

Marxism and the Easter Rising

Bernie McAdam Sat, 11/06/2016 - 22:00

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Ireland's modern history has a long and proud record of rebellion against British rule. The United Irishmen of 1798, the Irish Rebellion 1803, the Young Irelanders 1848, the Fenians 1867 and then the Easter Rising 1916 were all attempts to free a downtrodden Ireland from the yoke of imperial tyranny. They all spectacularly and heroically failed to free Ireland but as Lenin said of 1916 it became 'the touchstone of our revolutionary views'. Bernie McAdam analyses the Easter Rising and its aftermath from a Marxist perspective.

The centenary of the Rising has seen huge commemorations throughout Ireland this Easter. Irish Republicans remember this date every year in processions and speeches especially in nationalist areas of the northern six counties where there is still unfinished business in ending British rule. Governments in the Republic of Ireland have not been so enthusiastic even stopping commemoration marches in 1971 when, at the height of the anti Unionist revolt in the north, they sought to play down any connection between contemporary republican fighters and the 'good IRA' of yesteryear.

This centenary year, against the backdrop of a continuing 'peace process' in the north, the southern state has felt it safe enough to hijack the commemoration and lend it a 'respectable' colouring. A full state ceremony and its biggest military display ever have been held to remember 'all those who died'. Putting the executed rebel leaders on the same footing as British forces was a huge insult to the Easter insurgents. It was left to the thousands who marched in unofficial parades all over Ireland to pay their respects to those rebel fighters that took on the might of Empire. The Unfinished Revolution march in Coalisland was one such parade where 5,000 marched behind a Colour Party, representing Irish rebels throughout the generations, and marching bands.

There is a more telling strand of ruling class opinion peddled by the likes of former Taoiseach John Bruton that questions the necessity of the Rising at all as Ireland 'would have proceeded' to full independence by constitutional methods?. In truth the men and women of 1916 bear little resemblance to, and would have little time for the self-seeking representatives of a truncated state who would rather batter their people with austerity and make Ireland safe for the thieves' kitchen of the infamous Troika (IMF, EU and ECB).

Nothing could be further from the minds of the Irish ruling class than glorifying an armed rebellion of anti-imperialists. A hundred years may well be a safe distance but the northern 'Troubles', as they would like to call them, are not so far away. Of course they would not be presiding over their Republic but for 1916. But today's Republic is a far cry from the one the writers of the 1916 Proclamation fought for when they declared for 'the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland'.

The Easter insurgents would never have lived with a partitioned Ireland. It was the Rising's central figure and socialist James Connolly who accurately predicted 'a carnival of reaction' if partition was forced through. This is exactly what happened after the Partition Treaty was signed in 1921. The sectarian and

colonial prison state in the north was established and was matched by a confessional and semi-colonial 26 county Free State in the south every bit as repressive and backed by British guns.

Easter week and after

On Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, the Rising commenced. James Connolly's Irish Citizen Army (ICA), a workers' militia formed during the 1913 Dublin Lockout, fused with the revolutionary nationalist wing of the Irish Volunteers led by Padraig Pearse's Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). They were joined by the women's republican organisation Cumann na mBan. Around 1,500 volunteers in all occupied key buildings throughout Dublin.

This number would have been greater and better armed but for the scuttling of the gun running ship, the Aud from Germany, and Eoin Mc Neil's countermanding order, as leader of the Irish Volunteers, which demobilised many volunteers throughout the country. This had the effect of limiting the Rising to Galway, Enniscorthy and Ashbourne outside of County Dublin.

For six days the rebels held out before the inevitable surrender. The centre of Dublin lay in ruins under the relentless and superior firepower of the British. The British Army casualties were 116 dead and 368 injured with 16 police also killed. The rebel and civilian dead at 318 and 2217 injured with 64 rebels killed in action. The surrender was quickly followed by mass arrests of over 3,500 (not just the insurgents) and then the execution of 16 leaders of the Rising, including James Connolly, wounded and strapped to a chair.

The Rising opened up a revolutionary period in Ireland that lasted until 1923. British executions undoubtedly deepened this process, outraging the vast majority of Irish people outside of the Unionist areas in the north east. But the downtrodden conditions of political and economic life that the Irish people faced under British rule was the backdrop to the radicalisation. Equally important was the impact of the First World War as thousands of Irish in the British Army were slaughtered and as the fear of conscription increasingly gripped Irish society.

As the winds of rebellion gathered, the first casualty was the bourgeois Irish Parliamentary Party of John Redmond. This 'Home Rule' party denounced the rebels. They had unashamedly recruited to the British Army, having been sold the promise of Home Rule after the war. Home rule was a form of limited self rule within the Empire not separation. The General Election of 1918 saw them wiped out as Sinn Fein, calling for an independent republic, won 73 seats, the Unionists 22, and the IPP a paltry 6.

Sinn Fein declared the first Irish Parliament, the Dail, in 1919. The Irish Republican Army became the guardians of the Dail. There followed a War of Independence in which modern guerrilla warfare was born. British reprisals sunk to a new low as the Black and Tans were let loose with the sacking of urban areas, including Cork city centre. Ireland's first Bloody Sunday was a massacre of a Gaelic Football crowd by the Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary, with 14 dead and 60 injured, at Croke Park in 1920.

In 1922 a Treaty was signed between the British and a section of Sinn Fein leaders. This amounted to little more than home rule or dominion status, rather than complete separation. Even worse it was limited to 26 counties of Ireland with British control of the six counties of 'Northern Ireland'. Partition was sealed. It split the IRA down the middle and a civil war in 1923 was ended with defeat for the revolutionary republicans as the new counter-revolutionary 'Free State', armed by the British, was established. Ireland's national revolution had been defeated.

Working class action

In analysing this period, nationalist narratives have rarely gone beyond seeing it as a rebellion of heroic

individuals followed by a guerrilla war. They have deliberately locked out of Irish history mass working class action. Yet after 1916 the Irish working class entered the fray with a militancy, which recalled the pre-war rise of syndicalism and in particular the heroic five-month Dublin Lockout in 1913.

The main flashpoints of workers' action were:

In April 1918 a General Strike defeated Britain's attempt to introduce conscription. The victory led to a huge spike in recruitment to the Irish Transport and General Workers Union and a rash of strikes.

In 1919 Belfast had its own general strike in pursuit of a 44-hour week, centred on engineering and shipyard workers. Action spread to Glasgow where a military occupation of the city and backtracking from the union leaders saw a return to work - after securing a 47-hour week. Belfast fought on alone but ultimately won 47 hours too. Sinn Fein ignored this strike of mainly Protestant workers.¹

The radicalising effects of the Russian Revolution in 1917 spread to Ireland. The term soviet (workers council) became a popular expression in Ireland for working class action. The Limerick Soviet became the best known though Ireland would witness over a hundred 'soviets' in the years from 1919 to 1920.² These ranged from strike committees to cooperatives. In Limerick in 1919 a general strike against a British military curfew resulted in the strike committee/trades council taking over the running of the city, even issuing their own banknotes.

In 1920 a general strike was called for the release of over a hundred republican and socialist prisoners that had gone on hunger strike to protest their internment. As the Manchester Guardian commented: 'in most places the police abdicated and the maintenance of order was taken over by the local Workers' Councils? In fact it is no exaggeration to trace a flavour of proletarian dictatorship about some aspects of the strike?.' The British caned in and released all the hunger strikers.

One further key struggle in 1920 was the boycott of the military by Irish transport workers. For four months this action hampered military movements but ultimately, due to sackings and the lack of decisive all out action by the union leaders, rail workers went down to defeat.

The mobilisations of workers in this period showed quite clearly the potential of the working class to take over the leadership of the national struggle and away from Sinn Fein. The use of the general strike weapon and the readiness to use arms were there for all to see. A decisive lead by the working class, bringing in its wake the rural labourers and small farmers, could have built soviets on a permanent and national basis, defended by a workers' militia on the road to a workers' republic.

In this way the IRA's armed actions could have been part of, and subordinated to the interests of a mass armed rebellion rather than the unlikely victory of a purely guerrillaist strategy of defeating Britain. The absence of any democratic councils of action with control over the course of the struggle also allowed Sinn Fein leaders to sell out with impunity. A Bolshevik style revolution, as was already happening in Russia since 1917 would have required a Bolshevik style party with a clear programme of social and economic demands linked to the struggle for national independence.

The Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress that Connolly had helped to found should have been the party leading and organising workers against British Imperialism and capitalism. Instead it agreed not to challenge Sinn Fein in the 1918 elections, agreeing that 'labour must wait' until a Republic is first established, and not arguing an independent class programme. It could not even bring itself to defend the Rising or condemn the executions of its founder Connolly. Labour went on to become a loyal opposition in the Free State parliament which followed the defeat of the Republicans in the Civil War.

Despite the contribution of the working class to the independence struggle, Sinn Fein undermined any forward march of labour. It was hostile to strikes and occupations and small farmer takeovers of landed estates in the west. A mixture of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois pro-capitalist politicians, the most conservative of which readily went along with the Treaty, of course led it. The class contradictions within the movement were blown apart when the Treaty was signed and the Irish bourgeoisie was hoisted to power in the south on a deal which was far removed from a republic. This confirmed Trotsky's view that there was no material basis for the Irish bourgeoisie to finish the bourgeois national revolution or become a reliable ally in the fight against imperialism.

Marxists and the Rising

James Connolly was the founder of Marxism in Ireland. His life was one of implacable opposition to capitalism. His role as union leader and organiser saw him in constant battle against the bosses and he built the workers' defence guards of the Irish Citizen Army. He particularly championed the cause of women workers. He saw no contradiction in the fight for national freedom and the ultimate goal of socialism and died a heroic martyr in the fight against Britain.

He maintained that: "Only the working class remain as the incorruptible inheritors of the fight for freedom in Ireland." He cautioned against his nationalist allies while addressing the Irish Citizen Army: "in the event of victory, hold on to your rifles as those with whom we are fighting may stop before our goal is reached". His concern was that an opportunity to strike at Britain while in the midst of war should not be dissipated. This was to be a blow against imperialist war as well as a call to oppressed peoples around the world to rise up.

Yet still there were some on the European left not to mention the British left, that couldn't understand Connolly's apparent lapse of socialist principles in pursuit of a nationalist uprising. There was the Polish Marxist Karl Radek who condemned the Rising as a "putsch". Lenin, in defence of the Rising, criticised Radek and others in the following way:

"The term 'putsch' in the scientific sense of the term may be employed when the attempt at insurrection has revealed nothing but a circle of conspirators or stupid maniacs and has aroused no sympathy among the masses. The centuries old Irish national movement, having passed through various stages and combinations of class interests, manifested itself, in particular, in a mass Irish National Congress in America which called for Irish independence; it also manifested itself in street fighting conducted by a section of the urban petit-bourgeoisie and a section of workers after a long period of mass agitation, demonstrations, suppression of newspapers, etc. Whoever calls such a rebellion a 'putsch' is either a hardened reactionary, or a doctrinaire hopelessly incapable of envisaging a social revolution as a living phenomenon."³

Socialist historian John Newsinger mistakenly claims it was "a classic instance of a putsch" from a circle of conspirators that had "no sympathy among the masses".⁴ Far from being maniacs and conspirators, the 1,500 rebels did represent a significant strand of Irish society born out of the crisis of Home Rule, where the Ulster Unionists' armed defiance of Home Rule had nearly brought the island to civil war. The rebels, through the ICA, also represented the defeated workers' pre-war lockout struggle in Dublin.

As World War began, twelve thousand Volunteers split from John Redmond's Irish Volunteers, refusing to fight for Britain. They, along with the ICA, had been openly drilling and staging mock attacks. By 1916 there was an increasing weariness of war with thousands of Irish casualties. Britain was holding back on conscription, as they knew this could only be forcefully implemented. Connolly's role as the fighting leader of the Dublin proletariat continued during the war leading strikes by dockers at the Dublin Steampacket

Company.⁵ Connolly organised 'a daily course on military drill'⁶ with the strikers. Yes there was a mixed response on the streets in the direct aftermath of the Rising but British executions soon turned a significant minority into a groundswell of support.

At the time Lenin was waging a political struggle against those Marxists that were pouring scorn on the fight of small nations for self-determination. Lenin's groundbreaking theory of Imperialism was published in 1916. In this he sought to explain the imperialist nature of the First World War as rooted in the stage of development that capitalism had reached. The rival imperialist powers would divide and redivide the world, generating struggles in the colonies against their imperial overlords. This imperialist epoch would be one of wars, revolutions and national revolts, and Ireland's Rising fell into that latter category.⁷

Confirming Lenin's prognosis, national revolts broke out in the German Cameroons 1914, Nyasaland 1915, French Indochina, Dahomey and Niger in 1916 and many other African countries the following year.⁸ But it was 1916 that echoed around the British Empire. The Chittagong rising in India and rebellion in Egypt drew directly on the Irish example. Dan Breen's book *My Fight for Irish Freedom* was translated into Hindi, Punjabi, Tamil and Burmese 'and every edition banned!⁹ The Irish diaspora was electrified too and British army mutinies added another headache. British imperialist Henry Wilson knew the stakes well: 'If we lose Ireland we have lost the Empire'.

Lenin put it more aptly: 'a blow delivered against British imperialist bourgeois rule by a rebellion in Ireland is of a hundred times greater political significance than a blow of equal weight in Asia or Africa.' Rebellions of oppressed nations in Europe would 'sharpen the revolutionary crisis in Europe'. Easter 1916 presaged the revolutionary crisis set to engulf Europe after the war as much as it spelled the end of Empire.

Trotsky refused to call the Rising a 'putsch'¹⁰, (wrongly attributed in Geoffrey Bell's *Hesitant Comrades*).¹¹ He attacked Plekhanov for describing the Rising as 'harmful' and praised their heroism and courage. However, Trotsky did underestimate the strength of the national question in which he thought 'the historical basis for the national revolution had disappeared even in backward Ireland'.¹² Of course as a future leader of the Bolsheviks this was not to stop him urging solidarity with oppressed struggles: 'The British socialist who fails to support by all possible means the uprisings in Ireland, Egypt and India against the London plutocracy, such a socialist deserves to be branded with infamy, if not with a bullet.'¹³

The response of the British left to the Rising was largely unsympathetic and is well catalogued in Geoffrey Bell's latest book. Prominent Labour MP JH Thomas said 'there was no Labour leader in the country who did not deplore the recent rebellion in Ireland'.¹⁴ Both the *Daily Herald*, left wing and anti-war paper, and the Independent Labour Party condemned the revolt. They did so from a pacifist point of view but underlying their position was a reformist and pro-imperialist outlook so typical of a labour aristocracy with a material interest in the ill-gotten gains of Empire. This is why Lenin took such a hard stand against imperialist chauvinism of the type that existed in the labour movement and those Marxists, like Radek, who tailed it.

Even the Socialist Labour Party, of which Connolly had been a member, refused to comment. The Women's Suffrage Federation which produced the *Women's Dreadnought*, edited by Sylvia Pankhurst, was far more sympathetic to the cause of the Rising insisting Ireland 'should be allowed to govern itself' 'though the Rising itself was 'reckless'.¹⁵ As the War of Independence gathered momentum many in the labour movement and liberal circles were sickened at Britain's draconian repression, but there was little by way of solidarity with the resistance.

The Comintern detected the lack of solidarity in 1920 when they urged the fledgling British Communist Party to do more on Ireland and be judged on how many British comrades have been thrown in jail for their

support. They went on to declare, 'It is very easy at the moment to speak out in Britain against intervention in Russia, since even the bourgeois left is against it. It is harder for the British comrades to take up the cause of Irish independence and of anti-militarist activity. We have a right to demand this difficult work of the British comrades.'¹⁶

Connolly and Insurrection

If Lenin's defence of 1916 was unconditional it certainly wasn't without qualification:

'The dialectics of history are such that small nations, powerless as an independent factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a part as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli, which help the real anti-imperialist force, the socialist proletariat, to make its appearance on the scene? It is the misfortune of the Irish that they rose prematurely, before the revolt of the European proletariat had time to mature.'¹⁷

Lenin was first and foremost concerned with the fight against imperialist chauvinism, realising Marx's adage that 'a nation that oppresses another forges its own chains'. But his 'premature' comment reflects his deep unease at an insurrection that was not the culmination of a social revolution led by the proletariat, though entirely understandable and supportable as a nationalist rebellion.

Connolly's impatience for an insurrection was both a product of his disillusion with European social democracy's failure to stop the war and a deep-seated fear of Britain winning it. Unlike Lenin's dual defeatism Connolly was for a German victory. His desperation to strike Britain while at war drove him into the secret, conspiratorial tactics of the IRB. So secretive was the conspiracy that it undermined the mobilisation on the eve of the Rising.

The Marxist tradition has always fought against the idea of social change through Blanquist military conspiracies which are divorced from the masses, not least because they end up as failures. Instead an insurrection should be the high point of the revolutionary mobilisation of the masses, albeit one where an organised minority 'conspires' and seizes power. The pivotal role of the Bolshevik party in the success of the Russian Revolution lay in its ability to act when the masses had reached 'boiling point'. It knew this precisely by the unqualified support it received by the majority of workers and soldiers in the Soviets.

In contrast to this, the Easter Rising 'reduced the task of revolution to mere insurrection'.¹⁸ It certainly contributed to opening up a revolutionary crisis ahead. But insurrection is the high point of a revolutionary mobilisation, not the other way round. Ireland in 1916 had no mobilised working class; there were no workers' councils where revolutionary sentiments could be tested. Even the Proclamation of the Rising, though very democratic for its time, made no appeal to the working class or small farmers for action or support for the insurgents let alone socialism.

In this way Connolly, by fusing his forces with the IRB, lowered the red flag to the green.¹⁹ By signing the Proclamation he was agreeing to nothing more than a bourgeois republic, with nothing representing the independent interests of workers. He did this genuinely hoping that a free Ireland would see labour inevitably in a position of overwhelming strength. But how could this happen if the interests of workers are not spelt out and without independent self-mobilisation?

Purely at the level of military tactics the Rising also had shortcomings, as Newsinger points out.²⁰ A strategy of seizing key buildings very much left the rebels as sitting ducks. Connolly even believed the state would not bombard its own capitalist property. Contrast this with Trotsky who urges comrades not to occupy fortified buildings during the 1905 revolution in Russia: 'the troops will always recapture them or simply destroy them by artillery fire. Let our fortresses be courtyards with entrances front and back, and all places from which it is easy to fire and withdraw.'²¹ Trotsky's guerrilla tactics here of course presumed a

sympathetic working class.

The Easter Rising was not to be repeated, as an IRA guerrilla war ensued. There was widespread sympathy for this but no strategy to involve a second front of struggle from urban and rural workers. Similarly during the Civil War only a small band of Irish communists, including James Connolly's son Roddy, fighting alongside the anti-Treaty forces, with Comintern and CPGB advice, sought to win their allies to a 'social programme' and thereby deepen the struggle.²² But military considerations prevailed and defeat was soon in the offing.

Syndicalism and the Party

In James Connolly's politics syndicalism and revolutionary nationalism coexisted. His syndicalist ally in leading Irish workers was Jim Larkin who had left for the USA just before the Rising. Connolly and Larkin were shaped by the militant syndicalist movement that swept across France, USA, Britain and Ireland before World War 1. Syndicalism stressed the role of economic action in abolishing capitalism. One Big Union (OBU) was the mechanism that would usher in socialism. Connolly and Larkin may not have been 'pure' syndicalists since they helped build numerous socialist parties, but their primary weapon was the Irish Transport General Workers' Union (ITGWU), the OBU. Their idea of a party was as an electoral backup to the union not a party for political action. The union would guide the party, which through elections would 'neutralise' the state.²³ Unknown to Connolly at the time, Lenin was building a different kind of party, which did lead with the aim of smashing the state.

In 1912 Connolly and Larkin won the Irish TUC to the project of building a new Labour Party. Although some elections were contested, no party organs, like branches, were built, no activist members and no programme.²⁴ None of the parties they helped build took a leading role in the national independence struggle.²⁵ They believed that Home Rule was inevitable and when that had come around then they would stand as Labour for the new Parliament. This left the national question very much in the hands of middle class nationalists. One result of this was failing to give Protestant socialists/workers in the north a working class argument for separation from Britain, who instead only heard a Home Rule version.

When Connolly was murdered, it was all too apparent that the Labour Party was incapable of providing a revolutionary alternative. It had not been built as a combat party with a definite programme of action, but rather a broad church, continuing in the tradition of not intervening in the independence struggle. It deferred to Sinn Fein on the national question; it knew no other way.

Throughout his role as a union organiser Connolly was always a republican but he was unable to develop tactics towards the struggle for independence. With the combined disappointments of 1914 - defeat of the Lockout, Second International betrayal, the IPP's treachery on Home Rule and recruiting to the British Army and the rise of Carson and the Ulster Volunteer Force in Ulster - Connolly was increasingly driven towards a nationalist insurrection. Syndicalism would have to wait. The class question would be collapsed into the national struggle.

Of course syndicalism had its positive side. It gave us the solidarity strike, the picket line, the occupation and the workers' defence guard, all of which Connolly and Larkin as leaders of Irish workers heroically used against the bosses. However, syndicalism failed to provide a political direction for working class militants. Syndicalism in Britain for example cut itself off from the political struggles of the time, as with the questions of Ireland and of Women. The declaration of imperialist war also found it wanting.

Above all syndicalism failed to see the need for a revolutionary party, comprised of a vanguard of the most class conscious workers, in leading an insurrection to seize the power. One Big Union was too unwieldy a force that could never be the instrument for winning power. Trade unionism, even that which is based on

syndicalist militancy, would suffer from all the limitations of spontaneity. Lenin was clear on this and argued that spontaneous trade unionism can only be subordinate to bourgeois ideology, therefore, 'the task of Social Democracy, is to combat spontaneity, to divert the working class movement from this spontaneous, trade unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of the revolutionary Social Democracy'.²⁶

Permanent Revolution

As Marxists we celebrate the Easter Rising both as a blow against the British Empire and against the slaughter of the inter-imperialist World War. As a rebellion in Britain's own backyard, it gave huge inspiration to colonial peoples around the world. It justifiably stands in Ireland's revolutionary physical force tradition of all those who have tired of unsuccessfully pleading with Britain to leave peaceably.

But it failed in its ultimate goal for a free Ireland. So did the War of Independence that followed. A revolutionary crisis ended in counter-revolutionary regimes north and south of the border. It could have been different. If heroism and martyrs was sufficient for success then Ireland might have been free of Britain a long time ago. A successful struggle against imperialism would have required a mobilised and politically independent working class, with small farmer and rural labourer support, that was not going to stop at the stage of 'national freedom', that was not going to rely on the hesitant middle class nationalists, but was willing to move forward to socialist tasks.

Trotsky summarised permanent revolution in this way: 'the complete victory of the democratic revolution in Russia is conceivable only in the form of a dictatorship of the proletariat, leaning on the peasantry'.²⁷ The largely spontaneous democratic February revolution of 1917 succeeded in overthrowing the Tsar. This essentially bourgeois revolution was carried out by the masses, not the bourgeoisie.

The resulting Kerensky government failed to satisfy the needs of the masses and set the stage for the revolution to boil over into a thoroughgoing anti-capitalist revolution in October. It was this that finally ended the war and put power into the hands of the Soviets. A dual power situation posed to the workers the choice of either proceeding with the socialist tasks or be smashed in a counterrevolution. The role of the Bolshevik party 'in the Soviets and in organising the insurrection' was key to pursuing the path of permanent revolution.

In Ireland, Sinn Fein and Labour both wanted to stop at the bourgeois stage of national freedom. In the end they never even got that. The working class had entered the fray after 1916. But there was no political force arguing for the working class to lead the struggle for independence using its own methods of struggle, the general strike, the soviet and the workers' militia. There was no party fighting for a strategy to make the revolution permanent, on the way to a workers' republic.

It wasn't just a question of Connolly not leaving behind a 'solid party' as Kieran Allen in his recent book '1916' vaguely puts it,²⁸ but rather leaving behind a cadre party prepared to intervene with a clear strategy for permanent revolution. Instead Connolly's legacy confused republicanism with socialism. This thread in his politics where he believes that revolutionary republicans are in the camp of the working class is consistent with all of his writings.

In his 1910 book, *Labour in Irish History*, Connolly tries to prove that the national struggle has always been the struggle of the toiling masses against the alien imposition of private property.²⁹ This is misleading, as many leading Irish Republicans, like Tone, Emmet and Pearse, though fighting for a republic, stood on a platform that was unsurprisingly bourgeois, that is one that was pro-capitalist.

Socialists must certainly fight for anti-imperialist united fronts with revolutionary republicans but this is done

to mobilise working class action on the road to a socialist revolution. Republicanism by definition is incapable of going beyond national independence. This political weakness stops it from mobilising workers on a wider social programme and creates the illusion of a cross-class movement winning national freedom. This still plagues republicanism in Ireland, rarely breaking out of the vicious circle of guerrillaism and constitutional sell-outs.

The irony is that Connolly was right in proclaiming the working class as the incorruptible inheritors of national freedom but wrong to have collapsed the independent interests of workers in his final struggle. His vision of a workers' republic though stands as a beacon to all those sick of imperialist and capitalist decay and exploitation.

Only the working class can solve the national question in Ireland. That's true today as it was in Connolly's time. It still means there can be no confidence in nationalism/republicanism as being capable of consummating the struggle against imperialism. It has failed too many times. Neither is it possible to skip over the national question and ignore the oppression and sectarianism which British occupation has brought to Ireland. That is why the national and social struggles are inextricably linked, though not the same, requiring quite separate tasks in the overall strategy for a workers' republic.

The Easter Rising stands as a revolutionary inspiration to the struggle against imperialism. James Connolly stands as the most inspirational Marxist leader in Irish history. The legacy though of both the Rising and Connolly is also one of heroic failure to achieve not just the break with Britain but the establishment of his workers' republic. Unfinished Revolution was the rallying title for the Coalisland march this Easter but Marxists must make sure that Permanent Revolution is the new slogan for a new revolutionary socialist party in Ireland.

Notes

[1] Conor Kostik, Revolution in Ireland p.64

[2] Ibid p.70

[3] Lenin on Ireland p.32

[4] John Newsinger Rebel City p.151

[5] D.R.Connor Lysaght Connolly, the Dublin Steampacket Company Dispute and the 1916 Rising Irish Revolution blog

[6] James Connolly To Hell With Contracts 1915

[7] Lenin Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism

[8] Liam O'Ruairc The Global-Historical Significance of the 1916 Rising Irish Revolution blog

[9] James Heartfield & Kevin Rooney Who's Afraid of the Easter Rising? 1916-2016 p.105

[10] Leon Trotsky On the Events in Dublin

[11] Geoffrey Bell Hesitant Comrades p.16

[12] Leon Trotsky On the Events in Dublin

[13] Leon Trotsky The First Five Years of the Communist International Vol. 1 p.125 Pathfinder Press 1972

[14] Geoffrey Bell Hesitant Comrades p.11

[15] Ibid p.12

[16] Ibid p.114

[17] Lenin Collected Works Vol.22 pp.357-358

[18] Andy Johnston, James Larragy, Edward McWilliams Connolly A Marxist Analysis p.161. Published by the Irish Workers Group 1990. This is still by far the best Marxist analysis of James Connolly and the Easter Rising. It is the principal influence on the critique of Connolly in this article.

[19] Ibid p.162

[20] John Newsinger Rebel City pp. 143-145

[21] Leon Trotsky 1905

[22] Charlie McGuire Roddy Connolly and the Struggle for Socialism in Ireland p.62, Also Emmet O'Connor Reds and the Green p.67.

[23] Johnston, Larragy, McWilliams Connolly A Marxist Analysis p.141

[24] Ibid p.145

[25] Ibid p.144

[25] Lenin What is to be Done

[27] Leon Trotsky What is the Permanent Revolution?

[28] Kieran Allen 1916 p.59 For a more critical look at Connolly read Allen's 'The Politics of James Connolly' 1990. His latest book makes far less reference to this previous critique.

[29] Class Struggle, paper of the Irish Workers Group, 75th Anniversary Supplement Connolly's Republican Socialism

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