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Our History

The class struggle in Ireland - 1916

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At first sight the Tale of 1916 seems a simple one. On the one hand there was a small band - an alliance of socialists and revolutionary democrats. On the other hand the British imperialists and their Unionist supporters.

Even if we stay within that narrative The Rising had enormous significance. It was founded upon a wide range of working class struggles across Ireland and Britain and extending across Europe and the USA. Across the world democrats took inspiration from the rising, especially around anti-colonial struggles in Asia and Africa

Yet a deeper level there was class conflict within all the elements associated with 1916.

Connolly and the Citizen Army arrived at 1916 through a bitter struggle with Irish capitalism in the Dublin lockout of 1913. Connolly claimed this as a drawn struggle, but it was, in fact a Pyrrhic victory for the employers. Their main target, the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union survived and the smaller employers had been scared enough not to support any attempt to revive the strategy of the general lockout in Dublin. However, they were able to deny their workers union recognition, and their leaders, the biggest ones, were able to exclude the unions from their workplaces altogether.

What was especially significant about 1913 was the reasons for the setback. Alongside the onslaught of the state and the employers and the relative weakness of the Irish working class ran a strong reformist current in the trade union and labour movement. Connolly, in debates with the Belfast socialist William Walker, had already condemned the gas and water socialism that set as its goal the narrow aim of seats on the councils and municipal reform.

However the problem was much larger than that dispute indicated. Across Europe the trade union and labour movement had developed its own bureaucracy and become partly integrated with the structures of capitalism. There was a widespread view that, if the social democratic parties could win a majority in parliament, they would be able to use the structures of the capitalist state to institute socialism. In the heartlands of the imperialist powers sections of the working class saw themselves as an aristocracy of labour, having common interests with their Imperial masters. The Ulster loyalists were an extreme example of this current, combining an often quite militant trade union consciousness with an abject political loyalty to their Protestant bosses.

They were not Socialists but William Walker tried unsuccessfully to win them by his combination of milk and water socialism and Protestant unionism. His current was linked to the British reformists whose social patriotism deferred to royalty and the Empire

The reformist current had found its expression in the writings of Eduard Bernstein, the German social democrat. He used the social democrats division of "maximum" (socialism) and "minimum" (immediate reforms) to abandon the first ("the ultimate goal is nothing") and urge concentration on the second, the improvement of capitalism. The British Fabian movement was an example of this political shift.

The true cost of reformism was spelt out in the trenches of the First World War. The mass International of working people, the 2nd International, had seemed to be an invincible bulwark against war. Its leadership had declared that the workers would not fight and would rise up against war and institute a revolution. However when war was declared the reformist leaderships swung behind "their own" national capitalist class and sent an entire generation of European workers to the slaughter.

This background lent a sharp urgency to Connolly's decision to press for a rising. He felt it absolutely essential that the declaration of the International be upheld and that the workers rise up against the imperialist killing machine.

The revolutionary nationalists of the Irish Republican Brotherhood felt similar urgency. British propaganda had based itself around "gallant little Belgium" and the "freedom of small nations" while at the same time delaying on home rule. The revolutionists foresaw the carve up and decay of empires that would follow the war and felt it essential to put forward Ireland's claim to nationhood, summed up as "England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity."

Connolly's decision was within the context of rebellions and revolutions across Europe during and after the war, culminating in the workers seizure of power in the Russian Revolution of 1917. Lenin remarked that the Irish had "risen too soon" but the necessity for rising was never in doubt.

The IRB were also proved right. The war was followed by an increased assertion of national rights across the British Empire and its gradual decay. The Indian nationalist movement especially drew heavily on the Irish example.

As with the socialists there were divisions among the nationalists. These were much sharper, being based on a struggle between contending classes within the movement.

The class division showed itself at the onset of the rising with the leadership of the Irish volunteers countermanning mobilization orders dooming the Rebels to rapid defeat.

The Irish nationalists, representing local capital but excluding the unionist industrialists and the landed gentry, wanted limited home rule, a provincial assembly without any power over foreign affair within the British Empire. The revolutionary nationalist current, based in the Irish petit bourgeoisie wanted an Irish democracy and an independent economy. From a Marxist point of view the revolutionary democrats exhibited great courage and determination. However their vision of a revolution based simply on national self determination would always include a space for an Irish capitalism that would inevitably be subservient to British imperialist economic interests, and that class would inevitably betray the nationalist revolutionaries. In times of upsurge, the nationalist revolutionaries would break from the restraints of the home rule capitalists. However, there was a faultline amongst them between those, like the official volunteer leadership before the Rising who were clear in wanting a stable capitalist society and who feared losing control of their movement, and those who were happy to take the risk. When the downturn came, the conservative wing was able to block with its Home Ruler (and even unionist) opponents, while the revolutionary nationalists went into often military opposition leading to further splits later.

The British Empire faced a struggle with revolutionaries while in the background was an Irish capitalist class subservient to imperialism, a weak working class with a strong reformist current. The outcome was partial independence, partition, civil war followed by a society with the migrant boat the only escape from the grinding oppression of church and state.

Looking back, it is important to remember that many of the participants were unaware of the full extent of the divisions in their movements. Connolly saw himself as debating with other trade unionists and socialists who could be won to revolution. On the international stage, as part of the general reshaping of the working class movement, even Lenin believed that he was following closely the programme of German social democracy rather than re-establishing a revolutionary independence of the working class.

Within the working class the battle between revolution and reform was fought out in a series of skirmishes that were seen as individual disputes rather than a clash of world views. It was clear to Connolly that he was isolated within the world socialist movement, an isolation made more intense in that, unlike Lenin, he did not have a relatively

homogeneous political party behind him. He tried to make up for this by building working class militancy to clash with Britain, but he was unsuccessful. After the Rising the leadership of the Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party (then united in the syndicalist manner) used Connolly's name in vain whilst adhering to reformist (though never actually unionist) principles closer to those of his reformist opponent, William Walker. In the current peace process they capitulate utterly to unionism.

Since 1916 the class struggle has ebbed and flowed. There were many heroic struggles by the working class including general strikes, determined fights by railway workers, a widespread eruption of bitter struggles by farm labourers and, inspired by the Russian Revolution, a wave of soviets swept the country but we have never succeeded in building an independent working class leadership. The reformists in the Labour and union leaderships have time after time succeeded in dismantling the struggle and making peace with capitalism.

The revolutionary nationalist movement has ebbed and flowed with the class struggle. When strong it commits to armed struggle. When that fails, as it inevitably does, it surrenders to the capitalists. The latest collapse is a mighty fall, with Sinn Fein operating the mechanisms of a sectarian austerity administration within a British colonial structure.

The American author William Faulkner remarked in relation to the US deep South that: "the past is never dead. It's not even past."

This is certainly true of Ireland today. 1916 and its aftermath saw a partial and incomplete national revolution. Both parts of the country remain firmly in the grip of imperialism and workers continue to flee the country. Those who stay are ground down by a rapacious ruling class. The carnival of reaction predicted by Connolly is here today. The completion of the 1916 rising remains a task for the working class.

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