

IRELAND

The Irish Labour Movement

One of the reasons for the low priority given Irish affairs within the Labour Movement in Britain is the stance the Irish Labour Movement has taken itself over the past few years. In short it has little or nothing to say over Britain's presence in Ireland. Indeed it has often been studious in its determination to avoid commentary over any matters it considers political. To understand why this is so, and to understand what future developments there might be, it is well to come to an understanding of the history of the Labour Movement in Ireland.

Origins

Combinations of journeymen established themselves very early in the 18th century and like their British counterparts struggled against repressive legislation. They had to establish themselves in the face of ecclesiastical and liberal nationalist condemnation. In 1780 20,000 protested in Dublin against the enactment of draconian anti-union legislation. Part of the force mobilised against them consisted of the Dublin corps of the Irish Volunteers.

In the first half of the 19th century the unions became heavily defensive and 'luddite' as a response to the decline in trade which resulted from restrictions imposed by Britain after the Act of Union in 1800.

In 1826 Dublin experienced the first general strike in Irish history. It was a protest against inflation. Although there was no general foundation of unions there was, as here, frequent cooperation between unions in disputes.

The Irish brought their militancy to the British movement when they emigrated. John Doherty was the founder of the first national union—the Grand General Union of Cotton Spinners of Great Britain and Ireland. A year later, in 1830, he was elected the general secretary of the first proto-TUC, the National Association for the Protection of Labour.

Another Irishman, Feargus O'Connor, became a leading figure in the Chartist movement in Britain. He advocated cooperation between the Irish working class and English workers against their common enemy—the English ruling classes.

Although wary of, and largely unaffected by, revolutionary Chartism, the unions in Ireland were at this time frequently involved in the campaign against the union between Britain and Ireland.

After the Famine

By the 1850's the situation had changed completely. Irish agriculture, governed by British Imperial needs, forced a large section of the Irish population to feed themselves on a potatoe based diet. Disease, crop failure and the insistence of the British in maintaining crop exports from Ireland had produced massive famine and dislocation in the 1840's.

In Britain Chartism had petered out, giving way to the more narrow minded 'new model' craft unions. The bold visions of O'Connor had faded completely from the scene. Nevertheless in Britain the Industrial Revolution had firmly established itself. The urban working classes, though defeated, were now a major force to be reckoned with.

In Ireland, however, British economic domination suffocated and distorted the development of native industrial capitalism. This obviously restricted the growth of the urban working class and limited the degree to which the Labour Movement could become a major force. Opposition to British rule, as in other colonies, was most acutely expressed by the peasantry who were frequently subjected to harrassment and eviction by a British based landlord class. The middle classes too became frustrated by the restrictions imposed by British rule. Increasingly they came to see Home Rule, though not necessarily

independence, as the only solution to their problems.

Irish Trades Unionists, although individually perhaps home rulers or even fenians, seldom found themselves questioning British rule in quite the same way. The reasons for this were threefold:—

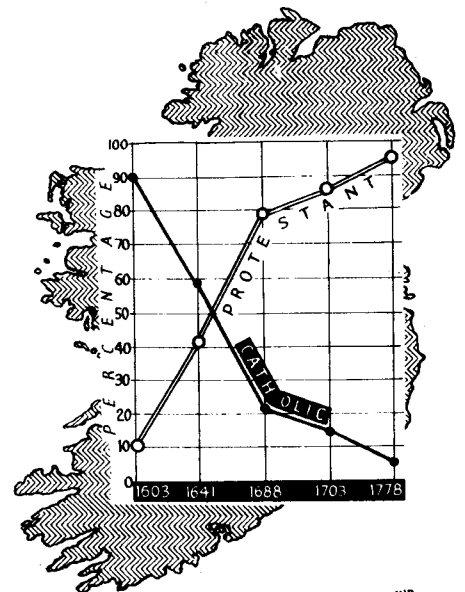
1) Despite their long establishment the unions in Ireland were still small and therefore concerned with more immediate problems.

2) British based 'amalgamated' unions began to make inroads in Ireland often competing with long established unions. Mergers frequently took place, the Irish unions seeing in the size of their British competitors greater strength and security.

3) Industrialisation was chiefly taking place in the north east. There the workforce was largely recruited from a protestant community still fearful of a displaced catholic peasantry.

Ironically, therefore, Irish trades unionists for the sake of unity refrained from discussing what they had most in common—their oppression by British capitalism.

Indeed unity was a prime concern for the Irish trades unions. They were in the process of setting up their own national federation when in 1868 the British TUC was formed. Again many Irish Trades Unions looked to this body for greater strength and solidarity. They could not have been more mistaken, congress after congress relegating discussion, if any, of Irish affairs to the Friday afternoon slot.



The transfer of land ownership: 1603-1778

From the 17th century the Irish were dispossessed as a nation and on a religious basis. The social foundations for the form future conflict was to take were thus built.

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By 1894 all the Irish unions, whether based in Britain or Ireland, had become so exasperated with this state of affairs that they decided to set up their own congress—the Irish TUC. Despite the fact that it was the logic of Britain's imperialist relationship to Ireland that had forced the Irish unions to make this move no anti-imperialist solution was arrived at until Connolly and Larkin upset the boat.

At the beginning of this century a sense of conservatism had embedded itself in the established union organisations of both Ireland and Britain. In both countries the old unions gave an inadequate response to the massive need for organisation amongst the now rapidly growing 'unskilled' sections of the workforce. It was here, in the docks and elsewhere, that Connolly and Larkin were able to step in and provide a militant syndicalist alternative in the fierce struggles before the First World War.

Socialism and Nationalism

Fenianism since the Famine had always had a 'socialistic' component to it. It challenged British dictated property relationships and saw a redistribution of ownership, either through nationalisation or individual control, as the solution to the misery of the Irish people. These populist ideas gained wide currency amongst the propertyless and small tenant farm workers during the agrarian struggles of the late 19th century. It was this mass of people who were to propel Sinn Fein to power after the First War and who have since remained one of the chief bulwarks of Republican sentiment in Ireland.

However, until the arrival of Connolly in Ireland 'urban' socialism was almost entirely an offshoot, organisationally and theoretically of socialism in Britain. These groups often had no policy on Independence, though they often supported Home Rule. This reflected current thinking in the Irish Labour Movement, the socialism of loyalist workers and also the predominant strain in European socialism which saw Imperialism as being progressive.

Connolly's Irish Socialist Republican Party was wholeheartedly in favour of Independence. It saw the oppression of Ireland as a nation by Britain as being as key a barrier to the emancipation of Irish workers as the most antagonistic domestic capitalist. It was the job of the working class to ensure that the struggle for national liberation became also the struggle



The Famine. Mass death and immigration resulted from a disaster that many came to see as avoidable.



The Irish Citizens Army. The first workers militia in Europe.

for social liberation. It was no good waiting for the working class to become the majority of the population, for under Imperialist domination this would never happen.

The Irish Citizens Army, a workers defence force set up by Connolly during the bitter days of the Dublin 1913 lockout, thus naturally found itself putting muscle into the Easter Rising of 1916 alongside the Republicans in the Irish Volunteers.

However with Connolly dead, the Labour Movement was content to adopt a low profile during the struggle for Independence. This allowed traditional Republicanism to become the focus for those workers who opposed

the British connection. It also gave the northern unionists the opportunity of driving a wedge into the working class of Ulster, directly by creating the Ulster Unionist Labour Association, and indirectly by creating an atmosphere in which loyalist trades unionists could hold sway.

By 1920 the Unionist politician Carson, not a poor man, raised the cry of 'No Popery' to split the unity of catholic and protestant workers which had been developing over the past year in the docks of Belfast. Again in the wake of the successful outdoor relief demonstrations of 1932 when the catholics of the Falls and the protestants of the Shankill united,

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Loyalist workers driving Catholics out of work in the 1930's. The Orange ruling class used sectarianism to divide the working class.

the Unionist leaders were quick to rekindle the flames of sectarianism. The Labour Movement remained powerless.

It was not merely through rhetoric alone that the protestant ruling class was able to stave off the move for complete Independence and split the working class of the north east. It had the power whether or not to provide employment, housing and through this after 1921, basic democratic rights. Protestant workers were led to believe that not to accept those sectarian conditions of existence would lead to economic misery under the tyranny of the Catholic Church. The paralysis of initiative on the part of the Labour Movement since the First World War prevented any challenge from within the protestant working class being mounted.

In the South popular politics thus focussed firstly on Sinn Fein and then Fianna Fail—neither of which have

ever been the political mouthpieces of the Labour Movement.

The trade union movement itself became divided between catholic nationalists and the amalgamated largely northern and British based unions. From 1945, for over a decade the movement split into two federations: the Confederation of Irish Unions and the Irish Trades Union Council.

Despite the fact that the ITUC and its successor the ICTU had an increasingly autonomous northern committee, the trade union movement was not even recognised by the Stormont government until 1964. This impelled trade union leaders to put forward as acceptable a face as possible in order to gain legitimacy. Political repression, discrimination and partition therefore became subjects not to be touched. Economic issues were to be their sole concern. The Movement in the north by strictly

adhering to the unionist rules thus straight jacketed itself throughout the 50's and 60's.

Civil Rights

By the end of the 60's some trade unionists were involved in the Civil Rights campaign. Decades of 'political stability' and a climate of relative economic prosperity had convinced many that it was now possible to beg a few concessions from the Unionist regime without fear of pogrom as reprisal. The demands of the campaign, although liberal, revealed the northern state to be riddled with discrimination against catholics in employment, housing and democratic rights. Disgruntled loyalist workers, for decades having been given ideological and material sustenance by the Orange ruling class, saw the Civil Rights Movement as undermining the very existence of their state and acted accordingly. The

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Labour Movement, in order to preserve its position of 'neutrality', soon afterwards began to dissociate itself from civil rights, as hostility to the campaigners became physical. With the RUC and 'B' Specials mounting increasingly vicious attacks on the catholic communities, the beleaguered population had no alternative but to resort to armed self defence. And in the circumstances this could only be done, not through the organs of the workers movement, but through a reborn Irish Republican Army.

Bread and Butter

From the arrival of the British troops, through Internment and Bloody Sunday the Labour Movement in the North remained largely quiet. It was unable to prevent its own loyalist members from mounting a general strike against the abolition of Stormont.

Eventually, under international and rank and file pressure the Northern Ireland Committee of the ICTU launched into the Better Life for All Campaign. Despite the campaign's incredibly short life the assumptions surrounding it strongly appealed to British trades unionists, and today still retain some level of credibility. Sectarianism exists in the working class of the north, so the argument went, because of economic inequalities. Before the working class can unite these have to be eavened out. Huge subsidies must be pumped in by Britain to develop capitalism in the deprived regions of the province. This strategy, totally impractical as it is, requiring a capital input far beyond the means of crippled capitalist Britain, was unlikely to appeal to the unionist ruling class who would thereby lose their source of strength. Furthermore it actually strengthened the position of British Imperialism by not recognising the ability or right of the Irish to govern themselves, by demanding that Britain should, once more, put things right for Paddy who can't manage his affairs himself.

On other fronts the BLFAC advocated various rights; for free speech, education and social services. Primarily, the emphasis was on "The Right to live free from threats of violence". By this it meant the violence of the 'gun-men'. It never took up the violence of the State regularly employed against the catholic community.

The BLFAC was only one facet of the NIC/ICTU's long term attempt to present itself as a non sectarian body slowly abolishing evils through



Burntollet January 1969. The official use of force convinced many of the irreformable nature of the Northern Ireland State.

economic reform. It has proved unsuccessful on all fronts. Wages are lower and prices and unemployment higher than anywhere in Britain. Its record on unionisation amongst women—43% of whom work—and incorporating women into the union structure is poor indeed. It has proved unable to oppose oppressive legislation or to take advantage of progressive legislation.

Of course, not all trades unionists, members or officials, are this over-cautious either on issues of pay or repression. There are numerous instances of both individual and rank and file upsurges over the past ten years—the Trade Union Campaign Against Repression being one of the more recent. But in a climate where repression is intense, where every peaceful march is harassed by hostile men, organising politically becomes a problem. Even when the unions have been pressured into voicing their objection, it all seems futile when no action is subsequently taken.

There does, however, seem to be a mood of change in the air at the moment. Recently, members of NUPE in the Royal Victoria and other hospitals have been taking Industrial action in objection to the disruptive presence of troops. They want them completely out of the hospitals. Typically the British appointed district official accused the leading steward of sectarianism in an attempt to break the strikers resolve.

More recently still conference has forced the NIC to withdraw its delegates from the standing committee on the Royal Ulster Constabulary. This represents a significant victory for those in the trades unions who have been campaigning against police harassment and torture for many years.

In the South too there has been a resurgence of interest in opposing



For regular coverage of events in Ireland and activity the monthly paper Troops Out is invaluable. Contact can be made at Box UT, c/o 2a St Paul's Rd., London N1.

the oppression taking place in the north. In the South activists in the labour movement critical of the Government's policy on the north have experienced their fair share of intimidation, harrassment and arrest. But as opinion polls have shown, they are not acting without a good deal of public support. What these activists, both north and south, need is our support. We believe that can best be given by people in the British trade union movement by demanding the withdrawal of our troops from Irish soil, and by recognising the right of the Irish people to determine their own future.

In the next LC we will be looking more thoroughly at the Labour Movement in Ireland as a whole today. There will be later in the year, a Supplement on the Republican Movement. Any comments, criticisms, would be warmly welcomed.

M.L.