

1916: What are you celebrating?

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Contents

NATIONALISTS	3
EQUALITY	3
NOT SOCIALIST	3
JAMES CONNOLLY	4
IRISH "SOVIETS"	4
A WORKERS REPUBLIC	4

THIS YEAR marks the 75th anniversary of the Easter Rising. There will be all sorts of commemorations throughout the country, organised by forces ranging from Fianna Fáil to Sinn Féin. We will hear a lot of talk about the “spirit of 1916”, what does it mean today?

The rising was heroic. Some would even say stupid. It had little popular support. Most Irish people at the time believed that Irish men should be off fighting the Germans. It was widely thought that in return Home Rule would become a reality. The leaders of the rising were not too worried about this. They believed that the blood sacrifice was all that was needed to inspire future generations.

NATIONALISTS

The rising itself was led by middle class nationalists. Their one and only objective was the liberation of the country from British rule. This has not yet been achieved. Indeed all the major parties, including the Workers Party, have given up on this. The Anglo-Irish Agreement was only the most recent attempt to come to terms with partition. For all the waffle about being the true inheritors of the Rising, not one government of the Free State has implemented the limited demands of the rebels.

The Proclamation declared the following “The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities for all its citizens and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally.”

EQUALITY

Here we see a general liberal desire for equality. But far from equality, all we see around us in the Irish Republic is inequality. Workers are thrown on the dole and expected to live on a pittance while the bosses make enormous profits and eat in outrageously expensive restaurants. There are plush new private hospitals while workers get second rate health care. Women are denied the right to participate fully in society. Their role as wives and childminders is enshrined in the Constitution.

Far from cherishing all the children of the nation equally, working class children are denied the right to attend third level education yet their parents fork out a fortune in taxes to subsidise the children of the rich.

NOT SOCIALIST

Not that the leaders of the Rising were socialist or anything like it. Their only concern was to get the British out. The new Ireland was clearly going to be capitalist. The Proclamation calls on all Irish people to unite, saying that all previous differences which “have divided a minority from the majority” were “carefully fostered by an alien government”. So the only problem was British domination.

It obviously was a problem but this perspective totally overlooks the fact that only three years previously the Irish bosses led by William Martin Murphy had locked out and starved thousands of Irish workers. Were the workers now to forget all this and unite with their enemies?

JAMES CONNOLLY

The presence of Connolly did not give the Rising a socialist tinge. Connolly had clearly decided that socialism should be put in cold storage. He believed that the World War was a great opportunity to strike at Britain. Also the defeat in the 1913 Lockout had left the working class demoralised. Rather than get stuck in and rebuild union organisation and militancy, Connolly chose to go with the nationalists. He was not fighting for socialism when he went into the G.P.O.

The executions following the Rising (rather than the Rising itself) and the British attempt to introduce conscription set the country alight. British rule was totally undermined by 1919. The War of Independence and the First Dáil not only showed that the majority of the people opposed the British, but also highlighted what Sinn Féin was fighting for.

IRISH “SOVIETS”

In many parts of the country land was seized and “Soviets” were established in many workplaces. These workers wanted more than a united capitalist Ireland. They wanted the whole set-up changed. They wanted real control over their lives. But this did not fit into the policy of uniting all the Irish people. Sinn Féin land courts were established and the land was handed back to its former owners. The Countess Markiewicz, one of the heroines of the rising, warned against the “dangers of social revolution”.

Today Sinn Féin claim, louder than anybody, to be the inheritors of 1916. Without a doubt they are. They carry on the tradition of armed struggle and the blood sacrifice. Despite all the left wing posturing they are still nationalists whose aim is to unite all the Irish people against the British. As in 1916 there are not just “Irish people”. There are Irish workers and Irish bosses, and they have nothing in common.

A WORKERS REPUBLIC

The task remains to free the country from British domination. For Anarchists this can only be done by taking up the struggle as part of the fight for a Workers Republic. Workers’ control and the smashing of capitalism is our aim. Anything less is not worth fighting for. The real heroes and heroines of Irish history are the workers who fought for this. The state will not hold commemorations for them. That might only encourage workers today.

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1991

Retrieved on 9th October 2021 from struggle.ws
Published in *Workers Solidarity* No. 31 Summer 1991.

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