

?Left? republicanism in Ireland

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Republicanism in Ireland is almost 200 years old. Taking its inspiration from the American Revolution (1776-82) and, more especially, the French Revolution (1789-94) republicanism emerged in Ireland as the doctrine of a developing northern protestant bourgeoisie in its fight against English rule.

The defeat of the 1798 rebellion and the subsequent abolition of the Dublin parliament signaled the end of an Irish republicanism associated with a revolutionary bourgeois class in Ireland. From the mid-nineteenth century on the national struggle passed into the leadership of the petit bourgeoisie based on an overwhelmingly catholic social base.

The twists and turns of the national struggle in Ireland have consistently thrown up various currents within the republican movement. Over the course of the last century one of these can best be defined as ?left? republicanism or ?socialist republicanism?. This trend, beginning with James Connolly, consciously seeks to connect the struggles for national liberation and for socialism.

The reformism ? and, exceptionally, the centrism ? of these currents graphically reveals the inability of the republican tradition to meet the needs of the workers. In every case, alliances with the ruling class at the expense of the workers have finally won out over the struggle for revolutionary socialism.

Over the last twenty years four major ?left? republican currents have emerged. Two of these have been left-centrist in origin: the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP), which split from the Official Sinn Féin in 1974, and the League of Communist Republicans (LCR), a group based in the Maze Prison which broke from Sinn Féin in 1986. The two largest ?left? tendencies have been openly reformist: the Stalinised pro-Moscow Official Sinn Féin ? now the de-republicanised Workers Party ? and the tendency around Gerry Adams which took over the leadership of the Provisional Sinn Féin in the early 1980s

Whatever the obvious political differences between these groups, they have all been heavily influenced by Stalinism and have laid claim to the political mantle of Connolly, the chief propagandist for Marxism in Ireland.

Through the prism of left republicanism Connolly is seen as the creator of a distinct ?Irish? socialism ? socialist republicanism ? defined by Connolly?s linking of the national question to the social question. This is a major question for any Irish organisation which seeks to put forward a revolutionary answer to the oppression and exploitation of the Irish masses. Connolly?s answer, though extremely influential, was deeply flawed.¹

Connolly?s Marxism

When Connolly founded the Irish Socialist Republican Party (ISRP) in Ireland in 1896, its programme differed in only one respect from that of the British Social Democratic Federation (SDF). Unlike the SDF and other Second International parties, the ISRP made no reference to the struggle for national

independence in its 'minimal' section. Instead it was included along with the final goal of socialism in the 'maximum' section. The goals of socialism and national independence were thus inter-connected.

Connolly's general argument was that the Irish national question was the expression of an inner movement within Irish society to recover the (fictitious) 'common property relations' of pre-conquest Ireland, a movement in which only the plebeian classes had an interest. Since the goal of the Irish bourgeoisie was the defence of private property, it had no interest in the struggle for its own nation state. Connolly's theory, therefore, severed the historic link Marx had made between, the nation, the bourgeoisie and capitalism, and reforged it in terms of the working class and socialism.

Connolly went even further and argued that the development of Irish capitalism was an impossibility because of the already saturated nature of world markets. The development of Ireland's economy after independence could thus only take place on a socialist basis. Nationalism in Ireland could only lead to socialism and only the working class could embody the national principle successfully. 'The cause of labour is the cause of Ireland. The cause of Ireland is the cause of labour' were the propaganda slogans Connolly drew from his analysis.

This schema had profound consequences for his politics and programme. To begin with it opened the door to bourgeois and petit bourgeois Irish nationalism. Connolly consistently denied the progressive character of bourgeois national movements in the nineteenth century in Ireland, whilst at the same time obscuring the bourgeois character of the programme of the revolutionary nationalists. In practical terms, his fatalistic optimism about the necessarily socialist outcome of the fight for national independence led him to concede leadership of the national struggle to petit bourgeois forces.

As a strategy and series of slogans Connolly's programme served to liquidate the political independence of the working class into revolutionary nationalism. His legacy is a source of theoretical and ideological confusion for latterday socialist republicans. His life's work gives licence for making vital concessions to bourgeois or petit bourgeois nationalist programmes.

But if Connolly was guilty of a naïve fatalism with regard to the socialist outcome of the national struggle he cannot be accused of espousing the rigid stageist approach of modern left republicans. We have Stalinism to thank for that.

It was Stalin, not Connolly, who argued that in the semi-colonies it was essential for the working class to forego its specific class, anti-capitalist, goals until the national, 'patriotic' semi-colonial bourgeoisie had led a successful struggle for independence. The prevailing notion among 'left' republicans that national independence is an essential pre-condition before the struggle for socialism can begin is a product of the degeneration of the Communist International after 1923.

The combination of the centrist legacy of Connolly and the deadening influence of Stalinist stageism has obstructed the evolution of centrist forces within left republicanism towards revolutionary communism. All of the left republicans who have tried to break with reformism have been trapped by the contradictions of these two ideologies, from the Republican Congress in the 1930s, through the IRSP in the 1970s to the LCR today.

The Irish Republican Socialist Party

The IRSP was founded in 1974 as the result of a breakaway from the Official Sinn Féin. Under the pressure of events in the North after 1969, the increasingly Stalinist republicans had been forced to participate, arms in hand, in the defence of the nationalist communities against the armed forces of the

Northern state and of British imperialism.

In 1970 the republicans split into the Provisional and Official IRA. By the summer of 1972 the Officials had called a ceasefire. Several opposition tendencies sprung up within them after this point. The most vocal and coherent oppositionists were those comrades who, to some degree, considered themselves Trotskyists. As members of the Young Socialist group in Derry they had, in the late 1960s, come under the influence of Eammon McCann, member of the Derry Labour Party and by 1969 a member of the International Socialists group (today the British SWP).

Having joined the Officials in 1971, this group put forward a resolution at the 1973 annual conference calling for the abandonment of stageism and reformism, for increased action in the national struggle and for greater internal democracy. All the opposition groups made the mistake of believing that the Officials could be won to alternative positions. They failed to forge a tendency armed with a genuinely revolutionary theory and programme that could have been the basis for winning the best militants in an internal struggle that would have led to a split.

In 1974 the Stalinist leadership moved to bureaucratically expel Seamus Costello, a leading figure later to be murdered by the Officials in 1977. The left, rallying to his defence, were effectively expelled from the organisation. An agreement was reached with Costello ? a man who in fact had never broken from stageism ? to found a new party, the IRSP.

Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, who joined the IRSP in December 1974 expressed the hopes of many for the new party when she said:

?The Provos are concentrating on getting rid of the British in a military campaign without any policy on the class war. And the Officials have no policy on the national question.?

The new party had about 400-500 members, with about a quarter of the membership in Derry. The weight of these left-centrist elements was felt at the first IRSP conference in 1975 in the shape of a series of radical resolutions. They argued for a struggle rooted in the working class against imperialism and capitalism; for the building of mass action in the streets and united fronts and struggle against repression North and South, for the right to abortion on demand, and for the building of an international to establish socialism world wide.

The vast majority the left resolutions were adopted, very often against Costello?s opposition. But resolutions, no matter how revolutionary, were to count for little in the events that overtook the IRSP. These events revealed, tragically, that the left lacked any real method which would have enabled them fight for their programme and ideas against Costello and his supporters.

The most important mistake the left made was to agree to the establishment of a separate military wing (the Irish National Liberation Army) outside the control of the party and its programme. This showed that, despite their avowed Marxism, they had not yet fully broken from the elitist physical force tradition of republicanism. Faced with a wave of murderous attacks on IRSP members by the Officials, the left had no answers.

The key task was to combine the physical defence of the organisation with the political task of exposing the Officials to the anti-unionist and southern working masses. It was paramount to mobilise support ? resolutions, meetings, marches etc ? for the right of the IRSP to exist and defend itself, and for an end to the Official?s bloody attacks.

The left failed the task. Their ?Marxism?, fine for writing resolutions, was not a method of analysis, a tool of

intervention, or an orientation of struggle. Despite the very real possibilities that had existed in 1974 for the creation of a revolutionary Marxist organisation with real roots in sections of the anti-unionist working class, the IRSP was doomed. Faced with Costello's reformism and the Officials' guns, the centrist left was paralysed. The only solution they could offer was resignation en masse.

Now in full control of the organisation, Costello's only attachment to 'the strategic working class struggle against capitalism and imperialism' was rhetorical. The IRSP rapidly combined the fatal ambiguities of Connolly's legacy with a classic stageism as they argued that the anti-imperialist struggle should take place within the framework of a 'Broad Front' which involved:

'The convening of an all-Ireland constitutional conference representative of all shades of political opinion in Ireland for the purpose of discussing a democratic and secular constitution which will become effective immediately following a total British withdrawal.'

It is difficult to imagine a clearer statement about the strategic goal of a 32 county bourgeois state.

The IRSP had become barely distinguishable from the Provisionals. This increased the temptation among the military factions to prove themselves equal or superior to the IRA as a means of drawing support. Though somewhat revived during the H-Block struggle of the early 1980s, in which the IRSP uncritically backed the cross-class H-Block committee and fiercely opposed a fight to build a real anti-imperialist united front based on workers, socialists and republicans, the IRSP/INLA finally imploded in a murderous feud in 1984.

In 1987 the IRSP reappeared, claiming to be a genuine Marxist-Leninist organisation. They have recently begun a serious attempt to theoretically address their political tradition, notably on the question of the Broad Front. The outcome of this discussion remains to be seen.

If the IRSP are to break with the ambiguous legacy of socialist republicanism and their past avowal of stageism, then they need to recognise that a serious attempt to bring the working class into the leadership of the national struggle requires openly fighting at all times for the action programme of the working class against capitalist rule. This means organising working class action including strike action and mass workers' struggles in all struggles against exploitation and oppression. Such a perspective would fight off not only the Irish bourgeoisie but also the Sinn Féin leadership.

The Adams tendency in the Provisionals

As Gerry Adams has acknowledged in his book, *The Politics of Irish Freedom*, by the late 1970s the Provisional IRA was facing defeat. Their belief that they could win a military war with British imperialism had been shattered, and it was increasingly clear that a war-weary population in the North could see little point in the continuation of the Provos armed struggle.

It was in this context that the 'left tendency' around Adams emerged in Belfast. They decided it was necessary to build and extend an active social base within the minority community. The H-Block struggle and the hunger strikes, with the enormous radicalisation of young people flooding into Sinn Féin, created the opportunity for the Adams wing to challenge for the leadership of Sinn Féin.

These young people were little concerned with the sterile orthodoxies of the republican tradition, more eager to see the movement become a force for radical social change. Thus 'feminism' and 'Marxism' were gradually accepted as no longer 'alien' to republican politics. In 1983 the strategy of the armalite and the ballot box was born, as Sinn Féin received 35% of the nationalist vote in the North. The Provisionals' policy clearly revealed their revolutionary nationalism—fighting for the armed overthrow of the

sectarian state. But they also revealed their petit bourgeois nature in their commitment to maintaining a co-operative vision of Irish capitalism.

The nature of the Provisionals' programme was further emphasised by the use they made of their political capital. The activists won to Sinn Féin in the H-Block struggle increasingly became 'servicers', hard-working social reformers in their local communities. The 'socialism' of Sinn Féin was limited to a radical municipal reformism. This is not to disparage the need to actively take up the grievances of the oppressed catholic communities, over housing and harassment for example, but the whole exercise was unconnected to any political (as opposed to guerrillaist) programme of overthrowing the statelet that enforced this oppression.

Emboldened by their success, Adams and the left, firmly in the leadership of Sinn Féin, more clearly sought to identify the Provisionals with the radical 'socialist republicanism' of Connolly. But while drawing expediently and rhetorically upon the legacy of Connolly and other Irish socialists, Adams had no intention of breaking from the petit bourgeois and elitist programme of the physical force tradition.

In their attempts to theorise the relationship between socialism and nationalism, the Provisionals have completely distorted the true nature 'the class basis' of republicanism itself. Without a shred of evidence, Adams has argued that 'Irish republicanism is not a term which defines a system of society in a way that socialism does'. He thus suppresses the fact that republicanism as a political phenomenon stands for the creation of a bourgeois state, founded on the defence of private property relations.

Sinn Féin carried this distortion further when they recently celebrated the establishment of the first Dail 'the revolutionary assembly created in 1919. In doing so, they hailed the democratic programme of the Dail as a 'document clearly based on socialist principles'.⁴ In fact the democratic programme, drawn up at a time when the petit bourgeois nationalists of Sinn Féin were waging a life and death struggle with British imperialism, drawing upon the support of the masses in town and country, was not a programme at all but merely a rhetorical statement of social aspirations. As such it was a bland statement of social pieties, typical of the standard legal formulae of many capitalist states. It made no mention of labour, of capital, of classes or of socialism. Some 'socialism'!

Addressing the relation of the national question to socialism Adams has argued:

'The true socialist will be an active supporter of the republican character of the national independence movement . . . will realise that unless this character is maintained and unless the most radical social forces are in the leadership of the independence struggle then inevitably it must fail or compromise. This classical view of the matter contrasts with the ultra-left view which counterposes republicanism and socialism and which breaks up the unity of the national independence movement by putting forward 'socialist' demands that have no possibility of being achieved until real independence is won.'⁵

But this is not the view of Lenin or Marx or Trotsky. It is an amalgam of two traditions: those of Connolly and Stalin, the former inadequate, the latter wholly treacherous. The Stalinist tradition of popular fronts and strategic alliances between the workers and 'patriotic capitalists' insists on the key role of the bourgeoisie, and on trimming the programme of the workers in order to maintain the alliance. In contrast to Connolly this Stalinist tradition is one of conscious class collaboration and stageism.

Sinn Féin's claim to the socialist republicanism of Connolly sits uncomfortably with its record. From the H-Block campaign to the current anti-extradition campaign the provisionals have consistently sought an alliance with the bourgeois constitutional nationalists of the SDLP and Fianna Fail. The recent appeal for the building of a mass anti-imperialist movement is all of a piece with a 'labour must wait' approach.

Sinn Féin's socialism dissolves away to reveal its wholly nationalist political perspectives which is to fight only for those demands around which the broadest movement can be built with an appeal to all major sections of Irish society?.

This opportunistic outlook will guarantee neither independence nor socialism in Ireland. Only a working class consciously self-organised on an independent class programme can effectively struggle against imperialism and capitalism in Ireland. Only a workers' state can be the basis for genuine self-determination. No amount of opportunist electioneering, community politics or guerrilla action, or combinations of all three, can be a substitute for the building of a conscious organised party leadership with a programme which leads the immediate struggles of the working class to the goal of social, political armed revolution against both Irish states.

The League of Communist Republicans

For far too long the cause of labour and the cause of Ireland have looked upon each other with suspicion. With one notable exception . . . both have failed?

Thus began the first issue of Congress 86 published by the LCR prisoners (and their supporters outside). While they were influenced by the decision of Sinn Féin to drop the principle of abstentionism in 1986, the prisoners believed that this was just one more signal of Sinn Féin's abandonment of the goal of socialism.

Avowedly Marxist, the LCR stands for the building of a revolutionary communist vanguard party to achieve national independence and socialism. This alone marks the LCR as being a qualitatively different political formation from the Provisionals. Nevertheless, in their break from the reformism of Sinn Féin, the LCR have yet to fully settle accounts with their political past. The confused legacy of Connolly weighs heavily upon them, as is shown by their aim of reconciling nationalism and socialism. The 'one notable exception' to the record of failure on this score mentioned in the above quote is, of course, Connolly's collaboration with the petit bourgeois nationalist Clarke, which culminated in the Easter rising of 1916.

Rather than draw the lesson that Connolly's 'socialism' was destined to collapse at the decisive moment faced with the programme of petit bourgeois revolutionary nationalism, the LCR began its project by seeking to clarify the common objectives that bind 'nationalism' and 'socialism'. Although the evolution of the LCR is far from complete, by the third issue of Congress '86 they had shown that they were engaged in a serious evaluation of Lenin's theory and practice which was taking them back to Lenin's original strategy, cutting through decades of Stalinist distortion. They argued, for example:

There should be no ambivalence on what form the unified republic will take. It has to be for a workers' and small farmers' state. To imprint the message clearly on Irish political life the slogan has to be 'A republic: under the revolutionary democratic control of the workers and small farmers'. It is only around this banner . . . that we can hope to gather the broadest possible support for a revolutionary struggle: workers, the poor, small farmers and the deprived will all see in it a means to improve their lot. Republicans of the Fenian tradition should find no difficulty supporting the demand and any genuine socialist could only welcome it.'⁶

The LCR are here arguing for a particular version of the slogan 'the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry', first used by Lenin in the pre-1917 Bolshevik programme, and later deformed by Stalin as the basis for strategic alliances with the national bourgeoisie of the imperialised world, and which led to such fatal consequences for the working class as in China in 1927.

It seems from the quotation above that the LCR wishes to put distance between them and the policy of

conscious class collaboration and counter-revolution that the Stalinised Comintern insisted upon after 1935. Thus the LCR aim to avoid the 'mechanistic' stages theory:

'The stages theory has, for years, come in for severe criticism. This is due mainly to the fact that it has been mechanistically and pedantically interpreted by reformists to suit their own behaviour . . . Nevertheless when properly applied, the stages theory remains a perfectly valid Marxist concept.'

Trotskyists, while defending the theory of permanent revolution have of course never denied that the process of political struggle, social revolutions involve definite phases of development to which concrete tactics have to be applied. If this is all the LCR means by 'properly applied stageism' then there may be room for agreement.

For example, it is obvious that the South African revolution began in 1986 as a struggle for democratic demands in which the working class had to exert its leadership. This would involve putting revolutionary democratic demands to the fore of agitation. But in no way does this mean that a revolutionary party postpones the vigorous pursuit of specifically proletarian political and economic goals.

The stageist programme of the South African Communist Party on the other hand consciously obstructs the working class in the formulation of and struggle for specifically anti-capitalist working class objective. This is because Stalinism 'like its fellow-travellers such as the 'Trotskyists' of the American SWP 'insists that these demands are impermissible at this 'stage'.

Where does the LCR stand? In a typically centrist fashion, their more general statements are compatible with either interpretation:

'It is clear that we need a democratic Ireland ' a democracy where the views of the majority are represented in administrative power . . . the structures which will bring a proper democracy into existence will first have to be put in place by the working class and their allies like small farmers. Our class must be organised into a force capable of fighting for, and creating, these structures.'

But what of the relationship of this to the struggle for socialism? This is what they have to say:

'For those who see this [i.e. revolutionary democratic republic] stopping short of the socialist demand the answer is blunt. There is no surrender on socialism. We are simply recognising the transitional period necessary between the overthrow of bourgeois political power and the socialisation of all private property.'

In an attempt to return to Lenin of pre-April 1917 the LCR comrades have found themselves embracing Stalin's mid-1920s right-centrist position, which cost the Chinese masses dear in 1927. At that time the centrist Stalin still wished for the victory of the Chinese workers ' unlike his counter-revolutionary line on Spain in 1936.

In 1927 his centrism consisted of the fact that he insisted that the working class should ally itself with the bourgeoisie in the pursuit of a democratic republic as a stage on the road to socialism. But ' predictably ' the national bourgeoisie was treacherous and turned on the working class with bloody consequences. Thanks to Stalin's insistence that the workers concentrate on achieving this alliance, and thus subordinating their class goals, the vanguard of the Chinese working class had been politically disarmed.

As Trotsky made clear at the time, the Chinese bourgeoisie had no strategic interest in fighting for a bourgeois democratic republic, any more than today's Irish bourgeoisie have in fighting for an end to partition! Trotsky's programme of permanent revolution, as expressed by the 1917 Revolution and

subsequently codified at an international level in the wake of the Chinese Revolution, insisted that the full revolutionary democratic republic could only be realised in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat in alliance with the small farmers or poor peasants.

The dangers of a right centrist interpretation of the revolutionary democratic republic and how to achieve it are already there to be seen. In a recent issue of their journal, they have dealt with the issue of privatisation. The LCR's programme revolves round the idea that the class struggle has to be fought within the limit of a preparatory democratic phase, defined by the goal of a 'peoples' republic'. This means that they refuse to advance demands which express the independent class interests of the working class against the capitalist state.

They thus suggest that faced with the anarchy of the market, state nationalisation is the only solution. They deliberately ignore the fact that capitalist nationalisations have always led to the subordination of workers' interests to those of the capitalists. By a programme of compensation to the former owners, by the anti-working class system of management and organisation, nationalisations by the 'collective capitalist' 'the state' help the ruling class, not the proletariat.

The only way to confront reformist illusions in bourgeois nationalisation is to fight for nationalisation without compensation and under workers' control. This also means a fight by the workers to smash the sacred seals of business secrecy and to open the bosses' books to workers' inspection. By giving no place for these demands in their article we presume that, for the LCR, these are socialist demands which are not on the agenda until some later stage or phase of class mobilisation.

With no clear and distinct independent working class positions of its own the LCR is doomed to merge its banner and programme with those that have a clearer left-reformist position. At the moment the most likely candidate seems to be the Stalinist CPI with whom the LCR already shares the view that the Soviet bloc represent healthy socialist states.

The corrosive consequences of Stalinism and of republicanism 'in all its variants' are clearly shown by the events of the last two decades in Ireland. The LCR, the latest product of the historic failure of physical force republicanism in Ireland, is at a turning point. Its unstable centrism 'like that of the IRSP' shows that without a political, programmatic break from the centrist and reformist traditions of the Irish left and of republicanism, it is not possible to create an organisation capable of leading the masses to victory.

Neither Stalinist reformism nor the armed nationalists of the Provisionals have anything to offer militant socialists or those trying to reforge Marxism in Ireland. If the LCR are to survive, if their most precious experience of the struggle is not to be lost to the workers' movement, they must be won to Trotskyism.

Notes

1. For a full analysis of Connolly's legacy see the series of articles in Class Struggle (nos 13-20) published by the IWG
2. Quoted in K Kelly, The Longest War (London 1980 p230)
3. Quoted in The Starry Plough, December 1987
4. APRN, 25 January 1989
5. G Adams, Politics of Irish Freedom p135
6. Congress '86, Vol 1, no3
7. Congress '86 vol 1, No3, p9
8. Congress '86, No6, 1989, p15
9. Congress '86, No6 (emphasis in original)

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