

James Connolly— Trade Unionist

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“There is indeed much to be done before we can claim that the guarantee (the Proclamation of 1916 to the Irish people) has been fulfilled. If we refuse to undertake its fulfilment, we would have to share the reproach directed by James Connolly against those who bubble over with enthusiasm for Ireland but witness unmoved the sufferings of so many of our people.” (An Taoiseach de Valera, April 24th, 1933, speaking on Easter Week.)

DE VALERA spoke well and truly of the greatest man who ever lived in Ireland, who was a Marxist Socialist, worthy product of a militant trade union movement of Scotland, the United States of America and Ireland. The latter became his adopted country, through kinship and

identity of interests. And for Ireland and her people he made the final sacrifice. How far De Valera and the Irish people honoured Connolly and his teachings must be judged by the reminder given by De Valera in 1933 and by the fact that, thirty-five years later, his work and teachings are still, in a

large measure, being deliberately disregarded, distorted or ignored.

But, in this year 1968, when Irishmen and women commemorate the 100th anniversary of his birth, after having, in 1966, paid homage to his ultimate sacrifice in 1916, those who have done their damndest to discredit Connolly are being forced to witness a serious revival of his teachings and are alarmed that he is now being acknowledged as the man, head and shoulders above all others, who understood best what was necessary for the Irish working class.

Early Experiences

Connolly's many years of struggle in the trade union and labour movement of Scotland—where he worked as a carter—for better conditions for the workers and to end their exploitation gave him an invaluable insight into the minds and motives of the capitalist class. He acted and wrote tirelessly to prove that nationality counted for little with the capitalists who employed, or fired, workers. His period in the British Army taught him that the armed forces of an imperialist state constituted a bulwark against the aspirations of a people whose only wish was to be free from imperialist domination and exploitation.

When he came to Ireland in 1896 and later was forced to emigrate to the United States of America he found no difficulty in recognising where his place was and never shirked the struggle—despite his poverty and the needs of his wife and young family. Many there were who went to the United States with one idea in mind—to do well for themselves and to leave behind, for ever, the bitter memories of hard times and privation. But not James Connolly. He became very much attracted to the idea of the “One Big Union” and charged that “the real truth is that workers do not unite industrially, but, on the contrary, are most hopelessly divided on the industrial field, and that their division and confusion on the political field are the direct result of their division and confusion on the industrial field”. (*Axe to the Root.*)

This pamphlet was written by Connolly whilst he was in New York and after he had witnessed a broken strike on the subway and elevated system by “. . . men who were engineers in the power-houses which supplied the electric power to run the cars . . . good union men with union cards in their pockets . . . and without whom all the scabs combined could not have run a single trip” (*ibid*). Like Jack London, he hated scabs and said of them, “. . . he was a vile creature” . . . and, what else, he asked, “are the trade unionists who supplied the power to the scabs to help them to break a strike” (*ibid*). Connolly did not mince his words.

Connolly's life in Scotland taught him the basics of industrial and political struggle. His experiences in the United States of America—the other rising imperialist power—deepened his knowledge and when he came back to Ireland in 1910 he never spared himself in his efforts to explain to the Irish workers, Catholic and Protestant, the real issues. He went to the root of the problems, social, economic, political and national, facing the country. Having worked as an organiser in New York for IWW (the Wobblies) and founded there, in 1907, the Irish Socialist Federation, with its journal, *The Harp*, Connolly was already preparing himself for his future work in Ireland.

Irish Transport and General Workers' Union

He returned to Ireland in 1910 to become the organiser of the Socialist Party of Ireland and then to join “Big Jim” Larkin in the task of building up the “one big union”, the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. In that year he also wrote his most famous book—*Labour in Irish History*—in which he traced, down through the centuries, the struggles of the Irish people and stated, without any qualifications, that the Irish working class must finish the task—the Irish bourgeoisie would never be fit, able or anxious to do it. The “men of property”, he claimed, had always deserted and betrayed the people. The “men of no property”, i.e. the working class must take up and finish the struggle.

He came to Belfast in 1911. He found that, following the great dockers' and carters' strike led by James Larkin, a new wind circulated through the North. For the first time, in the worst-paid of all jobs, men were given the dignity of men and, for the first time, they began to identify themselves as Irishmen and part of the Irish working class. Larkin, in a way never accomplished before, united the workers of Belfast and became, for the employers of the North and the orthodox British trade union officials, a thorn in their flesh. Larkin was disowned by the National Union of Dock Labourers, by whom he was employed. Their joy was short-lived with the formation of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, led by Larkin.

The joy became even less noticeable when Connolly arrived to take up the post of Ulster organiser for the Union. The Belfast *Morning News* wrote in October 6th that year:

“James Connolly attempts to introduce the principle of syndicalism into Belfast Trades Unionism by recruiting women workers in the linen industry to his Union standard. All that need be said is that if the trade unionism of Belfast does not purge itself of Larkinism it will end in its own undoing.”

Connolly had lost no time, after coming to Belfast, in having his Union affiliated to the Belfast and District Trades Union Council—September 7th, 1911. On January 4th, 1912, he was elected to the Executive Committee and remained a member until he went to Dublin early in 1914 permanently.

The Need to Organise

By October 1911, he was able to report to the Council that “. . . at the lower docks they had held up 20 ships to enforce trade union conditions”. In March 1912, the Belfast dockers had obtained wage advances of 3s. per week. He spoke for the bakers who were on strike, supported the Insurance Bill of the Lloyd George Government and strongly deprecated the role of the Irish Nationalist Party who had asked that the provisions of the Bill be not extended to Ireland, and flayed the British Labour Party for not supporting the Irish Workers' demand. Connolly said,

“ . . . as far as the Labour Party is concerned, Ireland is not recognised at all. We support the British Labour Party, but that Party invariably give us the kick, and as far as I am concerned the Irish working classes have not my sympathy as long as they refrain from respecting themselves and establishing a Labour Party of their own.”

Connolly fought for good public transport for the Belfast workers, reported that his Union had been able to win an eight-hour day for transport workers (December 5th, 1912), that textile workers had affiliated to the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union and had decided to ask for a Trade Board and a minimum wage of 3d. per hour. His Union had also decided to contest the local Municipal Elections. He was chosen as the candidate and polled 900 votes.

Employers “Orange” and “Green”

Constantly he campaigned against what he terms “Orange” and “Green” employers. In his article, written for *The Forward* on March 11th, 1911, “Sweatshops Behind the Orange Flag”, he pointed out that “the enemies of Home Rule and Popery were also enemies . . . of low rents and sanitary cottages for their labourers”, evidenced that the Home Rule Party and “the Ulster beaters of the Orange Drum” were united in attempting to prevent the passing of an Act for the feeding of necessitous schoolchildren and asserted that “the cries of the starving children of Ulster cannot pierce the loyal ears” of the Protestant employers of Belfast.

This was a period when the linen industry was in its ascendancy in Ireland—particularly in Ulster. Work done by women in their homes was sheer

and brutal exploitation. For thread-drawing pure linen handkerchiefs, 1d. a dozen was paid, and only six dozen could be drawn in a very hard day's work. A widow, with seven children, could earn, at the most, 4s. a week at hand-spoke work. The “munificent” sum of ¾d. was paid for clipping threads on an elaborately embroidered bedspread, 88 ins. by 100 ins.—and it took one hour to do that work. He was especially vehement about the exploitation of women and girls and, in 1913, addressed a manifesto *To the Linen Slaves of Belfast*. In the manifesto he described many Belfast mills “as slaughterhouses for women and penitentiaries for the children”. When women workers went on strike at the biggest textile mill in Belfast, the York Street Flax Spinning Company, they came to Connolly for assistance. He told them: “I will try to organise you for this strike because you can do nothing unless you are organised.”

Connolly taught the women how to defy the employers, how to get rid of the iniquitous fines system, to win higher piece rates and to demand a competent woman inspector for the proper inspection of the mills and factories. His appeal to women textile workers: “Sisters and Fellow-Workers. . . Be Brave. . . Have confidence in yourselves. Talk about success and you will achieve success” was not lost on the women who marched back into the biggest mill in Ireland singing at the tops of their voices where before they had not been allowed to “waste time” talking.

Connolly had come to work in Belfast (and Ulster) under the most unfavourable conditions as far as political understanding of the Irish question was concerned. He learnt well of the bad conditions in the city, the almost complete lack of social services, the long hours and low wages. Even as late as November 1915, engineering workers reported that men in the Sirocco Works were being paid from 10s. to 20s. for a week's work. In Coombe Barbour's 17s. to 20s. and Mackies Foundry were paying the same scandalous wages. Trade Unionists complained that workers were forced to wear Government badges when they were employed on munitions and the “patriotic firms” were flying the Union Jack! In the Springfield Cotton Spinning Mill, engaged on Government work for war purposes, women worked a 55½-hour week for the princely sum of 10s. 6d. Those who worked overtime from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. received the miserly sum of 8d. extra. The workers were learning the truth of Connolly's teachings—that Protestant employers do not pay “Protestant wages”. The same went for Catholic employers. The old Adam in them demanded profits and more profits and these could not be obtained unless workers were paid low wages and exploitation speeded up.

Battle Joined in Dublin

Connolly left Belfast to continue his trade union work in Dublin. He was drawn there in 1913 to assist in the greatest industrial battle in Ireland's history. He found, in the capital city of Ireland, the same "Green" and "Orange" employers. Martin Murphy and the 400 Dublin employers had thrown down the gauntlet—either the workers employed by them ceased to be members of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union or else they be paid off. They, the employers, accused the Union of fomenting industrial strife and Connolly, writing in the *Irish Worker* (August 30th, 1913) replied:

"The fault of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. What is it? Let us tell it in plain language. It's fault is this, that it found the labourers of Ireland on their knees, and has striven to raise them to an erect position of manhood; it found them with all the vices of slavery in their souls, and it strove to eradicate these vices and replace them with some of the virtues of free men; it found them with no other weapons of defence than the arts of the liar, the lickspittle, and the toady, and it combined them and taught them to abhor those arts and rely proudly on the defensive power of combination . . . out of this class of slaves the labourers of Dublin the Union has created an army of intelligent self-reliant men . . . trusting alone to the disciplined use of their power to labour or withdraw their labour to assert and maintain their right as men."

Connolly explained that all the educational agencies of the country had been used to teach the working class of Dublin that

"this world has been created for the special benefit of the various sections of the master class, that kings and lords and capitalists were of value . . . but that there was neither honour, credit nor consideration to the man or woman who toils to maintain them all."

He asserted that those who toil are the only ones who matter and that the others are "but beggars upon the bounty of those who work with hand or brain". He refused to shrink from the threat of Murphy and the 400 employers. "Let them understand", he wrote, "that once they start the ball rolling no capitalist power on earth can prevent it continuing to roll, that every day will add to the impetus it will give to the working-class purpose. . . ."

The battle was joined. All members of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union were summarily dismissed. All the force and might of the Irish and British imperialist authorities were brought together to crush the leaders of the Irish working class, James Connolly and Jim Larkin, to crush the Union and, most important of all, crush the Irish working class, for ever. Between August 1913 and October 4th of the same year

when Connolly put the case for the workers before the Asquith Inquiry, held in Dublin Castle, the city of Dublin became an armed camp.

British imperialism was perfecting its arrangements to go to war with imperialist Germany, but it did not hesitate to assist the Irish employers in their efforts to crush the workers of Ireland. It was all part of the one huge struggle—to maintain the Empire and continue to draw imperial tribute from the oldest—Ireland—and the newest colonies to be won when the world was plunged into war just one year after war had been declared on the Irish working class.

"Elevate Our Class"

When Connolly made his case before the Inquiry, he stated:

"We do not claim to be philanthropists labouring to preserve social amenities for the sake of some nebulous, changing thing known as 'the public'. We do not pretend to be animated by a fierce zeal for public order, though we hope we shall never wantonly disturb it, nor do we profess to be inspired by a single-minded desire to aid capitalists to conduct their business at all costs. No, we are banded together for the purpose of elevating our class, of organising that class for the conquest of its rights. If the public, the forces of law and order and the capitalist class are willing to co-operate with us towards that end, well and good. If, on the other hand, the social and political forces represented by these three terms unite to defeat and subdue us and to thwart our aspirations as we believe they have done in this case, we shall still press onwards believing that eventually victory and the verdict of history will be on our side."

The Dublin employers prevaricated and in the month of December 1913, Thomas MacPartlin, Chairman, Workers' Representation, was forced to declare, ". . . Under these circumstances the fight must go on . . . to defeat the ill-will . . . the malice . . . the vindictiveness, the passions and the prejudices of the employers who four months ago set out to starve us into submission, and to drive us back to slavery".

A proposal, made by kindly people in Britain, to take Dublin's starving children into their homes and to feed and clothe them was denounced by a cleric, described by Connolly as, ". . . One scoundrel in clerical garb (who) is said to have stated that the children were being 'brought to England by trickery, fraud and corruption for proselytising purposes'" and Connolly thundered, "Nothing more venomous and unfounded was ever spewed out of a lying mouth in Ireland since the seoinin clergy at the bidding of an English politician hounded Parnell to his grave". An appeal to his Grace, Archbishop Walsh, by Mrs. Montefiore to give his blessing to

the children being allowed to travel, coupled with assurances that the spiritual needs of the children would be looked after, went unanswered.

A public appeal by Connolly towards the same end was ignored. Even though Connolly, close to the workers and witnessing their terrible sufferings and privations, told his Grace that the master class of Dublin “. . . calmly and cold-bloodedly were using the sufferings of the children to weaken the resistance of the parents”, the appeal was to have no effect. The children’s souls must be looked after, even if their bodies were being starved by good Dublin Catholic and Protestant employers. Connolly requested Archbishop Walsh—who was to condemn the 1916 Insurrection and all who took part in it—to assist in bringing the powers of the press, public opinion and all the agencies at his command to bear upon “the inhuman monsters who controlled employment in Dublin”.

Solidarity—and Betrayal

The arrest of pickets and organisers went on. The starvation of the workers and their children continued. An appeal to the British Trades Union Congress resulted, once again, in the right of free speech in the streets of Dublin. Supplies of food, in specially chartered ships, and a huge amount of money arrived to help keep the struggle going. Connolly stated that the working-class movement of Britain reached its highest point of moral grandeur, “attained for a moment to a realisation of that sublime unity towards which the best in us continually aspire”. Connolly wrote so in the *Forward*, February 9th, 1914, after the workers of Dublin had been defeated in their struggle. They were forced back on any terms possible and on March 14th, 1914, Connolly analysed the reason:

“The Dublin fighters received their defeat, met their Waterloo, at the London Conference of December 9th, 1913. At that Conference the representatives of organised labour declared they would not counsel the use of any kind of economic force or industrial action in support of the Dublin workers, and immediately this was known, the fight was virtually lost. At the next Peace Conference in Dublin the employers would not even look at the joint proposals of the representatives of the British and Irish Unions. They knew they had nothing to fear, as their opponents in the labour camp had solemnly promised not to hurt them.”

Connolly (and Larkin) wanted the trade union movement, and especially the transport unions, of Britain to “isolate the capitalist class of Dublin”. Connolly showed that if the capitalist is able to carry on his business without the strikers, then the strike is lost, even if the strikers receive more in strike pay than they formerly did in wages. They,

and the Dublin workers, were fully appreciative of the offer to house the starving children, the food ships and money *but what was really wanted was to completely close the port of Dublin—and every exit and egress in Ireland*. What was wanted, as Connolly stated, was that the Irish capitalists would be starved (of profits) into submission to grant the modest demands of the workers, especially the right to belong to the Union of their choice and not to allow the workers and their families to be starved (for food) into submitting to the employers of Dublin, once characterised by Connolly as the “most stupid employers in the world”.

But appeals to the leaders of the National Union of Railwaymen, to Mr. James Sexton’s National Union of Dockers (who had quarrelled with Larkin), Mr. Havelock Wilson’s National Union of Seamen, and the leaders of the Seamen and Firemen’s Union, as well as Mr. Joe Houghton of the Scottish Docker’s Union were of no avail. The leaders refused to hold up the goods and raw materials coming into and going out of Ireland. Connolly charged, with justification, that “the officials failed to grasp the opportunity offered to them to make a permanent reality of the union of working-class forces. . . .” He claimed that “. . . sectionalism, intrigues, and old-time jealousies damned us in the hour of victory, and officialism was the first to fall to the tempter” (*Forward*, February 9th, 1914).

For the first time Connolly appeared to despair. He concluded his article thus:

“And so we Irish workers must go down into Hell, bow our backs to the lash of the slave-driver, let our hearts be seared by the iron of his hatred, and instead of the sacramental wafer of brotherhood and common sacrifice, eat the dust of defeat and betrayal. Dublin is isolated.”

The Lessons of Dublin

But Connolly was too great, in mind, heart and soul, to be thus thrust down or to give up the battle. Before the month of February 1914 was out he was penning articles on “the lessons of Dublin” and putting forward ever more sharply his case for working-class unity, for the sympathetic strike; his demand for industrial unionism; the organisation of all workers in any one industry into a union covering that industry; the need to link up all such unions under one head which, he stated, was a different thing from mere amalgamation of unions. He called on the Irish working class to work for trade union organisation that would unite, instead of divide, the workers and for the abolition of all executives “whose measure of success is the balance-sheet of the union, instead of the power of their class”.

On May 9th, 1914, he was able to write: “I am glad of the experience of the past few years. I am

glad that the extremely doctrinaire political attitude towards strikes received a check, and that check came straight out of the practical experience of the workers in ship, shore, shop and railway." He maintained: ". . . that in the long run the class in control of the economic forces of the nation will be able to direct its political powers . . . the mere right to vote will not protect the workers."

The Socialist Challenge

When war broke out in August 1914, Connolly immediately nailed his colours to the mast. He was opposed to the war. He was much dismayed and disappointed when the "socialists" of Europe, whom he said had been passing resolutions against such a war, betrayed the peoples of their countries. After the 1915 annual meeting of the British Trades Union Congress he declared, in the *Workers' Republic* (September 18th):

"We have ere looked hopefully to the British Trade Union Congress, but our hopes are gone. The British Empire is ruled by the most astute ruling class in the world; the British working class is the most easily fooled in the world. God help the poor Irish as long as they remain yoked to such a combination."

And so the man who had fought all his life, in Scotland, in the United States of America, chose Ireland in order to prove that there were revolutionary socialists in the world who would challenge the imperialists and their war; that there were men and women in the trade union movement whose understanding that there must be a link between trade union activity and politics would give them courage to stand and fight. Connolly did not know of the struggle being waged by Lenin and his comrades, although he did know that Tsarism would not be able to stand up against the hatred of the millions of Russians and other peoples bowed down by autocracy and the knout.

"The Cause of Labour is the Cause of Ireland"

And he set out to prove that Socialism was a living thing and that there were Socialists who would remain true to their word. To prove that there was a working class, whose leaders had not betrayed them, who would come to the clarion call of the struggle for a new society. He set out to prove that British imperialism was not invincible and that Irish men and women could begin the conflagration that would topple monarchs and bring down empires. *James Connolly set out to redeem the good name of Socialism and, in the process, lead the Irish working class into a new civilisation.*

His last article, written in the *Workers' Republic*, April 8th, 1916 (and before his last statement

delivered to a field general court martial on May 9th, 1916—three days before his execution by the British imperialists and for whose death Martin Murphy and the 400 employers of Dublin screamed) breathed his every belief in the Irish working class. He declared:

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

Others will describe how, out of 1907 and 1913, great industrial struggles in Ireland—one fought in Belfast under the leadership of Larkin and the other in Dublin under the leadership of Connolly and Larkin—grew the men and women who fought in 1916 to free their class and country and who gave the impetus, as Connolly prophesied they would, to those who found the courage to struggle through "the four glorious years"—from 1916 to 1920 and to be able to wrest 26 of the 32 counties from direct political rule by Great Britain.

And What of Today?

But does our movement today share, as De Valera stated in 1933, the "reproach directed by James Connolly against those who bubble over with enthusiasm for Ireland but witness unmoved the sufferings of so many of her people". No one denies that advances have been made. The Irish Trade Union movement has, despite the political difficulties of a divided country, been able to heal the breach and, after 14 years of disunity within the movement, from 1945 to 1959, come together, over 500,000 strong in the united Irish Congress of Trade Unions. The political force of Toryism in Northern Ireland was not able to prevail against the overwhelming desire for unity.

But Connolly would be demanding to know the reason why, in the Irish Republic, over 50 per cent of all male industrial workers and over 90 per cent of female workers have less than £12 a week; why male industrial workers in Northern Ireland receive, in earnings £3 to £4 per week less than their counterparts in Britain, although they are supposed to be "British" in every sense. He would want to know why it is that some right-wing leaders in the trade union movement condemn the "sympathetic strike", the cornerstone of Connolly's policy, demand that workers "pass the picket", deny Connolly's slogan "an injury to one is an injury to all", press for the means of hamstringing

the militant working class, and co-operate with the "inhuman monsters" in their so-called "economic planning".

Connolly would not remain silent, nor would he hesitate to use industrial action, to end the unemployment and emigration that Ireland, North and South, has suffered to the extent that more of her native-born live in other countries than Ireland; to end the dreadful housing conditions that afflict the majority of the population in both parts of the country, an education system that forces children in the Irish Republic to leave school at the tender age of 14 years and denies them the right to secondary education. James Connolly would wish to see the might of the movement used in order to take up with the British Government, the British Labour Party and the British Trades Union Congress the continued injustice done to his country by the continuation of partition, which weakens Ireland, and places the whole country into a position where Britain is able to carry out a policy of neo-colonialism even in that part which has political freedom.

We still have the rack-renting, slum-owning landlord; the sweating and profit-grinding capitalist . . . not only of Irish and British nationality. We have, in our midst, North and South, these

forces from America, France, Japan, West Germany, etc. Connolly wanted to be rid of the Irish and English variety—he, if he lived today, would be more than ever keen to get rid of the capitalists of the nations whom he hoped to help to topple when he went out in 1916.

We know the struggle is not yet finished. But James Connolly has left us an example of work and struggle that will help us on our way. He also left us a treasure house in his writings that enables us to see things for what they are with the aid of which to encourage the Irish working class to go on to victory.

"To speed the day the world awaits when Labour
long oppressed,
Shall rise and strike for freedom true, and from
the tyrants wrest—
The power they have abused so long. Oh, ever
glorious deed.
The crowning point of history, yet child of bitterest
need.
Ah, woe is me, thy father's eyes will not behold
that day,
I faint and die; child, hold my hand,
Keep-thou-my- Leg-a-cy."

And we will keep his **Legacy**.