

CHAPTER TWO

Connolly's Legacy

"Should it come to a test in Ireland....between those who stood for the Irish Nation and those who stood for foreign rule, the greatest civil asset in the hand of the Irish Nation for use in the struggle would be the control of the Irish docks, shipping, railways and production by unions that gave sole allegiance to Ireland."

**- James Connolly, "The Workers' Republic,
January 22, 1916**

Dublin Castle was not unaware of the close link - indeed, often the overlapping of membership - between the trade unions and Sinn Féin. Through the eyes and ears of its police force, the Royal Irish Constabulary, the British administration kept a close watch on trade union activities. The monthly reports to Dublin from County Inspectors regularly listed the ITGWU among the eleven "political" organisations monitored for the number of branches, membership and level of activity. This put the union under the same degree of suspicion as organisations like Sinn Féin, the Volunteers, the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish language movement, the Gaelic League.

In his annual report for 1918, the Inspector General of the Royal Irish Constabulary commented that the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union represented the "Socialist and Labour wing of the Irish revolutionary movement". (1) The I-G noted that in March there had been widespread political unrest, which showed no sign of abatement. Trade was good, the report noted, but the inflation caused by War prices was continuing and it was leading to Labour discontent.

The Inspector-General said Labour organisation was of comparatively recent growth, but the ITGWU had spread its branches everywhere and all classes of people were enrolled in it. He recorded strikes in eighteen counties, with nearly all the strikers belonging to the labouring class and demanding wages of forty to fifty shillings a week. There were few large employers in country districts and such wages would be impossible to meet in many cases. At the same time, the I-G conceded, the enormous prices charged by the farmers and shopkeepers during the War made the demand seem less unreasonable than it looked.

In March 1919, the month before the Limerick Strike, the Inspector-General sent a report marked "Secret" and "Urgent" to the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Ian McPherson MP. It warned that in the prevailing discontent, if the "extremists" decided to take independent action, they could "rely to a considerable extent" on the co-operation of Labour organisations and "they would certainly find a large body of fanatical Irish volunteers through the country, ready to do their bidding. (2) "Ireland", the Inspector-General warned, "is unquestionably in a highly inflammable condition, and in my opinion at no time was there

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more urgent necessity for the presence of an overpowering military force."

The Castle's worries about Labour involvement in the independence movement were well-founded. James Connolly, the Commandant-General of the 1916 Rising was a founder of the ITGWU. Apart from the practical example of his life and death, Connolly had left behind a body of political writings that strongly influenced trade union aims and the methods to be used in attaining those aims.

Many Labour people, apart from Connolly, had been prominent in the Rising, many more were active in Gaelic cultural bodies and activities like the Gaelic League or the Gaelic Athletic Association. Like many others, they were profoundly affected by the aftermath of the Easter Rising.

Under Connolly's influence, Irish Labour and trade unionism was strongly syndicalist in its policies and attitudes. In simple terms, syndicalism was a Left-wing philosophy that stressed a connection between workers' industrial strength, exercised through trade unions, and the political struggle for the achievement of Socialism. Syndicalism found its earliest organised expression in France, as a reaction to the failure of reformist, socialist political leaders to make gains commensurate with their voting strength in parliament. James Connolly had been particularly influenced by this analysis during his spell in the United States where he encountered it as an organiser for the pre-eminently syndicalist trade union, the Industrial Workers of the World.

According to syndicalist theory, the workers' industrial muscle would underpin the political advances, using major strikes in pursuit of political aims. Ultimately, a general strike would paralyse the existing capitalist system and result in the workers taking over the state. The workers' industrial organisations, the trade unions, would then form the basis for governing the new commonwealth.

Connolly's unique application of syndicalism to Irish conditions was to argue that the struggle for socialism and national independence from Britain were inseparable. "The cause of Ireland is the cause of Labour, and the cause of Labour is the cause of Ireland", he wrote. In his view, trade union power could therefore properly be harnessed in furtherance of the aim of independence

In the "Irish Worker" of May 30, 1914, Connolly tersely stated his view of the link between syndicalism and nationalism: "We believe that there are no real Nationalists in Ireland outside the Irish Labour Movement. All others merely reject one part or another of the British Conquest - the Labour Movement alone rejects it in its entirety and sets itself to the re-conquest of Ireland as its aim."

In the foreword to his monumental work "Labour in Irish History", Connolly linked progress in the achievement of the liberty of a subject nation with the liberty of the nation's most subject class. It was a distortion of Irish history, he argued, to deny the "relation between the social rights of the Irish toilers and

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the political rights of the Irish nation". (5) The basic argument of that book was that, throughout history, the better off and wealthy classes always reached an accommodation with Britain. The book's celebrated and succinct conclusion was that "...only the Irish working-class remain as the incorruptible inheritors of the fight for freedom in Ireland".

For Connolly, the creation of a nation state was a necessary precondition, or part of, the achievement of democratic power. Irish representative bodies would reflect the popular will more accurately than similar bodies based in Britain. Only in such an Irish republic, he argued, could the battle-lines of class antagonisms, hitherto obscured by "patriotism", be clearly drawn. Thus, he reasoned, a socialist-republican reached the same conclusion as the "most irreconcilable nationalist": the links with Britain must be broken. Connolly, therefore, saw Irish nationalism as the essential foundation for social and economic progress and the Irish revolution would have to be not only nationalist, but socialist as well

The Irish Trade Union Congress' plan for major strikes against conscription in 1918 was a clear expression of this fusion of political aims and with trade union organisation and methods. In January 1916, Connolly wrote in the newspaper "The Workers' Republic": "Should it come to a test in Ireland... between those who stood for the Irish Nation and those who stood for foreign rule, the greatest civil asset in the hand of the Irish nation for use in the struggle would be the control of the Irish docks, shipping, railways and production by unions that gave sole allegiance to Ireland". Here, clearly stated, was his synthesis of classical syndicalism and nationalism.

Those words of Connolly were published very shortly after he had spent three days in a secret meeting with the Irish Republican Brotherhood, being briefed on their plans for a Rising. Connolly had developed close personal ties with leaders of the separatist Volunteers, like Pearse, MacDonagh, Clarke and MacDermott. In the "Workers' Republic", he strongly advocated an insurrection and published articles on revolutionary warfare in other countries. He was severely critical of the dilatory attitude of the Volunteer leadership, something they resented greatly.

After hearing the IRB plans for an early insurrection, to take advantage of Britain's difficulties in the Great War, Connolly agreed to make available the forces of the workers' Citizen Army. He was appointed Commandant-General of the Dublin forces and became a member of the Brotherhood's Military Council. On Easter Monday 1916, the Council's seven members were declared to be the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic. Indeed, the proclamation of the Republic was printed in the basement of Liberty Hall, the ITGWU headquarters, under an armed guard of the Citizen Army.

The Irish Citizen Army was born out of the struggle of the Great Dublin Lock Out of 1913, to defend workers from police attacks. In March 1914, the Army was reorganised and adopted its first constitution. The constitution claimed the ownership of Ireland for the people of Ireland. It stood for what it termed the

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"absolute unity of Irish nationhood" and for the "rights and liberties of the democracies of all nations". Every member of the Army had to be a member of a trade union recognised by the Irish TUC and its declared object was to "sink all differences of birth, property and creed under the common name of Irish people".

The Dublin Trades Council approved the new Army early in April 1914, and in June, a contingent led by James Larkin marched in a Republican demonstration at the grave in Bodenstown of the father of Irish Republicanism, Wolfe Tone.

Connolly's analysis was jealously guarded by his disciple and successor as General Secretary of the ITGWU, William O'Brien, notably in his Presidential address to the 1918 Trade Union Congress in Waterford. In 1918, as well, the combined Party-Congress adopted a new name - the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress - and a new constitution that underlined its formal commitment, at least, to syndicalist thinking. Article 2(c) of the new constitution pledged to secure "the democratic management and control of all industries and services by the whole body of workers, manual and mental, engaged therein.... "

While the Labour "wing" of the national movement prospered, the political element was enjoying success too. In the General Election of December 1918, to the Westminster Parliament, as we have already seen, Labour stood to one side. Seventy three Irish constituencies - out of one hundred and five - returned Sinn Féin Members of Parliament, committed to an independent Irish Republic. Twenty six Unionists were returned and six members of the Irish National Party, though four of those were returned as a result of a pre-election pact with Sinn Féin in some Ulster constituencies. In votes, Sinn Féin won more than 485,000 against slightly over 277,000 for the Irish Party.

The foundation of Sinn Féin by Arthur Griffith, in 1905, was a development of a new kind of nationalism in Ireland. Since 1870, leaders of Irish nationalism had assumed the validity of the Act of Union of Great Britain and Ireland and had organised their strategy and tactics largely within the framework of the Westminster Parliament. Sinn Féin, instead, advocated that the elected Members for Ireland should assemble in Dublin and initiate a national programme of economic and social reform. The essence of that programme was to be Irish economic self-reliance and political self-determination - summed up in the movement's name: Sinn Féin, "Ourselves Alone".

Instead of taking their seats in London, then, the Sinn Féin MPs set up a separatist Republican parliament - Dáil Éireann - in Dublin on January 21, 1919. Out of the seventy three members elected, only twenty six could attend the opening session - the rest were in jail.

In the December 1918 General Election, the British electorate had endorsed a measure of Home Rule for Ireland and with that, had tried to put Irish affairs to the back of their mind. War weary as they were, the establishment of the Dáil caused barely a ripple in Britain. The "Times" Irish correspondent scoffed at what he termed the "stage play at the Mansion House", where earlier that morning there had been a "blaze of Union Jacks" at a luncheon to welcome home four hundred repatriated prisoners of war, members of the Royal Dublin

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Fusiliers. Few in Britain heeded the "Dáily News" warning that it was "very easy to laugh at the Sinn Féin Parliament, but it is not so certain that it is wise."

The establishment of a secessionist Parliament was a sophisticated development in tactics by the independence movement. The Dáil combined the new ideas of civil resistance with the old ideal of physical rebellion. The Dáil's Address to the Free Nations of the World declared that "a state of war existed", that could not end "until Ireland is definitely evacuated by the armed forces of England". This was effectively a declaration of war and it assumed more propaganda importance later, being looked to as the source of democratic backing for the armed struggle against Britain.

The Democratic Programme of the First Dáil Éireann - its statement of political and economic aspirations - was Left-wing in tone, again reflecting the strength of Labour's position at the time. Prior to the first meeting of the Dáil, there were contacts between prominent Dáil members and Labour leaders with a view to drafting some sort of social programme

It is clear from the exhaustively kept diary of the Labour leader William O'Brien that Labour's entitlement to representation at Berne loomed large in the background contacts on the Democratic Programme. On New Year's Day 1919, O'Brien met Richard Mulcahy, the Dáil member who later formally proposed the adoption of the Programme and they discussed the Berne Socialist Conference. Within a fortnight, there were two other meetings of Labour and Sinn Féin leaders at which Berne and the forthcoming opening of the Dáil were discussed. At the second of these meetings, it appears the Labour leaders submitted a document and a Dáil committee was set up to draft a social programme in consultation with Labour. On the Labour side, Tom Johnson was involved in drafting and the key person on the Dáil side was Harry Boland, a regular contact between Sinn Féin and Labour.

According to Sean T O'Kelly, a key organiser of the Dáil's proposed public sitting, Boland arrived on the night before the ceremonial opening with only a bundle of rough notes, received from Labour friends like Johnson and William O'Brien. The content of the notes aroused fierce controversy. Close to Midnight, O'Kelly says he was given a free hand to draft the Programme as he alone wished and he worked through the night to have it ready for the following day.

O'Kelly's final draft omitted references to eliminating "the class in society which lives upon the wealth produced by the workers of the nation but gives no useful social service in return..." Nevertheless, the Democratic Programme, in its final form, was far from being a total reflection of Sinn Féin's rather conservative economic and social thinking. It declared that the nation's sovereignty extended to all its material possessions, its soil and resources, all the wealth and wealth-producing processes. The right of private property was subordinate to the public right and, in return for willing service, every citizen had a right to an adequate share of the produce of the nation's labour. It was to be the government's first duty to provide for the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of children, "to ensure that no child shall suffer hunger or cold from lack of food, clothing or shelter, that all shall be provided with ample means and

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facilities requisite for the education and training of free citizens of a free nation".

The main purpose of adopting the Programme seems to have been to strengthen Irish Labour's hand in seeking full representation at Berne. Labour could argue that although they did not hold parliamentary seats, the new separatist assembly was committed to a broadly socialist programme. In turn, as later events proved correct, the Dáil could anticipate recognition for the Irish claim to self-determination from an important international forum. And there may have been a belief in some Sinn Féin and IRB circles that Labour should receive a tangible political reward for standing aside in the Election that, effectively, produced the first Dáil.

To an extent, Labour's eventual refusal to participate in the December 1918 General Election reflected its espousal of industrial over parliamentary methods of action. Indeed, the refusal served to reinforce the predisposition towards syndicalist methods. From beginning to end, the year 1919 saw a wave of Labour militancy wash over Ireland from North to South. Apart from the great Belfast strike of January 1919, there were strikes early in the year by building workers in Limerick, shipyard workers in Derry, asylum workers in Monaghan and strikes by farm labourers in Counties Kildare, Meath and Tipperary - sometimes involving violent clashes with the police and non-union labourers.

Thus, with the formal opening of Dáil Éireann on January 21, the year 1919 began with the lines of battle more clearly drawn than at any time previously. Home Rule was gone from the agenda, the only remaining item was a Republic.

At the same time, violence was emerging more strongly as a tactic. On the day the Dáil formally met for the first time, IRA members attacked and killed two members of the RIC at Soloheadbeg, in County Tipperary. By early 1919, the leader of the Soloheadbeg attack, Dan Breen, had no doubt what form the coming struggle should take. Breen believed political campaigns, notably the General Election of 1918, had "softened" many Republicans. "Many had ceased to be soldiers and had become politicians. There was a danger of disintegration, a danger which had been growing since the threat of conscription disappeared a few months earlier. I was convinced that some sort of action was absolutely necessary".

On January 31 1919, the shooting war was given added impetus by a directive issued in the Volunteer paper, "An tOglach" (The Volunteer). The Volunteers were reminded of the Dáil's declaration of a state of war, to last until there was a British military evacuation of Ireland. That state of war justified the Volunteers in treating the police and army as invaders. The authority of the nation was behind them, the editorial declared, embodied in the lawfully constituted authority of the Dáil. The Dáil, it said, was not just a group of "militarists" or "extremists" but "the accredited representatives of the Irish people met in solemn session". Every Volunteer, it concluded, had the legal and moral right to use "all legitimate methods of warfare" against the army and police.

From the end of January 1919, attacks on the RIC and British Army

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throughout the country increased in frequency and ferocity. By the end of the year, fourteen policemen and soldiers had been killed in attacks.

Dan Breen's worries reflected the concern of Michael Collins, now Adjutant General and Director of Organisation of the revived and rapidly growing Volunteers. All through 1918, Collins had complained that Sinn Féin seemed to lack "direction" and that those who "ought to" have been "directing" were too "lax" and did not spend enough time at the party's headquarters, Number Six, Harcourt Street in Dublin. This is despite the fact that in October 1917, the two bodies had been brought closer by the election as President of Sinn Féin of the man who was already leader of the Volunteers, Eamon de Valera.

In September 1918, the Volunteer journal "An tÓglach" had grimly predicted the abandonment of political methods and passive resistance. By May 1919, Collins was complaining of an intolerable position where the policy seemed to be to "squeeze out anyone who was tainted with strong fighting ideas". From June 1919 onwards, Collins intensified his military campaign, especially against the British detective and intelligence agencies in Dublin. By August of that year, the Dáil had passed a resolution insisting that the IRA take a formal oath of allegiance to "the Irish Republic and the Dáil".

The increasingly widespread sympathy with the separatist aim might never have developed to the extent it did, but for the attitude of the British Government in the years after the 1916 Rising. This has been aptly described as one of "mild coercion - repression too weak to root out opposition, but provocative enough to nurture it".

After the 1916 Rising, the changes in the British administration in Ireland were ones of personnel rather than structure. Martial law was imposed for a few months after the Rising, but in November 1916, the Commander in Chief for Ireland, General Sir John Maxwell, was recalled to Britain and replaced.

The police force was split between the Dublin Metropolitan Police and, for the rest of the country, the Royal Irish Constabulary. At one time, counting military services, there were no less than seven independent intelligence services operating, with varying degrees of effectiveness. By 1917, the RIC was short fourteen hundred members on its establishment of over 10,700 and morale was low

After the simultaneous enactment and suspension of the the Home Rule Act, in September 1918, the British government's efforts to resolve its Irish political problems were spasmodic and halfhearted. They were motivated more by the aim of eliminating any problems at Britain's backdoor and thus freeing resources for the Great War, than by any desire to respond to the increasing Irish nationalist clamour

Within weeks of the 1916 Rising, the Prime Minister, Asquith, asked his then Minister of Munitions, Lloyd George, to initiate fresh negotiations with the leaders of Irish opinion - John Redmond for the Nationalists and Sir Edward Carson for the Ulster Unionists. Lloyd George managed to get Redmond to agree to the temporary exclusion of Ulster's six North Eastern counties from a Home Rule parliament that would govern the rest of Ireland. Unionist members of the Cabinet,

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fearing that all of Ulster might eventually be brought in under the proposed Dublin parliament, torpedoed this plan from within the Cabinet.

By May 1917, Lloyd George had become Prime Minister and he offered Redmond two alternative proposals to settle the Irish question. One was the application of the 1914 Home Rule Act, but with a five year exclusion of Loyalist Ulster. The second, was an Irish Convention, representing all shades of opinion, to devise a scheme of self-government. Redmond accepted the second option and the Convention began its deliberations in July 1917.

Sinn Féin's refusal to attend the Convention rendered it an unrepresentative talking-shop. It sat until May 1918 and produced a report in which there was little substantial agreement between the participants.

In March 1918, Field-Marshal Viscount French was appointed Lord Lieutenant with a mandate to enforce conscription and get tougher with separatism. On May 17, the majority of Sinn Féin leaders were taken in a series of mass arrests, but this served only to increase the influence of the militarist-orientated hard-liners in Sinn Féin

On the very last day of 1918, a member of the British Cabinet, Walter Long, Secretary of State for the Colonies, wrote this perceptive summary of how matters stood:

"I have watched the rise and fall of every political party in Ireland for the last forty years, and I think that the present movement is much the most difficult and dangerous of any the Government has had to deal with and for this reason.

Their leaders are brave and fanatical and do not fear imprisonment or death; they are not to be influenced by private negotiations with Bishops or Priests, or captured by getting the patronage of appointments, which has been the favourite instrument of the Irish Government since 1905. Neither do they care a straw for the press.

It is a fair and square fight between the Irish Government and Sinn Féin as to who is going to govern the country."

On January 10 1919, French was replaced as Lord Lieutenant by the Liberal Scot, Ian MacPherson. MacPherson favoured Home Rule for Ireland and he made some conciliatory moves initially. But he was soon shocked into a stronger "law and order" stance by the rising tide of violence.

Limerick was far from being immune to these national developments, trends and influences. Indeed, as a major city with a strong tradition of nationalism and trade unionism, it was at the forefront of events.

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