

James Connolly and the Irish Labour Party

Donal Mac Fhearraigh

100 years of celebration?

2012 marks the centenary of the founding of the Irish Labour Party. Like most political parties in Ireland, Labour likes to trade on its radical heritage by drawing a link to Connolly.

On the history section of the Labour Party's website it says,

'The Labour Party was founded in 1912 in Clonmel, County Tipperary, by James Connolly, James Larkin and William O'Brien as the political wing of the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC). It is the oldest political party in Ireland and the only one which pre-dates independence. The founders of the Labour Party believed that for ordinary working people to shape society they needed a political party that was committed to serving their needs; they knew that there is only so much that trade unions and community organisations can do, an effective political party is needed to create a fair society'.

The Labour Party has never lived up to the rhetoric about its radical roots. During the 1950s, Jack White, the deputy editor of the Irish Times was asked by a foreign colleague to explain the irrelevance of the left-right cleavage in Irish politics. 'Draw a line, and put all the parties well to the right,' he explained. 'But what about the Labour Party?' his companion inquired,

to which White replied, 'Put that furthest of all'¹. White was joking but only just, and if Labour was regarded as conservative at home it was even more so when compared with her sister parties.

One historian described it as 'the most opportunistically conservative party in the known world'². It was not until the late 1960s that the party professed an adherence to socialism, a word which had been completely taboo until that point. Arguably the least successful social democratic or Labour Party in Western Europe, the Irish Labour Party has never held office alone and has only been the minority party in coalition. Labour has continued this tradition in the current government with Fine Gael. Far from being 'the party of socialism' it has been the party of austerity.

The Labour Party got elected a year ago on promises of burning the bondholders and defending ordinary people against cutbacks. Instead they have attacked the most vulnerable in our society. They have utterly betrayed those who voted for them. They have championed the EU-IMF programme as the only possible solution to the crisis and now advocating for the Fiscal Treaty that will see further cuts inflicted on working class families.

Lone parents and those on social welfare are suffering the brunt of the attacks from Labour Party Ministers like Joan Burton. Threats to cut welfare payments and force people into unpaid internship work abound while the rich are molly-coddled with tax breaks and suffer no surveillance on their tax returns.

Struggling single parents will see their income slashed by €1,000 a year. The up-

¹Niamh Puirseil: The Irish Labour Party, p408

²As above.

per age limit of the youngest child for new claimants of the one-parent family payment is to be reduced to 12 and it will then be further reduced on a phased basis. Child benefit for families with three and more children was cut by €19 a month for the third child and €17 a month for the fourth and further subsequent children - hitting the poorest families in the State. They are being scapegoated for a recession they did not cause. They hiked the top rate of VAT from 21 percent to 23 percent, which impacted most on poorer people.

The back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance was cut by €55 for children aged 12 or more and €50 for children aged between four and 11 - the eligibility age of this allowance was raised from two to four years. Special needs assistants in schools have been cut, third level students face increased fees and small rural schools are being closed.

The fuel allowance payment is to be reduced by almost a fifth, in the context of a report by the Institute of Public Health which found that levels of fuel poverty on the island of Ireland remain 'unacceptably high' and that these are responsible for 'among the highest levels of excess winter mortality in Europe, with an estimated 2,800 excess deaths on the island in the winter months'.

The community sector faces a reduction in funding of 35 percent by the end of 2013. This will devastate the poorest communities in the country. Affordable child-care will be stopped and a route out of deep poverty through education and training will be removed.

They have continued the deep cuts on health expenditure: €2.5 billion over three years, over 8,000 fewer staff resulting in closure of hospital wards and beds, leading to more public patients waiting longer for hospital treatment; poor, inadequate or non-existent community and primary care

services; closure of public nursing homes; a 5 percent cut to home helps; and cuts to the State subvention for prescription drugs.

Instead of creating jobs this government has slashed more jobs in the public sector. Pensions have been attacked and people will now be forced to work until the age of 68.

But it's a different story for the rich: The top 1 percent has recovered all their losses since the crash in 2008. The top 5 percent are sitting on assets worth €219 Billion according to the Central Statistics Office. There is no talk of taxing those assets; rather in the last budget the super-rich were given more tax breaks with some highly paid executives on €500,000 a year expected to pay only 30 percent income tax.

Rather than creating a 'fair society' Labour have helped increase inequality in Ireland.

The founding of the Labour Party



The National Executive of the Irish TUC and Labour Party, 1914

The Labour Party is a million miles away from where James Connolly, one of its founders, envisioned it could be.

As one of the delegates to the annual meeting of the Irish Trade Union Congress

of 1912 at Clonmel, Connolly moved the resolution ‘that the independent representation of labour upon all public boards be, and is hereby included ,among the objectives of this congress³.’ It was carried by 49 votes to 19, with another 19 delegates not recorded.

Connolly’s attempt to form a broader ‘labour party’ linked to the trades unions was an attempt to sharpen class struggle in Ireland and not a move towards constitutional reformist politics.

It was an attempt by him to form a militant class struggle based party to fit the specific needs of the Irish working class at the time. Connolly proposed that an Irish Labour Party be formed, its purpose being ‘to fight the capitalist parties of Ireland on their own soil⁴.’

Connolly saw the Labour Party initially as a broad non-socialist movement. He insisted that the new party ‘must keep a place for those who are not as far advanced as themselves, but whose class interests would bring them into line⁵.’ The Labour Party would be the municipal and parliamentary wing of the trades unions.

Connolly was absolutely right to try to give workers an independent voice in Irish politics. Only a year later all the nationalist rhetoric about all the Irish standing together against British exploitation was exposed by the great Dublin lock-out when Irish employers sought to smash the trade union movement in Dublin.

Connolly’s perspective was that the Home Rule Bill would soon be passed in the British parliament and therefore the question of nationalism would recede in Irish politics. What was needed in his view was a party for Irish workers to be able to act independently of Irish employers.

These views were expressed most clearly in Connolly’s pamphlet *The Reconquest of Ireland* which he wrote for the new Labour Party.

Connolly articulated this perspective at the 1913 congress of the ITUC where he stressed the extent to which the Labour Party was ‘above national divisions’. He claimed that in the past ‘the English Labour Party was the natural ally’ as it was better to ‘appeal to our own class across the water than appealing to our enemies in the master class in our country⁶’.

However, far from the Home Rule Bill ending the national question in Irish politics and clearing the way for class politics, it precipitated a new crisis in Ireland as Unionists organised against it. Connolly was forced to re-assess his political perspective.

The Labour Party remained a stalled project. The Irish TUC put little resources or time into it. At the first meeting of the Labour parliamentary committee in 1913 Larkin resigned the chair and Connolly refused to take it up, believing it would not work without Larkin at the helm. Thereafter the Labour Party remained a vehicle for issuing statements and lobbying government ministers until its rebirth after the First World War.

The Labour Party never became the working class political force Connolly hoped for, not because of organisational failings but because it became the mouthpiece of the trade union bureaucracy. It sought at most to represent workers, not to break capitalism.

Connolly believed it was possible to safeguard against reformism by having the party tied to militant industrial unions. He underestimated the need for independent

³James Connolly: A full life, Donal Nevin, p424

⁴ James Connolly, Forward, July 1st, 1911

⁵ITUC report 1914, p43

⁶ITUC report 1913, p34

socialist political organisation inside the trade union movement to combat the reformist political ideas of the trade union bureaucracy.

Instead Connolly argued that a socialist party only needed to make general propaganda in society and that the unions would do the rest.

He thought the union bureaucracy could become a force for revolution under the pressure of working class militancy. He did not conceive of the bureaucracy as a distinct conservative social layer inside the workers' movement.

This meant the ideas of the developing trade union bureaucracy were not challenged and the way was left open for them to compromise with the new nationalist ruling class.

Labour refused to contest the 1918 general election or the 1921 Parliamentary elections under the mistaken slogan of 'labour must wait' and thus left an uncontested field for the nationalists. It was after this that the party was revived in its modern safe parliamentary form - a million miles away from the class struggle party Connolly had envisioned.

Labour: Connolly's life work?

Joanna Tuffy TD, criticising RTE's 'Ireland's Greatest' show in 2010 about James Connolly that had forgotten to mention his role in setting up the Labour Party, said, 'It was his life's work to set up such a party'⁷.

Was the founding of the Labour Party really his life's work? Only someone who has never read any of Connolly's writings could utter such words.

⁷ <http://www.labour.ie/joannatuffy/blogarchive/2010/10/05/james-connolly-founder-of-the-labour-party/>

⁸ <http://www.labour.ie/blog/category/james+connolly/>

⁹ K.Allen, *The Politics of James Connolly*, London 1990, p.11

¹⁰ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1913/01/dockward.htm>

In 2008 at the Labour party's annual James Connolly Commemoration held in Arbour Hill, Dublin, even Eamon Gilmore, leader of the Labour Party, said 'Connolly's legacy has been claimed by many. But his life's story, and the many writings he left behind, make it impossible to depart from the compelling truth. That James Connolly was, first and foremost, a socialist'⁸. Which is much more than can be said for Eamon Gilmore.

But Connolly was not just a socialist he was a revolutionary socialist. He recognised the need to participate in elections but only as a tactic for agitation. 'The election of a socialist to any public body', he wrote, 'is only valuable in so far as it is the return of a disturber of the political peace'⁹. Connolly was completely clear on the need for revolutionary change to achieve socialism. Far from the creation of the Labour Party being his life's work, it is his unswerving commitment to working class self-emancipation that shines through all his writings.

Connolly was first and foremost a revolutionary. In January 1913, a year after the formation of the Labour Party, he stood as a candidate in the municipal election in Belfast. In one of his speeches he said,

'Believing that the present system of society is based upon the robbery of the working class, and that capitalist property cannot exist without the plundering of labour, I desire to see capitalism abolished, and a democratic system of common or public ownership erected in its stead'¹⁰.

In 1912, the previous year, Connolly

waged a polemic with the leading socialist in Belfast, if not Ireland, at the time, William Walker, on the need for socialists to have a revolutionary and not just a reformist perspective. Connolly labelled Walker's politics 'gas and water socialism' because of his sole focus on municipal services instead of the achievement of workers' power.

While supporting greater state intervention he was against 'mere government socialism'. Every reform would be won by workers militancy. Reforms and socialist policies would be achieved by the increasing power of the industrial unions on the factory floor. He wrote:

State ownership and control is not necessarily socialism - if it were, then the army, the navy, the police would all be socialist functionaries an immense gulf separates the 'nationalising' proposals of the middle class from the 'socialising' demands of the revolutionary working class¹¹.

During the great lock-out of 1913 Connolly formed the Irish Citizens Army. It was created to protect the workers from any groups that might have been employed by the employers to 'rough up' any striking worker. The ICA later played a central role in the Easter Rising.

In Belfast as in Dublin he was a strong supporter of the militant sections of the Suffragette campaigners for votes for women.

It was also at this time that James Connolly revived a newspaper called *The Worker's Republic*. Up to this year, all of Connolly's work had been orientated around socialism and developing the rights of the working class.

Far from abandoning revolutionary socialism for a reformist approach based on parliamentary change it is clear Connolly remained a revolutionary socialist. More over his commitment to revolution intensified, rather than waned, with the outbreak of the First World War, which he opposed on internationalist grounds. He denounced both those 'socialists' (like the German Social Democratic Party) who supported the imperialist slaughter and those who (like Karl Kautsky and Keir Hardie) who took a passive, or pacifist attitude to it. 'When the bugle sounded the first note for actual war, their notes should have been taken as the tocsin for social revolution'¹².

Someone whose politics were further away from those of Eamon Gilmore and the current Irish Labour Party would be hard to imagine. Unfortunately, as we shall see, there were weaknesses in his understanding of what was needed to defeat the influence of reformism in the working class.

The roots of reformism

Connolly's concept of a Labour Party that he proposed in 1912 was rooted in his experience of the revolutionary American trade union tradition, the syndicalists.

The Industrial Workers of the World (known as the Wobblies) were a militant revolutionary union who sought to overcome the divisions in the working class by organising everyone in 'One Big Union'. They had a vision of taking power within capitalism one factory at a time until they controlled all the economy. They therefore didn't need to engage in any political struggle with the capitalist class, it would all be decided at the economic level.

This approach meant Connolly didn't worry about the politics of the Labour Party, it only mattered that it was strongly

¹¹Cited in C.Desmond Greaves, *The Life and Times of James Connolly*, London, 1976, p.130

¹²Cited in K.Allen, as above, p.126

bound to the industrial unions, he thought that would guarantee militant politics dominated the new party.

Connolly's idea that you could guard against reformist politics by tying political organisation to a militant industrial base proved wrong. He lacked a clear analysis of reformism and its social base.

Tony Cliff, the founder of the SWP international tradition, helped develop a clear Marxist understanding of the social base of Labour and social democratic type parties.

Labourism is the political expression of the politics of the trade union bureaucracy. The trade union bureaucracy forms a distinct social layer in society. Their aim is to achieve a compromise between workers and employers. Left-wing trade union officials may fight harder for a better deal, but in the end of the day they too seek to cut a deal with the bosses - they don't try to get rid of the bosses altogether.

Lenin described reformist Labour type parties accurately as 'capitalist workers' parties'. They are capitalist in the sense that they do not seek to break from capitalism but rather seek only to curtail its worst excesses. They are workers' parties because they draw their support from the working class and are organically linked to the trade unions.

Therefore socialists need to organise inside the unions independently of the trade union bureaucracy. But it's not enough to just be a militant trade unionist, a socialist must be, as Lenin put it, a tribune of the people. That is a socialist must fight the system on an ideological and political level as well as economically. Socialists must offer a clear political alternative not just to capitalist parties but to reformist parties as well.

Connolly's model of socialist organisation downplayed this and therefore when major political questions emerged in so-

ciety the socialists split between the reformists and revolutionary camps. The resulting weakness of revolutionary socialist forces meant Connolly was in a much weaker position when the national crisis erupted in 1916.

100 years on: Is the labour party finished?

The question of reformism is still one on which socialists need political clarity. Some socialists argue that all Labour and Social Democrats across Europe have now become social liberal parties and therefore the question of reformism is now dead.

These socialists connect reformism to particular organisational forms and are confused when reformism re-emerges in other forms- whether as left reformist splits from traditional labour parties -like Syriza in Greece, Die Linke in Germany or the Front de Gauche in France, or in the form of Sinn Fein in Ireland.

Getting it wrong on how to relate to these movements and parties can be disastrous for socialists as can be seen from the experience of socialists in France.

Combating reformism cannot be done simply by launching a new party with a 'socialist program'. New left parties, like the United Left Alliance in Ireland, will be sites of struggle between reformist and revolutionary ideas; they will not exclude reformist ideas just by declaring it. How these parties develop depends on the course of the class struggle and on how socialists operate inside them. If they are too sectarian they can become moribund, if they are too opportunist they can be incorporated into the system.

Up to the very moment of successful socialist revolution revolutionary socialists will need to adopt methods of organising that draw non-revolutionary workers into common struggle. This will primar-

ily mean united fronts with members and supporters of reformist parties.

Reformist consciousness also has deep roots in the everyday experience of workers under capitalism. Reformism is the 'common sense' of the working class under capitalism and therefore will be with us until the moment of socialist revolution. It is rooted in the alienation and commodification of capitalism¹³. Under capitalism everything can be bought and sold, including workers' labour power. The exploitation of the system is hidden under a seemingly equal exchange of goods - the ability to work for a wage. It is summed up in the phrase 'a fair days work for a fair days wage'. This seemingly equal exchange hides the exploitative basis of the system - that each worker produces more than they get paid in their wage packet, while the rest goes to the bosses as profit.

This 'common sense' only starts to break down when workers understand their central role in feeding the system's profits

and begin to get a sense of their potential power. Often this starts to happen during strikes or other forms of collective struggle. But as class struggle is uneven this insight is discovered by different sections of the working class at different times and places. It is the central role of the revolutionary party to gather together these most militant sections of the class that understand the power and potential of the working class, in order to wage an ideological and political struggle against the influence of bourgeois and reformist ideas in the class as a whole.

The working class, in its majority, only comes to socialist consciousness in the process of social revolution. It is during this period that the active and focused intervention of a revolutionary party is decisive.

This is why the revolutionary party must maintain its political and organisational coherence at the same time as working in broader movements and alliances like the ULA.

¹³Marx developed his analysis of alienation in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and of the fetishism of commodities in Capital, Chapter 1, Section 4