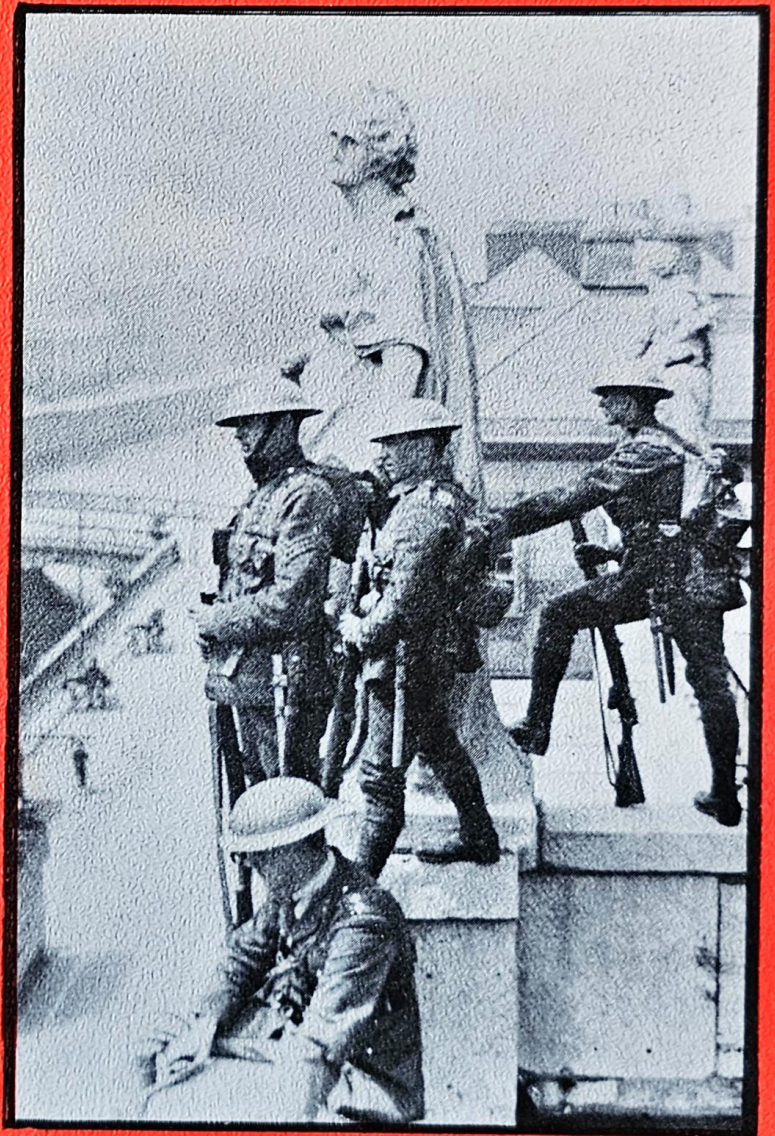


The Irish Crisis (1921)

The
British
Communist
Stand On
Irish
Self-Determination

by
William Paul



THE CORK WORKERS' CLUB

PRINTING HISTORY

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THE CORK WORKERS' CLUB

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The Irish Crisis

Ireland and the World Revolution

By WILLIAM PAUL

MANY people are perplexed at the recent dramatic turn in the Irish situation. The problem is as tantalising as it is complex and subtle. To thoroughly grasp it a whole series of factors must be carefully analysed and co-ordinated.

I.

The Capitalist North

IN Ireland there are as many conflicting political currents at work as there are different economic interests. It is in the North where there is the greatest opposition against the policy of separation, in any form, from Britain. Economically, the North is dominated by an imperialistic group made up of great land-owners and industrial magnates, who have enlisted the political services of legal luminaries whose careers have been conspicuous only in their venal vassalage to the propertied interests. The linen and engineering products of the North are not sold in any quantity in the Irish market. These are, in the main, exported to those markets which are under the protection and domination of the Union Jack. Thus, the economic interests of the capitalists of Ulster are inseparably entwined with the imperialist interests of Great Britain. The economic needs of the predominating political groups of the North are identical with the needs of British finance-capital.

Finance-capital can only expand its control and extend its interests by means of the State power of the Empire. Finance-capital thus demands the support of a large Empire State to advance its influence, and, likewise, every Empire State demands the support of finance-capital to maintain its power. It is this indispensable and mutual relationship between finance-capital and modern Empire-States which explains why the wealthy political elements in the North of Ireland enthusiastically proclaim their loyal devotion and adhesion to the union with imperialistic Britain.

The purely economic basis of the political attitude of the North has been obscured by religious fanaticism. An examination into

the temporal ground-work of religions clearly shows that they reflect definite economic forms and respond to particular class interests. Thus, capitalism, in a general way, presupposes Protestantism, whereas systems of land tenure tend to show a striking partiality for the Catholic Church. While, on the surface, the Irish question would seem to be a conflict between two religious forms, it is in reality a determined struggle between definite economic interests. Men tend to *idealise* their economic interests and aspirations. Many an Irishman, to-day, is fighting heroically and honestly on behalf of a certain religious creed, even carrying its fundamental tenets to the ballot box, without imagining that any other motive is prompting his actions. It is in the North, where Capitalism is most highly developed, and where, therefore, the potentialities of the class struggle are greatest. It is there that the propertied interests have used religion as a political factor in blinding the working class; and they have used it to create a psychology which finds expression in extreme reaction, in violence towards opponents, and blind bigotry.

Despite the seeming paralysis of the Labour movement in the North of Ireland, as a result of internecine religious feuds, there are many indications which show that once the class struggle deepens the masses will act in no uncertain fashion. Time after time, the struggle between Labour and Capital has taken on a very severe form in Ulster. In 1907 the great strike was of such a character that *the immediate needs of the masses choked all religious differences*. Protestant and Catholic workers united against Capital. This demonstration of the *weakness* of religion as a *separating force* in face of the *binding nature* of the class struggle terrified the capitalists of the North. At the conclusion of the war the Belfast workers, in conjunction with their comrades on the Clyde, conducted a big strike in which the magic word "Soviet" made its appearance. We can now understand how necessary it is for the employing class to stimulate religious feuds in the North of Ireland. It is their *one* hope, because they understand that without it the Ulster workers would soon become a revolutionary power. The peculiar psychology of "Orangeism" (derived from the Protestant followers of William of Orange), with its fierce and violent hatred against its enemies, will be easily diverted against the capitalist class during a revolutionary crisis. Indeed, the time is speedily coming when the financiers of Ulster will loudly curse themselves for having ever trained and drilled their wage-slaves to fight the South. The psychology of the Carson revolt cut deeper into the minds of the Ulster masses than most people imagine. It was Carson who taught them how to arm against the *status quo*. It was Carson who showed them how flimsy were the specious pleas of those who sentimentally prate about "law and order" and "constitutions." And it was Carson who demonstrated that political movements only yield to *force*.

When these workers move against Capitalism the revolutionary movement of Ulster will have good reasons for thanking Carson for his magnificent work.

The economic interests of the Ulster capitalists bind them, therefore, to Britain for two reasons. Firstly: because their imperial needs are identical with those of the English financiers. Secondly: because the political agitation for unity is in reality a religious attack upon the South and as such becomes one of the most important instruments of separating the Irish working class, and of setting it against itself. The moment Ireland becomes an Independent Republic that moment the political struggle between North and South will tend to collapse, and at the same time the religious feud, which in normal times separates the masses, will cease to operate. For, we must remember that the political conflict between the North and South takes on a religious form, and when the political differences are settled the religious differences will tend to vanish. It is necessary to understand this because *the Ulster capitalists in struggling to retain the Union, are also struggling to preserve Irish Capitalism!* This does not mean that an Irish Republic would be Communist; but in Ireland the revolutionary potentialities would be greatly accelerated by the advent of a Republic. It was this that determined the political tactics of James Connolly and made him a Republican. It is this that also explains the desperate efforts that are being made in the North of Ireland, by a campaign of White terrorism, to smash the negotiations which are being conducted between De Valera and the British Government. These terroristic acts are not the spontaneous uprisings of indignant and ignorant Orange workmen; they are the carefully planned tactics of Ulster Capitalism fighting to preserve its social system.

Whatever compromise takes place regarding the future between Britain and Ireland, the imperialistic groups of the North will do their utmost to prevent any settlement which will cut them off from the interest of what they call "The Mother Country." But in the North the class struggle cuts across the political and economic interests of the capitalists.

II.

The South

IN the South of Ireland Capitalism is relatively weak, while large financial magnates are scarce, small business men are prolific, particularly the small farmer. These middle-class elements have a traditional hatred for England. And small wonder! It is questionable if history can match the centuries of ruthless outrage which has been the normal conduct of England towards Ireland. The ruling class of Britain became proficient in the art of sub-

duing and crushing native races through the practise which they got by their policy in Ireland. The historic manœuvre of the English merchant class, ever since the days of Cromwell, of ruining other countries by relentlessly paralysing their trade, has been consistently applied against Ireland for hundreds of years. The geographical situation of Ireland gave it many points of vantage for building up considerable commercial relations. It contained a virile and industrial population living on a fertile land. But every endeavour of the Irish to launch into overseas commerce or to develop their trade was promptly strangled by the jealous propertied interests of England who moulded that country's policy towards Ireland. Not only was Ireland's commercial potentialities crushed, but the pitiless attitude of Britain reacted upon agriculture and practically ruined it, thus causing untold suffering to the peasant masses, millions of whom, as starvelings, were compelled to leave their native land to become citizens in other countries. Hundreds and thousands of these exiles have carried their hate of England to America, Australia, Canada, and have nursed it in these lands. Many of them have developed great political strength in these States, and they have added to the intricacies of the Irish problem by making it one of an international character.

It is, therefore, easy to comprehend why the people in the Southern districts of Ireland have been passionate in their hate against England. But this hatred created a psychology which manifested itself by producing an ultra-nationalist movement. Hatred of England reacted by creating a passionate devotion to Ireland.

Up until recent times, the political activities of the Southern Irish were in the hands of the Middle Class Nationalist Party, better known in England as the United Irish League. The members who were sent to the English Parliament were drawn from the middle class. They neither understood nor sympathised with the Labour problem in Ireland. They sat for years in the English House of Commons, and although generally opposed to the Government were extremely unsuccessful in their policy, based as it was upon political compromises.

While the danger to Ireland in the North comes from the large financiers, the dangerous element in the South comes from the middle class, the most unstable social group in history.

III.

The Middle Class in Politics

THE middle-class political leaders of Irish nationalism displayed that universal weakness which may be seen in every political movement in the world dominated by the petty-bourgeoisie. The middle class, in the structure of Capitalism,

occupy a peculiarly unfortunate economic position, inasmuch as they are continually vacillating between the capitalist class and the proletariat. Suspended between the upper and lower class, and yet being neither of one nor the other, there is created for them a situation of appalling insecurity. This economic insecurity is of a different character from that which haunts the wage worker. Whatever disasters overtake the average labourers—in the shape of unemployment, strikes or lock-outs—these neither alter their economic status nor their class relationship under Capitalism—they remain proletarians. But the economic insecurity of the middle-class man rests upon the fact that any minor industrial crisis may hurl him into *another* class—into the proletariat. Such an occurrence transforms both his economic status and his class relationship within Capitalism. The result of this vacillating economic position produces a peculiar mental outlook—the petty-bourgeois outlook. The most significant thing about this outlook is that it views every aspect of the social question, which deals fundamentally with class interests, in an irresolute and wavering manner. This explains why the middle class, and all those inspired by their ideas, are the greatest compromisers, *par excellence*, in the political world. The political history of the middle class demonstrates that they have never, unaided, *as a class*, carried out any heroic or bold political revolution. While other classes in history have died in great numbers fighting for certain political ideals, the middle class have always sought to reach their political objective by intrigue or compromise. History also demonstrates that the middle class have never, single-handed, put up a determined fight against the political organisation of any other class which they opposed. The middle class have certainly destroyed the political movements of other classes. This destruction, however, was never accomplished by either a heroic class struggle or in open political combat. It was always achieved by insidiously *undermining* their political opponents. The great middle-class political leaders like Gladstone, Chamberlain, or Lloyd George, are shining examples of statesmen who wavered and compromised upon the very principles which were the supposed lodestars of their careers. The same irresolute and undecided type of middle-class leaders may be seen—unfortunately enough—in the Labour movement. The experiences of the last few years demonstrate that where the political instinct of the masses correctly demanded an uncompromising and straightforward struggle against their masters, they were discouraged, even betrayed, at a time when vigorous and bold action was imperatively necessary, by their compromising leaders who had been nurtured on middle-class ideas. It is, therefore, not surprising that it is the rank-and-file movements of Socialism—where the concrete realities of life clearly reveal the economic struggle and where the influence of the middle class is almost negligible—which have enthusiastically rallied to the fighting and tenacious policy of the Communist International. Conversely, those socialist organisations dominated by

the ideology of the middle class—such as the lamentable I.L.P. in this country—enthusiastically embraced the vacillating policy of angelic pacifism, which in action becomes class cowardice.

Here and there individual members of the middle class have fought bravely and well, and have thus supplied those exceptional cases which prove every rule. But in every case where this happened it was only possible because these exceptional individuals cast aside their petty-bourgeois outlook and viewed the world from the standpoint of the interests of the class which they championed.

As a class, the petty-bourgeoisie stand in history the acknowledged and unchallenged masters of political compromise. And unless this is clearly understood it may be difficult to grasp the influence it is at present exerting upon the Irish situation.

IV.

The National War and the Class Struggle in Southern Ireland

EVEN the rise of Sinn Fein in Ireland did not mean, in the beginning, the inauguration of a bold or heroic policy. The leaders like Arthur Griffiths, undoubtedly very brilliant men, had to rely too much upon the middle class to get action of a daring character. Up until the beginning of the war, the Sinn Fein movement was not very powerful. During the transport workers strike in 1913, many of the Sinn Fein leaders were opposed to the demands of the strikers, but the strike introduced a new spirit into the Irish situation. It showed clearly for the first time, in Ireland, that, in addition to the national struggle, there was above all—the *class* struggle.

There were occasional outbursts of fierce class conflict in Ireland prior to the transport workers strike, but these never gave the masses a vision much greater than that of mere land redistribution. With the building up of the Transport Workers' Union, there was a new ideal placed before the Irish proletariat. This was mainly due to the magnificent communist agitation of James Connolly. He ruthlessly exposed the hollow pretensions of the Irish middle class leaders who were striving to get Home Rule. He showed the Irish workers that Home Rule, in itself, could only mean the exploitation of the Irish worker by the Irish capitalist. Connolly did not minimise the importance of the Irish workers agitating for national independence but he was always careful to show that their final aim would have to be for an Irish Workers' Republic. He, therefore, encouraged a vigorous agitation for national independence because he was a clever tactician and realised the value of always creating some ferment of revolt amongst the masses; and he saw the need

for continually harassing Great Britain which, to him, was the symbol of world imperialism and reaction. Connolly grouped round him a band of dauntless men, who did not quail during the bold bid for power which was made during the Easter rising. The execution of Connolly opened the flood gate of enthusiasm for Connolly's ideals, and impelled the Irish workers along the path of Communism. The brutality of the English Government towards Ireland, immediately after the Dublin rising, made thousands of Irish workers realise the truism preached by Connolly, that the imperialist class of Britain would submit to nothing but force. Nor do these workers to this day forget that the English Cabinet which executed the men of Easter week, was led by the notorious Asquith, and that one of his Cabinet colleagues was Arthur Henderson, one of the leaders of the Second International.

The heavy mailed fist of Britain, which has been so much in evidence in Ireland during the past few years, drove the workers, who had been influenced by Connolly, into a working agreement with the more militant elements in the Sinn Fein movement. This was an act of necessity imposed by the sheer need of self-preservation. It gave the Sinn Fein organisation a backbone. It was the proletarian rebels who, in the main, supplied the fighting force, which became the driving power in the Irish Republican army. Here again the influence of Connolly may be seen. It was he who first recruited the workers into the Irish Citizen army, which he organised as a counter-blast to the armed and bombastic threats of the capitalists of the North.

The fusion of the revolutionary workers with the Sinn Fein movement made it a more vigorous organisation than it had hitherto been. The fusion also transformed the Irish movement for national independence from a respectable middle-class organisation into one pregnant with revolutionary possibilities. Within the space of a few years the old reactionary Nationalist Party—which used to adorn the benches of the House of Commons under the leadership of the late John Redmond—has been swept aside and has been replaced by a new vigorous element which scorns the idea of *begging* for freedom in London, but which has resolutely set itself the task of working out its own emancipation on Irish soil. The new policy led to the appointing of members of Parliament, not to sit in Westminster in London, but to remain in Ireland and attend to their own affairs. This tactic meant that all forms of British administration in Ireland had to be replaced by political institutions set up in Ireland and administered by the Irish themselves.

When the Irish set out to build up their own political and Governmental administrative organs, which were to replace the institutions that the British State had enforced upon Ireland, they actually created a revolutionary crisis. No government dare allow any rebel group to destroy its administrative institutions, because

this means that *two powers* are seeking to govern the country. The State can only maintain its prestige by being the sovereign and unchallenged authority in the land. Hence, it was a revolutionary act when the Irish set up *their State*, in opposition to the sovereign power which the English State wielded over Ireland.

Bit by bit, the British administrative institutions were replaced by those created by, and administered through, the *Dail Eirrean* in Dublin. This struggle in reality led to open war. The British government viewed it as *civil war*, the Irish middle class viewed it as a *national war*, in which they were attempting to expel a foreign invader, the vanguard of the Irish workers looked at the problem as a *class war*. Viewing it as a civil war, the British Government drafted in troops, organised their "black and tan" murdering and plundering brigades, suppressed free speech and the press. They outlawed active rebels and brutally enforced martial law. The history of Ireland during the last few years is the final reply to those labour leaders of the Second International who still fatuously prattle about "democracy." Because it must be remembered that in Ireland the democratic majority of the voters gave their support to the policy which the British State has dimly and ingloriously failed to suppress. Viewing the struggle at a national war, and looking upon England as an alien invader, the Irish set up *their* army and set up *their* institutions, in order to drive the imperialist usurper from the land. And they adopted a system of tactics which ranged from the dislocation of all English institutions to the deliberate destruction of the Dublin Custom House building.

In addition to those in Ireland who viewed the conflict as a *national* one, there are great numbers among the masses, influenced by Connolly, and inspired by the recent rapid spread of Communist ideas, who see in a national war against British Imperialism, a splendid means of also conducting a *class war* against the propertied interests at home and abroad. These elements are striving to free Ireland from all forms of class enslavement. Their ultimate object is not so much an Irish Republic, as it is an *Irish Workers' Republic*. They are influential and have taken their stand beside the dauntless band of heroes who lead the fight in the Republican Army—the Republican *Might*—which has compelled the proud British Government—armed with its tanks, aeroplanes, bombs, and other democratic instruments of persuasion—to seek a truce with the leaders of the Irish Republic. The Connolly section in the Irish struggle has responded with magnificent courage to the defence of Ireland, and have placed their services at the disposal of the Republican leaders. But they are jealous lest their confidence be betrayed, or that the Republican figureheads compromise the situation. The Communists are growing more powerful every day, and it may happen that the petty-bourgeoisie groups in the Sinn Fein movement

will yield to British Imperialism rather than yield to the revolutionary demands of the Irish workers. In the measure that the revolutionary proletariat grows strong in Ireland, so in the same measure the middle-class Republicans, fearing that the Governmental power may pass from their hands, may be tempted to seek some sort of compromise alliance with the British Government. Many middle-class elements are losing courage, but the cry of the workers to De Valera is "No compromise."

The history of Ireland during the past few years does not seem to suggest that there is a powerful and determined Labour movement in the country. This is due to the revolutionaries carrying out their plan that the immediate needs of the class struggle can be best served by throwing all their strength into the national struggle against the British reactionaries. The moment, however, that they realise that the interests of the working class are much more urgent and more important than the national interest, then we shall witness a new development in the Irish situation by the workers resolutely opposing those who are now their middle-class allies. At present, however, the biggest and most dangerous enemy is the British Government.

When the class struggle actually begins in Ireland, it not only will surprise many moderate Sinn Feiners in the South, but it will certainly startle the large capitalists of the North, who fondly imagine that their workers are the most docile and superstitious creatures in the world.

Whatever may happen in the future, there can be nothing but praise for the clever and courageous policy that De Valera and his colleagues have carried out, up to the present time, in their wonderful stand against all the savage measures enforced against Ireland by the most brutal and callous government of recent times. Their present peace parley with the British Government is in reality a triumph for them in so far as it enables the Republicans to rest and re-invigorate their brave forces and to continue, if need be, the most heroic struggle ever waged by a small nation against a cruel and swaggering despotic imperialism.

V.

Lloyd George and Ireland

IT now only remains to explain the reasons that prompted Lloyd George, as the nominal political head of the British Government, to intervene in the Irish situation and to propose a compromise. He is, of all statesmen, the one with least principle, and what he lacks in character and honesty is counterbalanced by a superabundance of shallow, middle-class cunning. He is the unchallenged monarch of brazen prevarication. His guiding political

creed is how to hold political power in the interests of the British Federation of Industries. At the present moment, his political future looks very black indeed. He sees every prospect of his Government being smashed, or at the best hopelessly weakened, by the political triumph of the Liberal-Labour Party, led by that enthusiastic monarchist—Mr. J. H. Thomas. The strong card of the Labour Party is the Government's policy in Ireland. Notwithstanding the fact that the Labour Party's attitude on Ireland has been one of characteristic cowardice and stupidity, it, nevertheless, hopes to secure the votes of those who are determined to register their protest against the policy of Lloyd George. The Liberal Party—that shoddy political remnant led by Mr. Asquith, the murderer of James Connolly—hopes to gain a few votes in consequence of the escapades of the Government's "black and tans." No one better realises the common hatred that exists in the country against the Government's Irish Policy than Lloyd George himself. Consequently, as the champion Jeremy Diddler of the present generation, he hopes, by making peaceful overtures to Ireland, to plunge the country into a general election and to make "Peace with Ireland" his party slogan. By adopting such an attitude, he would simply undermine both the Liberal and Labour parties and might return triumphantly to power.

The political tactics of Lloyd George are as astounding as they are amazing. Here is a statesman who for years has carried on one of the bitterest wars ever recorded in history—a war against a small nation in which spies, provocateurs and politicians have all played a shabby part. A war in which terrorism, fire and plunder have been the normal instruments of intimidation. Tanks, aeroplanes, bombs and machine guns have been hurled against the Irish. Cut throat "black and tans," press censors, and a lying newspaper campaign against the population have all failed in overwhelming the stubborn resistance of the sons and daughters of Erin. And now with one sweep all these are ended and Mr. Lloyd George calls for peace—sweet peace with Ireland! We repeat the whole game is a political manœuvre, one of the many political 'stunts' by means of which governments are returned to power under the prevailing system of hypocritical political democracy.

Lloyd George's political career, as a "safe" capitalist statesman began by swindling great masses of strikers over the bargain counter of negotiations. His unfailing instinct as a negotiator is not to solve difficulties, but to try and find a point upon which he can force a disagreement among his enemies, divide them, and then play them against each other to their mutual destruction. He is now seeking to play this crafty game against Ireland. He knows that certain middle-class elements in Ireland are tiring of the struggle, and are growing afraid of the advent of the revolutionary working class. As a middle-class type himself, Lloyd George

knows the badge of his tribe—its proneness to compromise when confronted with difficulties that demand courage and sacrifice. He is playing upon that to smash the solidarity of the Irish republicans and to reap a political triumph for himself out of a defeated Ireland. We sincerely hope that he will fail.

Lloyd George does not intend to give Ireland peace. If he does, it will be because the slaughtering of the Irish will be too expensive to suit the Anti-Waste maniacs of the middle-class union, who see ruin for themselves in the increasing burden of taxation. Never, in his long and tortuous career, has Lloyd George ever taken a strong stand upon any political principle. Being typically middle-class, he meets every problem, not with a view of solving it, but of trying to discover the best way to avoid it. And he meets every demand of labour, and of Ireland, by granting only sufficient as will blunt the edge of their grievance.

No! The British Government will not grant freedom or independence to Ireland; no one knows this more clearly than the rebel proletarians of Ireland who realise that whatever they get will only come as a result of having the *power to take*—by tearing it from the blood-red fist of a rapacious imperialism. They do not forget the words of Connolly, who said:

“Tis Labour’s faith that Labour’s arm
Alone can Labour free.”

We, the Communists of the British Party, have a sacred duty to perform in connection with the Irish question. We must help Ireland in her struggle against Britain.

The Communist Party in assisting Ireland does so as part of its international policy. We believe in a Republic for Ireland because, that is precisely what the majority of the Irish workers want. We believe in helping Ireland because she is the victim of capitalist imperialism, and we are against imperialism all the time. It is nothing to us that our fight for Ireland brings us into opposition with the imperialism of Britain. We are of the opinion that no one has a greater moral right to resist British Imperialism than the British working class. We agree with the murdered Karl Liebknecht—“If the German Socialists, for instance, were to combat the English Government, and the English Socialists the German Government, it would be a farce or something worse. He who does not fight the enemy, Imperialism, represented by those who stand opposed to him, face to face, but attacks those from whom he is far away . . . is no Socialist, but a miserable hack of the ruling class.” As Communists we are opposed to Imperialism. As British Communists we are particularly opposed to British Imperialism. We scorn to hide our opposition to British imperialism. We will fight it by any and every means. Therefore,

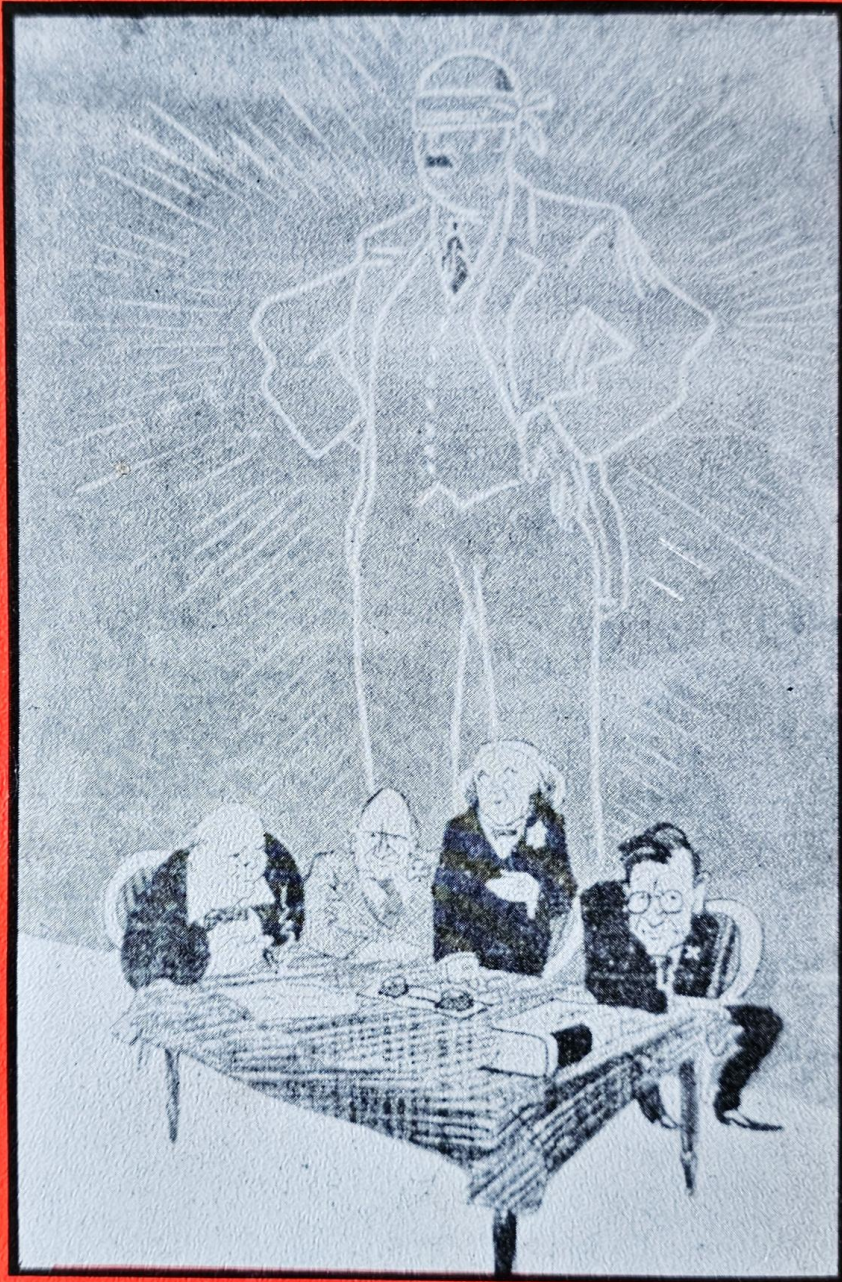
because Ireland is engaged in a life and death struggle with it, we rally to her assistance.

The same principle that makes us lend a helping hand to Ireland, in its fight against British domination, impels us to assist the so-called backward nations, like India, Persia, and Egypt in their onslaught upon the imperial power of Britain. As workers we Communists know that the same troops, tanks, machine-guns, and other democratic instruments of capitalist persuasion, which are sent to Ireland and elsewhere, are also hurled against us during a big strike. We know that marines and machine guns were drafted into the mining areas during the miners' strike, and we have seen tanks parade the streets of Glasgow and other cities during an industrial upheaval. And just as the Communists are the first, are the most active in helping strikers to defeat the ruling class, so we place our assistance at the disposal of those nations subjected by the same ruling class.

The Communist Party of Great Britain hails the dauntless fight of the Irish Republicans in their successful struggle against the British Government. Unlike the Labour Party, which does not desire to harass the Government during the present negotiations, we defiantly declare that it is our intention to so challenge the Government, that it will gladly yield all the demands made by the Irish Republicans. In lending every assistance to Ireland, it is not only necessary for us to attack the Government, but also to warn our Irish friends that the political and trade union leaders of the British Labour movement are as dangerous to them as even a Lloyd George or a Hamar Greenwood. The cowardly ineptitude of the Labour Party in the House of Commons, so far as Ireland is concerned, is at once humiliating and treacherous. The bare-faced betrayals of Ireland and her workers by the British trade-union leaders is on a level par with that of the Labour Party. We assure our Irish friends that these elements are being exposed by the Communists.

But, above all, when the Irish proletariat decide to take power into their own hands, we shall be prepared to render them all the assistance that is humanly possible. And we promise them, here and now, that whatever cost we may have to pay, our life's blood will be the test of our comradeship and the price of our solidarity.

HISTORICAL REPRINTS NO. 16



Front Cover: British Forces on the roof of the Four Courts, Dublin, 1920.
Back Cover: Sketch which appeared on the cover of 1921 edition of this booklet.