Socialist political thinking in revolutionary Ireland, 1912-1923

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Abstract

The Irish revolutionary period of 1912-1923 helped stimulate and develop the political thinking and outlook of the Irish left. During this period, Irish socialists and labour movement activists had to frame responses to the movement for independence, the responses of the British state, the rise of unionism, and the threat of partition. There was consensus within the Irish left on the existence of the Irish nation, the need for some degree of independence and a strident opposition to partition. In the period prior to 1916, it did appear as though Irish labour was preparing itself to challenge both unionism and nationalism for political leadership of the country as a whole. In the aftermath of the Easter Rising, however, the Irish left allowed the republican movement to monopolise leadership of the independence struggle. This resulted in the marginalisation of Irish Labour in the south and made it more difficult for activists to resist the pan-class unionist movement in the north.

Key words: Ireland, socialism, labour, revolution

This paper examines socialist and labour movement political thinking on the national question, during the period of the Irish Revolution. It focuses on attitudes towards independence, imperialism, republicanism, partition, and unionism. There was a diversity of views within the Irish left on certain of these issues, particularly the relationship with Irish republicanism and republican organisations. For much of the time, it was inconsistent and hesitant on the question of how it should orientate itself towards the demand for a thirty-two-county Irish republic and the organisations making this demand. Even within those sections of the left that generally supported republican aims and objectives, there was no real unanimity on the nature of the support to be offered.

Notwithstanding this, however, this paper will argue that during the Irish revolutionary period, all Irish left political organisations shared a number of ideological strands, which straddled nation and class. Firstly, there was the fact of the Irish nation. All operated on the basis that Ireland was a single nation, separate from Britain. They did not consider that Ireland was composed of more than one nation, and did not doubt the historical basis of the claim to nationhood. Secondly, as a nation, Ireland had the right to national self-determination. There was consensus that the present constitutional arrangement, of direct rule from London, was unsatisfactory. Opinions varied on the question of an Irish republic, but all accepted there ought to be an Irish parliament in Dublin. Thirdly, there was opposition to partition. The Irish Left viewed partition as having a potentially catastrophic effect on Irish working class interests. The measure would weaken all labour organisations and effectively ruin any prospect of an all-Ireland labour movement. It was because of this that the Irish left emerged as perhaps the strongest source of opposition to partition. Of course none of this is to argue that all trade unionists in Ireland supported home rule or independence or opposed partition; indeed in Belfast, the majority were unionist and remained firmly opposed to independence. But the unionist position was not supported by any independent political organisation of Labour during the period of the Irish revolution. Those advocating unionism did so through the Ulster Unionist Party. The revolutionary years were years of great promise and achievement for Irish Labour, but the actual outcome of the processes represented defeat for them, one arguably from which they did not recover.

Immediately prior to the period we are examining, there had been a struggle within the Irish labour movement, between those who accepted the lead of nationalist MPs such as J.P. Nannetti, and viewed the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) as the natural political vehicle for achieving social reform,[1] and two stronger factions: William Walker and his Belfast colleagues, who were in thrall to British Labour organisationally and politically;[2] and a socialist-republican tendency which dominated Dublin Trades Council (DTC) and advocated a politically independent Irish Labour movement, which would challenge nationalism and unionism, in pursuit of an Irish socialist republic. Key developments in the generation of this latter tendency were the formation of the ITGWU by Jim Larkin in 1909, and the return of James Connolly from the USA a year or so later. Larkin and Connolly were very different, in terms of personality and leadership style, but their political thinking

was remarkably similar. Both shared the same conception of the Irish revolution, that it was national and social. While Connolly argued that 'Irish freedom' was not compatible with 'those insidious forms of economic subjection – landlord tyranny, capitalist fraud and unclean usury; baneful fruits of the Norman Conquest',[3] Larkin stressed that he not only stood for 'freedom from political and military slavery ... but also from a more degraded slavery, economic or wage slavery'.[4] Both derided the IPP as a bourgeois organisation that had 'never represented the workers',[5] and that a choice between this organisation and the 'reactionaries' of Irish unionism was 'almost a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea'.[6] Connolly and Larkin were also of the view that the Irish working class *was* the Irish nation, and the political task of the day was the formation of independent Irish labour organisations, including an Irish Labour Party. It was strengthened in 1912 both by the planned Home Rule Bill, which seemed to place on the agenda the establishment of an Irish parliament, and by William Walker's retirement from politics. This allowed the socialist republicans finally to sweep aside the combined opposition of the British labourites and IPP sympathisers. They also gained support from a layer of the Belfast labour movement, including some of its leading figures on Belfast Trades Council. At the ITUC conference that year,[7] congress would agree the historically significant step of forming a separate political party. Divisions would remain but from that point onwards those who supported Irish self-government and independent Irish Labour representation held the upper hand within the movement and were responsible for charting its future course.

The socialist-republican project was disrupted, however, by the prospect of partition, which was floated by the British government in early 1914. Connolly's famous prediction that partition would generate a 'carnival of reaction' was an argument based primarily on class considerations; he was concerned about the impact the measure would have on Irish workers and feared it would 'destroy' the 'oncoming unity of the labour movement'.[8] These class-based fears were accompanied with sharp attacks on what Connolly considered to be the false nationalism of the Home Rulers who had reluctantly accepted the measure, and the cynicism of the Ulster Unionist bourgeoisie, who stood to benefit from it. Connolly predicted that in the event of a home rule plebiscite, the IPP leaders would soon be touring the north-east in disingenuous fashion, seeking to get votes against the region's exclusion from the provisions of the act:

> [Redmond and Devlin will be] letting loose floods of oratory [designed to delude] the workers into forgetting the real crime, viz, consenting to make the unity of the Irish nation a subject to be decided by the votes of the most bigoted and passion-blinded reactionaries in these four counties where such reactionaries are in a majority. The betrayal is agreed upon...the vote is only a subterfuge to hide the grossness of the betrayal.[9]

Connolly's analysis of partition is well known, but he was not alone in his opposition. The Irish labour movement as a whole was aware of the dangers posed by partition and strongly opposed it. Class interests were central to the thinking. For example, in March 1914, a meeting of the ITUC Parliamentary Committee registered its 'dismay and anger at the attempt to divide Ulster from the rest of Ireland under the proposed amendment of the Home Rule Bill'. Partition would, the statement continued, 'intensify the divisions ... and destroy all our hopes of uniting the workers of Ulster with those of Munster, Leinster, and Connaught, on the basis of their industrial and economic interests'.[10] On 5 April, the unions organised a mass labour demonstration in Dublin against partition, describing the proposed separation of the 'Ulster democracy' from that of the rest of Ireland as a 'dire calamity'. This event was attended by labour movement activists from all over Ireland, including Belfast. One of the main speakers was D.R. 'Davy' Campbell, a former president, secretary and founding-member of Belfast Trades Council (BTC). Although not sharing his revolutionary socialism, Campbell was still influenced by Connolly's ideas and the political strategy he had embarked upon after his move to Belfast in 1910.[11] Campbell supported Connolly in his debate with Walker over the future of Labour organisation in Ireland and also backed the affiliation of Larkin's ITGWU to the ITUC, at a time when that proposal was being resisted by the British-based unions.[12] He believed that the trade union movement in Belfast should be part of an all-Ireland labour movement and supported Irish independence. All of this was threatened by partition. In his speech at the rally, Campbell criticised Redmond for conceding on partition and also referred to a public meeting held by BTC a few days earlier, at which 'the organised workers of Belfast ranged themselves with their comrades of Dublin on the side of a united Ireland'.[13] Whatever the credibility of that latter claim – as we will see below, it was a claim keenly contested by other trade unionists in Belfast – there can be no doubt that many northern Labour movement activists saw

partition as the worst possible outcome of the political crisis in Ireland. In 1914, the ITUC voted eighty-four to two against partition. There were around twenty northern delegates at the Congress, showing the degree to which they opposed the measure.[14] In fact, so concerned were the Belfast labour leaders that, like Connolly himself, they made it clear that in a straight choice between further delaying home rule, or avoiding partition, Irish Labour must choose the latter.[15]

Opposition to partition would remain a central feature of Labour politics throughout the entire period of the Irish revolution. There are numerous examples of speeches, or resolutions, or articles in newspapers, and throughout most of them, we find similar arguments – that Ireland is one, that partition will dismember the country, and that partition is an attempt to weaken the Irish working class, by creating a permanent division in its ranks. A good example of this is the comment made by Labour councillor James Logue, at a meeting of Derry Corporation in the summer of 1921, which was specially convened to discuss partition. Logue stated that he was opposed to any division in the working class movement in the country and that 'from the point of view of labour, Cork was essential to Belfast and Belfast to Cork. He argued that unity of labour was necessary to maintain even the modest degree of 'elevation' that had been achieved in working class living standards in recent years. Logue went onto praise the achievements of the trade unions in Belfast, pointing out that it was the only city in Ireland where any section of the working class had a forty-four-hour week, and that their input would be crucial in improving conditions throughout the south and west. He concluded by describing the division as a false one, which had been 'manufactured' by a 'small band of employers' in the north.[16] Logue's belief that partition was a ruse by the Ulster industrialists and the British elites to head off any prospect of workers' unity remained widely held in the Irish labour movement; indeed, at the ILPTUC conference held that same week, a leading Irish labour figure, Cathal O'Shannon, rubbished partition as a measure 'destructive to the growing power of Irish labour and an attempt to prevent Ulster workers from partaking of the fruits of the struggle against Irish landlordism and capital'.[17]

Partition was a serious blow to the hopes of the Irish left but worse was to follow when war broke out a few months later. However, if the First World War would serve to create a harsh political climate that made class-based political activity more difficult to organise, it also had the effect of sharpening the political thinking of the Irish left. This

was particularly so in relation to imperialism. Connolly and the Irish left clearly saw the war as an imperialist conflict. Connolly argued that it was a response by British imperialism to its own economic decline, likening its conflict with Germany to that of a 'doddering old miser confronted with a lusty youth, a miser whose only hope is to purchase the limbs and bodies of others in order to protect her stolen properties'.[18] The ILPTUC became the only western European trade union federation to view the war as an imperialist conflict.[19] In Dublin, the unions were at the heart of what would eventually become a vibrant anti-war movement. The war exposed John Redmond's support for the British Empire, his view that it was 'an instrument of civilisation',[20] and his long-held belief that Ireland should play a part in its administration and maintenance. Redmond's decision to encourage the Irish Volunteers to enlist in British colours and the IPP's recruiting activities in Belfast further widened the gap between the politics of home rule nationalism and the politics of Irish Labour and created space for the anti-imperialism of the Irish Left to come to the fore. Connolly, in particular, repeatedly made the connection between Redmond and British imperialism, excoriating the IPP leader for his desire to 'deliver the goods for the Empire' in the shape of young Irish recruits to the British army.[21] In one blistering article published in November 1915, Connolly noted:

> Mr Redmond and his followers tell us that it is useless to struggle against the empire, that we should devote all our powers to the task of pleasing the government by services to the Empire. That we might win by favours what we cannot gain by struggling and that the sole hope of Ireland is to win reward by giving pleasure ... is a prostitute's argument ... was ever a nation so beset by its enemies? Was ever a nation so betrayed by its friends?[22]

In October 1915, DTC issued a statement, stating that while it would not prevent those who had 'zeal for the British Empire' from fighting abroad, it was calling upon the organised workers of Ireland to join either the citizen army or Irish volunteers as the best way to avoid conscription.[23] BTC also adopted an anti-war position, describing conscription as 'yoke' around the neck of all workers and calling instead for the 'conscription of wealth'.[24]

By this stage, Connolly had become convinced of the need for a rising in Ireland and was secretly working to achieve that goal. Class

considerations were prime. To return to his metaphor, Connolly feared that if the 'miser' could purchase enough limbs of others, it might defeat the 'youth', stave off its decline and rule Ireland for another generation. That was bad enough. What made it worse was the fate awaiting Irish workers in such a dispensation. Connolly feared that the power of the British state was increasing in Ireland, threatening the hard-fought but precariously-held liberties of the working class.[25] Newspapers were regularly suppressed and Liberty Hall, HQ of the ITGWU and 'citadel of the Irish labour movement' was attacked by the police.[26] Added to this was the constant threat of conscription, which was introduced in Britain in January 1916, and the morale-sapping reality of economic conscription, where, Connolly claimed, workers were being laid off in order to force them to join the army.[27] That Connolly saw it as an age of blood and iron, opening up revolutionary socialist possibilities was made clear in two letters he sent to Scottish socialist leader Arthur McManus in Glasgow in late 1915-early 1916. Only one of these letters, written on 23 November 1915, has survived, but it is worth re-printing extracts here because of the insight it offers into Connolly's political thinking at this crucial stage in his life. Writing to inform McManus that he would be unable to accept an invitation to speak at an anti-conscription meeting in Glasgow, Connolly stated:

> Every moment in Dublin now is full of tragic possibilities as our beneficent Government is becoming daily more high handed in its methods, and my presence is required here in constant watchfulness. Hence with regret, I must decline your kind invitation, and send you instead this message to yourself and all comrades who refuse to be led astray to fight the battles of the ruling capitalist class. Tell them that we in Ireland will not have conscription, let the law say what it likes. We know our rulers: we know their power, and their ruthlessness, we experience every day. We know they can force us to fight whether we wish to or not, but we know also that no force in their possession can decide for us *where* we will fight. *That* remains for us to decide; and we have no intention of shedding our blood abroad for our masters. Rather we will elect to shed it if need be in a battle for the conquest of our freedom at home.[28]

McManus pointed out that in the second letter, written at the end of January 1916, but later seized by Scotland Yard after he was arrested in 1917, 'the one consoling fact to [Connolly], which stood out in the

Government's policies of persecution, was the potentialities of Social Revolution which their action developed' and concluded that 'Jim Connolly was the first socialist I had met who actually *worked* for the Revolution and dreamt of its immediate possibility!!!'.[29] The import of these letters is clear. Connolly was convinced that the government was 'becoming daily more high handed in its methods' and in threatening to introduce conscription, was driving Ireland to the point of a revolt which had 'potentialities of social revolution'. With this analysis at hand, Connolly's decision to rise in 1916 becomes understandable.

No Irish labour movement organisation supported Connolly's actions in 1916. In Dublin, where the trades council was strongly influenced by republicanism, and where Connolly had been in control of the ITGWU and ICA, support was not forthcoming. In Belfast, where the local trades council was led by activists who had been influenced by Connolly, there was a strong and understandable reluctance to say anything publicly about the Rising.[30] Recent research on Irish attitudes towards the rising has suggested that the shift in public opinion towards the republicans took place earlier than had previously been believed.[31] In fact, the tide of public opinion may have already begun to turn against Redmond even before Easter 1916.[32] This makes it likely that by the autumn of 1916, there was already a growing sympathy to the Rising and republicanism more generally within the labour movement, at rank-and-file level. However, at leadership level, Labour was unwilling to take such a position. Behind this, there was an understandable fear of British repression, but also some clear ideological factors. In August 1916, at its first post-Rising gathering, the ITUCLP met at Sligo and adopted what Desmond Greaves described as a 'facing both ways' stance of sympathy for the dead both of Easter Week and the trenches of France and Belgium.[33] Labour leader, Tom Johnson, went further, expressing his personal support for the British war effort, binding it to the victory of freedom the world over. This stance of Johnson was well in line with his political training and background. He was, as his biographer informs us, a socialist of ILP vintage,[34] and one who shared many of the preconceptions within the socialist movement of his native England. As O'Connor pointed out, the Labour leader 'assumed a tension between nationalism and socialism' and treated Ireland's right to self-determination 'as if it were an item of foreign policy'.[35] The other powerful figure in the leadership of Irish Labour was William O'Brien, the acting secretary of the ITGWU and Vice-Chairman of the Labour party. O'Brien was a close friend of Connolly. For reasons that were

initially different to those of Johnson, but which had the same ultimate effect, O'Brien too opted Labour out of the independence movement, consigning it to a position of follower rather than leader of the national struggle. O'Brien was influenced by Connolly's syndicalism and he appreciated the socialist potentialities of industrial unionism. He had, as O'Connor Lysaght has pointed out, 'learnt, with Connolly's aid, that the means to their desired end was through building the workers' organisations within the shell of the political state'.[36] But Connolly's syndicalism had been combined with the promotion of a militant class consciousness, designed to fire the Irish working class to the head of the independence movement. His basic beliefs about the dual nature of the Irish struggle and his own revolutionary approach were not adopted by O'Brien. A syndicalist without a revolutionary attitude or approach, O'Brien would soon become the trade union bureaucrat *par excellence*, insulated by the machinery he put in place from the rising levels of political and industrial militancy.

In this period after 1916, Irish labour would become far more powerful. Trade union membership rocketed,[37] and many strikes and occupations were organised that shook the British state to its core. In April 1918 there was a one-day general strike against conscription; the year 1919 witnessed the Limerick Soviet;[38] the following year saw the munitions railway boycott, which was perhaps the most significant and bitterly-fought struggle between the British state and the Irish labour movement throughout the entire revolutionary period;[39] while in 1922 alone there would be over eighty workplace occupations throughout Ireland.[40] Clearly, then, Labour had many opportunities to play a more leading political role during this period, but two points need to be made in order to explain its rather toothless status in post-revolutionary Ireland. Firstly, Labour did not view the national question as an integral feature of the political terrain in Ireland and did not frame its programme in accordance with this reality. Instead, it considered the national question as an unwelcome obstacle that needed to be overcome, in order for normal, British-style left-right politics to develop. Secondly, it looked to Sinn Fein to clear away this obstacle and from 1918 onwards, acted as a tail-end to the republican revolutionaries. As it made clear in the 1918 General Election, when justifying its decision to withdraw, Labour did not wish to challenge Sinn Fein's claim to speak for the Irish nation. The party supported Irish independence, but never put this to the fore of its programme, preferring to focus on social and economic issues, which it considered to be separate to the national

question. Congress never recognised Dáil Éireann, being fearful that such a move might invite British repression and threaten the unity of trade unionism in the north. But it made it equally clear that it would not be taking part in any struggle for political leadership in Ireland, for the duration of the Irish revolution.

The post-1918 revolutionary left adopted a different stance in relation to the national independence struggle. This section of the left moved through different phases and for a period was controlled by some of the same leaders who wielded power within the broader Irish labour movement. But in October 1921, it eventually took on a new organisational form and became the first Communist Party of Ireland (CPI). The political ideology of the CPI was Connollyite, which was perhaps not surprising, given the prominent role played in this party by Connolly's son, Roddy. But aspects of Irish communist political thinking were also innovative, in that they applied these ideas to a political context very different to that which had obtained during James Connolly's life. This was especially the case in relation to the Treaty. The CPI was the first political organisation to oppose the Treaty, describing it as a 'hollow mockery of freedom' and predicting 'civil war and social hell' if it was accepted.[41] In two lengthy articles, which were carried over several editions of the *Workers Republic* during 1922-1923,[42] Connolly depicted the Free State as a 'puppet' state of British imperialism. The social base of the state was the upper stratum of the Irish bourgeoisie, a class that was too weak to defeat the British but one that was 'interested in imperialist exploitation of the Dominions, India, the Far East etc., and tied by dividend coupons to the fortunes of the British Empire'.[43] The departure of the nationalist stratum of the Irish bourgeoisie from the revolutionary movement into what was effectively an alliance with the British and the unionists had sabotaged the republican movement and strengthened British rule throughout Ireland. The context in which the CPI placed the Treaty was inspired also by Russian Bolshevism. It believed the British empire to be 'rocking', and predicted it would be 'broken and crushed in India, and destroyed in Egypt'. The Comintern analysis, of an impending war between the USA and Britain was invoked, and it would be as a pawn of imperialism that Irish Free State would now be placed. The pro-Treaty section of the IRA would become the 'watchdog' of the English capitalists, helping to 'enslave millions under the Union Jack'.[44] I have argued previously that the political ideology of the first CPI not only informed the outlook of the socialist republican IRA in the late 1920s-early 1930s, but can also be regarded as an early

contribution to the development of what would become the Marxist theory of neo-colonialism.[45] However, if the analysis of the CPI was very different to that of the ILPTUC, the party also found the question of how it should relate to republicanism troublesome and divisive. For much of its short history, CPI political strategy was based on an acceptance of republican leadership of the national struggle. Partly as a result of its own analysis of the IRA as potentially a proletarian army, partly at the behest of the Comintern, which wanted a broad, anti-imperialist front established in Ireland, in order to upset and weaken the power of its most aggressive enemy,[46] and partly in recognition of its own tiny nature, the CPI would subordinate itself to the IRA, and, unlike Labour, would later support it during the civil war, joining the fighting itself, before its eventual dissolution by the Comintern as an organisation in 1924.[47] But this subordination was divisive and arguments for a more independent class-based strategy were also repeatedly made. All Irish communists accepted the need for an orientation towards the anti-Treaty IRA; precisely how close they should get to the republicans was always the devil in that particular detail.

For very different reasons then, the Irish Marxists and the social democrats both supported Irish self-determination and accepted that this particular struggle should be led by republicans. They had different conceptions of what constituted freedom in Ireland, but were both of the view that republicans would provide the spearhead and much of the muscle in the struggle against British rule. Another aspect of political thinking they had in common was their analysis of unionism and loyalism. Both regarded unionism simply as a reactionary ideology, disseminated from above by the orange capitalists, supported by the British, and designed to prevent protestant workers from unifying with their catholic counterparts. Arguably, this apparent lack of understanding of unionism and Labour's subordination to Sinn Fein would have implications for the future of the labour movement in the north, and it is to labour in the north, specifically Belfast that I now want to turn.

Competing ideologies were in evidence within Belfast trade unionism during this period. There was a minority section that aligned itself with the rest of the Irish labour movement. This faction was composed mainly of protestant activists, many of whom were part of BTC, and the Belfast Labour Party, which was formed by the trades council and remnants from the old Independent Labour Party branches in 1918. As we have noted above, these activists had been influenced to a degree by Connolly. Their main concern in this period was partition and they

were active in organising meetings and events designed to highlight the dangers the measure posed to working class interests all over the country. The Belfast labour activists also remained opposed to conscription and in 1918 BTC endorsed a resolution passed by Bradford Trades Council, which described conscription in Ireland as a 'monstrous injustice'.[48] They were central to the organising of two anti-conscription meetings in Belfast in April of that year, the second of which was broken up by large crowds of loyalists.[49] The national question posed them more difficulties and was dealt with in a cautious fashion. D.R. Campbell sought to distance Labour from Sinn Fein but did indicate publicly that a solution might be found on the basis of dominion home rule in an unpartitioned Ireland. He did not feel that it would be possible to move beyond this position at that point in Belfast. That this appeared to be the view of some of the other northern labour leaders could be seen in 1917, when Belfast Trades Council was part of a wider Belfast Labour delegation to the Irish Convention, established by Horace Plunkett. The majority of this delegation, which including some who would later stand in elections for Belfast Labour, signed a statement which advocated such a political dispensation.[50]

The Belfast socialists generally maintained this position thereafter. There was concern at Labour's deference towards Sinn Fein in the south. The party's decision to withdraw from the 1918 general election was criticised by northern activists. Campbell, for example, rejected the leadership's view that a peace-time election was in any way different to a war-time one, while other Belfast delegates expressed their disbelief that a Labour body would lie down to Sinn Fein in this fashion.[51] As the election drew near, Belfast Labour Party decided to act and eventually candidates were ran in four strongly unionist wards – Pottinger, Victoria, Shankill and Cromac. In their pre-election meetings, the candidates focused mainly on social and economic questions. For example, they called for the extension of the medical benefits of the National Insurance Act to Ireland and also made the case for a 41-hour working week. With this latter demand, they were tapping into a grievance that would soon precipitate a general strike in the city. The party also took a strong anti-war position, which was a courageous stance to adopt in Belfast. At one meeting, Sam Kyle pointed out how 'twenty men in Europe had made twenty million homes desolate' and that the same thing would happen again 'unless there was a federation of the working classes'.[52] There was a reluctance to engage in discussions on the national question. At one pre-election meeting, Labour candidate,

James Freeland was asked his views 'on the Union'. Freeland deflected the question with humour, saying that as far as he was aware the (poor law) Union was situated on the Lisburn Road and that he hoped it 'would soon disappear'.[53] At the same time, however, at least three of the four Labour candidates were known to be pro-independence. The unionist press reminded its readers that one of four, Robert Waugh, had been part of the Labour delegation that 'had signed a Home Rule declaration at the recent Irish Convention'.[54] Another of the candidates, Samuel Porter, who stood for Labour in the Pottinger ward, made his own views clear. In language that showed the influence of recent international events on the discourses around Irish independence, Porter called for the 'the fullest measure of self-government, in accordance with the principle of self-determination of nations, as laid down by President Wilson and accepted by the Allies'.[55] Sam Kyle, who stood for Labour in the Shankill and was probably the best known of all the candidates, had previously stated his support for an Irish workers' republic.[56] Labour won no seats at this election, but they did receive an impressive average twenty-two per cent of the vote across the four seats, and over 12,000 votes in total. It would be wrong to claim this as evidence that a significant section of the protestant working class were accepting of Irish independence, but it does show quite clearly that they were not all behind the Ulster Unionist Party. Several of these Belfast socialists would soon be involved in the famous forty-four-hours strike of January 1919. This included strike leader, Charles McKay, who had also been a signatory to the Irish Convention report. A few months later, they organised the biggest May-Day workers' demonstration in the city's history, involving over 100,000 people. The high-point of Belfast Labour was reached the following January, at the corporation elections, when twelve candidates were elected after receiving 17,000 first-preference votes. This made Labour the official opposition to the unionists and led directly to the latter abolishing proportional representation for local elections, in order to prevent a repeat occurrence.

Thereafter Belfast Labour toiled in a complex political situation of rising unemployment, constitutional crisis, revolution and lethal sectarian violence. The major set-back of this period was the expulsion of around 5,500 catholic workers and 1,850 protestant trade unionists from their workplaces, which was accompanied with weeks of street rioting and murders.[57] These expulsions were fomented by loyalist groups, including the Belfast Protestant Association and the Ulster Unionist Labour Association. The Belfast socialists understood the expulsions

not simply as acts of extreme anti-catholic violence, but as an attack on their own organisations and progressive socialist ideas generally. They believed that the violence had been orchestrated by the unionist leaders, with the aim of wrecking the prospects of workers' unity that had begun to develop in the 1919-20 period. This can be seen in the appeal which accompanied the establishment of an expelled workers fund in August 1920. It was noted here that the expulsions had not been carried out by ordinary workers, but by backward elements whose 'religious and political rancour' made them 'ready instruments' for the stirring of sectarian hatreds. 'But the wire pulling and the instigation' the appeal continued, 'were the work of a political and capitalistic caucus who sought to break up the ranks of Labour. Their plan was the old one: Divide and Conquer'.[58] In the months that followed the expulsions, many of the Belfast labour leaders were involved in expelled workers relief fund activity. They spoke at numerous trade union meetings in Ireland and especially Britain, in an unsuccessful attempt to secure the meaningful backing of the British TUC for the expelled workers. Their analysis of the expulsions did not change. For example, James Baird, a member of the boilermakers' society, and prominent Belfast Labour councillor offered the following comments at the 1921 British TUC conference:

> Every man who was prominently known in the Labour movement, who was known as an ILPer, was expelled from his work just the same as the rebel Sinn Feiners. To show their love of the ILP, they burnt our hall in North Belfast. The Chairman of our Central branch had to flee to Glasgow for his life. The secretary had to fly all the way to London. The district chairman of the AEU, a very quiet and moderate Labour man was beaten not once but two or three times because he persisted in returning to his work. A member of the executive of the joiners society was also expelled. He was not a catholic and was also a moderate Labour man.[59]

At a meeting in South London later in the year, two campaigners, one of whom was the prominent ex-orangeman turned socialist, John Hanna, were quoted by the *Belfast News Letter* as saying that that they had been driven from their jobs because they supported an Irish Republic, and that they would not be satisfied until such a republic was established.[60]

Between July 1920 and July 1922, 453 people were killed in Belfast and around 23,000 of the city's 93,000 Catholics were forced out of

their homes.[61] Belfast Labour could not function in this environment and decided not to stand in the inaugural Northern Ireland Parliament elections in 1921. Four independent Labour candidates did run, but were physically prevented from holding meetings. The best-known example of this took place at the Ulster Hall on 17 May, when a group of loyalists headed by the Ulster Ex-Servicemen's Association and the British Empire Union attacked a meeting planned by three of the four candidates, Baird, Hanna, and Harry Midgley. Notwithstanding these difficulties, during the election, the Labour candidates remained supportive of Irish independence and Irish unity and continued to represent partition as a sectarian ruse concocted by the Unionist leaders to gain political support: 'We are completely against partition. It is an unworkable stupidity, as the inner circle of wire-pullers well know, but it is considered good enough to fight an election on ... the interests of the workers of Ireland are politically and economically one'.[62]

However, the socialists associated with Belfast Trades Council and the Belfast Labour Party were a minority voice within Belfast trade unionism. Throughout the revolutionary period, they would be opposed by a labour unionism that was ideologically, and in the political field organisationally, indistinguishable from mainstream Ulster Unionism. Previous manifestations of labour unionism had taken place through the medium of independent orangeism and had been more autonomous and troublesome for the unionist elites, especially during the period of Tory 'constructive unionism' at the turn of the century. However the emergence of the unionists from the shadow of the Conservative Party and the forging of a stronger and more cohesive pan-class alliance in the years following the formation of the Ulster Unionist Council in 1905 had neutralised independent orangeism, stripping away its autonomy, strengthening the control of the Ulster Unionist leaders and official Orange Order.[63] During the revolutionary period, there would be several highpoints of labour unionist activity. In 1912, the first round of expulsions of catholic workers and protestant trade unionists was accompanied with the establishment of unionist working men's clubs in the Belfast shipyards and engineering shops. In April 1914, a mass meeting of several thousand protestant workers took place at the Ulster Hall, expressing opposition to home rule and repudiating the political leadership of the local trades council. Labour unionism was institutionalised in 1918 into two bogus labour organisations, the Ulster Unionist Labour Association, (UULA) and the Ulster Workers Union, (UWU) – the former was a clear attempt at formalising hegemony over

the protestant working class by Edward Carson, while the latter was an attempt by a well-known labour unionist, James Turkington, to establish a sectarian rival to the ITGWU. Again, in 1920, labour unionism played a central role during the larger and more politically significant round of workplace expulsions.

Labour unionist political thinking had a number of features. It disputed the right of organisations such as BTC to speak for protestant workers; for example at a meeting in 1914, Turkington claimed that BTC represented only one-fifth of Belfast trade unionists and was the 'tool of the socialist home rulers and puppet of the United Irish League'.[64] The ideology was class collaborationist and imperialist. At one pre-election meeting in Strandtown Unionist Club in Belfast in 1918, UULA candidate Thompson Donald reflected warmly on the 'wonderful assistance' that 'our colonies' had given the 'mother country in her hour of need', and how they must be accorded their share of representation in the future when imperial matters were being discussed. Donald stressed that 'Ulster' must never in the future allow any measure that was calculated to benefit the community be limited to Scotland, England and Wales.[65] A few days earlier, the same speaker had praised shipyard owner Frank Workman as an 'admirable employer', before expressing his 'abhorrence' at strikes and his belief that 'labour and capital should go hand in hand'.[66] Three years later, in the run-up to the Belfast Parliament elections, a well-known labour unionist and shipwright, William Grant, criticised independent Labour candidates for attempting to split the protestant electorate, assuring protestant voters that their interests would be best served by the four unionist candidates, because they were evenly selected from the ranks of capital and labour.[67]

Labour unionism did have something of a material basis. It rested on a reading of the uneven development of the Irish economy, the perceived social and economic interests of the protestant working class and the dependent relationship of the Belfast economy to the British economy. For example, at the Ulster Hall rally in 1914, there were references to how Home Rule would rob protestant workers of the protection of a parliament, under which Belfast had become one of the most prosperous and important manufacturing and commercial cities of the empire and place it in the hands of protectionists and agriculturalists who did not understand and would be indifferent to Ulster's industrial progress.[68] Edward Carson in particular tended to stress this particular threat when addressing labour unionist gatherings. On occasion, he

could go as far as to warn protestant workers that the rights and benefits and improvements they had obtained as part of the British labour movement (rarely supported by the Ulster Unionists, it has to be said!) would perish under home rule.[69]

In keeping with unionist and conservative discourses more generally,[70] the labour unionists also tended to present republicanism and communism as one and the same. But they went further and connected this to their labour opponents in Belfast. During the 1921 Northern Ireland parliament elections, West Belfast UULA candidate, Harry Burn, dismissed his Labour Party rival, John Hanna, as a 'Bolshevist', arguing that 'unionist Labour was quite capable of representing the unionist working men and women better than any socialist or any of those who stood for an unpartitioned Ireland'. In North Belfast, William Grant argued that there was an alliance between Belfast labour and Sinn Fein, 'that the Bolshevik movement and Sinn Fein were one' and that they had allied to 'cause trouble to unionism in Belfast'.[71] In East Belfast, Thompson Donald pointed out how he had been opposed in that constituency by a combined force of 'Sinn Feiners and Red flaggers' but vowed that unionism would 'fight to the finish' against them.[72]

Unionism continued to exert a strong grip over the protestant working class. There was no appetite for the weak, Ulster-only trade unionism advocated by Turkington's UWU, but this was not surprising, given the manner in which that organisation was used by employers to introduce scab labour and weaken bona-fide trade union organisation.[73] Trade unionism within the shipbuilding and engineering industries remained British in organisation and unionist in political outlook. Most branches of those unions were not affiliated to the local trades council. In May 1918, a deputation travelled to London, to express the opposition of protestant trade unionists to home rule. A large meeting of Belfast workers was duly held shortly afterwards which expressed support for this 'most emphatic protest' against home rule. In another sign of the divides within the Belfast working class, this particular meeting went onto strongly endorse conscription, calling for its immediate introduction in Ireland.[74] But labour unionist ideology throughout this period remained indistinguishable from that of Ulster unionism. There was never any critique of the social policies of the Ulster Unionists, and no attempt even to resurrect William Walker's effort at a politically independent labour unionism of many years earlier. Instead, it would remain part of the unionist bloc, under the control of the unionist leaders. Labour unionism and the UULA had mixed fortunes during

these years but would ultimately play a significant role in the formation and consolidation of the state of Northern Ireland; the UULA did well in the 1918 election, returning three MPs in Belfast. It was unable to wield any influence during the time of the 1919 Belfast strike and was eclipsed by the Belfast Labour Party in the 1920 corporation elections. However, later in 1920, the association was instrumental to the workplace expulsions. As Morgan pointed out, these expulsions would in turn prove crucial to the emergence of a protestant political economy; a loyalist industrial order; and the purging of the existing trade union leadership – processes that simply overwhelmed the Belfast labour movement, solidified pan-class unionism and strengthened those in control of the new Northern Ireland state.[75]

In conclusion, this analysis of socialist and labour movement political thinking in Ireland reveals a pre-1916 movement that was preparing itself as a challenger to both nationalism and unionism for political leadership in Ireland, and a post-1916 movement that quite clearly did not. The removal of Connolly and Larkin from the leadership of Irish labour led to the development of a new political strategy, based on different political thinking. Post-1916 socialists had difficulty in engaging with the question of Irish independence and the sudden emergence of a mass-based republican movement. They saw the national question as one that only republicans could solve and in so doing, they gave up their hopes of political leadership without a struggle. The Irish Labour party's uncritical support for Irish nationalism and its subordination to Sinn Fein also made it more difficult for the admittedly far weaker movement in the north to resist the structural processes that were underway, and which would result in the partition of the island; a permanent division in the working class; the temporary destruction of labour politics in Belfast; and the triumph of a yellow variant, which would wield significant, if also temporary, power during the latter period of the Irish revolution.

Notes

1. Joseph Patrick Nannetti (1851-1915) was one of the founder-members of Dublin Trades Council and served as its first president from 1886-1888. Nannetti was later elected as the Irish Parliamentary Party MP for College Green in 1900 and held the seat for the next three general elections until his death in 1915. Nannetti was hostile to the emergence of a separate political party for labour, arguing that the nationalist party was the real Labour party in Ireland.

2. William Walker (1871-1918), shipyard carpenter and the leading Belfast labour movement politician in the first decade of the twentieth century. His political ideology was that of a more socially-aware unionism. He was opposed to home rule but also the narrow class interests upheld by the Ulster Unionist Party. Walker's vision of unionism was more radical, but on occasion, and especially during his election speeches in North Belfast in 1905, his rhetoric was anti-catholic and sectarian. Walker's retirement from politics in 1912 meant that the initiative in Belfast labour politics passed to the likes of D. R. Campbell, Samuel Kyle, and William McMullen, all of whom were sympathetic to Irish independence and the formation of an independent Irish Labour party. For more on William Walker's views see Cork Workers Club *The Connolly-Walker Controversy on Socialist Unity in Ireland,* pp5-8, 15-17, 25-27, Cork n.d. See also Henry Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, Belfast 1980, pp55-61.
3. James Connolly, 'Socialism and Nationalism', *Shan Van Vocht,* January 1897.
4. Emmet O'Connor, *Big Jim: Hero or Wrecker?*, Dublin 2015, p83.
5. *Irish Worker*, 2 December 1911.
6. James Connolly, 'Mr John Redmond, M.P., his strengths and weaknesses', *Forward,* 18 March 1911.
7. Irish Trades Union Congress, set up 1894. This became the Irish Trade Unions Congress and Labour Party (ITUCLP) in 1914, before switching to the ILPTUC in 1918.
8. *Irish Worker,* 14 March 1914.
9. *Forward,* 11 April 1914.
10. *Irish Worker,* 21 March 1914.
11. Sean Byers, 'Belfast Trades Council, the Easter Rising and the Trade Union Politics of Commemoration, 1916-1966, *Saothar,* Volume 41, (2016), p46.
12. *Derry Journal,* 18 May 1910.
13. *Irish Worker,* 11 April 1914.
14. Donal Nevin, *James Connolly: A Full Life,* Dublin 2005, p523
15. Ibid.
16. *Derry Journal*, 26 August 1921.
17. *Derry Journal*, 27 August 1920.
18. *Workers' Republic,* 20 November 1915.
19. Desmond Greaves, *Life and Times of James Connolly*, London 1961, p355.
20. Kieran Allen, *1916, Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition,* London 2016, p16.
21. *Irish Worker*, 3 October 1914.
22. *Workers' Republic*, 27 November 1915.
23. Adrian Grant, *Irish Socialist Republicanism, 1909-1936*, Dublin 2012, p67.

24. *Workers' Republic*, 17 July 1915; 12 February 1916.
25. This was a recurrent theme in Connolly's writings during the war. See, for example, 'Rally for Labour', *Irish Worker,* 14 November 1914; 'Our disappearing liberties', *Workers' Republic,* 5 June 1915; 'the right to strike', *Workers' Republic*, 3 July 1915; 'Militarism', *Workers' Republic*, 21 August 1915; 'War for Civilisation', *Workers' Republic*, 30 October 1915; 'forces of civilisation', *Workers' Republic*, 8 April 1916. In all of these articles, and others written in a similar vein, Connolly dealt expressly with the threats posed to *working class* interests as a result of the increased militarisation of the British state apparatus in Ireland.
26. Priscilla Metscher, *Republicanism and Socialism in Ireland*, Frankfurt 1986, p438.
27. Perhaps the best example of this was the front-page article in the *Workers' Republic,* 18 March 1916, where he took aim at the 'pious sweaters' and 'soul murderers' of Messrs. W.&R. Jacobs, the biscuit manufacturers. According to Connolly, this firm, 'one of the most malignant on the side of the employers during the Lock-Out', had not only been an enthusiastic recruiting sergeant, but had dismissed every man of military age, to force them into the war.
28. Connolly to McManus 23 November 1915, re-printed in McManus, 'James Connolly: Socialist and Revolutionary', *Socialist,* 17 April 1919. Arthur McManus (1889-1927) would later become the inaugural president of the Communist Party of Great Britain.
29. Ibid.
30. Byers, 'Belfast Trades Council', pp47-48.
31. See, for example, Fergal McGarry, *The Rising*, Oxford 2010, p281. Here, McGarry cites a report from the RIC Inspector General from June 1916 which reported how the republicans now enjoyed the support of the majority of people in towns.
32. See Allan, *1916*, pp40-41.
33. Desmond Greaves, *The Irish Transport and General Workers Union: the formative years, 1909-1923*, Dublin 1982, pp173-174.
34. J. Anthony Gaughan, *Thomas Johnson 1872-1963*, Dublin 1980, p399.
35. Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland 1917-23*, Cork 1988, p87.
36. D. R. O'Connor Lysaght, 'The Rake's Progress of a Syndicalist: the Political Career of William O'Brien, Labour Leader' in *Saothar* 9, (1983), p51.
37. For example, ITGWU membership rose from 12,000 in 1917 to 100,000 by 1920. The number of affiliates to the ITUC rose from 110,000 in 1914 to 300,000 in 1921. For more, see Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland Popular Militancy 1917-1923,* Cork 2009, pp150-151.
38. For a thorough exploration of this event, see Liam Cahill, *Forgotten Revolution: The Limerick Soviet 1919-a threat to British Power in Ireland*, Dublin 1990.

39. For an overview of the strike and its importance, see Charles Townshend, 'The Irish railway strike of 1920: Industrial action and civil resistance in the struggle for Irish independence', *Irish Historical Studies,* 83, (1979).
40. O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland, 1917-1923*, p139.
41. *Workers' Republic,* 17 December 1921.
42. These were 'the Republican Struggle in Ireland' (later reprinted by the Irish Communist Organisation, 1966) and 'Past and Future Policy'.
43. Roddy Connolly, 'Past and Future Policy', *Workers' Republic,* 6 January 1923, 13 January 1923, 20 January 1923.
44. *Workers' Republic*, 17 December 1921.
45. Charlie McGuire, *Roddy Connolly and the Struggle for Socialism in Ireland*, Cork 2008, pp243-257, and Charlie McGuire, 'Irish Marxism and the Development of the Theory of Neo-Colonialism', *Eire-Ireland,* 41, 3&4, Fall/Winter 2006, pp110-133.
46. Russian State Social and Political Archive (RGASPI), Borodin Interviews Delegates from the Irish Party, 15 July 1922, fond 495/89/13.
47. For a full analysis of the demise of the first CPI, see Emmet O'Connor, *Reds and the Green: Ireland, Russia and the Communist Internationals, 1919-1943,* Dublin 2004, pp76-92.
48. *Belfast Newsletter*, 3 May 1918.
49. *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 April 1918.
50. Two of the seven labour delegates did not sign: John Hanna and T. Lundon. In Hanna's case this was probably because the report did not advocate a republic.
51. Grant, *Irish Socialist Republicanism,* p89.
52. *Belfast Newsletter*, 2 December 1918.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. *Irish News*, 2 December 1918.
56. Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland, 1917-1923*, Cork 2009, p71.
57. Austen Morgan, *Labour and Partition, the Belfast Working Class*, London 1991, pp268-269.
58. *Derry Journal*, 10 August 1920.
59. 1921 *TUC report*, p268.
60. *Northern Whig*, 1 December 1921.
61. Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland: The Orange State*, London 1980, p62.
62. *Irish News,* 21 May 1921.
63. Paul Bew, Peter Gibbon, Henry Patterson, *Northern Ireland 1921-1996: Political Forces and Social Classes,* London 1997, pp23-24.
64. *Belfast Weekly News*, 14 May 1914.
65. *Belfast Newsletter,* 22 November 1918.
66. *Belfast Newsletter,* 19 November 1918.
67. *Northern Whig*, 14 May 1921.

68. *Belfast Weekly News,* 7 May 1914.
69. See, for example, Carson's letter to William Grant in the *Belfast Weekly News*, 14 May 1914.
70. See for example, Richard Dawson, *Red Terror and Green,* London 1920. Dawson's book was based partly on British intelligence leaks. See also HMSO, CMND 1326, *Intercourse Between Bolshevism and Sinn Fein,* June 1921.
71. *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 May 1921.
72. Ibid.
73. See Greaves, *Irish Transport and General Workers Union,* pp279-80.
74. *Belfast Newsletter,* 11 May 1918.
75. Morgan, *Labour and Partition* pp264-284.