

Connolly: 150 years on

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James Connolly was an exemplary socialist rebel. He became a revolutionary socialist and Marxist in his early twenties after reading the *Communist Manifesto*. He continues to be Ireland's most important Marxist. The socialist vision and strategies he developed for Ireland continue to be of profound importance today. The 150th anniversary of Connolly's birth is an opportunity to celebrate his contribution to the international working class struggle and to engage with his ideas to bring about an end to capitalism and imperialism; and the struggle for a socialist Ireland.

Though best known as a leader of the 1916 Irish Rising and the 1913 Great Dublin Lockout, Connolly was born in Edinburgh, Scotland on June 5, 1868. His parents, like hundreds of thousands of others, had fled the misery and death of Ireland's Great Hunger. In their new homes, poverty for Irish migrant families was common. As a result, Connolly worked in menial jobs from a very early age. Formal education ended for Connolly when he was just eleven years old. Considering his future unique theoretical, political and strategic contributions to the international working class movement, this is quite impressive. Falsifying his age and name, he joined the British Army in 1882, when he was only fourteen years old. For many migrant children, poverty was the main form of recruitment into military service.

Connolly first arrived in Ireland in the uniform of a British private. He hated military service but it gave him a tremendous insight into the role of the army, the ordinary soldier and Britain's role in Ireland. The future prospect of former occupying soldiers leading rebellions against imperial states is something we should celebrate and look forward to. When stationed in Dublin Connolly met Lily Hughes, his future wife and lifelong companion. Lily was from a Protestant Church

of Ireland background and employed by a wealthy family in Dublin's suburbs.

After seven years of service in Ireland, Connolly deserted the army, possibly because his regiment was bound for India. He returned to Scotland where he joined the socialist movement in 1889 and became active in the trade union movement. The late 1880's witnessed the first wave of militant struggles led by low paid workers in Ireland and Britain for better conditions known as 'New Unionism'. Working as a carter in Edinburgh, Connolly joined the Scottish Socialist Federation and studied the works of Marx, Engels and William Morris. For Connolly, and an entire generation of activists like him, socialist ideas gave theoretical direction to their class anger and pointed towards a strategy of human liberation led by the international working class.

Connolly returned to Ireland in 1896 to take on the position as organiser of the Dublin socialists. Before long Connolly and a small network of socialists founded a new organisation, the Irish Socialist Republican Party (ISRP). Their goal was to build a revolutionary socialist movement in Ireland with the objective of overthrowing capitalism and British imperialism simultaneously through the establishment of a socialist Workers' Republic. Connolly and ISRP pioneered the application of marxism to Irish politics through their newspaper, the Workers' Republic. They put forward a socialist perspective in defence of the Irish language, the role of religion and a whole host of other questions. Rejecting the traditional republican movements conspiratorialism and sole emphasis on a physical-force approach, the party campaigned for reforms that would improve the lives of people living in Dublin slums. This included, for example, campaigning against landlords, low wages, terrible sanitation conditions and for better treatment

of working class children. The ISRP challenged the Catholic Church's embrace of the political establishment and toleration of poverty for those it ministered to. The socialists regularly stood for election with Connolly famously arguing:

The election of a Socialist to any public body at present, is only valuable in so far as it is the return of a disturber of the political peace. Until Socialism attains such a foothold in this country as shall enable the Socialists to return a majority to the public bodies which rule the country, every fresh seat captured must simply be regarded as a fresh means of spoiling the little games of the Jabezian philanthropists, financial jobbers, and political thimblerriggers, who thrive on their reputations as Liberal and Tory politicians. If only for the value of letting the light of public opinion in on the doings of officialdom, we should never relax our efforts until every representative body has its full quota of Socialist members.

Connolly left Ireland in 1903 to join the growing socialist movement in the United States in order to relate socialist ideas to the massive population of Irish migrants living there. He spent seven years in the US where he was active in the Socialist Labor Party, the Industrial Workers of the World (Wobblies), the Irish Socialist Federation and the Socialist Party. He campaigned across the US for the Socialist Party Presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs and for a break with the two capitalist parties, the Democratic and Republican. Connolly spent his entire time in the US living and working with migrants and the American working class; he had absolutely no truck with the wealthy, conservative and racist Irish-American political establishment.

In 1910, Connolly returned to Ireland to set about building the Socialist Party of Ireland. As a organiser for the ITGWU in Belfast, he worked to bring Catholic and Protestant workers together in common struggle. With James Larkin, Connolly was a key leader of the 1913 Dublin Lockout. Amidst the turmoil of agitation opposing Home Rule and the outbreak of the First World War, Connolly campaigned against partition and against support for Britain's war effort. Socialists, Connolly argued, should do everything possible to stop the imperial war including igniting a European-wide revolution from below. Connolly agitated for a rising in Ireland with the view that it could end British rule and

set-off a struggle against capitalism and imperialism across the entire continent. He was executed by the British Army for his role in the 1916 Irish Rising.

Connolly and Women's Liberation

Connolly's support for the women's struggle is possibly one of the least known aspects of his politics. One hundred years ago society was much more conservative in the way it viewed and treated women – and the international socialist movement certainly reflected this. The changing role of women in society and the women's rights struggle against oppression have had a dramatic impact on Ireland and across the world, but we are still very far from full and genuine equality.

Connolly worked with and was influenced by many leading women activists and campaigners in the socialist, feminist, suffrage, trade union, anti-war and Irish independence movement. Many women played a prominent and leading role in the Irish Citizen Army with Connolly. He was a keen supporter of the right of women to organise for trade union rights and supported the formation of the Irish Women Workers Union. The founders of the Irish Women's Franchise League, Francis and Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, described Connolly as "the soundest and most thorough-going feminist of all the Irish labour men."

In his last pamphlet, *The Re-Conquest of Ireland*, Connolly included a chapter on Woman where he wrote:

In Ireland the women's cause is felt by all Labour men and women as their cause; the Labour cause has no more earnest and whole-hearted supporters than the militant women. Rebellion, even in thought, produces a mental atmosphere of its own; the mental atmosphere the women's rebellion produced, opened their eyes and trained their minds to an understanding of the effects upon their sex of a social system in which the weakest must inevitably go to the wall, and when a further study of the capitalist system taught them that the term 'the weakest' means in practice the most scrupulous, the gentlest, the most humane, the most loving and compassionate, the most honourable, and the most sympathetic, then the militant women could not fail to see, that capitalism penalised in human beings just those characteristics of which women supposed themselves to be the most complete embodiment. Thus the spread of industrialism makes for the

awakening of a social consciousness, awakes in women a feeling of self-pity as the greatest sufferers under social and political injustice; the divine wrath aroused when that self-pity is met with a sneer, and justice is denied, leads women to revolt, and revolt places women in comradeship and equality with all the finer souls whose life is given to warfare against established iniquities.

The worker is the slave of capitalist society, the female worker is the slave of that slave. In Ireland that female worker has hitherto exhibited, in her martyrdom, an almost damnable patience. She has toiled on the farms from her earliest childhood, attaining usually to the age of ripe womanhood without ever being vouchsafed the right to claim as her own a single penny of the money earned by her labour, and knowing that all her toil and privation would not earn her that right to the farm which would go without question to the most worthless member of the family, if that member chanced to be the eldest son.

Clearly, Connolly had developed a deep and sympathetic appreciation of the oppression women faced. He continues:

Whatever class rules industrially will rule politically, and impose upon the community in general the beliefs, customs and ideas most suitable to the perpetuation of its rule. These beliefs, customs, ideas become then the highest expression of morality and so remain until the ascent to power of another ruling industrial class establishes a new morality. In Ireland since the Conquest, the landlord-capitalist class has ruled; the beliefs, customs, ideas of Ireland are the embodiment of the slave morality we inherited from those who accepted that rule in one or other of its forms; the subjection of women was an integral part of that rule.

Unless women were kept in subjection, and their rights denied, there was no guarantee that field would be added unto field in the patrimony of the family, or that wealth would accumulate even although men should decay. So, down from the landlord to the tenant or peasant proprietor, from the monopolist to the small business man eager to be a monopolist, and from all above to all below, filtered the beliefs, customs, ideas establishing a slave morality which enforces the subjection of

women as the standard morality of the country. None so fitted to break the chains as they who wear them, none so well equipped to decide what is a fetter. In its march towards freedom, the working class of Ireland must cheer on the efforts of those women who, feeling on their souls and bodies the fetters of the ages, have arisen to strike them off, and cheer all the louder if in its hatred of thralldom and passion for freedom the women's army forges ahead of the militant army of Labour.

But whosoever carries the outworks of the citadel of oppression, the working class alone can raze it to the ground.

Captured in this is Connolly's grasp of the women's rebellion and its relationship to the entire struggle to end capitalism and all forms of oppression. Significantly, Connolly argues for the right of women to determine what constitutes a "fetter" and that it is the duty of the entire working class movement to actively support the struggle.

Socialist Strategy for Ireland

The manifesto of the ISRP declared: "The national and economic freedom of the Irish people must be sought in the same direction, viz., the establishment of Irish Socialist Republic." Their goal was "to muster all the forces of labour for a revolutionary reconstruction of society and the incidental destruction of the British Empire."

Connolly believed that only a mobilised Irish working class had the social power to end British rule while in pursuit of its own economic, social and political demands. Therefore, he fully rejected the idea the working class movement should hold back or moderate its demands in order to appease the upper middle-class and elite Irish nationalists. He turned this argument around - by holding back its struggle for self-determination the working class would weaken the struggle to end British rule. Therefore, he rejected the Republican movement's 'all-class alliance' strategy believing it would not only corrupt the working class movement but also destroy the struggle for independence. So too did Connolly reject the idea of struggling first for independence in order to, sometime long off in the future, fight for socialism. This was a strategy incapable of fighting for fundamental social change.

Connolly's strategy was permanent revolution, not

a revolution in stages determined by what would be acceptable to nationalist elites. He argued nationalist elites who favoured independence or Home Rule would abandon the struggle if they feared it would give power to the working classes. Not just that, when faced with a mobilised working class they would become a counter-revolutionary force seeing themselves as having more in common with the British ruling class. Connolly's vision of an Ireland wide revolutionary upheaval was realised in the revolutionary period 1918-21 when mass working class strikes, workplace occupations, boycotts combined with guerilla war to make it impossible for the British to govern Ireland. Within the revolutionary movement, conservative republicans sided with nationalist elites to undercut urban and rural workers social and economic demands. This weakened the overall revolutionary struggle laying the basis for partition and the emergence of a conservative pro-capitalist elite holding control of the Irish Free State.

Opposition to Partition

Inadvertently, Brexit has become a catalyst for a renewed discussion of the Irish border and partition. Connolly's prognosis of partition is crucial for socialists and progressives today. Though Connolly was for the creation of a fully independent republic, he supported Home Rule for Ireland on the basis that it would weaken Britain's control of its closest and first colony. He also believed it would weaken the political dominance of Nationalist and Unionist elites over politics and create the conditions for the emergence of a working class alternative to both.

Unionists agitated against Home Rule for Ireland fearing it would challenge their position of power and dominance. They found backing from the British establishment for partition. For the British ruling class, partition would keep the economically developed and powerful North East in the United Kingdom and empire. Connolly opposed partition arguing in *The Exclusion of Ulster* in 1914:

The effect of such exclusion upon Labour in Ireland will be at least equally, and probably more, disastrous. All hopes of uniting the workers, irrespective of religion or old political battle cries will be shattered, and through North and South the issue of Home Rule will be still used to cover the iniquities of the capitalist and landlord class. I am not speaking without due knowledge of the sentiments of the organised Labour movement in Ireland

when I say that we would much rather see the Home Rule Bill defeated than see it carried with Ulster or any part of Ulster left out.

Therefore, Connolly's opposition to partition was not based on mythical notions about the nation. Since Connolly believed the Irish working class was the only revolutionary social force that could end both end empire and capitalism - its division North and South would weaken the struggle for socialism. Connolly's understanding of the partition was prophetic. He wrote

Such a scheme as that agreed to by Redmond and Devlin, the betrayal of the national democracy of industrial Ulster would mean a carnival of reaction both North and South, would set back the wheels of progress, would destroy the oncoming unity of the Irish Labour movement and paralyse all advanced movements whilst it endured.

Partition did lead to a 'carnival of reaction' North and South. Partition established two conservative, corrupt and anti-working class states. The 'Orange state' was dominated by Unionist elites who used discrimination to marginalise the Catholic minority and who used the ideology of the Orange Order to instill fear and loyalty among the Protestant working classes. At every challenge to the Northern state in the North, no matter how it first develops, the Unionist elite beats the 'Orange drum' to weaken the potential unity of Protestant and Catholic workers. Partition created a permanent division among the North's working classes - strengthening the power of elites and employers.

In the South, a new elite emerged who used nationalism and Catholicism as a means of controlling the working class and to instill acceptance of poverty. In the 'carnival of reaction' women especially paid a heavy price. Decades later, the reactionary legacy of partition is being systematically challenged by the struggles for women's rights, LGBTQ equality and the separation of Church and State.

Unifying struggles for economic equality and civil rights across the North and South has the potential to challenge partition and the political and social order of both states - and lay the basis for a socialist Ireland as Connolly envisioned.

Challenging Sectarianism

Living in Belfast Connolly witnessed first hand the vicious effects of sectarian division among the working

class. Nevertheless, while there Connolly had success in bringing workers together in the fight for improved conditions. He wrote:

The Irish Catholic was despoiled by force, the Irish Protestant toiler was despoiled by fraud, the spoliation of both continues today under more insidious but more effective forms and the only hope lies in the latter combining with the former in overthrowing their common spoilers, and consenting to live in amity together in the common ownership of their common country – the country which the spirit of their ancestors or the devices of their rulers have made – the place of their origin, or the scene of their travail. I have always held, despite the fanatics on both sides, that the movements of Ireland for freedom could not and cannot be divorced from the world-wide upward movements of the world's democracy. The Irish question is a part of the social question, the desire of the Irish people to control their own destinies is a part of the desire of the workers to forge political weapons for their own enfranchisement as a class.

While campaigning to bring workers together in common struggles that cut across the sectarian divide, Connolly believed it was necessary to challenge support for the British Empire and the Orange Order among Protestant workers for united struggle to be effective. Challenging Sinn Féin's inability to reach Protestant workers and making the case for a different approach he argued:

Hence, when a Sinn Féiner waxes eloquent about restoring the Constitution of '82, but remains silent about the increasing industrial despotism of the capitalist; when the Sinn Féiner speaks to men who are fighting against low wages and tells them that the Sinn Féiner body has promised lots of Irish labour at low wages to any foreign capitalist who wishes to establish in Ireland, what wonder if they come to believe that a change from Toryism to Sinn Féinism would simply be a change from the devil they do know to the devil they do not know!

To unite Catholic and Protestants in the North, the point of the struggle must have the potential to improve working class people's lives. The same argument also applies to the case for ending partition. Winning support among both the Protestant, and the Catholic working class, for ending partition, can only come about

on the basis that the entire working class, North and South, will see an improvement in their lives. Connolly's vision of a socialist Ireland continues to be the key way sectarian division can be challenged in the North.

Militant Labour and the 1913 Dublin Lockout

Connolly believed in the power of the trade union movement to unite the working class in the fight to improve living standards and bring about fundamental social change. For Connolly, the 1913 Dublin Lockout was a precursor to the coming struggle over what Ireland's future would be. He described it as more than an isolated labour struggle but as a battle over which class would shape Ireland's future. The Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) was leading an insurgency of low paid workers for better pay and conditions using militant tactics that terrified Ireland's economic and political elite.

Taking its inspiration from the Industrial Workers of the World in the United States, under the leadership of Connolly and James Larkin the ITGWU was for the establishment of a Workers' Republic, ending capitalism and imperialism in Ireland. In the Dublin Lockout employers set out to destroy the ITGWU.

Large sections of Ireland's elites were in favour of Home Rule. For them, local control would allow for the fuller development of Ireland's economy and a more powerful capitalism integrated into the British Empire. More wealth and power awaited the rulers of Home Rule Ireland.

The heroic struggle of Dublin workers sent shockwaves across Ireland and Britain. Solidarity in Britain came in the form of strikes and enormous amounts of aid. The struggle awoke the consciousness of workers in its call for solidarity. The militant approach and the revolutionary politics of the ITGWU was a threat to the political establishment and the existing social order but also to more moderate trade union leaders. Workers struggles had carved out a place for the trade union movement in Ireland and Britain but many trade union leaders viewed themselves as negotiators between labour and capital rather than aiming to use the strength of the trade union movement to overthrow capitalism. Moderate politics led to a cautious organising strategy with limited demands.

Dublin's employers had the full backing of the state in its attempt to break the solidarity and will of the ITGWU - but this was aided by trade union leaders who refused to back the call to extend militant action. The struggle

in Dublin had the potential to ignite struggle across Britain too. After a prolonged struggle the ITGWU was defeated. The defeat was a blow to workers in Dublin and Ireland but also for the working class in Britain. In the struggle, Connolly understood the potential for the Dublin struggle to lead to a challenge to the system across Ireland and Britain. He wrote:

We are told that the English people contributed to help our enslavement. It is true. It is also true that the Irish people have contributed soldiers to duly crush every democratic movement of the English people from the deportation of Irish soldiers to serve the cause of political despotism under Charles to the days of Featherstone under Asquith. Slaves themselves the English people helped to enslave others; slaves themselves the Irish people helped enslave others. There is no room for recrimination.

We are only concerned now with the fact – daily becoming more obvious – that the English workers who have reached the moral stature of rebels are now willing to assist the working-class rebels of Ireland, and that those Irish rebels will in their turn help the rebels of England to break their chains and attain the dignity of freedom. There are still a majority of slaves in England – there are still a majority of slaves in Ireland. We are under no illusions as to either country. But we do not intend to confound the geographical spot on which the rebels lies with the political Government upheld by the slave.

For us and ours the path is clear. The first duty of the working class of the world is to settle accounts with the master-class of the world – that of their own country at the head of the list.

To that point this struggle, as all such struggles, is converging.

Connolly is a iconic figure in the Irish trade union movement. However, the type of trade unionism he advocated is in desperate short supply today. To revive the labour movement for the challenge to austerity, zero hour contracts and precarious work we should take inspiration from the ITGWU and type of trade union militancy it espoused.

Imperialism, Global War and the 1916 Irish Rising

The outbreak of the global imperialist war in 1914 shattered the international socialist movement. After

decades of preparing to oppose the coming war, socialist parties in the belligerent countries opted to support their own governments in the slaughter. This was disastrous for working class people and assisted in leaving millions dead and injured. Small networks of revolutionary socialists, including Connolly in Ireland, opposed the war from the outset and laid the basis for the empire and system shaking movements that would finally end the war and challenge Europe's economic and political order. On imperialist war Connolly wrote:

Every war now is a capitalist move for new markets, and it is a move capitalism must make or perish. The mad scramble for wealth which this century has witnessed has resulted in lifting almost every European country into the circle of competition for trade. New machinery, new inventions, new discoveries in the scientific world have all been laid under contribution as aids to industry, until the wealth producing powers of society at large have far outstripped the demand for goods, and now those very powers we have conjured up from the bosom of nature threaten to turn and rend us. Every new labour-saving machine at one and the same time, by reducing the number of workers needed, reduces the demand for goods which the worker cannot buy, while increasing the power of producing goods, and thus permanently increases the number of unemployed, and shortens the period of industrial prosperity. Competition between capitalists drives them to seek for newer and more efficient wealth-producing machines, but as the home market is now no longer able to dispose of their produce they are driven to foreign markets.

Connolly agitated against the war and for opposition to the British war effort in Ireland. His slogan was “We serve neither King nor Kaiser but Ireland”. The war in Connolly's estimation would destroy civilisation. He believed it was the duty of socialists to initiate civil war and ‘a great uprising of the working class’ to stop the slaughter and ruin of human civilisation. He insisted “The signal of war ought also to have been the signal for rebellion.” Revolutionary action was the key to challenging imperialism and the irrational economic system giving rise to militarism.

Isolated in Ireland and dealing with defeat of the Dublin Lockout and the prospect of partition, Connolly agitated for a rising. In 1914 he developed a perspective

he would see through to the 1916 Rising:

...it is our manifest duty to take all possible action to save the poor from the horrors this war has in store. Let it be remembered that there is no natural scarcity of food in Ireland. Ireland is an agricultural country, and can normally feed all her people under any sane system of things. But prices are going up in England and hence there will be an immense demand for Irish produce. To meet that demand all nerves will be strained on this side, the food that ought to feed the people of Ireland will be sent out of Ireland in greater quantities than ever and famine prices will come in Ireland to be immediately followed by famine itself. Ireland will starve, or rather the townspeople of Ireland will starve, that the British army and navy and jingoes may be fed. Remember, the Irish farmer like all other farmers will benefit by the high prices of the war, but these high prices will mean starvation to the labourers in the towns. But without these labourers the farmers' produce cannot leave Ireland without the help of a garrison that England cannot now spare. We must consider at once whether it will not be our duty to refuse to allow agricultural produce to leave Ireland until provision is made for the Irish working class.

Let us not shrink from the consequences. This may mean more than a transport strike, it may mean armed battling in the streets to keep in this country the food for our people. But whatever it may mean it must not be shrunk from. It is the immediately feasible policy of the working-class democracy, the answer to all the weaklings who in this crisis of our country's history stand helpless and bewildered crying for guidance, when they are not hastening to betray her.

Starting thus, Ireland may yet set the torch to a European conflagration that will not burn out until the last throne and the last capitalist bond and debenture will be shrivelled on the funeral pyre of the last war lord.

Connolly believed the whole of Europe was ripe for revolution and that a revolt in Ireland could set off a chain of rebellion. Leading into the Rising, Connolly reiterated his lifelong political objective:

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.

The cause of labour is the cause of Ireland, the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour. They cannot be dissevered. Ireland seeks freedom. Labour seeks that an Ireland free should be the sole mistress of her own destiny, supreme owner of all material things within and upon her soil. Labour seeks to make the free Irish nation the guardian of the interests of the people of Ireland, and to secure that end would vest in that free Irish nation all property rights as against the claims of the individual, with the end in view that the individual may be enriched by the nation, and not by the spoiling of his fellows.

Connolly's Socialist Vision

Everywhere he lived - Scotland, Ireland and the United States - Connolly championed the cause of the working class. He is a true hero of the international working class struggle. Today, his socialist vision is becoming ever more relevant and important. Capitalism continues to fail the vast majority of people on the planet. Out of control inequality, climate change and the threat posed by the rise of the far-right is a clarion call for the revival of the international socialist movement. The great victories in Ireland against austerity driven water-charges, for LGBTQ marriage equality and for a woman's right to choose demonstrate the power of ordinary people to bring about fundamental change. Connolly's confidence in the capacity of the working classes, the downtrodden and the dispossessed to bring about the radical transformation of society drove his political activity throughout his life. We are in need of thousands of revolutionaries like James Connolly across Ireland and across the world to build socialist organisations and people power movements to topple the existing rotten political, social and economic order. The best way for us to pay tribute to Connolly today is by committing to the building of mass working class revolutionary movements whose clear objective is the overthrow of capitalism, imperialism and all forms of oppression - and to usher into being socialist workers' republics on every corner of the globe. Wherever we fight – James Connolly will be there.