

Political and historical issues underlying the Irish “peace” talks - An exchange of letters

Chris Talbot
11 April 1998

The World Socialist Web Site is publishing here an exchange of letters between a reader of the WSW in Britain and Chris Talbot, a member of the WSWS editorial board and the Socialist Equality Party of Britain.

The letters deal with important questions concerning not only current developments, but also the attitude of Marxism toward Irish nationalism and republicanism.

Letter from MM to Chris Talbot

Dear Comrade,

I would like to take up some points in Chris Talbot's article, which was also the editorial in *International Worker* (7 Feb 1998).

I do not share the view that the execution of Billy Wright of the Loyalist Volunteer Force was a “sectarian” killing. It is customary for the British media to portray the conflict in the 6 counties as one of religious sectarianism, when in fact it is a political conflict over how the place should be ruled. It is the British rulers who gave the conflict its religious form by giving land to Protestant settlers at the expense of the native Irish who were Catholic.

This has continued into the 20th century with industrial capital in the hands of the Protestant ascendancy, and the descendants of the dispossessed Catholics forming part of the urban working class. Protestant workers formed a privileged layer akin to a labour aristocracy (as James Connolly noted). The Northern Ireland state rested on sectarian discrimination and oppression. The link with Britain guaranteed the dominance of the elite and the relative privileges of the loyalist workforce.

Since its foundation 200 years ago by Wolfe Tone (a Presbyterian), republicanism has sought to unite Irish people regardless of religion against English rule (“the never failing source of all our ills”). Whether republicans have always lived up to that is another matter. Likewise, being bound up with a national movement subordinated to a rising bourgeoisie prevented it from realising its potential as a “lower orders” movement (as Marx once referred to the Fenians).

However, there is no way that republicanism can simply be equated with loyalism as the other side of the “sectarian divide.” In the modern context its limitations may serve the needs of a limited social layer rather than the mass of working class people, but this does not amount to sectarianism, and a more considered critique is necessary

In recent years the social basis of the Northern Ireland state has been eroded, and new forms of rule are on the agenda. Loyalist paramilitary gangs have operated in this context to cling onto the privileges associated with the ascendancy and the link with Britain. Their murder campaign is directed against any perceived threat to these arrangements, republicans and nationalists of course, but any Catholic will do. Billy Wright continued to organise this campaign from his prison cell, and it was for

that reason the INLA killed him, not his religion.

We may complain that individual terror is no solution, but we can be certain that if the threat to the status quo had come from socialists, it would be socialists who were being murdered by the loyalist gangs. I have encountered many definitions of socialism, but never one which was compatible with allegiance to the British crown.

Clare Short of New Labour, and formerly associated with the “Time to Go” campaign, which envisaged an end of sorts to British rule (if only they were asked politely enough), has recently been quoted as comparing Orangemen to the KKK. This seems fairly reasonable to me, but there are two things of significance which emerge from this. One is that she vehemently denies the quote, and the other is that others in the Cabinet see fit to use the quote against her. The tide of unionism is still strong it seems.

It is of course possible that the killing of Wright suited the British sufficiently to look the other way, and this brings me to the nature of the so-called peace process. “The break-up of the British nation state will inevitably provoke a backlash,” we are told by the article.

Are we really witnessing the break-up of the UK? Blair's constitutional changes for Britain as a whole are aimed at strengthening the UK. In my view they have no intention of conceding a united Ireland. If anything the strand of the talks to do with links to the south would strengthen British influence over the whole of Ireland, and effectively consolidate partition. Also, the loyalists would get back control of a regional assembly.

I consider that the main purpose of the talks is to weaken and divide republicans, and then impose the new constitutional arrangements. The peace process will break down because the aims of the parties are incompatible. It is a question of placing blame for this on republicans, and splitting republicans into those who will talk on British terms and those who will fight on and be isolated and crushed.

The killing of Wright for his part in the sectarian murders of Catholics led to an intensification of loyalist activity and brought the possibility that the IRA would be provoked into action. The collapse of the talks which would have followed would have been used to isolate republicans, push through a pro-British agenda, and crush resistance.

This did not happen because republicans refused to fall into line and play the victim. Sinn Féin leaders now face the prospect of being excluded from the talks simply on the word of the RUC chief, claiming the IRA was behind two recent actions. That elected political leaders can be held responsible for the actions of others without evidence, suggests to me that we are only a stroke of a pen away from internment without trial, or something like it under a new name.

I agree however with the central argument of Chris Talbot, that there is no national solution. Class politics have to be counterposed to all the contending interests. This would necessarily challenge the link with Britain and the continued existence of partition, which together ensure the ascendancy and the split in the working class in the North.

Many socialists, especially those influenced by the Stalinist stages

theory, pause at this point, as if waiting for developments to catch up. Republicanism has periodically given rise to more radical even socialist movements. INLA/IRSP are an example of this. They too are politically at an impasse, caught between socialism and nationalism; this is partly the product of circumstances, and the absence of an independent movement of the working class.

In reality, perspectives cannot be confined to a 6-county, or a 32-county, or a British Isles scenario, but require the end of all national boundaries, as well as the end of all forms of privilege which arise within these boundaries.

Fraternally,

MM

14 February 1998

Chris Talbot's reply

Dear MM,

Thank you for your e-mail. We welcome this opportunity to deepen the discussion with you and other socialist-minded workers on the vital political question of Ireland.

You say you agree there is no national solution for the Irish working class, and that "class politics" has to be counterposed to all the contending interests. But if this is to have more than a purely rhetorical significance, it can only mean an approach to all questions that proceeds from the struggle to establish the political independence and unity of the working class, and achieve its leadership of all oppressed layers of society in a political struggle against capitalist rule. History has demonstrated that the only vehicle for carrying out this task is the revolutionary Marxist party, based on an assimilation of the lessons distilled by the Marxist movement from the historical experiences of the international working class.

This has been the essence of the struggle of Trotsky and the Fourth International against Stalinism, social democracy, bourgeois nationalism and all varieties of revisionism, including Pablistism. This fundamental standpoint must be applied consistently when considering the complex issues involved in the Irish question.

It is important that we avoid the approach, predominant in radical circles, which sees all of the political relations established in the postwar period as fixed. These elements are taken completely unawares when things don't work out according to their schemas.

You point to changes that have taken place in Irish politics and economics in the last period, but you underestimate both their scale and impact on the politics of nationalism/republicanism. We must address the economic and political issues that have given rise to the so-called peace process, which centre on the impact of the development of globalised production on Ireland and its long-time imperialist oppressor, Britain. Your approach tends to see everything solely in terms of the undoubted aim of the British ruling class to reassert its dominance over the whole of Ireland. But this alone cannot explain the developments of the last two decades.

That is why we have paid a great deal of attention to the conflict of interests in Ireland between British, American and European imperialism and its effect on all the classes, sections of classes and their political aspirations.

We do not share your view that either the present set-up in Ireland, or, indeed, the British nation state itself, is a permanent structure. Fundamental changes in capitalist production have resulted in the break-up of several nation states in Eastern Europe, the collapse of the USSR and the breakdown of nation states in Africa. The general forces underlying these changes have not bypassed either Britain or the tiny

nation state of the Republic of Ireland.

The Irish Republic has gone from being a relatively isolated, predominantly agricultural backwater, dependent entirely on exports to Britain, to a major focus for transnational investment in Europe, especially in hi-tech industries. The GNP per head in southern Ireland is now higher than that in Britain, while the gap between rich and poor has widened. The domination of Ireland by Britain continues, with the huge military occupation in the North and the maintenance of the border, but American, European and Japanese investment, not to mention the relationship with the European Union, have transformed Irish politics.

Nearly 10 years ago we explained that the impact of the international economy on Ireland was making its partition unviable and undermining the relative independence of the southern Republic. Even then economic commentators were discussing the need to create a huge investment zone, stretching from Dublin to Belfast. The 1985 Anglo Irish Agreement was declared largely in response to pressure from the US to establish cross-border economic collaboration in order to create better conditions for investment. In response to this challenge, Britain attempted to use the agreement as a means to strengthen its own influence over the whole of Ireland, an agenda that it has maintained in the present talks. But it did this to combat rival American interests and the ambitions of Germany through the European Union.

Whilst we talk of the "British ruling class" for the purposes of analysis, the reality is far more complex. There are growing divisions between the various sections of the ruling class that show up in the conflicts over relations with Europe. Powerful sections of the British bourgeoisie and global finance capital do want the removal of the border in Ireland, and do want new political arrangements that correspond to their investment interests. On the other hand there is a die-hard Tory/Unionist and military establishment with an opposing view.

The underlying economic developments have also led to considerable changes in the social structure of the northern six counties, which has profoundly impacted class relations and hence both the Unionist and the nationalist parties. The conflicts of the last 28 years have seen very sharp divisions between Protestant and Catholic areas, and there is undoubtedly still widespread discrimination against Catholics. As you say, for a century or more the Protestant workers formed a privileged labour aristocracy, which provided much of the social basis for Unionism.

Today, however, the secure jobs in the shipbuilding industry, etc., on which this was founded no longer exist. The Protestant working class areas show the same signs of deprivation and poverty as the Catholic areas. This provides great political opportunities for overcoming the domination of the Unionist bourgeoisie and ending the sectarian division of the working class.

In your letter you say that "in recent years the social basis for the Northern Ireland state has been eroded," but you still talk of "industrial capital in the hands of the Protestant Ascendancy." Industrial capital in the North cannot be viewed in such nationally-isolated terms. It is dependent for its success on its ability to attract international investment and trade. Hence the support of the CBI and significant sections of the Unionist bourgeoisie itself for the "peace process."

For its part, Sinn Féin has built up support in the Catholic working class areas of West Belfast and elsewhere where the population have looked to the IRA for protection against the British army and unionist thugs. But the class basis of their nationalist politics was and is in the urban middle class.

The last decade or so has seen the opening up of opportunities for advancement in a growing layer of university educated Catholics—community workers, lawyers and business people. Many in this layer, who once saw radical nationalism and a limited mobilisation of the working class as a lever with which to develop their own ambitions, now see the talks as a vehicle for realising their narrow aims.

The abandonment by the republicans of their radical pretensions again

provides favourable opportunities for socialists to free the Catholic working class from the domination of this petty bourgeois trend. To do this, however, requires a scientific Marxist assessment of the republican tradition, free of the romanticism regarding Irish nationalism that predominates in middle class radical circles.

You indicate in passing that “its [republicanism’s] limitations may serve the needs of a limited social layer rather than the mass of working class people,” but you don’t seem to draw the political conclusions that flow from the basic issue of republicanism’s class character. It is only by evaluating concretely the class nature of modern-day Irish nationalism, as with all political movements, that Marxists can determine their attitude towards it. I believe that you have not made a full appraisal of the objective reasons for the bankruptcy not just of Sinn Féin, but of bourgeois nationalism as a whole, and you therefore hold illusions in the progressive character of republicanism.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has made a considerable study of nationalism and national liberation movements in the course of the past 12 years. We have drawn fundamental lessons on the politics of nationalism. David North wrote in his Keerthi Balasuriya memorial lecture:

“While defending the democratic rights of all oppressed peoples, it is the obligation of Marxists to expose how the slogans of ‘national liberation’ and ‘self-determination’ have, in practice, been transformed by the bourgeois nationalists into reactionary justifications for separatist and communalist programs that are without any genuine democratic or progressive social content.

“To the extent that Marxists attributed a progressive content to national liberation movements, it was because they were in some way identified with overcoming imperialist domination and the legacy of backwardness, tribal and caste distinctions, etc. ‘India’ and ‘China’ were not ethnically nor linguistically unified nations, but political concepts which implied the progressive unification of peoples across a vast territorial domain, opening up the prospects for genuine economic and cultural progress.

“That content is hardly to be found in any of the movements which presently claim to champion ‘national liberation’” (*Fourth International*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 251-2).

A basic problem with your approach to Irish nationalism and republicanism is, in my opinion, the fact that it is essentially ahistorical. Can we as Marxists speak, as you do, of 200 years of republicanism, drawing a line of descent from Wolfe Tone to the Fenians to Gerry Adams? Apart from the rhetoric used by Sinn Féin today, their politics have virtually no resemblance to either the great bourgeois revolutionary movement of the 1790s, the United Irishmen, inspired by the French Revolution, or the Fenian movement of the 1860s, based as you say on the “lower orders,” i.e., peasants, and supported by Marx and Engels.

Even then, the founders of scientific socialism made no attempt to dress the Fenians up as a proletarian movement. Engels wrote to Marx: “As regards the Fenians you are quite right. The beastliness of the English must not make us forget that the leaders of the sect are mostly asses and partly exploiters and we cannot in any way make ourselves responsible for the stupidities which occur in every conspiracy” (*Ireland and the Irish Question*, Lawrence and Wishart, p. 155).

The progressive elements in the historical traditions of early republicanism are entirely lacking in the present-day republican movements.

This history of Ireland in this century is a rich confirmation of Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution. In the imperialist epoch the national democratic revolution cannot be carried out by the bourgeoisie, but only by the working class as part of the socialist revolution. The erosion of any progressive content to the bourgeois nationalist movement in Ireland was already revealed by the establishment of the Irish Free State. By that time the republican movement had changed from the peasant-based movement

which Marx and Engels knew. Trotsky’s perceptive remarks on the defeated 1916 uprising make this clear:

“The historical basis for the national revolution had disappeared even in backward Ireland. Inasmuch as the Irish movements of the last century had assumed a popular character, they had invariably fed on the social hostility of the deprived and exhausted pauper-farmer towards the omnipotent English landlord....

“After the agrarian reforms of 1881-1903, the farmers turned into conservative property owners, whose gaze the green banner of independence is no longer able to tear away from their plots of land” (Trotsky’s *Writings on Britain*, vol. 3, p. 168, New Park).

Stalinism and social democracy suppressed the revolutionary situation in Ireland and all over the world, but a crucial supplementary role was played by the parties and groups affiliated to the Pabloite United Secretariat (USec).

As you know, Pabloism emerged as an opportunist and liquidationist trend against which the orthodox Trotskyists fought, leading to the formation of the International Committee of Fourth International in 1953. Proclaiming a continued loyalty to Trotskyism, the parties of the Pabloite United Secretariat miseducated thousands of workers and youth looking for a revolutionary perspective, yourself included.

The Pabloite groups rejected the theory of Permanent Revolution and abandoned the construction of independent revolutionary parties of the working class. Instead they worked to give fake socialist credentials to whatever political forces—Stalinist, social democratic or bourgeois nationalist—dominated in the labour movement of any given country, and thereby subordinate revolutionary-minded workers to them.

Pabloism’s characteristic arguments to justify support for bourgeois nationalists was that they were moving in a socialist direction; they were “unconscious Marxists,” etc. You broke from the USec many years ago and have been politically supportive of the ICFI. Nevertheless your characterisation of republicanism and Irish nationalism indicates that you have yet to fully assimilate the lessons of the historic struggle between Trotskyism and Pabloite revisionism.

In your appraisal of republicanism, you state at one point that “being bound up with a national movement subordinated to a rising bourgeoisie prevented it from realising its potential as a ‘lower orders’ movement.” The danger in this formulation is that the bourgeois character of nationalism is presented as something of an unfortunate accident, the implication being that an alternative scenario was—and perhaps remains—a proletarian nationalist movement.

This is reinforced by your comments on the INLA/IRSP, in which you betray illusions in the ability of petty-bourgeois nationalists to evolve into socialists. You describe the INLA/IRSP as being “politically at an impasse, caught between socialism and nationalism,” and go on to say, “this is partly the product of circumstances, and the absence of an independent movement of the working class.”

This suggests that an independent movement of the working class could push the INLA/IRSP into the camp of genuine socialism. But is not the essence of Pabloism the denial that the working class is the sole consistent revolutionary force in modern society, and its relegation instead to the subordinate role of pressuring and pushing other class forces to carry out the socialist revolution? Does not your presentation of these “left” nationalists implicitly cede to petty-bourgeois forces the role of revolutionary leadership?

We see no more reason to identify the INLA/IRSP with socialism than we do the middle class radicals in Britain. No amount of spontaneous pressure from the working class or friendly advice from us will lead them to change their spots. An eruption of the class struggle on the basis of a socialist programme would find them in the opposing camp.

On a more general basis, you preface your remarks on the INLA/IRSP with the assertion that “republicanism has periodically given rise to more

radical even socialist movements. INLA/IRSP are an example of this.”

Whilst it is not possible to go through the history of Ireland and Irish nationalism, all of our work on the subject goes against such an assessment. At the beginning of this century, Connolly sought to put the working class into the leadership of the struggle for national independence, but he did not seek to dress up the bourgeois nationalist movement in socialist clothes.

In the years that followed the Easter Uprising, all the Irish bourgeoisie could achieve was the 26-county state, dominated by the Catholic Church, and with limited independence from British rule. This confirmed Connolly’s appraisal that the task of liberating Ireland from national oppression by British imperialism fell to the working class and the development of the socialist revolution.

The founding of the Communist Party in the early 1920s, led by Roddy Connolly (James Connolly’s son), was an inspired beginning. It originated in Connolly’s proletarian socialist tradition, and was bitterly opposed to both wings of the nationalists. Roddy Connolly took part in the Second Congress of the Communist International, discussing the Irish question with Lenin and opposing any concession to the Irish nationalists. But this tendency did not survive due to the growth of Stalinism in the Communist International.

In the 1930s there was the Republican Congress, upon which today’s radicals heap their praises. This movement was not socialist, but comprised of left republicans and Stalinists, the latter under pressure from the Comintern to follow the line of collaborating with and boosting nationalist groupings.

Present-day nationalism/republicanism was virtually created after 1969. Its origins are to be explained far less from the tiny band of IRA men who still survived, than from the international eruption of the class struggle in the period 1968-75. The nationalists were the right wing of the civil rights movement. As this movement began to get out of the control of the old style nationalists and the Stalinists, drawing into it the Catholic working class in Derry and Belfast, the Labour government sent in troops to prop up the Unionist state apparatus.

The Provisional IRA, who broke with the official Republicans, were opposed to socialism and an independent movement of the working class. They were able to take the leadership in working class Catholic areas in large part because socialist-minded youth involved in the civil rights movement were influenced by the radicals and drawn behind nationalist politics and the formation of a “national liberation movement.”

The younger generation of Provisional Sinn Fein leaders, like Adams and McGuinness, later recognised the need for some socialist rhetoric. But they were no more opposed to capitalism than their political friends in Britain, Labour “lefts” like Ken Livingstone and Tony Benn.

You suggest that today Sinn Fein are showing some superior political skills in their response to British attempts to weaken and divide them by refusing “to fall into line and play the victim.” But Sinn Fein are in the talks because they have no choice. 28 years of British occupation and attacks on nationalist areas, hundreds of young IRA men killed or in gaol, and there is nothing to show for it.

Sinn Fein leaders were in secret talks with the British state for a number of years before the first IRA cease-fire was announced. The rhetoric may be that they have joined the talks to expose the intransigence of the British. But the reality is the hope that, with the support of US imperialism, they can establish a place for themselves in a new political framework in Ireland.

The common aim of national separatist movements in the modern epoch of globalised production is to establish territorial enclaves in which bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces preside over the super-exploitation of the working class by the transnational corporations. Like every other national liberation movement, the politics of Sinn Fein and the IRA is now centred on the effort to gain direct economic ties with imperialism and

globally mobile capital.

With support from US big business, symbolised by the visit to the White House and Clinton’s trip to Belfast, the Adams leadership hope to secure a political and economic niche for themselves in whatever new constitutional arrangements are established in the talks. To the extent that they hold sway over sections of the working class, this is only to be used as a bargaining chip in their negotiations with the imperialist powers.

In this connection, I must say I find your analysis of the Belfast talks seriously off the mark. You state categorically, “The peace process will break down because the aims of the parties are incompatible.” Really? Are the interests of the IRA any more incompatible with those of the British bourgeoisie and its unionist allies than were the interests of the PLO with Zionism, the ANC with their former apartheid oppressors, the Sandinistas with the US-backed oligarchy, or Mugabe and Nkomo with the Rhodesian ruling elite?

Regardless of the immediate outcome of the current talks, this statement reflects the lack of a consistent class standpoint and class analysis of the “peace” process, the various participants and the political situation as a whole. Why, in principle, are the aims of the parties incompatible? Who, after all, do the IRA and its various splittoffs represent? Do they represent the working class? Hardly. They represent layers of the middle class and aspiring national bourgeoisie who—confronted by the shambles of their past policy and the clear signs of discontent and questioning from below, and attracted by the possibilities of a place at the table in a new arrangement—are ready to make a deal. Those disgruntled nationalists on the fringes, like the INLA/IRSP, offer no more of a viable alternative than do Hamas or the “rejectionists” in the Middle East or Pan Africanist opponents of Mandela in South Africa.

You seem to believe that the talks, as least as far as the British are concerned, are little more than a set-up for the staging of various provocations, aimed at splitting the republican camp and maintaining the status quo. This is, however, a serious misreading of the significance of the talks, and it flows, I believe, from the more basic political issues discussed above.

In your letter you object to our use of the term “sectarian” in relation to the activities of the INLA and the republican movement in general. We have no hesitation in using this term and reject your claim that it is an impermissible adaptation to the British media.

Whatever their claims to being a secular movement, none of the republican groups advance any genuine measures to unite Catholic and Protestant workers on any issue. Instead they have encouraged the attitude that Protestant and British workers are the enemy, not the British ruling class, the loyalist paramilitary groupings and the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie.

Neither can we gloss over the issue of the IRA bombing campaigns as you do. It is not enough to demur with phrases like “we may complain that individual terror is no solution.” Notwithstanding the hypocritical denunciations of the capitalist press, bombings of innocent working class people, whether in Warrington or Belfast, are criminal and politically indefensible acts. They express the political bankruptcy of their perpetrators and serve the entirely reactionary end of reinforcing sectarian divisions.

You suggest that because Wright was a loyalist paramilitary thug we must endorse his assassination. We emphatically disagree. In what way did his murder advance the interests of the working class? As Marxists we determine what tactics are advisable or permissible not on the basis of middle-class moralising, but rather from the standpoint of whether and to what extent they contribute to the political education of the working class.

From this standpoint, killing Wright has no progressive significance. On the contrary, it serves to strengthen the conception that there is no independent political role for the working class. It became, predictably, the occasion for renewed sectarian violence which was then used to

reinforce illusions in the “peace process.” That is why we drew attention to the connivance of the British state in Wright’s murder.

Finally you make the point that loyalists would murder socialists who threatened the status quo. This is true, but do you really believe that the republicans are any more favourably disposed towards the development of an independent socialist movement in the working class?

To conclude: whatever the progressive origins of the nationalist tradition, and to find these you have to go back to the last century, the bitter lesson of the last 70 years is that nationalism plays as big a role as unionism in blocking the path of the working class to the overthrow of imperialist rule.

We hope that you will seriously consider these points and continue to discuss these important political questions with us.

Yours fraternally,

Chris Talbot, for the Socialist Equality Party (Britain)

9 April 1998

See Also:

The Labour Government’s agenda in the Irish “peace process” [4 February 1998]



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact