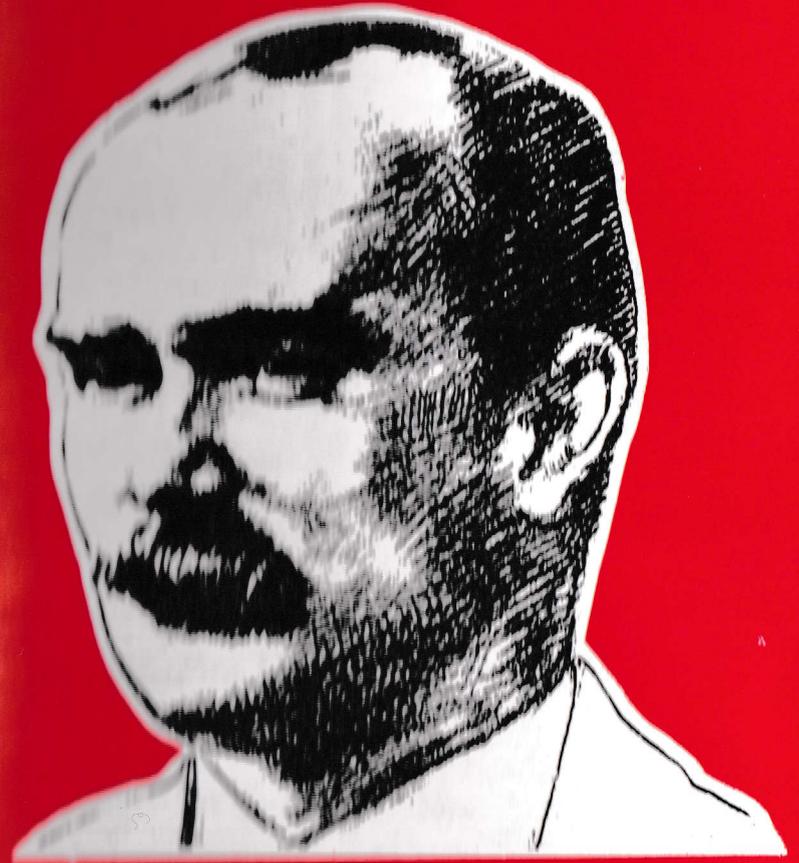


Irish Worker Pamphlet
Number 1
Price £1

WHERE IS OUR



JAMES CONNOLLY?

Labour's struggle and labour's betrayal

WHERE IS OUR



JAMES CONNOLLY?

Labour's struggle and labour's betrayal

By Brendan Kelly and Ronan Brady
Foreword by Anne Speed and Larry O'Toole

AN IRISH WORKER PAMPHLET

Foreword

IN A YEAR WHICH MARKS the 75th anniversary of 1916 and the tenth anniversary of the hunger-strikes, the truth about James Connolly needs, more than ever, to see the light of day. In the years since his death, his message has never been so necessary. Nor has it ever been more seriously misrepresented.

Today, the word "labour" brings to mind politicians whose only 'principle' is achieving power and a movement which excludes the most oppressed. It was not always so. In Connolly's own day, the word was spoken proudly by working people who were determined to stand up for themselves — in unity. Partition, and the discrimination which northern nationalists have suffered under it, would have been regarded with anathema by those who saw themselves as "labour". Today, Dick Spring and his supporters preside over a party which upholds partition and the trade union movement remains silent in the face of a form of apartheid within our own shores.

It may be sad, but it is appropriate, that Spring picked this year's Labour conference in Killarney to sever the last verbal commitment to the Workers' Republic and the tradition of James Connolly. He is following in the tradition of those leaders who betrayed Connolly as he sat, strapped-up for execution, 75 years ago.

The leaders of the modern Irish Labour Party believe Connolly's ideas — republicanism, socialism and fighting for the most oppressed — are 'things of the past'. Mild, liberal-sounding phrases, vigorous support for the EC and direct collaboration with the British military through institutions like the Hillsborough Agreement are seen as the way forward.

But Spring, like his predecessors, has made a terrible mistake. The tradition of James Connolly and Big Jim Larkin is not dead within the labour movement. It has often re-asserted itself and will do so again. Many within the Labour Party itself are deeply troubled by his abandonment of labour's radical tradition and of the northern nationalist people. By betraying its radicalism in the past, labour leaders only secured the eclipse of their own organisation, while Fianna Fáil gained the support of most working-class voters. The future of the labour movement depends upon unity in action among all those committed to freedom, democracy and socialism.

The 1991 Labour conference in Killarney went further still from that tradition and it stands to disappoint its supporters even more than previously. Political parties of the left do not make gains by looking backwards towards the policies of the right. They simply go out of business. If voters are going to choose right-wing policies, they generally prefer to get these from parties which are openly right-wing.

Today Sinn Féin is the only party, North or South, to stand resolutely by the objectives of James Connolly — the only one to stand for the unity of the Irish working class. That also makes us the only one to see the future clearly.

That future will have to entail a struggle against the policies which have handed over super-profits to the multinationals, at the expense of the PAYE worker. It will mean a fight to increase, not to cut, employment in state-owned firms so as to reduce emigration. It will also mean a fight with the institutions of the European Community which are designed to drain jobs and investment out of this country and to dilute what little sovereignty we possess.

On all of these issues, the 'new-look' Labour Party of Dick Spring has deserted working people and is pandering to the right. But the party of James Connolly and Bobby Sands has not. The historical record has already vindicated most of Connolly's analysis. It will go on to vindicate those, such as Sinn Féin, who stand by that analysis.

— By Anne Speed and Larry O'Toole

"The two currents of revolutionary thought in Ireland, the socialist and the national, are not antagonistic but complementary." — James Connolly 1896



● James and Lillie Connolly with their daughters Mona and Nora

The practical visionary

TO REVISIONIST HISTORIANS James Connolly's participating in the 1916 uprising is the ultimate proof of his abandonment of socialism. By joining the rebellion he violated all the principles of Marxism on which his political outlook was based. In 1916 there was no revolutionary situation; there was no attempt to involve the broad mass of workers; there was no declaration in favour of socialism. In place of these there was only a conspiracy of isolated day-dreamers and a lot of woolly idealism. To become embroiled in such an adventure Connolly must surely have ditched his Marxism in preference for the romanticism of his nationalist confederates. **So goes the myth.**

The revisionists are unable to fathom Connolly's distinctive approach. He agreed with militant republicans that a national uprising should be attempted during the First World War. But anyone who reads his writings and follows his activities during 1914-'16 cannot fail to be impressed by the independent line he pursued.

When his analysis is compared with what actually occurred, and his activities contrasted with those of later trade union leaders, the reality of Connolly's vision can be clearly seen. That is the purpose of this pamphlet.

A REVOLUTIONARY SITUATION

Connolly remained firmly committed to the view that a rising could only be

attempted in a revolutionary situation. This he believed existed. In the Marxist tradition to which Connolly adhered, there are two conditions for defining a revolutionary situation — firstly, the ruling class has to be at an impasse such that it must radically change its method of political domination; secondly, there must be a sufficient awakening among the people such that they refuse to continue to be ruled as before.

During the period 1914-'16, British rule in Ireland arrived at this kind of crossroads with a vengeance. In Britain itself the social and economic underpinnings of the Tory-Liberal two-party system had long been eroded and the First World War was hastening major political changes under the worst possible conditions.

Meanwhile, in Ireland, expectations of Home Rule had been raised to fever pitch. However, Britain was walking a tightrope. The autonomy on offer was drastically reduced. To add insult to injury, partition was introduced and then the whole sorry mess was deferred indefinitely for fear of alienating the loyalists and provoking a Tory backlash, which would upset the precarious balance in Britain itself. The national question had become explosive and Britain had no strategy to defuse it, except hope for the best.

In consequence, a huge National Volunteer force steamrolled into existence. Some 12,000 of this army was staunchly in favour of a radical separatist solution to Ireland's problem. They began to arm, drill and train openly.

Parallel with this the working class was becoming an independent factor in Irish politics for the first time in history. Trade union membership doubled from 50,000 in 1910 to 100,000 in 1914. In 1914 also, despite an undemocratic franchise, Dublin labour and Sinn Féin won 42% of the vote in a wide number of seats contested in the capital. And from 1914 onwards there was a steady growth in the number of strikes.

As workers grew in self-confidence they continued to be faced with intense hardship. From the turn of the century wages had steadily declined while prices rose. Unemployment was high and social misery endemic. Dublin, for example, was one of the worst slums in the world — 20,000 families (a quarter of the total population) lived in one-room tenements and infant mortality was higher than in Calcutta.

Overall the traditional dominance of the constitutional nationalists was under threat. All the signs were that political reality was about to catch up dramatically with the Home Rulers. Their traditional one-party dominance was in imminent danger of collapse in a situation that was highly volatile.

A STRATEGY FOR MASS MOBILISATION

It was in the context of this crisis that Connolly proposed a strategy for mobilising the people of Ireland as a prelude to armed insurrection. The first lever he suggested should be a popular campaign against the export of food to Britain. The war, he warned, would bring even greater poverty and misery to the downtrodden. A fight for the retention of food supplies and their equitable distribution could be turned into a mass confrontation with the British authorities.

Connolly proposed a joint labour-republican campaign around this issue to galvanise a widespread social uprising. "Let us not shrink from the consequences", he wrote in August 1914. "This may mean more than a transport strike, it may mean armed battling in the streets to keep in this country the food for our people. But whatever it may mean it

must not be shrunk from. It is the immediate feasible policy of working-class democracy."

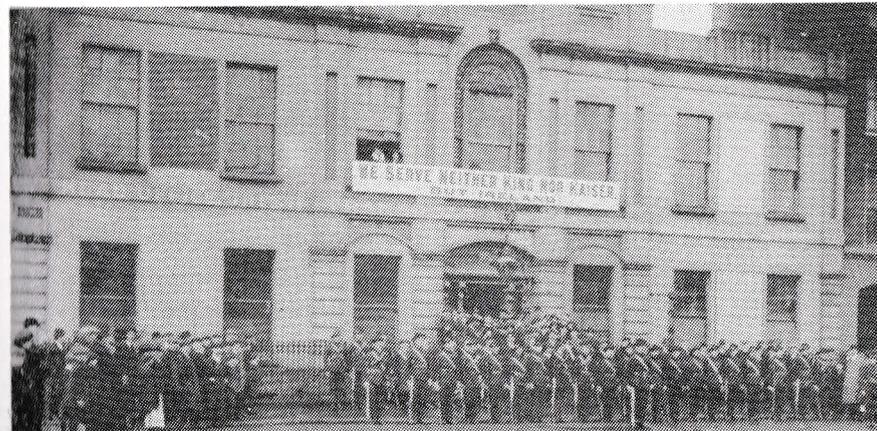
A second lever he proposed was a campaign against conscription. He emphasised especially the need to resist economic conscription and to take on the Home Rule employers who were acting as recruiting sergeants for Britain. Opposition to enlistments, he urged, should be backed up with a declaration from the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) to defend all resisters. The outcome he envisaged would be popular revolt, "in short it means barricades in the streets, guerrilla warfare in the country". Connolly was familiar with the history of the 1905 revolution in Russia and here he is echoing the strategy pursued by the left wing of the Russian social-democrats.

Connolly also argued for a determined fight against the accelerating curtailment of civil liberties. Under the Defence of the Realm Act the republican and labour press was being systematically suppressed and scores of leading activists were being arrested or deported. Connolly insisted on the need to defy this coercion and to draw in the Volunteers and ICA in defence of its victims.

Today's republicans are criticised for their opposition to imperialist wars such as George Bush's intervention into the Gulf while supporting armed struggle against Britain. It is worth noting that this position is identical to that of Connolly in that period. He condemned the bloodshed in the trenches but prepared to take on British imperialism at home.

Connolly himself was immersed in building the trade union movement. He became general secretary of the ITGWU in 1914 and, under his leadership, recruitment developed steadily. At the same time he tried to popularise the ICA by deploying it as an armed guard to pickets during strikes.

There were two reasons why Connolly's proposal to foment mass discontent were not as successful as he had hoped. In his own view the more important of these was that the advanced nationalists were paralysed by a right-wing clique — Arthur Griffith, Eoin MacNeill et al. This element tried to prevent a link-up between the labour and national movements. In January 1916, just as he was about to conclude an agreement for



● The Irish Citizen Army — the first armed workers defence force in 20th century Europe — on the steps of Liberty Hall

insurrection with the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) Connolly publicly slated the right-wingers:

"Had we not been attacked and betrayed by many of our fervent advanced patriots, had they not been so anxious to destroy us, so willing to applaud even the British government when it attacked us, had they stood by us and pushed our organisation all over Ireland it would now be in our power at a word to crumple and demoralise every offensive move of the enemy against the champions of Irish freedom. Had we been able to carry out our plans, as such an Irish organisation of labour alone could carry them out, we could at a word have created all the conditions necessary to the striking of a successful blow whenever the military arm of Ireland wished to move."

But there was also another major reason why Connolly's strategy was unsuccessful. As a syndicalist Connolly concentrated on the building of trade unions to the neglect of a specifically socialist political party. Because of their broad-based nature the unions were too unwieldy for giving prompt and principled leadership. They were not suitable for the type of political campaigning Connolly had in mind and he was left with no vehicle to implement his programme, while the unions themselves were taken over by the short-sighted and the factional.

INSURRECTION OR ADVENTURE?

Given that his mass action strategy was not successful, surely Connolly violated his own Marxist principles by not postponing the contingent objective of an armed insurrection? In fact, within the Marxist tradition, there is substantial support for the stand Connolly took.

It is true that for Marxists such as Connolly, an insurrection should be attempted only in the context of a revolutionary situation where mass support exists. But within that framework insurrection is a specific art with a logic of its own. Armed preparations cannot simply be subordinated to the ebbs and flows of popular consciousness. It is obvious therefore, that Marxism does not exclude the possibility — rare though it may be — of a situation where an armed uprising can be a prelude to an awakening of the mass of people.

With regard to the situation in Russia, Marx's close collaborator Engels wrote in 1885 "the country is like a charged mine which only needs a match to be applied to it... This is one of the exceptional cases where it is possible for a handful of people to make a revolution, ie — with one little push to cause a whole system, which is in more than labile [unstable] equilibrium, to come crashing down, and thus by an action in itself insignificant to release explosive forces that afterwards become uncontrollable."

Conditions in Ireland during 1914-'16 were fairly similar to those outlined by Engels. The political situation had reached an impasse of historical proportions and a substantial resistance force was already in existence. The powder was in the keg and the fuse was set; would the match be lit? The right wing of the Volunteer leadership was trying to prevent it. So were the British who were gradually whittling away democratic rights to prepare for a general clampdown.

As Connolly saw it the balance was gradually tipping in their favour. On occasion Engels had said that once the battle lines were drawn, even in unfavourable circumstances, it was better for the working class to fight than to retire. A temporary



● JAMES CONNOLLY

he would be throwing away the potential of a revolutionary situation. On the other hand, he felt every right to be optimistic that an insurrection, though relatively isolated to begin with, would reinforce and prolong revolutionary opportunities.

defeat was preferable to long-term demoralisation. In assessing the situation in Ireland, Connolly had precisely the same idea in mind. He constantly stressed the danger of letting a revolutionary situation slip away without taking decisive action. Consequently, his views on the timing of an insurrection started not from the mood of the workers at that time but from their long-term interests. Apart from the consciousness of workers, Connolly also had to keep the objective situation in mind — particularly the line of march of indispensable allies and the machinations of the British state.

When the Irish Republican Brotherhood eventually proposed definite plans for insurrection, Connolly readily agreed. In the *Workers Republic* he gave a guarded prediction of impending events and expressed regret that they would not take the form of a classical revolution envisaged by Marxists. But he was prepared to push ahead anyway. On the one hand, he was convinced, as a socialist, that if he did not do so

NATIONAL REVOLUTION AND SOCIALIST OBJECTIVES

The claim that Connolly abandoned his objective of a socialist Ireland in order to take part in a nationalist rising is a contortion hard to credit even from the pens of revisionists.

It is clear that Connolly did not see the Easter Rebellion as a specifically socialist undertaking. But he remained convinced that the logic of events would help transform the ensuing upsurge in a socialist direction. His was a thoroughly socialist perspective, similar (though not identical) to the strategy then being followed by Lenin in Russia.

The mass of workers were not yet thinking in socialist or revolutionary terms. But they were organised in mass cultural, athletic, military and, above all, labour organisations which were not under the leadership of the traditional constitutional nationalists. Therefore, an insurrection for national democratic demands had a tremendous possibility of evoking a broad response. Connolly's aim was to place democratic demands, which specifically affected workers, in the forefront of this rebellion in order to draw workers in and ensure that the struggle would be dominated by the traditional methods of struggle of the labour movement.

Connolly outlined this approach in the January 15th, 1916, issue of *Workers Republic*:

"Ireland should commence by guaranteeing the rights of its toilers to life and liberty, and having guaranteed those rights should then call upon her manhood to protect them

with arms in hands." In this struggle it would be necessary to "conscript" the railways, ships, factories and land of the wealthy classes. These socialist measures, hitherto feared or thought impractical, would be readily accepted "as the propertied classes have so shamelessly sold themselves to the enemy, the economic conscription of their property will cause few qualms to whomsoever shall administer the Irish government in the first days of freedom".

In sum then, Connolly saw a socialist transformation of property relations as the necessary outcome of a real struggle for national freedom. He ended his article by saying, "If the Irish Volunteers and Irish Citizen Army is the military weapon of, the economic conscription of its lands and wealth is the material basis for, that reconquest [of Ireland]."

This conception of a democratic revolution flowing into a socialist revolution became a constant theme of Connolly's, leading up to the events of April 24th. Later on he wrote again that "should it come to a test in Ireland... the greatest civil asset in the hands of the Irish nation for use in the struggle would be the control of Irish docks, shipping, railways and production by Unions that gave sole allegiance to Ireland". Or again on the eve of the insurrection, as he coined the battle-cry of the Citizen Army he declared:

"We are out for Ireland for the Irish. But who are the Irish? Not the rack-renting, slum-owning landlord, not the sweating profit-grinding capitalist; not the sleek and oily lawyer; not the prostitute pressmen — the hired liars of the enemy. Not these are the Irish upon whom the future depends. Not these, but the Irish working class, the only secure foundation upon which a new nation can be created."

From this definition of the social driving force of the looming national revolution he logically derived a socialist programme.

"The cause of labour is the cause of Ireland, the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour. They cannot be dissevered. Ireland seeks freedom... Labour seeks to make a free Irish nation the guardian of the interests of the people of Ireland, and to secure that end would vest in that free Irish nation all property rights as against the claims of the individual, with the end in view that the individual may be enriched by the nation, and not by the spoiling of his fellows."

When Connolly's strategy and programme is understood it becomes obvious how preposterous is the claim that by joining the Easter Rising and signing the Proclamation of the Republic he was reneging on socialism. He signed away no principles or abjured no cause. Quite the reverse. To Connolly, Easter Week was an essential step on a longer journey with a more ambitious destination.

CONNOLLY LEGACY AND THE MARGINALISATION OF LABOUR

Revisionist historians blame Connolly for the subsequent marginalisation of the labour movement in Irish politics. They claim that in the national struggle, contrary to Connolly's expectations, social and economic issues were bound to be squeezed out. The labour movement, they argue, should have held aloof and continued to stress purely working-class issues. But, say the revisionists, under the influence of Connolly's legacy his heirs plunged into the national struggle, abandoned socialism and became indistinguishable from the nationalists.

Unfortunately for both the labour and national movements the new labour leaders did not follow in the socialist-republican tradition pioneered by Connolly. This was one of the great tragedies of modern Irish history.

Events following 1916 unfolded in a way remarkably similar to what Connolly had expected. The explosion of national sentiment and fighting spirit is well known. What is less acknowledged is the simultaneous eruption of working-class militancy. The most revolutionary phase of class struggle in Irish history was unleashed during this period.

At the same time, the Irish working class brought the methods of the labour movement to bear on the national struggle. The anti-conscription general strike was a death blow which marginalised the constitution nationalists and prepared their destruction in the 1918 general election. This was followed up by mass strikes in support of republican hunger-strikers, against executions, military use of the railways, martial law, military motor permits and travel restrictions. Without the 1918 general strike the national struggle might never have got off the ground at all and without the 1920 munitions strike the armed struggle would have been crushed in its infancy.

As a sequel to all this upheaval, Labour made enormous strides in popular support. All the evidence suggests that Connolly's pre-1916 prognosis was convincingly vindicated. If the national struggle did not develop into a socialist phase it was precisely because his successors did not embrace his legacy. The working class put the Labour leaders in a position to take the leadership of the national struggle and press on to victory on the economic and social fronts. Sadly, these leaders copped out. They tried to undermine and water down the popular spontaneous support for the anti-imperialist resistance.

'LABOUR MUST WAIT'

A favourite argument of the revisionist historians is that when de Valera said "Labour must wait" the Labour leaders, voicing Connolly's strategy, meekly obeyed. This is a travesty of what actually happened.

In reality, the Labour leaders were not prepared to nail their colours to the mast and come out unequivocally for a republic. Labour would only go as far as favouring "self-determination" (ie a British withdrawal) after which the form of government suitable for Ireland would be decided upon. In line with this Labour never gave official recognition to



● Events following 1916 unfolded in a way remarkably similar to what Connolly had expected

Dáil Eireann, just as it refused, at its annual conference in 1917, to support the stand taken by Connolly in 1916.

Just how backward many of these leaders were, was shown by the result of the discussion on the formation of an Irish labour party at the 1911 conference of the Irish Trades Union Congress (later to become the ICTU). William Walker, a loyalist trade union leader from Belfast, opposed the motion and won the day by 32 votes to 29, arguing that Irish trade unionists should simply affiliate to the British Labour Party.

James Connolly was able to reverse this decision at the following year's conference in Clonmel, County Tipperary, but this did not mean his fellow union leaders shared his and Larkin's political stance. The publication of the Home Rule Bill earlier that year, made the prospect of a separate parliament a likelier one in the eyes of the delegates. The absence of political organisation among Irish trade unionists became more glaring.

Walker, who believed that municipal ownership of the waterworks and the gas company were what socialism were all about, and who also supported a Protestant monarchy, was a particularly dim-witted reformist. But others such as Thomas Johnson showed a greater subtlety.

Johnson was, like Larkin, born in Liverpool — but there the similarities ended. Constance Markievicz once described Larkin as a "great primeval force rather than a man". As he spoke "it seemed as if his personality caught up, assimilated, and threw back to the vast crowd that surrounded him, every emotion that swayed them, every pain and joy they had ever felt". Tom Johnson was totally and precisely the opposite of that. Quiet and undemonstrative, even when under attack, he had the personality of a bureaucrat.

The man who became chairperson of the ITUC and later head of the Irish Labour Party, described himself as "Liverpool-English" as opposed to "Liverpool-Irish". Although he had been active in the political organisation which persuaded James Connolly to return to Ireland from the United States, he was steeped in the ways of the British labour movement and shared little of Connolly's vision.

PLAYING THE RIGHT TUNE

Johnson was a commercial traveller by trade and had very little in common with working-class trade unionism. Never once in his career did he lead a strike. The reasons for his rise within the ranks of the labour movement were his connections with the Socialist Party of Ireland in Belfast and his meticulous attention to detail. Historian JJ Lee points to his "political ineffectuality" but also notes his success, judging that he "did much to consolidate the Free State as a conservative régime".

He played exactly the right tune for those in power, both within the Irish trade union movement of the early part of the century and later on. But that was not the only reason for Johnson's success. The truth was that, although Larkin was a brilliant orator and a courageous leader, he was also extremely erratic. Cautious, plodding characters such as Johnson are often chosen to balance out figures like Big Jim Larkin. When Larkin left the scene in 1914, Johnson was able quietly to consolidate his power.

The way in which the ITUC responded to the First World War showed both its strengths and its weaknesses. The influence of the ITGWU was seen in the fact that it was

the only body of its kind in Western Europe to declare that the purpose of the 'Great' War was "the aggrandisement of the capitalistic class" and to take a resolutely anti-war stand. Every one of the other union congresses followed the drums of war.

But there were considerable fears that this firm position would be eroded at the following year's conference by a combination of northern loyalists and southern Redmondites. With Connolly's assistance as seconder, Tom Johnson successfully moved to abandon the regular ITUC annual conference planned for 1915.

He did not share Connolly's attitude, adopted by the ITGWU, of opposition to "both King and Kaiser" and was fundamentally opposed to using England's difficulty as Ireland's opportunity. In his heart of hearts, Johnson remained on the British side of the conflict. Like the British TUC, he claimed that the cause of 'democracy' would be 'better served' by a British victory than by a German one. He seemed oblivious to the fact that the German trade unionists were arguing just as persuasively, the exact opposite case.

By comparison, that of Larkin was crystal clear. In his union's newspaper, the *Irish Worker*, just before his departure to the US, he gave the tersely worded anti-conscription message:

"Stop at home. Arm for Ireland. Fight for Ireland and no other land."

PASSIVE SPECTATORS

Johnson and — with the exception of the Irish Citizen Army — the movement he led, were passive spectators of the events of Easter 1916. With a typically methodical attention to detail, the ITUC & LP chairperson kept a diary of what happened to him while the Rising was taking place and, although he makes no judgements about the event in those pages, it is an extremely revealing document.

On Easter Monday, Johnson was on his way back to Ireland from a trade union conference in Britain. He intended to take the ferry from Holyhead to Dublin so as to get to the Spring Show where his company had an exhibit. Boats to the North Wall had been cancelled ("Reason given: 'Revolution in Dublin'") and the leader of the Irish labour movement decided to try to get one to Kingstown — "very important (financially) for me to attend" he notes.

Throughout this diary, he shows only a concern with himself, despite the implications for those such as Connolly, whom he knew well:

"I feared that, if there had been an outbreak in Belfast [where he was living], the authorities would arrest all persons who might be suspected of having any communications with the rebel leaders in Dublin. Several trade union leaders might be implicated and my association with them — however innocent — might require explanation."

Following the Rising, William O'Brien and PT Daly were arrested and taken to Frongoch, although they played no part in the events. According to his own papers, the most senior Irish trade unionist seems to have restricted his efforts to trying to secure their freedom and that of the pacifist Francis Sheehy-Skeffington whom he did not know had been shot.

The fate of Connolly seems not to have concerned Johnson. No appeal was heard from the ITUC for clemency in the case of the leader of the largest Irish union and Connolly

went to his death in a wheel-chair without even a verbal statement of regret from the leadership of the movement to which he had given so much.

The comfortable, right-wing union leaders, whom Connolly and Larkin had troubled so much over the years, were now in control again.

At the Dublin Trades' Council which followed the Rising condolences were expressed to the relatives of the three leading trade unionists who died. Peadar Macken of the house-painters' union was a member of the IRB as was Richard O'Carroll, leader of the labour group on Dublin Corporation. Interestingly enough, the condolences for Connolly came last and those who died in the Flanders slaughter were also commemorated. Scores were being settled.

Addressing the ITUC conference that year in Sligo, Johnson adopted a similar strategy to that of the DTC. There were honeyed words about honouring Connolly's work and revering his memory, but the struggle in Dublin was again placed on a par with the senseless carnage of the trenches.

From the United States where he had been campaigning against the war, Larkin issued his response to Easter 1916:

"It must be admitted that the most glorious thing that has happened during this carnival of bloodlust in Europe, was the self-sacrifice and devotion of these men to a cause which they believed in." But, at home, an agenda very different to his had been adopted by labour leaders.

THE 1918 GENERAL ELECTION

All this puts the attitude of the Irish Trades Union Congress and Labour Party to the 1918 general election into perspective. The failure of Labour to put up candidates is usually presented as symbolic of its general subservience to Sinn Féin. What transpired on that occasion was a bit more complex.

Labour expected to win no more than six or seven seats — four of which were in Dublin. Sinn Féin offered Labour a free run in these four constituencies, which would have given Labour effective political dominance in the capital of the country and the heartland of the working class. This was a generous offer by any standards.

The Labour leaders were willing to do a deal but refused to accept the one condition laid down by Sinn Féin, namely the adoption of abstention from Westminster as a matter of principle. They were afraid of offending loyalist trade unionists and of embarking on a course of action which had "illegal and unconstitutional" implications. Besides they imagined, as was explained in the president's address to the TU Congress in 1919, that the British Labour Party would soon be in power at Westminster and in conjunction with Irish Labour would legislate home rule for Ireland! As a result of this timidity and hesitation a grass roots rebellion rolled through the unions and forced the opportunist leaders to retreat. Rather than enter a principled alliance with Sinn Féin, Labour withdrew to the side lines.

In an important, if not totally accurate phrase, Johnson was later to speak of how his colleagues had "subordinated the claims" of the labour movement to the struggle for independence.

That was not strictly the case. The labour movement was subordinated at a political

level to the very "conservative revolutionaries" who were about to set up the Free State. The unions were to play a major role in the anti-conscription campaign. But the political agenda and the crucial decisions were to be left to others and the radicalism of Connolly and of Easter 1916 was to be ditched. That, and not a commitment to the national struggle, was what lay behind the decision by the ITUC not to contest the 1918 general election.

BOLSHEVIK REPUBLICANS

For the rank-and-file of Irish workers by contrast, the political situation was genuinely "changed and changed utterly" in the wake of 1916. The rising struggle for national independence coincided with a general radicalisation among the most oppressed. Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Lawson, who carried out an investigation into the British Army in 1920, noted that "in the last three years, there was a considerable change from right to left in Irish opinion".

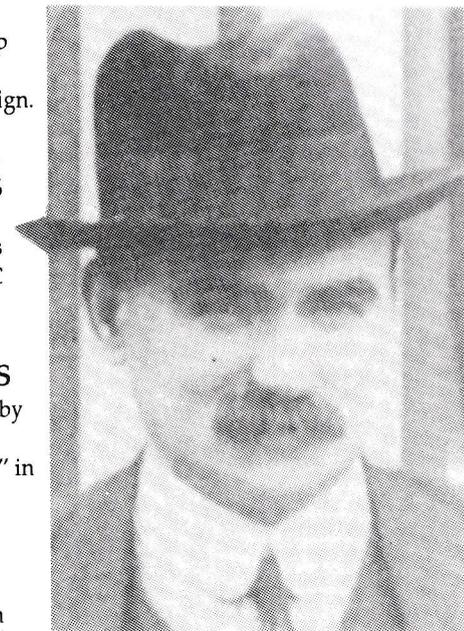
This was fomented by a rapid expansion of the labour movement which grew from 110,000 in 1914 to 300,000 in 1921. Unskilled urban workers and rural labourers now predominated and the conservative craft unions were forced into the background. There was a new spirit of defiance, especially on the national question. The old alliance between the trade unions and the Home Rulers dissolved. With the foundation of a Labour Party by the unions, a new Labour/Republican alliance began to emerge.

At the polls, Labour won 324 seats in the 1920 local elections compared to 422 seats for Sinn Féin. In the 1922 general elections, Labour scored 21% of the vote to rival the 21% for Sinn Féin and 38% for the Free Staters.

In fact, Ireland in the years immediately after 1916, became a political cauldron which could easily have produced a workers' republic. The one thing it lacked was a labour leadership which measured up to the task.

That message was not lost on the enemies of the Irish working class. One contemporary British apologist, Richard Dawson, wrote in the appropriately-entitled *Red Terror and Green*, that:

"Sinn Féin and Labour must be regarded as a single entity for the purpose of its revolutionary enterprise against Great Britain" and a mass-circulation unionist leaflet of 1919 accused Sinn Féin of advocating "Russian Bolshevism". A report to the Chief of Police stated that the "seeds of sovietism" were to be found in Sinn Féin: "Connolly's doctrine has not been spread in vain and it is likely to become the rallying-post of the dispossessed."



Of course, these accounts are somewhat hysterical, but they also contain more than a grain of truth. Local union meetings were often a cover for IRA operations and there was close co-operation between union branches, Sinn Féin cumainn and Volunteer units.

At the same time, the trade union leadership was busy burying Connolly's political legacy. For a considerable period, on issues such as conscription, they decided to give a certain amount of ground by authorising radical action. But their objective was to recoup that ground, later on.

FIGHTING CONSCRIPTION

The first major conflict which showed the mettle of the Irish trade union movement after the Rising was the Anti-Conscription campaign. In 1918, the First World War was still blazing and the British were suffering under a renewed German offensive. In Ireland, the Redmondites appeared to be recovering from Sinn Féin's electoral successes of the previous year and their party won three bye-elections in a row. The British cabinet thought it opportune to introduce conscription. The Westminster politicians believed it would remove popular republican support from the country and provide cannon-fodder for the battlefields of Europe.

Resistance was offered by a coalition of the republicans, the Redmondites and the labour movement. But it was labour which took the initiative. In addition to a series of mass protests, a national stoppage was organised. On April 29th, 1918, virtually the whole country came to a total standstill. Nothing moved. This was the first national general strike in Irish history (indeed the first in Europe) and was a complete success. The British soon retreated, indefinitely postponing the introduction of conscription. Nationalist morale went from strength to strength, culminating with the crushing electoral victory for Sinn Féin in December 1918.

Labour entered the battle again in April 1920. As republican resistance mounted, so did British coercion. Prisons on both sides of the Irish Sea were soon bursting at the seams. The POWs, mostly held without trial or sentenced by special courts, were portrayed as 'criminals'. The prisoners responded with a hunger-strike. On April 5th, 100 men refused food. Popular support was overwhelmingly on their side. But, again, it was the trade union movement which made the decisive breakthrough.

Eight days into the hunger-strike, labour launched an indefinite general strike. Once again, the close-down was total throughout nationalist Ireland. Militancy reached a new peak. Flying pickets and food committees were organised and in some areas, these declared themselves "soviets", taking over public administration. Within two days, the British took fright and climbed down. Against all expectations, the prisoners were suddenly released.

TANS AND AUXILIARIES

The immediate effect of the strike was to divide and demoralise the British authorities. Generals and bureaucrats blamed each other and split into warring factions. The general strike smashed the British pretence of normality and the Westminster government resorted to open war. Martial law was declared over wide areas. The Auxiliaries and the Black and Tans were drafted in and released on a rampage.



● Connolly (far right) and Larkin (fourth from right) at a meeting with the English TUC in 1913

Irish labour responded with another blow to the military. On May 20th, 1920, Dublin dockers refused to handle war materials for the British army. They were followed immediately by the railway workers. As the strike unfolded, it was extended to the boycott of all soldiers and armed police.

For six months, the workers withstood fierce intimidation from the military. Even at gunpoint, the strikers refused to capitulate. On top of this, over 1,000 strikers were dismissed from their jobs as the rail service ground to a halt and economic chaos grew. Labour leaders like Johnson, O'Brien and Cathal O'Shannon were giving their members free rein. But they were not going to do so for ever.

In December, the threat of total military control of the railways forced the workers to return to their jobs. But they had performed another vital service to the national struggle. General Macreedy, military governor, admitted that "this state of affairs, lasting over six months, was a serious set-back to military activities during the best season of the year". Furthermore, the strikers exposed the hypocritical 'patriotism' of the wealthy middle classes. Practically every employers' organisation condemned the strike and demanded a return to work.

British historian Charles Townsend noted of the Munitions Strike in his work *The British Campaign in Ireland: 1919-23* that "it broadened the republican campaign and heightened the atmosphere of alienation from British authority; it was a true example of civil resistance".

These were not the only examples of labour movement action during the fight for the republic. Others included the Limerick Soviet, a take-over of the city in protest against British travel permits, the Dublin general strike against political executions, the national stoppage to honour Terence MacSwiney, the boycott of Belfast goods following anti-nationalist pogroms and a strike against motor permits.

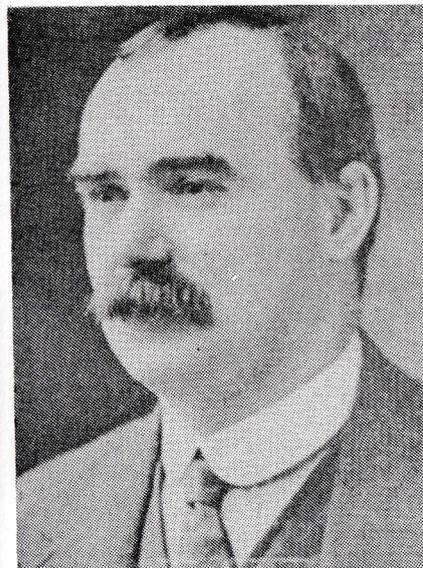
The trade union movement paid dearly for its assistance to the national struggle. Liberty Hall was wrecked by the Tans who also burned union halls in Cork and Galway. Union meetings were banned and scores of union officials were arrested. Even cautious Tom Johnson was arrested on occasion. Strangely enough, this intense coercion was unable to separate labour from the national struggle. When that separation came about, it was due more to the short-sightedness of the republican and the trade union leaders than to any external cause.

THE RED FLAG

At the very moment of this huge commitment to the Republic, labour was waging a huge battle for the class interests of working people. The claim by establishment historians that the trade union movement abandoned social and economic issues in the interests of 'national unity', is a colossal distortion of the historical record.

From 1918 on, the movement acquired a new militancy — inspired to a large extent by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia which provided goals for workers to aim at and examples of radical action to guide them.

At an international level, the Irish unions allied themselves with the minority within the socialist movement which supported Soviet Russia and voted for the concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat", which meant workers taking the reins of economic power. Back home in Ireland, the unions organised a mass campaign in solidarity with



the Bolsheviks which received much popular support. Sinn Féin publicist Aodh De Blácam caught the atmosphere of those days:

"A few days ago, a company of boys was marching through the Dublin streets. As is usual, they were singing. But their song was not *The Watch on The Rhine*, so popular in 1915; nor yet *The Soldier's Song*, so popular since Easter Week. It was *The Red Flag*. This song, unknown or unrespected throughout Ireland a year ago, is now heard on every side, and is sung by children at their play."

Two waves of radical class action were unleashed in this period. The first phase, 1919-1920, witnessed an explosion of sustained militancy by workers. The unions made a conscious decision to fight on as many fronts as possible. Practically every branch of industry was drawn into the maelstrom. Against a background of

universal unrest, there was one national general strike and 20 local general strikes in the cities and towns.

GENERAL STRIKE

A one-day national general strike was called on May Day 1919 to demand higher wages and shorter hours. The strike, despite attempts by the RIC to break it up, was a total success. Mass demonstrations were held right round the land. The Red Flag predominated everywhere and *The Workers' Republic* was the most common slogan on banners. This period also saw the Belfast general strike for a 44-hour week. The workers held out for a month but were forced to submit in the face of massive military intervention.

General strikes also occurred in practically every town of any size — Westport, Killarney, Wicklow, Kinsale, Nenagh, Thurles, Boyle, Charleville, Clonmel, Dungarvan and Ballina. Some of these were hard-fought battles — rioting and shooting were frequent. In Boyle, the RIC intervened for the first time since 1913, pitched battles ensued and 79 strikers were tried under the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act.

Even the ordinary day-to-day strikes showed a high level of militancy. In Monaghan, the RIC laid siege for several days to the local asylum which had been occupied by staff and patients. In Caledon, mill workers organised their own police force. Strikers in Bunclody were arrested by the British army, scrubbed with cane brushes, cold water poured on their wounds and threatened with execution. Their leader was stripped naked and tortured on the barracks' square.

Farm labourers in the East and South were also active during this period, as were small farmers in the West. Whole townlands were swept by strikes and land seizures. The farm strikes were marked by pitched battles with the RIC, wrecking of machinery, arson,

shootings and by roads being dug up. The land occupations were effected by large groups of men (one group was 2,000-strong), who ploughed up ranch grazing land, divided plots among small farmers or ran the enterprise cooperatively.

These actions also led to confrontations with the RIC and British army. In addition, assassinations of big landowners and their agents were carried out. A Dáil Eireann report gives a whiff of the agitation during the winter of 1919-20:

"Cattle-driving and gross intimidation became common. In Galway, a farmer was ducked in a lake until he proved tractable. In Roscommon, a recalcitrant owner was driven naked through a crowded fair. Mr Shaw-Taylor, a large ranch owner, was shot dead. An ugly vendetta in Kerry during April, with shooting on both sides, between landless labourers and farmers refusing to sell, was only ended by the intervention of the Republican Department of Agriculture."

SOVIETS

The first round of labour's revolt subsided towards the end of 1920. The boom which followed the 1914-'18 War had collapsed and employers sought to retrieve some of the gains won by workers. In the face of this new threat, workers needed something more than the strike weapon. This came in the shape of factory occupations — indeed, the workers went beyond mere occupation. They declared the owners redundant and set about producing and selling for themselves. These phenomena, which became known as "soviets" after the Russian word for a workers' council, grew in popularity up to the outbreak of the Civil War.

The initial soviet experiment of this period began in Arigna. Workers took over the local coal mine at the height of a wages struggle, and operated it for themselves. So successful were the workers that the mine owners gave in after two months.

This example was soon followed by workers elsewhere. Bruree bakery, Cork harbour, Drogheda foundry, Castleconnell fishery, Ballingarry mines, Quarterstown mills, Mallow mills, Tipperary gasworks, Cork railways, Knockbrack quarry, Killarney and Ballinacourties sawmills and Tipperary carriage factory were all occupied for longer or shorter periods and run by the workers for their own benefit. In addition, there were a number of "passive" occupations (where the workers simply took over the plant and did not operate it) and threats of occupations which brought immediate success for the workers.

All this was only a prelude to the great battle of the Munster Soviet Creameries. In May 1922, the workers, threatened with redundancies and wage cuts, responded by seizing 100 creamery depots. They elected their own management committees, armed themselves and hoisted the red flag. Despite attempts by large farmers to burn them out, the sabotage of machinery, the intimidation of suppliers and distributors as well as armed attacks, the workers held out for three months.

The soviet idea also spread to rural areas. It was the landless farm labourers who gave the lead. Lands were seized and farmed under the red flag at Lisdoonvarna, Ballyneety, Doolin, Lismoyle and elsewhere. Strikes occurred in many townlands, especially in County Waterford, where there was a violent general strike. The land soviets and farm strikes were accompanied by other forms of agitation. There were rent strikes and cattle

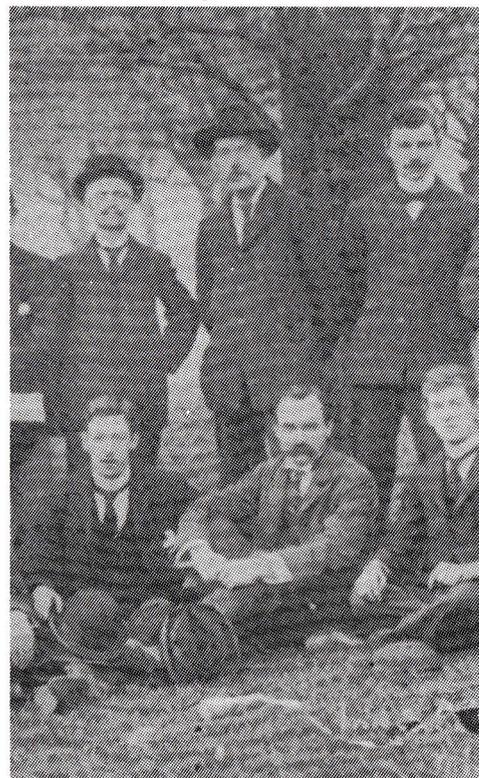
drives, and auctioneers were forced to cancel the sales of small farmers' land. As usual, riots, arson and killings attended much of these activities.

The soviets and the related agitation only came to a close during the Civil War. The social revolt which followed 1916 was finally crushed by the advancing Free State forces.

BETRAYAL

This huge, revolutionary upsurge proved, once and for all, that Irish workers, rural and urban, had arrived on the stage of history as an independent force. Connolly's vision that the working class was ripe for revolt had been vindicated. They had both given a mighty impetus to the struggle for national independence and had posed the question of socialism in Ireland. Yet the final outcome was a far cry from these beginnings. The opportunity was wasted and never since has the struggle for a Workers' Republic attained such scope or depth.

One reason for this is that the British and Irish ruling classes recognised the danger inherent in a convergence of the national and social revolutions. After the Truce, in 1921,



● Connolly (centre front row) in Phoenix Park with members of the Irish Socialist Republican Party in 1901

Churchill warned of the danger of a "Bolshevik Ireland" on Britain's doorstep. He told Michael Collins that a continuation of the independence war would lead to further social instability and urged him to break decisively with the republicans in order to safeguard capitalism in Ireland.

The Free Staters justified their bloody counter-revolution precisely on these grounds. A government pamphlet, issued at the height of the Civil War, declared that the new administration had to act determinedly "if Ireland was to be saved from descent into the hell of Bolshevism".

Committed republicans were less perceptive of the real role they were playing. During the pre-Treaty period, many of them participated as individuals in the labour struggle, but, as organisations, the IRA and Sinn Féin remained aloof. Most republicans saw the social/economic conflict as a separate issue rather than as a second front in the battle with

imperialism. Only after the Civil War had begun did the more radical republicans, such as Mellows, make an explicit appeal to the working class as such.

But, one of the most important reasons, if not the key to the failure of the labour movement after 1921, lay in the capitulation of labour's leaders. They ignored Connolly's political starting-point, which was always the interests of the workers as a whole, and allowed sectional interests to predominate. The more conservative leaders who spoke for the skilled, craft workers, were allowed to keep the whole movement back.

Faced with the dilemma posed by the Treaty, they decided that it was to be supported. Jim Larkin might rail from America, demanding "the rejection of this foul and destructive bargain" and wishing "the fate of Judas" on those who signed it. Instead, labour's leaders went for compromise with the government of Griffith, O'Higgins and Cosgrave — one of the most conservative in the Europe of its day. They distanced themselves from the soviet/occupation movement and launched a vitriolic campaign to oust the local leaders who had helped to run it. O'Brien went so far as to suggest that unions should be run with the same ethos as a capitalist enterprise.

CARNIVAL OF REACTION

Connolly's oft-repeated warning that a "carnival of reaction" would follow partition and that the division of Ireland "would paralyse all advanced movements whilst it endured" was proved to be strikingly accurate. In the 26 Counties, divorce was banned and a triumphant Catholic church was able to secure the censorship of books and periodicals which did not reflect its medieval notions of morality. Similar forms of religious fundamentalism reigned supreme north of the border.

These leaders knew exactly what the implications of partition would be. Johnson accurately forecasted its effects in a letter to Arthur Henderson, leader of the British labour movement:

"Dissension will arise immediately both in Ireland and in Ulster. Instead of one problem, we will have two and the coercion of a greatly strengthened radical nationalist party (or, perhaps a physical force party) will be the first awful business of the new Irish government."

But, sensing a parliamentary future for themselves, they became an essential prop of the Free State after the bloody Civil War, almost mocking the sacrifice of rank-and-file workers in the years between 1916 and 1921. The tradition of support for Redmond and his ilk came to the fore once again, as did that of the loyalist William Walker in the north-east. 'Keeping the labour movement united' became a catch-phrase, but it meant recognising partition. Thus, instead of uniting the movement, it was more seriously split than ever before.

The division between loyalist and nationalist workers was copper-fastened and intensified. Northern and southern workers were cut off from each other. In the South, workers lost faith in Labour and large numbers became de-politicised or, eventually, turned to Fianna Fáil. In the 26 Counties, Labour was sentenced permanently to the political wilderness. In the North, any hope of splitting loyalist workers away from their masters was abandoned.

With little concern for logic, leaders such as William O'Brien tried to justify their

refusal to endorse a republic by suggesting they were 'keeping the door open' for a Workers' Republic. But it was the exact opposite which crept in.

OPPOSITION REMAINS

The tragedy is, that it need not have done. In the 1922 general election, Labour and the republicans shared 42% of the vote evenly between them. Together, they had a clear majority over the Free Staters. The 17 Labour TDs could have boycotted the new assembly. Together with the republicans, they could have offered an alternative.

At the very least, the Civil War could have been pre-empted. Had Labour refused to enter Leinster House as the official opposition, the Free State government would not have had the political or moral credibility to launch a counter-revolution.

But, the Labour leaders were expecting a major employer offensive against wages and employment. The rank-and-file was already 'dangerously out of control'. An explosive confrontation was imminent. Johnson, O'Brien and their colleagues were anxious to defuse this impending crisis by means of reformist political haggling, rather than by mobilising workers for combat. They jumped at the opportunity which Leinster House offered them.

By entering its doors they totally broke the last link with the politics of the Irish labour movement in its radical years. In the process, they sold out both the cause of Ireland and the cause of labour.

The leaders of the Irish labour movement had failed in their greatest challenge and the movement was to be marginalised in the years which followed. Yet the tradition of Connolly and Larkin, of the Citizen Army and the early years of the ITGWU, remains as an opposition within the unions, constantly mocking the pretensions of those who now hold power. It is still waiting in the wings and the heirs of Tom Johnson know that.

*Printed and
published by
Sinn Féin
Trade Union
Department*



Price £1