

Republicanism and the working class

It is best to examine republicanism within the larger framework including the role of the bourgeoisie, the working class and the tasks - national democratic - which republicanism sets itself. But firstly we should look at what Marxists have to say on these tasks from a broader perspective than the Irish experience.

The French revolution was the classic and never to be repeated purest form of bourgeois revolution.

"In the heroic period of French history we saw a bourgeoisie; enlightened, active, as yet not aware of the contradictions of its own position, upon whom history had imposed the task of leadership in the struggle for a new order, not only against the outworn institutions of France but against the reactionary forces of the whole of Europe. The bourgeoisie, in all its factions, regarded itself as the leader of the nation, rallied the masses to the struggle, gave them slogans and dictated their fighting tactics. Democracy bound the nation together with a political ideology. The people - urban petty-bourgeoisie - peasants - and workers - elected bourgeoisie as their deputies, and the instructions given these deputies by their constituents were written in the language of a bourgeoisie coming to awareness of its historic mission." (Permanent Revolution)

The bourgeoisie was henceforth unable or unwilling to undertake a revolutionary overthrow of the feudal system that constricted its power.

"In 1848 the bourgeoisie was already unable to play a comparable role. It did not want and it was not able to undertake the revolutionary liquidation of the social system that stood in its path to power. Its aim was - and of this it was perfectly conscious - to introduce into the old system the necessary guarantees, not for its domination but merely for a sharing of power with the forces of the past. It was made wise through the experience of the French bourgeoisie, corrupted by its treachery and frightened by its failures. It not only failed to lead the masses in storming the old order but placed its back against this order so as to repulse the masses who were pressing it forward. [Permanent Revolution]."

Again from Trotsky on why the bourgeoisie had passed to reaction in the light of the French revolution:

Within the framework of the bourgeois revolution at the end of the century, the objective of which was to establish the domination of capital, the dictatorship of the sansculottes was found to be possible. This dictatorship was not simply a passing episode, it left its imprint on the entire ensuing century, and this in spite of the fact that it was very quickly shattered against the enclosing barriers of the bourgeois revolution. In the revolutions at the beginning of the 20th century, the direct tasks of which are bourgeois, there emerges as a near prospect the inevitable or at least probable political domination of the proletariat. The proletariat will see to it that this domination does not become a mere passing "episode" as some realist philistines hope. {Permanent Revolution}

revolution.

The revolution of 1848 did not turn into socialist revolution, but that is precisely why it did not achieve democracy.

{Permanent Revolution}

The kernel of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution was that, in the world historical conditions of the early 20th century [the global spread of imperialism], the working class would provide the driving force for resolving the democratic tasks of bourgeois revolution. Conscious struggle by the working class to resolve democratic tasks in backward countries would lead directly to the dictatorship of the proletariat and this puts socialist measures on the order of the day. Socialist measures in backward countries would not be, as vulgar Marxists would have it, preconditioned on the country having a high level of development of its productive forces. They would depend on the balance of class forces nationally and decisively on the international level.

Trotsky's views were confirmed by the Russian revolution where its relatively tiny working class, through its experience of struggle and leadership by the Bolsheviks, was able to set up the world's first worker's state. The Russian working class proved to be more class conscious and cultured than the powerful working classes of advanced capitalist countries.

In Ireland Trotsky's opinion of the non-revolutionary nature of the bourgeoisie was confirmed. Aside from the 1798 rebellion, which drew direct inspiration from the French revolution, every bourgeois leadership from Wolfe Tone to today proved wanting in pressing home their own historic task of national liberation.

Representatives of the national bourgeoisie from Daniel O'Connell, Parnell, Redmond, Griffith, Cosgrave and through to De Valera and his successors has, like the European bourgeoisie of 1848, sought not the political domination of their class but a sharing of power with the forces of the past. In their case a servile and wholly subordinate junior partnership with the forces of colonialism and imperialism was the height of their ambition. So timid was the Irish bourgeoisie that despite the fact that for much of their history the working class was an insignificant force, leaving them free from any deep class antagonisms or organised class struggle, they also subordinated themselves to the forces of feudal reaction, the Catholic church - itself being sponsored by the British authorities.

It is entirely in character that the semi - independence that the Irish bourgeoisie have today was gained, not as republicans would have it, by riding on the backs of worker and small farmer forces in the independence struggle, but through launching a counter-revolutionary war at the behest of the British against the forces who had brought them to the negotiating table.

The civil war was a very conscious and inevitable act by the bourgeoisie. The class struggles of the 1910's and 1920's in Ireland, the revolution in Russia and the flowering of workers struggles and methods during the independence struggle and civil war [general strikes, soviets] can only have given them a warning of their possible extinction.

The treaty was also a product of the international political situation. Despite the fact that the revolutionary wave in Europe was ebbing the British working class was restive. The Russian revolution had survived and the prospect of a further radicalisation of the struggle in Ireland was a factor that made the treaty an act of mutual self-preservation by the British and Irish bourgeoisie. The development of workers power, however embryonic, in the West of Europe as well as in the East was the consideration which

guided British policy in Ireland not just on partition but henceforth to the present. In the

context of the present struggle British politicians in their more paranoid moments warn of the danger of a "Cuba" off Europe.

THE REPUBLICANS AND THE FREE STATE

Liam Mellows in his prison letters and Peadar O'Donnell were in a very tiny minority among the republican leadership who drew any lessons from the class composition of the pro-treaty forces. The majority were purely militarists who saw the developing class struggle as a divisive factor. They continued a policy of all class alliances even when in the midst of civil war when the national bourgeoisie was leading an offensive against them. Their political trajectory remains the same today despite the failure of that alliance to materialise. Even in the war of independence "national" unity was at a premium.

THE NATIONAL BOURGEOISIE

The Post famine national bourgeoisie was mainly a gombeen layer involved in services [money lending], distribution and some agriculturally based manufacture. Where there were industrial capitalists they were, like their Northern counterparts, dependent on Britain and imperial markets and hostile to nationalism. The national bourgeoisie was politically sectarian in that the church had become thoroughly integrated into its political organisations. The absolute limit to its ambition was home rule - not much more than political control over state patronage. The church was in accord with these aims. The patronage it enjoyed from the British would not be jeopardised by a leap into the dark. By 1914 it had accepted partition as the price of home rule.

Griffith, who had been an isolated figure after 1913 and 1916, and whose programme included the strengthening of Irish capitalism through the erection of tariffs, became the standard bearer of those forces after the eclipse of Redmondism. The treaty settlement contained little more than the "home rule" proposals of 1914 - a formal parliamentary separation sovereign in name only. But it was enough to draw the bulk of petty bourgeois support from the republicans and defeat the purely military organisation that remained without much trouble. The leaderless working class, whose trade union leaders abstained from the conflict, were to suffer an historic defeat from which they have not yet recovered.

The new government accepted a free trade policy in the treaty negotiations in contradiction to its own limited aims. Despite the division and demoralisation of the working class the Free State was not a very stable entity. As much as half of the population in the 26 counties regarded the national question as unfinished business. The state was very repressive and leaned heavily on the church to sustain it. Its ideological veneer was permeated with catholic absolutism. Individual rights were crushed by church led crusades banning books, films, music, dancing women's rights and sexual expression.

The republicans failed to transcend their militarism and when De Valera took power in 1932 he was able to co-opt them into supporting his very brief protectionist period and to defeat the threat from the right from Cosgrave and the Blueshirts, who were mobilised by the capitalist layers most dependent on the British market. The limits of progressiveness of the gombeen layer was reached during the "economic war" with Britain. By 1935 the coal-cattle pact had been signed. The republicans had again failed to develop an independent programme around which the working class could rally. In the conditions of world capitalist depression in the 1930's this was eminently feasible. De Valera was able to stabilise the 26 county state without making any but the most superficial reforms to its structures. His crowning glory was the 1937 constitution which elevated Catholic dogma into the official ideology of the state. Republican abstentionism ensured the success of the constitutional referendum. Articles 2 and 3 must be seen within this context - little

more than a contradiction - which ensured its passage. The sectarian nature of both states is fundamental to their continued survival.

The republicans had nowhere to go but down after the 1930's. The sectarian nationalism of the 26 county state - an artificial construction with no historical authenticity - was absorbed almost totally by the republicans, leaving little difference with Fianna Fail other than the gun. When the current phase of political struggle opened up through the civil rights movement the republicans were a fairly anachronistic outfit. That the unreconstructed wing, the provisionals, came to be the dominant force in the struggle is entirely due to failures on the left.

Although the republicans have evolved politically over the past period they have not broken from their petty-bourgeois ideological inheritance. They have adopted a more left leaning stance at high points in the struggle when mass mobilisations occurred. This never went beyond a radical populism which can be seen with hindsight as being within their traditional politics.

In the period after internment, when there was a high level of organisation among the working class of the ghettos - no go areas, rent and rates strike, etc., they bypassed all the organisations that had sprung up in the struggle and took it upon themselves to represent the struggle in talks with the British. This freed the SDLP from accountability to the mass movement and consolidated them as successors to the Nationalist party,

Similarly during the H-Block struggle. The campaign which mobilised large numbers of organised workers was never on the inside track in the negotiations with Britain. When the republicans did not see themselves as the embodiment of the national struggle they were pursuing the holy grail of nationalist unity, blind to the fact that the population of Ireland has become overwhelmingly urban and proletarianised and that the bourgeoisie and economic structures of the state are more integrated with imperialism than ever before.

In the 26 counties the republicans have been no less confused than in the 6 counties. Over the last 20 odd years there have been struggles of quite a broad scope by the working class on economic issues, the womens movement and the national question. At crucial stages in each struggle the republicans have reverted to type. When the issue of the independence of workers organisations in the struggle against austerity arose during the Programme for national Recovery they clung to their relationship with Phil Flynn, the chief negotiator for ICTU. He was seen as being on the inside track for bettering their relationship with Fianna Fail and aiding their preferred option of a Fianna Fail government by delivering the working class vote. On womens rights they abstained on the first anti-abortion referendum, gave no direction on the divorce referendum and on the abortion debates around Maastricht they were so deeply ensconced with rump right wing element of Fianna Fail that they found themselves in the same camp as the catholic fundamentalists.

THE 26 COUNTY STATE AND THE WORKING CLASS.

The long crisis of imperialism has impacted on both Irish states very sharply. The institutions of both have been destabilised, more particularly in the 6 counties, but the character of the crisis is a combined and uneven one unravelling the structures of both states. The main underlying feature of the crisis is the weight that the working class has attained in Irish society. The elites which rule Irish society are essentially those that gained power, stability and growth through partition and the defeat of and division of the working class in the civil war. These are manufacturing capitalists in the 6 counties, the Southern bourgeoisie, the churches of both states and the labour bureaucracy.

To deal with the 6 counties briefly: The absolute decline of manufacturing capital

indigenous to the 6 counties has undermined the objective basis on which partition and Loyalism rested. Direct patronage by the British state has been needed to plug the gaps in the sectarian state. The changed nature of the economic base - direct imperialist investment and the decline of the orange bourgeoisie has meant the sectarian superstructure of the state has become an anachronism, which because it cannot be replaced has to be maintained by violence. That is why questions of equal rights and positive discrimination retain their explosive significance.

In the 26 county state up till the 1950's a kind of stability was maintained through a political structure which was very repressive and obscurantist. The open door policy to imperialist investment has had a tremendous dislocative effect on the state and society.

Inward imperialist investment has been responsible for the very rapid urbanisation of Irish society and also for the greatly increased weight of the working class. The cost has been the break-up of stable communities in the towns and cities, depopulation of the countryside, mass unemployment, emigration and a huge increase in the rate of exploitation. With imperialist investment the outward flow of superprofits became a flood, thereby exaggerating the contradictions within the state and leading to a huge shift in class forces, though this is in terms of relative weight rather than the balance of the class struggle. Consequently there is a deep crisis affecting all the elites of the 26 county state both as separate institutions and as a whole.

THE STATE, THE CHURCH AND THE T.U. BUREAUCRACY

The singular most important feature of present day reality in the 26 counties is the crisis of the states institutions. The superstructure of the state has been out stripped by the change in the forces of production. Imperialism's crisis accelerates this process by increasing the rate of profit repatriation, debt management and diminishing local control and power of the neo-colonial elite. This has a contradictory effect on the states institutions. The crisis within each tends to blow them apart as each tries to shore up its own place and power within society. Thus the church, which finds the majority of society against its ideological positions on divorce, abortion and its authoritarian positions in general, responds by dictating excommunicating those who assist in abortions and reiterating their "constitutional" right to control education - measures which the political parties and union bosses cannot politically defend. The T.U. bureaucracies seek closer integration into the state while the only policies on offer are austerity measures of such severity as to threaten their own positions. Likewise the political parties cannot continue in the old way. Their differences are disappearing to vanishing point as the demands of imperialism to implement IMF and EC measures becomes paramount and the system of patronage with the electorate comes under strain. The bourgeoisie itself, whose relationship and influence in the state is far more intimate than in developed capitalist countries, has resorted to straight-forward looting of the public sector. This is far less a strategic option than in other countries where privatisation has occurred. The public sector of the 26 county is the most developed part of it and the private sector will not become any more developed on account of it.

In the end the state and its various institutions and hangers-on will survive and refound a new stability only on a defeat of the working class on a scale at least comparable to that of the civil war. As partition has been the central division in managing and controlling the working class it would have to be restored on a basis in which the ambiguities of its present existence are eliminated.

THE T.U. AND LABOUR BUREAUCRACY

For the working class the key questions are those of working class independence and political organisation. The last 20 years have shown that left to itself the working class

were an unmanageable force even within the 26 counties. The mobilisations against National Wage Agreements, the strike wave of the late 60's and early 70's, and the campaigns on PAYE and service charges [all directly linked to the ratcheting up of imperialist exploitation] frustrated at every turn the states ability to implement economic policy. It was only through the T.U. bureaucracy's role in firstly limiting picketing rights through the NWAs and latterly through eliminating every right of trade unionists except that of paying dues through deals like the PESP and its offspring the industrial relations act. The dammed up frustration of workers, which has also found some expression in the volatile voting pattern over the last decade has now reached the stage where options for diverting it have dried up. Every permutation of government has been tried and failed. Participation at union branches, where members find they have no input into the issues central to their lives has fallen to an all time low

The resolution of the present impasse is of course that of class consciousness. The question is; what sort of class consciousness?

A look at the recent history of mobilisations of the working class in the 26 counties shows that workers consciousness has moved between that of syndicalism and republicanism. These movements have not been under the control and direction of the T.U. and labour bureaucracy in their various manifestations. Rather they were mobilisations which had broken out of their control which have had to be reined in and inhibited from reappearing by restrictions on workers organisations. Neither have the mass mobilisations around the national question [1968, Bloody Sunday, internment, hunger strikes] been under republican control and impetus, tho' they were no less effectively dissipated by the inadequacy of their petty -bourgeois politics to move them forward.

The task of transcending the present and most advanced consciousness of the working class requires that they become conscious as a class of their historically determined role to complete the tasks of bourgeois democratic revolution. Leaving aside the question of the revolutionary party these tasks can only be achieved if that class is organised as a self-acting, self organised class working by its own methods and to its own agenda. By consciously striving to become the leader of the nation or its ruling class, only on that basis is socialism on the order of the day. By becoming conscious of a break with the past where at every historic crossroad in its struggle it put its fate in the hands of a petty -bourgeois leadership of either the republican or labourist tradition. Then it can settle accounts with its enemies - imperialism, the national and orange bourgeoisie, their sectarian ideologists in churches and orange lodges and the labour bureaucracies who combine, however contradictorily as an interdependent entity to ensure their continued domination and oppression.

The question of petty-bourgeois leadership seizing power in the "special" circumstances which arose after the second world war and in a choice of sink or swim became workers state Yugoslavia, China, Cuba, Vietnam etc. or negatively in Algeria, Egypt, Chile etc. is another area which needs addressing. But given the change in the international situation, the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the ending of the bi-polar world to that of the "new world order" the question of "special circumstances" no longer arises. The republicans have always been further away from the question of seizing power than other national liberation movements in countries where their petty - bourgeois base [i.e. the peasantry] was far larger, have in any case taken the same negative prognosis from the world situation and moved rapidly to the right. They now begin to see the brokerage of imperialism [the UN and EC] as a despairing answer to their ideological blind ally.

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