly only in order to benefit by the lessons of his past in ensuring that we do not repeat the same mistakes. This is a sentiment that Connolly himself—huge of heart and solid in principle—would thoroughly have approved of. ■

that the demands of the democratic programme might be partially conceded on a basis favourable to continued bourgeois rule. This was especially true if the working class did not resolutely pursue its own strategic goal at all points in the struggle. Ireland was such a case in 1916-22.

Thus there were two preconditions for a favourable outcome for socialists in a national struggle. The working class had to become the leading force, mobilising all poor and oppressed of town and country under their banner. And they had to maintain their political independence from the radical democrats and bourgeoisie and at no point to suspend the class struggle against the capitalists even where united action against a common enemy was tactically agreed.

But Lenin and Trotsky never equated even the most radical national-democratic programme with the working class programme for power. Tactics were necessary which would link the two in a way that responded to shifts in the mood of the masses and the degree of their illusions in the bourgeois nationalists. Demands for the most radical forms of democracy, such as the revolutionary constituent assembly, the most radical solution of the land question etc. were crucial in challenging the hold of the nationalist parties.

Connolly's much acclaimed slogan, therefore, "The cause of Ireland is the cause of labour, the cause of labour is the cause of Ireland", did not represent such a method. It was founded on a populist misconception of the national struggle as inevitably socialist. It masked in reality a tragic liquidation of the political independence of the working class into revolutionary nationalism. In that respect it is a part of Connolly's legacy that must be rejected in the fight for the overall goal which Connolly first placed before the Irish working class—the establishment of a Workers Republic and international communism. ■

### What Alternative?

The inspiring quality of Connolly's life was his attempt to make the struggle against British imperialism a central concern of the labour movement. Sadly, he failed to work out a strategy and tactics to link the class and national struggles without subordinating the cause of labour. To understand and learn from his mistake is the best service to his memory.

Within a year of his execution the Russian revolution was to vindicate and bring to prominence a new programme which was being hammered out on the left wing of the International and which did indeed spell out the kind of principles, strategy and tactics which Connolly's heroic enterprise so desperately needed.

The Comintern under Lenin and Trotsky recognized that struggle for demands of the minimum programme, such as national independence, had the potential to arouse revolutionary struggle against the capitalist system itself, if decisively led in that direction. It was equally possible

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