

Ireland — Nationalism, socialism and partition

Class struggle in Belfast 1880–1920

Andrew Flood

May 3, 2007

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| The missing north | 3 |
| The mythology of nationalism | 3 |
| Irish speaking Orangemen and the Land League | 4 |
| The choices made by nationalism | 5 |
| The first international in Ireland | 6 |
| Nationalisms logical hostility to socialism | 7 |
| The pope and the nationalists | 8 |
| Socialism and sectarianism | 10 |
| The diffusion of the land struggle | 11 |
| The first and second expulsions | 12 |
| <i>“bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing”</i> | 12 |
| Could things have been different? | 13 |
| Barriers to left unity | 14 |
| Class struggle in the Orange Order | 15 |
| Larkin and the 1907 strike | 16 |
| Connolly in Belfast | 17 |
| The 1919 strike | 19 |
| Down but not out, the last fling of Belfast radicalism | 21 |
| Loyalism re-imposed | 22 |

Thursday 3rd May was the 88th anniversary of the largest ‘Mayday’ demonstration in Irish history, when what the Belfast Newsletter described as “a little band of disgruntled Red-Socialists” led 100,000 workers through the streets of Belfast. Everywhere else in Ireland in 1919 had also seen massive Mayday demonstrations, with 10,000 demonstrating in Burr Co. Offaly.

Outside of the North East, these had been called for the 1st of May in order “to demonstrate the solidarity of workers and to reaffirm their adhesion to the principles of self-determination”. But Belfast marched to a different theme on the 3rd May. Both North and South a massive wave of working class militancy had grown and although these struggles shared a common rhythm they happened in isolation from each other.

The missing north

The period of Irish history from the 1880’s to the 1920’s defined and divided politics including socialist politics, on the island for the rest of the century. The most militant workers struggles occurred in the second half of that period, north and south, concentrated in the last five years. This was also the period of the 1916 insurrection in Dublin, the 1918–21 War of Independence, the treaty and partition of Ireland in 1921 and then in the south the bloody Civil War ending in 1923.

The year 1919 saw the greatest demonstration of the potential of Irish workers, north and south to take over the running of society but the events of the following years cemented the division that would do much to end workers militancy. In terms of working class struggle the periods of militancy of northern and southern workers coincide. Yet the working class was divided and these struggles remained almost completely isolated from each other.

Events in the north in this period are almost absent from southern nationalist history outside of some key events that had profound effects in the south like the 1914 UVF Larne gun running. Apart from a small number of left academic books the history of working class struggle in the period is almost unknown.

The reason is not hard to understand, the events of those years do not readily fit into the Irish nationalist presentation of history. Irish nationalism like nationalism elsewhere has sought to create a powerful unifying history that combines fact and myth to create a sweeping story leading up to and justifying the actions of the present day. The northeast and in particular the protestant population doesn’t fit easily into this history and so is largely ignored.

The mythology of nationalism

The great central theme of Irish nationalism is 800 years of oppression by a foreign crown and a rebellion in every generation against that crown. In reality much of that 800 years is really the story of civil war within Ireland and foreign intervention on one or the other side. Or Irish involvement in British civil wars, which in turn spilled over onto this island. The syndicalist left republican James Connolly¹ writing of the Williamite Wars at the end of the 17th century said “*The war between William and James offered a splendid opportunity to the subject people of Ireland to make a bid for freedom while the forces of their oppressors were rent in a civil war. The opportunity*

¹ The description of James Connolly as a syndicalist should be of no controversy given his writings, see ‘The ideas of James Connolly’ by Oisín Mac Giollaímoir from Red & Black Revolution 8, online at struggle.ws

was cast aside, and the subject people took sides on behalf of the opposing factions of their enemies.”(2)

In Ireland as elsewhere the imagining of a unified Irish nation was a project of the capitalist period, really only getting underway in the last decades of the 18th century. It was initially a project of a mostly protestant leadership drawn largely from the more privileged classes and radicalised not by the imaginings of a return to a Celtic Ireland but rather by internationalism, in particular the radical republicanism that had seen the French and American revolutions. Independence for Ireland was presented not so much as an end in itself but rather as a way of opening up a political space free of the reactionary British monarchy, a space in which a democratic republican experiment could then be staged.

This culminated in the great rebellion of 1798, which was largely led by radical protestant republicans, and where the blood spilt fighting for the republic was as likely to be presbyterian as catholic. Yet this moment at which the republican project appeared to about to succeed in forging a unified Irish nation was also the moment at which that nation was sundered. The brief and incomplete unity of ‘catholic, protestant and dissenter’ of that year faded to sectarian division and eventual partition. See my article on the 1798 Rebellion – at struggle.ws – for more detailed analysis of this.

The period immediately after the defeat of the 1798 rebellion is often presented as the point at which any potential for radical northern protestants siding with catholics ended forever. Unionist histories of the rebellion create their own nationalist myth of progressive protestants tricked into a rebellion where they were betrayed by their catholic allies.

By the opening years of the 20th century any mass support for republicanism amongst protestants was extinguished, north and south. There were individual protestant nationalists, Bulmer Hobson editor of ‘Irish Freedom’ the main journal of the Irish Republican Brotherhood was one of the better known. But there was no mass support amongst Irish protestants for the Irish nationalist project.

Irish speaking Orangemen and the Land League

Yet as late as the 1880’s things were not so straightforward. The Orange Order was still very much a self identified Irish cultural-political organisation. When on 12 July 1867 a 30,000 strong parade Orange Order parade from Newtownards to Bangor took place the Belfast Newsletter reported that they marched “*without interruption save the cead mille failtes’ of hosts of sympathisers*”.² This use of the Irish language by loyalists was to fade as the Irish nationalists sought to solidify the nationalist political agenda through a cultural revival which laid claim to the Irish language. The unionist Ulster Convention of 1892 would be the last time the slogan “*Erin-go-Bragh*”³ would be on display.

This same period saw a demonstration that the common interests of the labouring classes could overcome the Irish nationalist and Unionist division. In the years after the famine of the 1840’s the fact that most land in Ireland was held by a tiny number of often-absentee landlords became the burning issue of mass mobilisations. The struggle of the Land League spread across Ireland, which often was a struggle that denied the ‘right’ of ownership to the landlords at all. Michael Davitt,

² A History of Ulster, Jonathan Bardon, The Blackstaff Press, 1996, p355

³ A History of Ulster, p422

secretary of the Land League insisted *“the land question can be definitely settled only by making the cultivators of the soil proprietors”*. Evictions were met by mass mobilisations and agrarian outrages become commonplace as Irish peasants mobilised in ever increasing numbers.

In 1880 and 1881 *“northern protestants as well as catholics thronged to attend Land League meetings”*.⁴ At the time 100,000 tenants were threatened with eviction. The land struggle divided even the Orange Order. On the one hand in October 1880 the Orange Order mobilised 50 labourers from counties Cavan and Monaghan to work the lands of Charles Boycott (whose tenants with the support of the local population were refusing to work his land). On the other in parts of Ulster the Land League was able to use Orange halls as the venues for meetings.

Lord Deramore warned *“A weeks since, the Land League invaded Ulster .. men who voted for the Conservatives last April are now openly fraternising with democrats whom six weeks ago they would not have touched with a long pole, and the wave of communism has spread like wildfire”*. Lord Deramore’s fear of communism seems misplaced to those schooled in the conventional rival Irish nationalist and unionist histories of Ireland. However for the next 40 years Ireland would see a now almost forgotten upsurge of worker and farmer militancy, a wave that would really only be ended with and, at least in part, through partition.

Historian David Fitzpatrick observed of this period *“Landlords and employers were confronted by ever more formidable combinations of tenants or workers; men became aware that there were women demanding equal rights. All of these oppositions tended to disturb the solidarity of nationalists and loyalists alike, since they cut across communal loyalties and solicited support without regard for religious affiliation”*.⁵

Davitt addressing 2000 Protestant farmers at Letterkenny, Co Donegal on 21 January 1881 said *“You are no longer the tame and superstitious fools who fought for their amusement and profit with your equally foolish and superstitious catholic fellow workers .. No, my friends, the landlords of Ireland are all of one religion — their God is Mammon and rack rents, and evictions their only morality”*.⁶

The British anarchist paper Freedom had a correspondent in Ireland covering the land struggle. They noted *“the effect of the teaching of Michael Davitt is to be traced in many a cottier’s hut and small shopkeeper’s house and though that teaching is not so sound economically as might be wished, it yet leads by stages to the recognition of the truth that all wealth is produced through the pressure of society, and is the joint property of the community”*. Reporting on the furious resistance to evictions they reported *“At Kilrush the police used their rifles against the men threatened with eviction, and were bravely attacked by the crowd, who carried on the fight with stones until the evening. A pity the Irish peasants are so inadequately armed; but, as it is, their brave spirit of revolt is inspiring a glowing sympathy and emulation amongst the Kelts and English of the larger island.”*⁷.

The choices made by nationalism

In the 1790’s the United Irishmen were able to use radical democratic demands, including ones that held up the promise of land redistribution, to unite workers and peasants who were

⁴ A History of Ulster, p367

⁵ The two Irelands:1912–1939, David Fitzpatrick, Oxford University Press, 1998, p18

⁶ A History of Ulster, p366

⁷ Freedom reports from this period archived at www.wsm.ie

previously divided by deep sectarian divisions. In the 1880's those Irish nationalists who claimed to be travelling in the footsteps of the United Irishmen failed to even try to repeat this despite circumstances being in many ways more favourable. Indeed they went in the opposite direction. The Land League was dissolved in favour of the founding of the National League in 1882, which by 1884 even had the public support of the catholic church. This helped build the nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party under Parnell across most of Ireland but in the North East it resulted in protestant land leaguers turning to the Irish Unionist Party. The path chosen by the nationalists at this time led towards eventual partition and the further entrenchment of sectarian reaction.

The choice of the Irish nationalists to move away from popular agitation was not unique, but rather mirrored across Europe. In the 1790's and as late as the 1840's the working class was not well enough organised to demand the implementation of those sections of republican programs that appeared to promise redistribution of wealth as well as equality before the law. Such demands had been raised in Ireland and elsewhere from the 18th century but the bulk of bourgeois republicans did not yet fear that the labouring classes could impose on their new republic such programs of redistribution.

However by the European republican revolts of 1848 distinct working class organisation had started to take shape. For this reason in the Communist Manifesto, published in the aftermath of the 1848 European republican revolts, Marx wrote of the spectre of communism stalking Europe. This spectre was not simply stalking the minds of the old aristocracy. It also stalked the imaginations of the bourgeois republicans who feared that the working class could take advantage of the chaos of republican insurrection to impose a redistribution of property. Over the next 20 years republican ideology and movements would be forced to make choices for or against the possibility of insurrections becoming struggles for economic freedom as well as political liberty.

By the 1860's this conflict within European republicanism were increasingly out in the open. Left republicans like the Russian Michael Bakunin were coming to realise that bourgeois republicans would not risk revolt if there was a danger of the labouring classes coming to power. The production of the initial documents of the anarchist movement happened in these years within a group of former left republicans who in recognising the short coming of left republicanism as a strategy for working class liberation constructed a new strategy, anarchism, based on their experiences. As importantly the foundation of the First International, which the anarchists soon joined, illustrated that the labouring classes were becoming increasingly organised in pursuit of their interests on the international as well as national level. The question of what classes would be in power in the new republics was one that could no longer be avoided by those who claimed to stand for freedom.

The first international in Ireland

Mainstream Irish history of all varieties conceals these new forces and the impact they were having, even in Ireland. In fact these ideas reached Ireland almost immediately, a small section of the First International was founded in 1872 with branches in Dublin, Cork, Belfast and Cootehill. According to Fintan Lane "*The Freeman's Journal assessed the Cork membership to be as high as three hundred within a few weeks of the branch's formation in late-February 1872.*"⁸ As elsewhere

⁸ Fintan Lane, The Emergence of Modern Irish Socialism 1885-87, Red & Black Revolution 3, online at www.wsm.ie

the International was repressed in the panic that spread through the establishment in the wake of the Paris Commune. In Ireland individual catholic priests played an important part in the suppression of the international, mobilising mobs to attack the internationalists. The last Dublin meeting of the international took place at Chapel lane 7th April 1872. According to an Irish Times report it was attacked and *“The defenders of the Communists of Paris were set upon and a hand-to-hand encounter ensued. Chairs and tables were upset, the glass was smashed on the windows, and every strong piece of wood was availed of as a weapon for attack or defence. Several members of the detective force were in the room at the time, but, exercising a wise discretion, allowed the parties to fight it out.”*⁹

The period from 1880 to 1920 sees members of the British, Unionist and emerging Irish nationalist ruling class worry again and again about the influence of communist ideas on workers in Ireland. Even the left republican Constance Markievicz in a memorandum for cabinet written towards the end of the War Of Independence *“forecast violent revolution unless the Dail moved to forestall direct action by ‘disaffected’ workers”*.¹⁰ IRA commander Ernie O’Malley noted in the same period that *“There was land trouble in the South and West. The Dail, afraid of the spread of land hunger, used the IRA to protect land owners; the IRA .. carried out the orders of the Minister of Defence”*.¹¹

In relation to the earlier struggles of the 1880’s Michael Davitt in his book ‘The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland’ claimed Parnell had warned him that the formation of Trade Unions would *“Frighten the capitalist liberals and lead them to believe that a parliament in Dublin might be used for furthering some kind of socialism. You ought to know that neither the Irish priests or the farmers would support such principles.”* Somewhat later Sinn Fein wrote of the strikes of 1911 that *“Against the Red Flag of Communism...we raise the flag of an Irish nation. Under that flag will be protection, safety and freedom for all.”*¹²

Nationalisms logical hostility to socialism

More confirmation of the fear of all factions of the bourgeois and petit bourgeois of revolution will be found in my other articles on 1916, some more will be provided in this article in relation to the north. For now I want to note that the first reason for the failure of the republican leadership of 1916–20 to appeal to radical northern protestants was that they were indifferent or more often opposed to the radical economic policies that such an appeal would have been required.

Irish nationalism was in fact often hostile to the cause of labour. This was particularly clear during the 1913 Dublin Lockout when the employers led by William Martin Murphy locked out tens of thousands of members of the Syndicalist ITGWU in order to smash the union. During the lockout the Irish Times of the 4th October observed, *“Today Mr Murphy’s press and the official Nationalist press are at one in condemning Larkinism.”*¹³

After the 1913 lockout a Sinn Fein paper, Irish Freedom wrote;

⁹ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, Donal Nevin, Gill & Macmillan, 2005, p52

¹⁰ Syndicalism in Ireland 1917 – 1923 Emmet O’ Connor, Cork University press, 1988, p93

¹¹ On another Man’s Wound, Ernie O’Malley, p161, Colour Books Limited, 1936

¹² Mags Glennon, “Against the Red Flag”, Socialism and Irish Nationalism 1830 – 1913, online at struggle.ws

¹³ Mags Glennon,

“We have seen with anger in our hearts and the flush of shame on our cheeks English alms dumped on the quays of Dublin; we have had to listen to the lying and hypocritical English press as it shouted the news of the starving and begging Irish to the ends of the earth; we have heard Englishmen bellowing on the streets of Dublin the lie that we are the sisters and brothers of the English.. and greatest shame of all, we have seen and heard Irishmen give their approval to all these insults.. God grant that such things may never happen in our land again.”

As with republicans elsewhere in Europe, nationalists reacted to the rise of radical working class movements by retreating into a mystical nationalism that sought to deny class differences beneath the fiction of a common nation united by culture and an ancient history. The earlier Irish republican movement of the 1790’s was built as part of a common international movement with links to radical British republicans like the United Englishmen. Freedom in previous republican rebellions had been a matter of democratic rights, often with a more radical fringe of property redistribution. From the 1880’s the meaning of ‘freedom’ was much less clear, perhaps no more than the absence of imperialist domination. In this way an ideology of mystic nationalism that sought to maximise differences between populations replaced the earlier republican ideology based on radical democracy.

For this reason 1880’s Ireland saw an explosion of cultural nationalism based around creating an image of an Irish nation that was catholic, peasant and Irish speaking. It sought to divide and exclude any other culture, for instance those who continued to play cricket, rugby or other ‘foreign’ games could not even join the G.A.A., the nationalist sports body. This movement was not confined to a few intellectuals. By 1906 the Gaelic League had 900 branches and 100,000 members.¹⁴ The historian Thomas Hennessey argues that cultural nationalist leaders like D.P. Moran *“succeeded in making cultural nationalism the dominant ideological force in Irish society between 1900 and 1906. He wrote that non-catholics who wished to throw in their lot with the Irish nation ‘must recognise that the Irish nation is de facto a Catholic nation.’”*¹⁵

In the 1790’s the mainly protestant republican leadership made enormous efforts to win over catholic peasants going so far as to provide lawyers to represent Defenders (brought up in court for battling the Orange Order) and housing the catholic refugees of that Orange Order terror in Armagh. In the 1890’s the nationalist leadership made no effort to win over the northern protestant working class. Appeals were limited to convincing them they were really Irish, as David Fitzpatrick puts it *“Nationalist rhetoric emphasized the racial admixture of the inhabitants, the tendency of successive invaders to become more Irish than the Irish, and the prominence of protestants in previous insurrections and campaigns.”*¹⁶

The pope and the nationalists

In his history of the 1916 rising Brennan-Whitmore who commanded the Earl street garrison reproduced a letter Count Plunkett has sent to the press about a meeting he claimed to have had with the Pope in advance of the rising. *“The Pope was much moved when I disclosed the fact that*

¹⁴ Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland: Popular militancy 1917 to 1923*, Pluto Press, 1996, p10

¹⁵ *Dividing Ireland: World War I and Partition*, Thomas Hennessey, Routledge, 1998, p30

¹⁶ *The two Irelands*, p34

the date for the rising was fixed, and the reason for that decision. Finally I stated that the Volunteer Executive pledged the Republic to fidelity to the Holy See and the interests of religion. Then the Pope conferred His Apostolic Benediction on the men who were facing death for Ireland's liberty."¹⁷ Plunkett's claim demonstrates the depth of the connection the nationalists tried to build with catholicism. Quite how publishing such a claim would win over northern protestants who were afraid that Home Rule would be Rome Rule is not clear!

Another more trivial but still telling illustration of the depth of the catholic element of Irish nationalism was the number of left republican protestants and widows of republicans who converted to catholicism in the period after 1916. These included Constance Markievicz, Grace Gifford and Lillie Connolly, the widow of James Connolly. The American historian George Dangerfield observed of her husband that "*Connolly died a 'convinced' catholic, because catholicism had become the religion of Irish nationalism*"¹⁸ Lillie Connolly told Annie M.P. Smithson that Connolly had asked her to convert on her last visit before his execution¹⁹.

In the 1918 elections the nationalist leader de Valera ran in Belfast for Sinn Fein. The Sinn Fein manifesto declared "*As Irish Catholics we will .. urge the Church and Nation to oppose .. a demoralizing and Godless educational system which a Foreign Parliament would impose upon a partitioned North-East corner.*"²⁰ This manifesto was distributed in protestant areas of Belfast including St Annes, Woodvale and Ormeau²¹ Ironically Devlin, his opponent, who was the leader of the sectarian Ancient Order of Hibernian's in the city, was able to attack the republicans from the left in this election in the competition for the catholic vote. Devlin declared "*I decline to tell the shipwrights and mill workers, the street sweepers or any section of the working people that they must wait 50 years on a republic before their grievances are addressed.*"²²

Far from any attempt to reach the protestant working class on the grounds of an improved life for all some republicans simply issued threats that would have been seen to be directed against protestants in general. In the earlier February 1918 Co Armagh by-election deValera speaking at the rally at Bessbrook described unionists as "*a rock in the road*" "*which must if necessary blast it out of our path*".²³ In January of 1920 when Unionists lost control of Derry corporation, Hugh O'Doherty the cities first catholic mayor said in his inaugural speech "*Ireland's right to determine her own destiny will come about whether the protestants of Ulster like it or not*". In September 1921 Eoin O'Duffy Treasurer of the IRB Supreme Council, who was later to found the fascist blue shirts, declared that if the population of Belfast would not accept being part of the Irish nation "*they would have to use the lead against them.*" This was during a speech in Armagh where he was accompanied by Michael Collins.²⁴

It is little wonder that earlier James Stephens in his eyewitness account of the 1916 rising had asked "*What has the Irish party ever done to allay Northern prejudice, or bring the discontented section into line with the rest of Ireland? The answer is pathetically complete. They have done nothing. Or, if they have done anything, it was only that which would set every Northerner grinding his teeth*

¹⁷ W.J. Brennan-Whitmore, Dublin burning; The Easter rising from Behind the Barricades, Gill & Macmillan, 1996, p30

¹⁸ James Connolly 'A Full life', p686

¹⁹ James Connolly 'A Full life', p688

²⁰ Revolution in Ireland, p44

²¹ Labour and partition: The Belfast Working Class 1905 – 23, Austen Morgan, Pluto Press, p210

²² Labour and partition, p210

²³ A History of Ulster, p459

²⁴ Eoin O'Duffy – A Cautionary Tale, Irish Political Review, May 2006, online at www.geocities.com

*in anger.*²⁵ The success of the unionist leadership in mobilising in arms tens of thousands of northern protestant workers can be explained in part by the political positions and rhetoric of the Irish nationalists.

Socialism and sectarianism

The left in the south also offered little resistance to these catholic nationalist arguments. Indeed because the left often came under attack by the Catholic church they sometimes responded by trying to prove the solidness of their catholicism. In 1899 the minutes of the Irish Socialist Republican Party (ISRP) recorded that “*Connolly suggested that the secretary should enter on minutes for the benefit of posterity that the ISRP instructed all its members to attend Mass on Sunday, Jan 8 1899.*”²⁶ James Connolly also put much effort into trying to prove the compatibility of catholicism and socialism in his writings. Yet even Dublin at the time had a substantial protestant working class likely to be alienated by such appeals.

Connolly did however also argue for a separation of nationalism from catholicism on occasion. For instance in 1898 Connolly complained that date of laying for the foundation stone for the Wolfe Tone monument was “*a festival of the Catholic Church, and therefore, if not absolutely prohibition to, at least bound to raise grave suspicions in the minds of our non-Catholic fellow-countrymen.*”²⁷ And as we shall see both Connolly and Larkin tried to unite catholic and protestant workers in Belfast.

If the republican movement did little to try to attract protestant workers the same is not true of the unionist bosses. Historian David Fitzpatrick notes that in particular after 1903 “*The Ulster Unionist leaders, though conservative to a fault on social and sexual issues, took care to provide separate loyalist bodies within which radical murmurings could be uttered, heard and placated.*”²⁸ They even formed a Ulster Unionist Labour Association (UULA) in 1918. Which is not to suggest protestant workers were in control, the UULA had Edward Carson as president and John Millar Andrews, a linen manufacturer as Chairman.²⁹

The general approach of the unionist leadership was to elevate the common bond of Orangeism above any suggestion of class struggle as the following rhyme demonstrates

Let not the poor man hate the rich
Nor rich on poor look down
But each join each true Orange Order
For God and the Crown.³⁰

So it would be very wrong to simply lay the blame for the sectarian division at the door of the nationalists or the Dublin based left. Nationalism as we have seen was not after all about class politics but about the opposite, creating an all class alliance of Irishmen. Berating the nationalists for not modifying their nationalism to facilitate workers unity would be rather missing the point.

²⁵ The Insurrection in Dublin, James R Stephens, 1916, p107

²⁶ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p66

²⁷ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p118

²⁸ The two Irelands, p36

²⁹ The two Irelands, p40

³⁰ Revolution in Ireland, p8

The Dublin left was tiny in number and faced with both a low level of working class political consciousness and high level of hostility from the catholic church. The two in fact went hand in hand, the mobilisation of the catholic church against the starving children of strikers during the 1913 lockout played a key part in the defeat of the locked out workers. The church could only risk alienating such a large number of its own members in this way because of the low level of political consciousness of most union members.

The diffusion of the land struggle

The British and Unionist establishment were also taking care to mend the gaps that the Land League struggle had opened up. From the 1880's the British government introduced some very real land reforms in Ireland that would transform the land issue during this period. Landlords were first persuaded and then from 1909 forced to sell out to their tenants. This shifted the class struggle in the countryside from one between the great mass of the population and a few often-absentee landlords to one between a large but smaller number of landless labourers and a sizeable minority of farmers living on the land.

Alongside these reforms the unionist ruling class were using the Orange Order to once more divide the movement in the countryside. The Orange Order established the Orange Emergency Committee in 1881 to oppose the Land league and to aid landlords. An Orange appeal of 1883 asked "*Are you prepared to allow Parnell, the leader of the enemies of our united empire, the champion of the principle, Ireland for the Irish .. meaning Ireland for the Romanists .. Are you prepared to accept the doctrine of the English radicals that the Protestants of Ireland are aliens in their land and should be swept out of it by fair means or foul?*"³¹

This propaganda could be credible because as we have seen the growing wave of cultural nationalism did seem to mean 'Ireland for the Romanists'. As cultural nationalism advanced in the north so the use of the Irish language by the unionist Irish organisations came to an end.

Politics was dominated for most of this period by the attempts to win Home Rule. Home Rule bills were prepared in 1886, 1893 and 1912-14. The first two were defeated but the 1912-14 bill passed on its third reading as the Lords could no longer veto a bill passed by the Commons twice. It was to have been implemented in 1914 but the start of the First World War saw implementation postponed. But each Home Rule attempt was used by the northern protestant ruling class to bind protestant workers ever closer to them. As we shall see this culminated in 1920 with a bloody pogrom in Belfast when protestant workers encouraged by their employers were used to smash the left and the union movement.

As the Home Rule crisis dragged on the Unionist elite staged larger and larger popular mobilisations culminating in 1912. On Easter Tuesday 70 British MP's attended a demonstration of 100,000 loyalists in south Belfast. The 28th September was proclaimed as 'Ulster Day' and the Unionist elite launched the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant on that day, signed by them and by 218,206 Ulstermen of all classes, three quarters of all Ulster protestant males. Women were not allowed to sign it but 229,000 signed a parallel women's declaration expressing "*desire to associate ourselves with the men of Ulster in their uncompromising opposition to the Home Rule bill.*"³² By the

³¹ A History of Ulster, p372

³² The two Irelands, p36

end of that year the UVF had 90,000 members, a large percentage of the protestant population of Ulster.

The first and second expulsions

Alongside these land reforms and the building of all class Unionist institutions like the UVF, sectarianism was being encouraged or at least given a wink by the employers in many workplaces. In the year of the first Home Rule bill, 1886, a mob of unskilled protestant workers in the giant shipbuilders Harland and Wolff attacked and expelled from the shipyard almost all of the 8% of workers employed there who were catholic. Harland not only claimed to be powerless to stop such expulsions he actually denied that *“the taking of ‘Belfast confetti’, rivets, bolts, etc. for use in street rioting, was theft.”*³³ Yet in the previous two years he had closed the yard twice to impose wage cuts.

A second round of expulsions happened in 1912 as the third Home Rule got underway. This set of expulsions as we shall see followed a period where labour struggles saw workers unity across the sectarian divide so those targeted this time included protestant socialists as well as catholics. Once again these expulsions were not spontaneous events beyond the control of the unionist bosses. Before the sequence of events that led to the 1912 expulsions it was reported that *“All Fenian’s clear out”* was painted up in the Workman, Clark shipyard³⁴ Drilling for the massive unionist show of force at Balmoral Easter 1912 when Carson reviewed 100,000 loyalist demonstrators had been allowed to take place in the yard and Sir George Clark of Workman, Clarke was *“one of the most militant leaders of the unionist mobilisations. He later chaired the committee responsible for gun-running and even landed arms at his yard.”*³⁵ Those targeted in the 1912 expulsions were not just the catholic workers but also included *“English and Scottish workers, trade union and labour men and all protest and dissidents of the Edwardian years, such as liberals and independent orangemen.”* These totalled 20% or 600 of those expelled.³⁶

It’s important to understand that the various round of expulsions were neither spontaneous acts of the protestant working class as a whole or simply occurring in reaction to events. Rather they involved a minority of protestant workers as active participants and were often orchestrated or at the very least encouraged by unionist employers. By 1920 such encouragement was coming from the tops ranks of unionism and the British cabinet.

“bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing”

It is not surprizing that looking at these historical facts and the depth of popular unionist mobilisation that many left republicans simply wrote off the protestant working class. The nationalists also tended not to take the threat of the unionist mobilisation very seriously, the more militant nationalists instead seeing them as useful in encouraging their side to arm as well. When

³³ Labour and partition, p16

³⁴ Labour and partition, p128

³⁵ Labour and partition, p128

³⁶ Labour and partition, p130

the UVF ran guns ashore in Larne in 1914 one of the northern leaders of the IRB went so far as to lend them his car to help transport the weapons to local hiding places.³⁷

The nationalist mystic Padraic Pearse who would declare himself president during the Easter rising said of the Larne gun running “*I am glad that the Orangemen are armed, for it is a goodly thing to see arms in Irish hands .. We must accustom ourselves to the thought of arms, to the sight of arms, to the use of arms. We may make mistakes in the beginning and shoot the wrong people; but bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing.*”³⁸

Nationalist thinking on the north was at best based around the hope that northern protestants would see the light when faced with the reality of British withdrawal or that they would be forced into a united Ireland by the collapse of the northern economy after partition. This is probably the reason why partition hardly appeared in the bitter debates on the treaty in the south that were to lead to civil war. Of the 338 page official Dail report only a handful of pages dealt with partition. De Valeras alternative to the treaty, ‘Document Number 2’ simply endorsed the existing Ulster clauses of the treaty.³⁹

Could things have been different?

At the turn of the century Belfast was the centre of industry on the island and hence important in both union and left organisation in Ireland. In 1899 half the affiliated trade unionists of the Irish Trade Union Congress were working in and around Belfast.⁴⁰ At the outbreak of world war one Belfast had both the worlds largest shipbuilder and the worlds largest linen mill. The working class was already divided along sectarian lines. As we have seen the first mass expulsion of catholics from the shipyards had happened in 1886 when 190 of the 225 catholics working there were expelled. It would happen again in 1912 before the culmination in the 1920 pogrom.

But there was also a socialist movement and from time to time workers came together to struggle for better conditions. Although the socialist movement reflected the sectarian reality of the divided working class at times it could rise above this reality. There were significant strikes in 1907 and 1919 — some have argued the 1919 strike was “*the greatest industrial struggle in Irish history.*”⁴¹

The socialist movement in Belfast dates from the same period as that in Dublin. A Christian socialist Revd. J. Bruce Wallace was active in the 1880’s and brought the radical USA flat taxer Henry George to the Ulster Hall in 1884. The Independent Labour Party (ILP) was active from 1893 although trouble at a trade’s council demonstration that year showed how close to the surface sectarianism was. It apparently started when a gasworker was seen wearing a union sash, which happened to contain the colour green.⁴² In the 1897 local election 6 Trades Councils candidates were elected, the first leftists to be elected in Ireland.

One of the more prominent of these early socialists was William Walker, mostly remembered today as being the other pole of the Walker — Connolly controversy⁴³. In 1894–5 “*Walker had to*

³⁷ Labour and partition, p202

³⁸ The two Irelands, p48

³⁹ Labour and partition, p299

⁴⁰ A History of Ulster, p417

⁴¹ Labour and partition, Preface, pxiv

⁴² Labour and partition, p61

⁴³ This was an exchange of articles in 1911, see www.marxists.org

be almost continuously under police protection, because of his advocacy of the principles of socialism”⁴⁴ By 1904 he had been elected to the city council as a trades council candidate and he ran unsuccessfully in the 1905 and 1907 elections. But in these elections he also reflected the sectarian domination of politics, saying in 1905 *“that he was against transubstantiation, for the inspection of convents and monasteries and for the exclusion of catholics from the office of Lord Lieutenant of Ireland”*⁴⁵ and in 1907 *“that I must again declare that I am, as I always have been, a supporter of the legislative union.”*⁴⁶

This highlighted a problem that remained throughout the period. To a considerable extent both the left and the union movement tended to be divided along sectarian lines. Even where workers appeared to be in the same industry the reality was often that internally they would be divided into different areas as was found with the division on the Belfast dock into catholic deep sea dockers and protestant cross channel dockers. The organised left reproduced this division, the ILP was mostly composed of protestants, the Socialist Party of Ireland (SPI) and later the Independent Labour Party (Ireland) was mostly composed of catholics.

The degree of separation is suggested in the recollections of one ILP member of that period, William McMullen, who said *“Our school of socialist thought had no nationalist tradition, and was not conscious of, and even if it had been would have been contemptuous of, a Socialist movement any other part of this country .. The members of the Socialist movement in the City were Protestants, as the Catholics were in the main followers of .. Devlin.”*⁴⁷

Barriers to left unity

The sectarian politics of the period tripped up efforts at workers unity on an all island basis. In 1912 Connolly got four of the five branches of the Belfast Independent Labour Party and the Belfast branch of the British Socialist Party to go to Dublin for a Socialist unity conference with the SPI. But when they travelled down in Easter 1912 for the first all Ireland socialist conference *“Some Dublin members, in what they may have taken to be a joke, placed a Union Jack on the door-mat of the conference room, thereby driving back to Belfast some members of the British Socialist Party.”*⁴⁸ Those who remained set up the Independent Labour Party (Ireland) but its Belfast members mostly consisted of just the existing Belfast SPI members. The Independent Labour Party not only continued its separate existence but also went from strength to strength.

This was not the only attempt at unity that collapsed over such a seemingly trivial matter. Earlier Belfast Trades Council had initially *“welcomed an Irish attempt to set up a trade-union centre, until its Dublin advocates held a sports day on the Sabbath.”*⁴⁹

James Connolly may have argued for a fusion of the ILP and SPI but the barriers even he erected to such unity become obvious when you read his article ‘Socialist Unity in Ireland’ written in 1911 in which he declares *“I have a great admiration for Comrade Walker, of Belfast .. but I am glad that he was defeated in North Belfast. This victory would have killed the hopes of Socialism among Irish Nationalists the world over. Not only in Ireland, but also all over the continent of America*

⁴⁴ Labour and partition, p61

⁴⁵ Labour and partition, p74

⁴⁶ Labour and partition, p82

⁴⁷ Labour and partition, p147

⁴⁸ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p149

⁴⁹ The two Irelands, p64

and Australia, wherever Irishmen live and work, a vote given by Comrade Walker in the House of Commons against Home Rule would have filled the Irish with such an unreasoning and inveterate hatred of the cause that they would be lost to it for a generation. But imagine what our situation would have been in the rest of Ireland if the only Irish Socialist M.P. had voted against Home Rule.”⁵⁰

McMullen a protestant Harland & Woolf worker who did cross the sectarian divide to join the ILP observed “In those times it was difficult enough for one to break with the Unionist family tradition and embrace socialism, but much more difficult to swallow the hook, line and sinker of Irish Republicanism as well.”⁵¹ Both parties in other words tended to define their attitude to the constitutional question around what would be acceptable to their constituency. There seems to have been very little discussion of developing, from scratch, a socialist position on this question independent of the nationalist / unionist divide.

This sectarian division in the politics of the left in Belfast was further exasperated by the fact that the electoral representative for much of the catholic population throughout this period was Joe Devlin. In 1905 Devlin had become the president of the Ancient Order of Hibernians⁵² a catholic version of the Orange Order that like the Orange Order was also opposed to socialism. Despite this in 1906 Devlin narrowly received the Trades Council endorsement⁵³ and was able to run as the “*Irish Nationalist and Labour Candidate*”.

In this same period the AOH was involved in anti-trade union activity in Dublin and Cork where it drove Connolly out of Cobh/Queenstown. It published the pamphlets ‘Socialism: A warning to the workers’ and ‘Larkinism: What it is and what it stands for’. Despite this a good parts of Devlins electoral success was down to his successful portrayal of himself as a friend of the workers, in particular the catholic worker. In the 1910 election he staged a rally of 3000 female workers in St Marys Hall, many wearing cards bearing the slogan “Vote for Devlin and Labour” surrounded by green and orange flags.⁵⁴ In the December 1910 election he was even reported by the Irish News to have had a rally of protestants in St Mary’s Hall. The Irish News claimed 5/6 of the audience were “*Protestant artisans and labourers*” although the accuracy of this claims has been questioned.⁵⁵

Class struggle in the Orange Order

From the account so far it should be easy to see why many saw a monolithic unionist / nationalist divide which made class unity an illusory demand. But up close many fractures can be seen in the supposed unity of both unionist and nationalist blocks, fractures that ran along class lines.

Within the Orange Order the class forces woken by the Land League continued to come to the fore but this time contained within loyalism. Official unionist opposition to the 1903 Land act had the effect of radicalising the rural lodges of the Independent Orange Order (IOO) set up after a row in 1903. This radicalisation allowed the adoption of the ‘Magheranorne Manifesto’ in 1905 which not only called for ultimate ownership of houses and plots of land by the rural labourers but also for the ending of clerical control of education and the ending of protestant control of Trinity

⁵⁰ James Connolly, Plea For Socialist Unity in Ireland, [1911] online at www.marxists.org

⁵¹ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p435

⁵² Labour and partition, p36

⁵³ Labour and partition, p33

⁵⁴ Labour and partition, p37

⁵⁵ Labour and partition, p38

college. Some of the leadership, Lindsay Crawford in particular, quite clearly moved to the left. In 1907 along with another leader Alex Boyd he had an “*active involvement in the strike.. when he became a regular speaker on strike platforms*”⁵⁶ After the collapse of the IOO, Boyd would appear again as a Independent Labour Councillor in 1920 but would also be a supporter of the shipyard pogroms of that year. Crawford on the other hand migrated to Canada where he founded “*the protestant friends of Irish freedom*” and become president of the Self Determination for Ireland League of Canada.⁵⁷

Larkin and the 1907 strike

Although the working class in Belfast was often segregated into workplaces and even section of industry that were overwhelmingly Catholic or Protestant this segregation was not absolute. And the needs of struggle could cause workers to unite in solidarity across several industries, breaking down the effect of the segregation found in individual workplaces

The nature of industry in Belfast meant that early on it developed a large industrial working class, which was driven from quite early times to organise and take action in defence of its interests. So there were significant engineering strikes in 1895–6 and again in 1897–8 along with linen strikes in 1897 and 1906. But it was the 1907 strike, which started on the docks that seemed to hold out the promise of workers unity.

At the time there were 4600 dockers, quay labourers and dock working carters in Belfast⁵⁸. This was an example of an industry where individual workplaces were segregated. As we have seen catholic and protestants tended to be employed in different firms, and even in different sections of the docks. Cross channel dockers were mostly protestant, deep-sea dockers were mostly catholic.

James Larkin was sent from Liverpool to Belfast as an organiser for the National Union of Dock Labourers. Larkin brought new ideas with him, historian Emmet O’Connor even points out that “*As an international port Liverpool stood in the van of new influences; the anarcho-syndicalist Liverpool Direct Action Group was formed in 1907*”⁵⁹.

Larkin was certainly no anarchist but he was influenced by syndicalism and would become the personification of syndicalism in the history of the Irish union movement. This came to be known simply as Larkinism, defined by O’Connor as having “*three salient characteristics; a workerist mentality, a technique in conflict based on sympathetic action, and a broad ambition to promote class solidarity.*”⁶⁰.

Larkin rapidly recruited over 3000 workers on the docks, both Catholic and Protestant. When the bosses Shipping Federation imported scab labour in response to minor strikes Larkin called an all out strike for 26 June 1907. As the strike escalated on July 13 the coal merchants locked out 1,000 labourers and crowds of up to 8,000 attended meetings. By 11 August serious riots had started to break out, on the 12th the army killed two people on the Falls road. On 30 July 1200 troops had been deployed in Belfast in anticipation of a police strike, by early August there may have been 6000 troops in the city.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Labour and partition, p54

⁵⁷ Labour and partition, p56

⁵⁸ Labour and partition, p94

⁵⁹ Syndicalism in Ireland, p. 9

⁶⁰ Syndicalism in Ireland, p 13

⁶¹ Labour and partition, p108

The workers were defeated with the strike collapsing by mid September. But it did go some way to forging workers unity across the sectarian divide in the working class. Larkin claimed in Derry that 7 out of 10 of the strikers were Orangemen and that these were the 'best men we had'. 23 of 29 members of the strike committee(s) were protestant⁶² and when faced with the threat of communal rioting the strike committee issued a leaflet reading *"This is not a fight between Protestant and Catholic but between the employers, backed by the authorities, and the workers .. don't be misled by the employers game of dividing Catholic and Protestant."*⁶³

In what was to become a familiar pattern the unity built up during the strike was not to survive the years ahead.. In the aftermath the *"employers moved quickly to reinforce sectarianism by sponsoring a yellow union, the exclusively Protestant Belfast Coalworkers' and Carters' Benefit society."*⁶⁴ Larkin fell out with the NUDL and as a result formed the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. This only really succeeded in recruiting the catholic workers from the deep sea docks⁶⁵ and in 1908 was described by Alex Boyd who was active during the strike as *"a Sinn Fein organisation that not even a decent nationalist in Belfast would have anything to do with."*⁶⁶ Boyds intervention split the Belfast ITGWU with the Protestant dockers going back to the NUDL.⁶⁷

Connolly in Belfast

After returning from a period in the USA where he had organised for the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) James Connolly became Belfast Branch Secretary of the ITGWU from 1911. On the 19 July 1911 Connolly brought out the 300 mostly catholic deep-sea dockers in sympathy with sailors and firemen who were on strike for the same wages as their English equivalents. The deep-sea dockers were also looking for higher pay, shorter hours and less speed up for themselves. Connolly organised members of catholic and Orange bands to form a Non-Sectarian Labour Band, which paraded through the streets while collections, were taken up. When the sailors returned to work Connolly seized on a modest offer from the employers to end the strike and proclaim victory.⁶⁸

In October 1911 there was a spontaneous spinners strike at a mill in Henry street resulting in a company lockout, Connolly had some involvement and was condemned from the pulpit in the local Catholic church on Sunday 15 October for "his syndicalist agitation" The strike was lost but Connolly organised the spinners into the Irish Textile Workers Union which was in effect a section of the ITGWU. This led in 1912 to Mary Galway of the (mostly protestant) Textile Operatives Society of Ireland (TOSI) accusing Connolly at the Clonmel TUC conference of dividing the working class in Belfast along sectarian lines.⁶⁹ The ITWU faded away while the TOSI grew to 10,000 members by 1918.

Mary Galway's accusation is worthy of serious consideration. The problem was that an industry that employed catholic and protestant women workers was again internally divided. The

⁶² Labour and partition, p116

⁶³ Labour and partition, p111

⁶⁴ Syndicalism in Ireland, p. 12

⁶⁵ Labour and partition, p118

⁶⁶ Labour and partition, p118

⁶⁷ Syndicalism in Ireland, p172

⁶⁸ James Connolly 'A Full life', p395

⁶⁹ James Connolly 'A Full life', p399

spinners whom Connolly organised were mostly catholic while the weavers in the TOSI were mostly protestant.

Some years later in 1919 the left republican Peadar O'Donnell was to become an ITGWU organiser in Derry. He showed a willingness to be pragmatic when faced with an employer playing the Orange card during the Fulton mill strike. O'Donnell established a band with Orange and catholic bandsmen, and "*was happy to parade behind Union Jacks until they gave way to red flags.*"⁷⁰ All the same years later O'Donnell described the ITGWU entry into Derry in 1919 as mistaken "*and ultimately divisive. Unionisation in Derry was already adequate and the ITGWU's identification with Irish nationalism .. only served to heighten divisions between workers of different political and religious persuasions.*"⁷¹

At times the ITGWU under Connolly did manage to recruit protestant workers but then its nationalist ethos proved to be a liability. In 1913 in Larne a strike by 300 workers at the British Aluminium Company, who had to work 12 hours a day 7 days a week, ended when after church on Sunday the minister told the protestant workers who comprised the majority to return to work. Connolly reported in *Forward* that "*The fires of sectarian and political bigotry had been let loose, the chief argument used being that as the headquarters of the union are in Dublin it is a 'Fenian' and 'Papist' organisation .. the twin forces of scabism and Carsonism won a glorious victory.*"⁷² Connolly claimed that this happened at a point at which the strike had been almost won on the basis of an 8 rather than 12 hour day.

The Home Rule crisis built up, peaking in 1912 with the mobilisation of a huge percentage of Ulster's protestant population and the expulsion of catholics and radical protestant workers from the docks. Some 20% of those expelled were protestant socialists or those who had been involved in the IOO. The deputation put together at a meeting of the expelled workers was 75% protestant.

The rise of sectarian tensions made it increasingly difficult for the ITGWU to attempt to organise protestant workers. In July 1913 the annual outing of ITGWU and ITWU was attacked by mill and shipyard workers both as it left and returned to Belfast⁷³ This was at the end of Connolly's period in Belfast.

The sectarian build up was interrupted in 1914 by the start of the First World War. Huge numbers of both nationalist and unionist workers were led into the army, and to the slaughter of the trenches by their respective leaderships. Both nationalist and unionist leaderships saw sacrificing their rank and file supporters as the best way of gaining a position of strength to negotiate after the war.

The northeast remained quiet during the 1916 rising with the slaughter of the Somme a few weeks later coming to form an alternative mythology of 'blood sacrifice' for loyalists. The UVF had been allowed to form the 36th Ulster Division and they went 'over the top' on the 1st July – the date on which under the old calendar the Battle of the Boyne had occurred. Although they were among the most successful at achieving their objectives the slaughter was terrible, in the first two days of the Somme 5,500 men of the Ulster Division were killed or wounded and "Blackers' boys" which consisted of UVF men from Armagh, Monaghan and Cavan returned with only 64 of the 600 who had gone over the top.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Peadar O'Donnell, Donal O' Drisceoil, Cork University Press, 2001, p14

⁷¹ Peadar O'Donnell, p15

⁷² James Connolly 'A Full life', p406

⁷³ James Connolly 'A Full life', p410

⁷⁴ A History of Ulster, p455

The later years of the war saw a significant economic boom as the army required supplies and the navy ships to replace those sunk by U Boats. The fact that large numbers of men were away at the front meant that employers were forced to make concessions to retain workers even if they were also able to use appeals to support those at the front to drive up working hours. It was widely realised that the end of the war was not only likely to see the end of the boom but also tens of thousands of demobbed soldiers seeking work.

The war also saw the Russian revolutions of 1917 and what at first seemed like the constructions of a 'workers' state. Then in 1918 as the slaughter ground on the working class in the German navy mutined, in effect bringing the war to an end. This was a highpoint for socialism around the world – workers were both organised and had what appeared to be concrete examples of it being possible to defeat capitalism and construct socialism. Class struggle had broken out in many of the armies on both sides with significant mutines in both the French and British army.

The 1919 strike

As elsewhere in Ireland and indeed many parts of Europe the high point of working class radicalism in Belfast was in 1919. The director of Intelligence at the Home Office Basil Hugh Thomson wrote of this period in relation to Britain that *"During the first three months of 1919 unrest touched its high-water mark. I do not think that at any time in history since the Bristol riots we have been so near revolution"*⁷⁵ *Sir Henry Wilson had walked out of a cabinet meeting in December 1918 when it "refused to consider that either that a state of war existed or that a Bolshevik rising was likely."*⁷⁶

The immediate issue of the 1919 strike was the length of the working week. During the war this had been pushed up and up until in some cases it was 65 hours. As the end of the war came in sight a movement for 44 hour week began in Belfast when on 21 August 1918 a rank and file meeting was organised by James Baird, James Freeland and Robert Weir⁷⁷ Such a shorter working week would not only be good for the workers themselves it would also open up jobs for demobilised soldiers and lessen the impact of the post war slump.

In Belfast those organizing for the 44-hour week carefully went out of their way to avoid being accused of being disloyal. On December 4th they called a meeting to be addressed by the election candidates. The meeting opened with the singing of the British national anthem 'God save the King' and James Baird introduced the meeting by saying its object was *"to assist the workers apart altogether from politics, in obtaining short hours of labour"*. Neither Devlin nor any of the Sinn Fein candidates were present but Carson was and he spoke without of course really committing himself to anything, when the strike broke he would be part of the behind the scenes move to undermine it.⁷⁸

With the employers only offering a 47-hour week the strike ballot was set for Tuesday 14 Jan 1919. At lunchtime some 30,000 workers marched into the city centre with banners reading *"44 hours means no unemployment"*, *"44 means work for demobilised soldiers"*, *"47 be hanged we want*

⁷⁵ Revolution in Ireland, p55

⁷⁶ Labour and partition, p237

⁷⁷ Labour and partition, p230

⁷⁸ Labour and partition, p231

44”⁷⁹ 92% of workers voted against the employers offer of a 47 hour week. 97% voted for “*drastic action in the way of an unofficial strike*”.

The strike was set for January 25th and on that day the shipyards and engineering plants in the town shut down. The electricity plant also closed down meaning that trams ground to a halt at 4pm and at midnight the gas works shut down.

Some 40,000 workers were directly involved in the strike and an additional 20,000 indirectly involved. At 3pm on that Saturday a General strike committee of 150 delegates met and elected a 15 strong district committee, which “*was heavily protestant*” although the president, Charles McKay may have, been a catholic.⁸⁰ It included the 3 organisers of the rank and file meeting the previous August.

On the Monday members of this committee met Belfast corporation who agreed in return for the resumption of electric power that only the hospital would be allowed to use power and not businesses or private homes. In this period only the homes of the rich would have had electric power. However some businesses broke this agreement and as a result a mob smashed their windows in. This resulted in the commissioner enrolling 300 strikers as special constables who “*actively assisted in the protection of property in the central district of the city.*”⁸¹

The strike committee continued to try to demonstrate its loyalty in other ways. When three socialist agitators started to hold public meetings around Belfast the strike committee denounced them. All three were subsequently charged with unlawful assembly and sentenced to 6 months hard labour. When at the start of the 3rd week of the strike James Baird sent a letter to the Northern Whig in which “*he advanced, without attribution, some of Connolly’s ideas on industrial unionism, and portrayed the strike committee, somewhat romantically, as being engaged in a historic struggle for socialism*” it appears he was removed from the strike committee.⁸²

When the Glasgow strike which had started at the same time was crushed with the use of troops and machine guns were set up in the centre of Glasgow McKay the president of the Belfast committee presented Glasgow as “*a warning to their men of the folly of unconsidered action*”. Solidarity was limited to a meeting of Belfast strikers calling for the release of the Glasgow arrestees.⁸³ When on Saturday 8 February Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress conference in Dublin offered “*Moral and financial support*” the Belfast strike committee declined to approach the national exec of the ILPTUC.⁸⁴ In turn it should be pointed out that the ILPTUC should have been aware that somewhat more than the sending of a letter would be required to overcome the divisions that had arisen between the northern and southern union movements!

Despite all these precautions and compromises the strike was still attacked as a Sinn Fein plot by the unionist establishment. The Belfast Newsletter of Saturday 25 January proclaimed “*The threat to paralyze the public services of the city, if carried out, will rejoice the heart of Sinn Fein and will play most powerfully into its hands*” and The Northern Whig claimed that members of the strike committee “*spoke with accents not generally associated with the North of Ireland*”.

The Orange Order tried not to publicly appear to be taking sides for fear of losing influence in the protestant working class but a Grand Lodge document produced in the Belfast Weekly

⁷⁹ Labour and partition, p231

⁸⁰ Labour and partition, p233

⁸¹ Labour and partition, p235

⁸² Labour and partition, p235

⁸³ Labour and partition, p237

⁸⁴ Labour and partition p238

Telegraph on the 8th February claimed “*the condition of affairs today had been to a great extent engineered by parties who are neither employers nor employed but have taken advantage of a trade dispute to attempt to bring discredit on the fair fame of Belfast*”⁸⁵ Unionists also seem to have circulated leaflets claiming the strike was part of Sinn Fein plot to bring about an all-Ireland strike. On Monday 3rd February Col. Wallace the Belfast grandmaster of the Orange Order issued a manifesto described to Carson as designed “*to get the decent men to secede from the Sinn Fein Bolshevik element.*”⁸⁶

On the 7th February the Lord Lieutenant Lord French endorsed the view of GOC Northern command that the strike was organised by Bolsheviks and Sinn Feiners.⁸⁷ On Saturday 15 Feb a proclamation was published by the Lord Mayor and fully armed infantry with machine guns and armoured cars moved into gasworks and power station with full services being returned that Monday. The town employers announced they would open Tuesday 18 and the shipyards reopened on the 20th with 80% of workforce, the rest returning by the 24th. After a few short weeks the workers were defeated.⁸⁸

Part of the significance of the way the strike was defeated was that the extreme lengths the strike committee had gone through to demonstrate their loyalty was in the end of the day no protection. Being really careful to not only appear neutral but actually pro-unionist neither protected the strike nor individual committee members.

Speaking after the expulsions of the following year John Hanna who had become the leader of the expelled workers described the protestant workers who were expelled as “*the backbone of Trade Unionism in the North*”. Hannah had been an Orange Lodge master before becoming a syndicalist, he told the ILPTUC “*During the strike for 44-hrs week the capitalist classes saw that the Belfast workers were one. That unity had to be broken, it was accomplished by appeals to the basest passions and intense bigotry.*”⁸⁹

Down but not out, the last fling of Belfast radicalism

The militancy that had been born during the strike did not die immediately despite its defeat. On Mayday 1919 Belfast did not take part in the ILPTUC strike of 1st May, probably because it was called “*to demonstrate the solidarity of workers and to reaffirm their adhesion to the principles of self-determination*”. But on Saturday 3rd May the trades council march was the biggest Labour demonstration in the cities history. The Independent Labour Party activists were prominent in the organisation of the demonstration. The Belfast Newsletter estimated 100,000 took part and attributed it to “*a little band of disgruntled Red-Socialists .. who figured prominently in the strike*”.⁹⁰

Sam Kyle believed the Belfast general strike “*gave the biggest scare to the Tories they ever had, and probably led to the engineering pogrom of 1920.*”⁹¹ That January the 1920 council election saw 35 ILP or trade union candidates taking 12 of the 60 seats in Belfast.⁹² Sam Kyle who opposed

⁸⁵ Revolution in Ireland, p60

⁸⁶ Labour and partition, p239

⁸⁷ Labour and partition, p244

⁸⁸ Labour and partition, p244

⁸⁹ Revolution in Ireland, p156

⁹⁰ Labour and partition, p248

⁹¹ Revolution in Ireland, p154

⁹² Labour and partition, p250

partition topped the poll in the Shankill and in fact a majority of the 22 Belfast Labour Party candidates were anti-partition.⁹³

Carson and the northern ruling class were facing a defeat for British imperialism in the south and a radicalized working class in the north. All the effort that had gone into creating a northern protestant nation in the last 40 years looked fragile in the face of class struggle. At a time when the War of Independence was intensifying in the south a large percentage of the protestant working class in Belfast was not only voting for socialist candidates but many of these candidates were known to be anti-partitionist.

The tactic the unionist elite fell back on was one that would be used again and again when faced with working class radicalism. A sectarian mobilization of the most reactionary elements of the protestant working class against both catholic workers and the progressive elements of the protestant working class.

The exact timing for the offensive was dictated by decades of tradition, July 12. Yet it did not occur in July of 1919 in the aftermath of the 44-hour strike and the 100,000 strong May Day parade. The election results of 1920 suggest that in July 1919 a large percentage of protestant workers still held radical ideas. Between that July and the next the war of independence escalated in the south. The unionist establishment was able to use the events of that war and in particular the support of the southern union movement for the nationalists to drive home the idea of the labour movement as little more than a nationalist plot. In some ways the ground had been prepared for them in the portrayal of protestant involvement in the radical democratic rebellion of 1798 as a foolishness in which they had been betrayed by the supposed catholic allies.

Loyalism re-imposed

On the 12 July 1920 Carson set events in motion by declaring that *“these men who come forward posing as friends of Labour care no more about Labour than does the man on the moon. Their real object and the real insidious nature of their propaganda is that they mislead and bring disunity amongst our people.”*⁹⁴

The 20 July was the first full day of work after the July holidays. Notices were posted for ‘Protestant and Unionist’ workers to meet outside the gates of the shipyard. *“The call to drive out ‘disloyal’ workers was enthusiastically supported.. Sam Kyle later noted that the meeting was “at the shipyard .. though meetings have always been prohibited there .. this one was winked at by the authorities, whom must have known what was coming.”*⁹⁵

At the end of the meeting hundreds of apprentices and rivet boys from Workman, Clark’s marched into Harland & Wolff’s yard and ordered out Catholics and socialists. Some were *“kicked and beaten, others were pelted with rivets, and some were forced to swim for their lives”*. There were three days of rioting in the city in which 7 catholics and 6 protestants were killed. Catholics were *“driven from the Sirocco Works, Mackie’s, McLaughlin and Harvery’s, Musgrave’s and Combe Barbour’s”*.⁹⁶ At the same time Loyalists attacked Catholic owned businesses and homes in Ban-

⁹³ Labour and partition, p259

⁹⁴ Revolution in Ireland, p155

⁹⁵ Revolution in Ireland, p155

⁹⁶ A History of Ulster, , p472

bridge and Tramore and drove catholics out of mills and factories. The entire catholic population of both these towns was forced to flee.

The shipyard pogrom were followed by the unrolling of huge union jacks in the various workshops and the setting up of vigilance committees to prevent catholics or trade unionists getting back into the shipyards. One of the leaders of the pogromists Alex McKay who was also a UULA councillor for Bangor, while unfurling the largest union jack said *“we are all Imperialists. And the reason we meet today is because we believe in imperial authority.”*⁹⁷ According to the Irish News Sir James Craig, at the time still a member of the British Government, was present at an unfurling in Harland and Wolff on the 14 October. He said *“Do I approve of the action you boys have taken in the past?. I say yes.”*⁹⁸ Carson in parliament said *“I am prouder of my friends in the shipyards than of any other friends I have in the whole world.”*⁹⁹

A committee estimated 11,000 catholics had been expelled from work and very few were to get their jobs back in later years. Yet there was no contact between the ILPTUC and British TUC on combating the expulsions. In fact the TUC delayed action for months and its delegation to Belfast even criticised the ASCJ, the one union that tried to do something about the expulsions. The ASCJ had blacked the employers who refused to combat the expulsions and then expelled from the union the majority of ACSJ members who continued to work for these employers.¹⁰⁰

The expulsions devastated the left and the union movement. James Baird said *“Every man who was prominently known in the labour movement, who was known as an ILPer was expelled from his work”*.¹⁰¹

An ILPTUC report of 1921 showed that the workers who remained in the shipyards had seen a significant drop (12s) in wages in the shipyards after the pogroms¹⁰² In the two years after the expulsions employment declined from 20,000 to 15,000 at Harland and Wolff and 7,000 to 1,800 at Workman Clarke’s¹⁰³ If the pogromists had hoped to protect their jobs through their actions they failed.

Conventional left histories of the period often conclude by suggesting that if the republican movement had adopted a left wing program this history could have turned out differently. This alternative history however suffers from a failure to understand why the nationalist movement had moved in the 1880’s to a promotion of mystical nationalism over radical republicanism. The nationalist movement of that decade was a movement that rejected a strategy of uniting workers and peasants around a radical program. Its program instead was one of submerging all class differences into the quite successful creation of a cultural nationalism based around ‘traditional’ values including Catholicism. It was not that it was unaware of a potential for workers unity, rather as we have seen it rejected that path and sections were very hostile to it, precisely because it would have undermined the nationalist all class alliance they sought to create.

If we step back from the specifics of the Irish situation this was part of the same process that saw republican movements across Europe divide on the question of what Freedom meant. Those that saw it in terms of radical democracy including the redistribution of property set up new

⁹⁷ Labour and partition, p276

⁹⁸ Labour and partition, p277

⁹⁹ Revolution in Ireland, p157

¹⁰⁰ Labour and partition, p279

¹⁰¹ Labour and partition, p270

¹⁰² Revolution in Ireland, p157

¹⁰³ Labour and partition, p269

working class organizations to fight for these demands. This included the anarchist movement. In most cases they didn't reject national liberation as a concept but rather insisted it must be subsidiary to the class struggle.

Those who saw Freedom as meaning the right of local capitalists to make decisions in the interests of the local economy (and themselves) constructed a movement hostile to the left based instead on cultural similarities within a given population. Inevitably this had a mystic tinge due to the need to construct a common history that would culminate in independence or in some cases fusion as the nationalism of this period included 'big nation nationalists' who argued for fusion. In that context the unionists were also nationalists, as one southern unionist argued in a 1912 letter to the Irish Times "*The Unionist who thinks that the inhabitants of the two islands should be regarded as forming a single nation is, I think the true Nationalist... the name of Nationalist properly belongs to the man who recognises but one nation, and wishes to keep that nation whole and unimpaired.*"¹⁰⁴

Some, including James Connolly in Ireland, tried to stand on both sides of the socialist / nationalists divide simultaneously. They tried to convince the separatist nationalists that due to imperialism there was no room left for an independent capitalist nation to develop so that real nationalists should throw their lot in with the socialists. Although the nationalists were not convinced by this argument these left nationalists consoled themselves with the idea that the bulk of the mainstream nationalists would learn this lesson in the course of the independence struggle

Unfortunately in Ireland prior to world war one the left under the pressure of events simply divided into a small nation Irish nationalist faction, typified by James Connolly that was mostly based in the south and a big nation Unionist nationalist faction typified by William Walker that was based in Belfast. The weak attempt to overcome this in 1912 failed because it was simply based around a demand to change sides rather than an attempt to develop a new program.

There is a common anecdote in Ireland about a tourist driving in the countryside who gets lost and stops to ask a farmer for directions. On hearing where they want to go the farmer replied "Well if I was going there I wouldn't start from here". This was the problem of the left for much of Irish history, it found itself in a place where class struggle was frequently dominated by the national question and it never really developed either the program or the organization to deal with this. Again and again fragile workers unity won in times of relative quiet fractured as soon as the national question reared its head.

Anarchism contains no magic bullet to overcome that problem. Indeed there were anarchists in Dublin, at least in the 1880's. A Dublin branch of the Socialist League in formed in December 1885 shortly after Michael Gabriel, an anarchist, moved to the North Strand. However they failed to come up with a program on the national question, Fintan Lane writes that they "*tried to stand above what was the primary political issue of their day*". With the introduction of Gladstone's 1886 Bill they admitted in a report to the Socialist League in London that it was "*extremely difficult just now to get people to think of anything but Home Rule*". It collapsed in March 1887, this appears to be the last attempt at libertarian organisation in Ireland until the 1960's.¹⁰⁵

The question of partition continues to divide the working class on the island and like it or not if we want to get to anarchism we have to start from here. In the 130 plus years that have passed

¹⁰⁴ Dividing Ireland, p9

¹⁰⁵ Fintan Lane, The Emergence of Modern Irish Socialism 1885-87, Red & Black Revolution 3, online at www.wsm.ie

since the collapse of the Socialist League no anarchist organization has produced a convincing map, indeed few have even been willing to try to go beyond a set of standard slogans. The most advanced attempt by far has been the work of my own organization, the Workers Solidarity Movement, but even this effort is considered by others on the left to merely reflect either the unionist or nationalist standpoint depending on where they place themselves.

I'd hope these articles in general and this one in particular aid in the debate amongst anarchists and those on the left about how to overcome the sectarian divisions in the working class on the island. These divisions flow from our shared history but that history is also the story of the struggles of ordinary workers overcoming for a time the divisions and opening a view of an alternative politics that promises freedom for all. Some 91 years after 1916 and 88 years after that Belfast Mayday the task of completing that struggle remains before us.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Andrew Flood
Ireland — Nationalism, socialism and partition
Class struggle in Belfast 1880–1920
May 3, 2007

Retrieved on 12th August 2021 from www.anarkismo.net

theanarchistlibrary.org