

**THE RELEVANCE**

OF

**JAMES CONNOLLY**

IN

**IRELAND TO-DAY**

BY

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## THE RELEVANCE OF CONNOLLY

It is hardly necessary to remind Irish workers of James Connolly's life-long work as a Trades Union organiser. There can be no question in our minds as to the relevance of that side to his work in the circumstances of to-day.

When, however, we come to consider as a more comprehensive question the relevance of Connolly in 1970 we are thinking not only of his work as a Trades Union organiser, but of his whole political outlook in which that work was contained and, very much, of his view of Irish politics in relation to world politics.

There always have been, and probably still are, sincere and devoted Trade Union workers who see the function of working-class organisation as beginning and ending in the amelioration of the lot of wage-earning people within the capitalist system of society. If any of us accept that view of working-class struggle, we must, I think, dismiss Connolly's political teaching as irrelevant. He never held that view.

If, on the other hand, we believe, as he believed, that working-class struggle for better conditions within the kind of society in which we live must, to achieve a worthwhile result, be pushed ahead to the overthrow of the social system that rests on the exploitation of the working classes, and to the organisation of society on a socialist basis instead—if we accept that as our task—then we can, to some purpose, consider the question of the relevance of Connolly's teaching to the tactics of today.

I will not suggest that Connolly, or any other man, was invariably correct in his judgments, but I do contend that the more we study in his writings his attitude towards key questions that arose in the political movements of his own day the more we will be struck by the relevance of his judgments to the questions that arise today. The reason, I think, is that to him more than to most political leaders the Irish nation was the Irish people. His concern was with the realities of their lives—with the realities with which they were forced to contend—and he saw the political situation whole, both at home and abroad, as few of his contemporaries did. The subjection and oppression of the Irish nation was, to him, the subjection and oppression of the non-exploiting classes in Ireland by the capitalist society whose power centre and control was in London—whose interest was not in the Irish people but in the control of the Irish economy for the benefit of the British economy, emphasising especially the production of cattle for the British market. That recognition of the effect on Irish living conditions of foreign control was,

surely, the essential thing differentiating him from many socialist leaders of his day.

He was well aware, of course, of that section of society in Ireland that held its privileged position in Irish life by its subservience to the British imperial requirements. He drew a sharp line between that section and the people he thought of as the oppressed Irish nation. In one of his last editorials (April 8, 1916) he wrote: "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 pressman—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." When he made his final stand for national independence his flag displayed the earthly agricultural plough as well as the starry constellation.

Connolly is so fully established now in the hearts of those Irish people that every political leader, of no matter what party, must needs pay lip service to him, but he is well documented, and easily understood if we are willing to accept the difficulties of the task that he lays upon us. For the purpose of this discussion\* I shall only draw your attention to a few examples of situations in which his judgment was challenged by many people who shared his socialist objective, but who were less realistic in their approach than he was—situations in which I think that his judgment has great relevance today. In each case Connolly's differences with other socialists illustrate the special contribution that Connolly made to Irish politics—arising, as they did, from his better understanding of the meaning of the imperial link, and of the part that the national struggle against empire has to play in the general working-class struggle against capitalism.

But times, we are told, have changed. We must live in the present; not in the past. That of course, is right—unquestionably so, but my contention is that the changes that we see in the political situation since Connolly's day are very superficial changes; are, indeed, principally changes in the names of things; that the political situation in Ireland today is very similar basically to what it was fifty-odd years ago, and that the neo-colonialism of today serves the same exploiting interests that were served in Connolly's time by the more blatantly stated imperialism.

On the home front—having progressed from Redmondism

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\*This paper was intended for a symposium under the auspices of the Dublin Trades Council.

through Griffithism and, now, back to Redmondism—we have to make our choice again between Connolly and Redmond. On the international front we have still to make our choice between Connolly and the socialists of the Second International who denounced Connolly as a Chauvinist while they were themselves supporting their respective capitalist governments in a war of imperialist rivalries.

In 1914 the Irish will for independence was being met by a concession of Home Rule—a recognised national identity—an Irish parliament in Dublin having a flag of its own and a police force of its own, but having no powers, even theoretically, to develop an Irish economy. Under Redmond's Home Rule act our economy was to remain a subservient part of the British economy, and, in return for that sop, we were committed to the defence of that imperial economy against its rivals in the war that was about to erupt in Europe.

It was against that settlement—that completely phoney “independence”—that Connolly revolted in 1916. When he took command of the republican forces in Dublin, he, an internationally minded socialist, spoke his last word on the question of the part that a national revolt against empire has to play in the general working-class struggle against capitalism. His concern was with the reality of empire—not with names or symbols; not with “a recognised national identity”, but with the reconquest of Ireland by its people.

Connolly commanded the republican forces in Dublin in 1916, but—and this is important today—he was no war-monger. He met the war situation by means dictated by the war situation. You will find no glorifying or glamourising of war in the things he wrote about it. When his very close comrade, Patrick Pearse, wrote his notorious essay glorifying the butchery that was going on in Europe as an ennobling thing in itself Connolly pointed out that the workers of Europe were butchering each other for the benefit of their exploiters. He told Pearse that anyone who held the views on war that Pearse had expressed must be “a blithering idiot”. He urged the socialist leaders of Europe to cease their co-operation with their governments, and, if necessary, to fight their way out of that war. He told them that in doing so the price in blood that they would have to pay would be less than what they were already paying in defence of their masters' dividends.

It was not any kind of love of war, or ambition for martyrdom that influenced Connolly in his action in 1916. It was his understanding of the connection that there is between the imperial link and the capitalist grip.

The Rising, as we know, failed in its objective, but it did

not, as we are sometimes told, "bring the gun into politics". The gun was always in politics. There were about 40,000 Irishmen killed in that war in defence of empire. On the contrary, in spite of its failure, the Rising put an end very largely to the drain of young men to the slaughter-house in Flanders, and it aroused a spirit of courage that made it possible to resist the conscription plans that the British government had for Ireland.

This discussion is not one about war or no war—that is a different question—but Connolly's attitude in 1916 does bring us close up to the question of involvement today in the military defence of the capitalists of Europe in the presently proceeding consolidation of their power in the European Economic Community.

It was not as a soldier that Connolly was denounced by the Second International socialist leaders of England and of the other countries. He was denounced by them as a Chauvinist because he advocated the breaking up of empires by the national struggle of subject peoples, as opposed to their policy—if it can be called a policy—of supporting the war efforts of their respective empires and working for reforms within those empires whose rivalries had erupted in war. He saw Irish independence, in his own words, as "the first requisite for the free development of the national powers needed for our class".

My second example of an issue on which Connolly differed from other socialists of his time is concerned with the partition of Ireland and its relation to the imperial link and the capitalist grip.

The support given by the major part of the Belfast working class to the political Unionism of their employers has made it easy for the imperial government to ensure the continuing weakness of the anti-imperialist movements in Ireland—North and South. It was an important factor in frustrating Griffith's effort to develop an Irish capitalist economy as well as in frustrating Connolly's effort to create an Irish socialist republic.

Connolly was, in those critical years leading up to the 1916 Rising, working in Belfast as a Trades Union organiser, and so, with his views on the real nature of imperialism, it was inevitable that he should come into collision with imperially minded leaders of the Belfast Labour movement—notably with William Walker, with whom he carried on a long and bitter controversy in the I.L.P. paper, "Forward".

Walker, when standing for election as a Labour candidate, was sufficiently candid to describe himself as "a Unionist in

politics". He sought to combine the political views of the Ulster Unionist Council with the social policies of the British Labour Party. While Connolly was working strenuously to unite the Belfast and Dublin working classes in an Irish Labour Party, Walker was urging a merger of the North of Ireland Labour movement into the British Labour movement.

Connolly said of Walker's policy that it was "scarcely distinguishable from imperialism—the merging of subjugated peoples in the political system of their conquerors". He saw the strength of the Irish working class to lie in the unity of the Labour movements of Belfast and Dublin. He saw the Walker policy as a partitionist policy—a barrier to Irish working-class unity, and a tower of strength to the capitalist classes of both Britain and Ireland.

We have seen recently some very significant developments in Belfast that must have reminded us of the old controversy between Connolly and Walker. We have seen the leftward forces in the Belfast Trades Union movement scoring a victory by preventing the pogrom from spreading into the shipyards and factories. We have seen, too, the reaction to that victory by the more imperially minded section in a revival of Walker's idea of merging the North of Ireland Labour movement into the British Labour movement.

Has Connolly's controversy with Walker any relevance today?

Just one more example. There is a natural tendency for Trades Unionists to think in terms of urban life, and to forget how much we are still—in spite of continuing clearances—a landward nation. It is not altogether easy for a socialist movement to see itself as leading the rural workers to a victory that would establish their position in the socialist society of the future.

In this connection I would draw your attention to Connolly's attitude towards agrarian struggle when he described James Fintan Lalor as "this Irish apostle of revolutionary socialism".

Connolly has been criticised by more than one commentator for having described Lalor in those terms—on the grounds that Lalor was not a doctrinaire socialist. Lalor, of course, was not a doctrinaire socialist, and Connolly *was* a doctrinaire socialist, but Connolly saw the non-exploiting tenant farmer, whose emancipation was Lalor's chief concern, not only as powerful allies in the struggle against the imperial link—which undoubtedly they are—but as an essential part of the Irish population for whose emancipation he strove—as a section which could be integrated into the socialist society of

the future, and without which the Labour movement could not hope to advance beyond an ameliorative role within the capitalist society. He referred, in the editorial that could be called his political will, to "the Irish working class, the only secure foundation upon which a free nation can be reared". When he described Lator as "this Irish apostle of revolutionary socialism" he made it clear that he counted the non-exploiting farming class within that category.

If the Labour movement has advanced beyond the policy of amelioration—if it is thinking in terms of the reconquest of Ireland by its people—can we question the relevance, in the circumstances of today, of Connolly's attitude to Lator?

With regard to the situation today: Connolly's political views, of course, never formed the policy of an Irish State. Griffith's political views did become guiding lines in the Twenty-six Counties State under Fianna Fail rule. Within the past few years we have seen Griffith's policy of Irish capitalist development abandoned. We have seen what amounts to a return to Redmondism.

In this democracy of ours we are not told very much about what is being done with us, but the fact of the abandonment of Griffithism and the return to Redmondism, with all its implications, has become increasingly apparent.

If anyone is interested in ferreting out the facts leading up to the change in foreign policy—and in home policy to correspond, for they cannot be separated—I would suggest that he should study the newspaper reports relating to the manipulation of the Marshall Aid grants and loans, and the pushing into the background of the Minister for External Affairs whose policy was more representative of the old republicanism of the Fianna Fail rank and file by that section of the Fianna Fail Party Leadership that was more representative of the business interests that were willing to work closely with the capitalist rulers of the Anglo-American power bloc.

According to the newspaper reports of the time the crisis arose through the American government changing the terms governing their Marshall Aid plan, and insisting on the States to which they had given aid "without strings" giving now a guarantee of support to the political and military plans of the Anglo-American bloc.

Mr. Lemass, who had in his youth been a notably courageous soldier for independence, did not willingly abandon his attitude of non-alignment. He knew where the foundations of the State rested, and he appealed urgently to the Chambers of Commerce to come to the rescue. The Irish Independent quotes him as telling them that "questions of economic and



financial policy which must be decided this year would divide the people between those who were willing to see the nation 'kept as a pet by somebody dependent on foreign aid' and those who wanted to see it able to stand alone and maintain its freedom."

The Chamber of Commerce, as might be expected, showed no enthusiasm for maintaining such freedom, and it was not long before Mr. Lemass's speeches showed that he had surrendered to the economic pressure.

There followed a period during which we heard totally contradictory statements by different Fianna Fail Party leaders as to their policy with regard to Irish involvement with the Anglo-American bloc. According to an Irish Times report in October 1962 it was in New York, in July of that year, that Mr. Lemass first announced his intention to abandon the policy of neutrality. He is reported as saying: "We are prepared to go into any integrated Union without any reservations at all as to how far this would take us in the field of foreign policy or defence commitments."

Mr. De Valera, who apparently was not keeping up with the changing times, stated, also in October 1962: "Neutrality remains constant national policy. We would never allow any foreign State to use our country as a base.", and Mr. Lemass, just a few days later, while negotiating in Bonn for admission to the E.E.C., found it necessary to contradict Mr. De Valera flatly. The Irish Press of October 24, 1962, reports him as stating: "In the East-West conflict we are not neutral. . . . We have made it quite clear that our desire is to participate in whatever political union may ultimately develop in Europe. We are making no reservations of any sort, including defence."

The Fianna Fail government, in short, had attempted to maintain an independent foreign policy on the basis of the Griffithite State and had found that that structure would not support it, so now, in spite of some difficulties of readjustment that have become very obvious recently, we are back to Redmondism—to "a recognised national identity" accepting once again subservience to the British economy, and committed once again to the political and military defence of that economy. That, I contend, is the big issue in Irish politics today. Other dangers there are, but they are minor ones. Capitalism is defending itself today—not by a return to the methods of thirty-odd years ago—but by a consolidation of its power in Brussels and Wall Street.

We see the British government working towards a solution to the troubles in the North which will, they hope, make the new Redmondism more acceptable to the Irish people.

We see the Twenty-six Counties government collaborating with that design in its own way—moving carefully, and sometimes with difficulty, because of the anti-partitionist feeling in its followers.

All the voices—newspapers and others—that represent the interests of Irish capitalism, both of the old Unionist and old Redmondite varieties, are urging upon us now the same course that Redmond urged upon us in 1914. The hook is baited with vague talk of a possible reunited Ireland within some kind of “federation” with Britain.

In 1914 there were voices, too, that claimed to speak for socialism urging the same things that Redmond urged. It was in defiance of those voices, with their accusations of Chauvinism, that Connolly rose in revolt against Redmondism in 1916.

So—we have Redmondism in Dublin again. We have Walkerism in Belfast again. We have land clearances again to make room for bullocks. The question of the relevance of Connolly depends for its answer upon whether the Labour movement of today is inspired by the spirit of Redmond—with his side-kick, Walker—or by the spirit of Connolly.

If we accept the reality of neo-colonialism as the over-all motive of the capitalist rulers in the situation of today, can we then question the relevance of Connolly versus the imperial link—of Connolly versus Walker—of Connolly’s approval of James Fintan Lalor? He differed with many socialists on those interwoven issues. His attitude to them constitutes his special contribution to Irish political thought.

The Labour Party is presented with an opportunity—and a responsibility. It is just not good enough for some of its leaders to allow themselves to be diverted from the great issue of involvement in the Anglo-American defence of capitalism by the techniques—Paisleyite or Blaneyite—that are being used to influence simple people on both sides of the border.

Both Blaney and Paisley are appealing to deeply seated—and admirable—emotional survivals from the struggles of freedom-loving people in the past. Their efforts are harmful and destructive of working-class unity, but they are especially harmful and dangerous if we allow them to blind us to the return, by the less simple leaders of both sections—North and South—to the new Redmondism.

My contention is that the Labour movement still has that choice to make that Connolly had to make fifty-five years ago.



George Gilmore

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