

One hundred years since Ireland's Easter Rising—Part One

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Events are taking place across Ireland this week to commemorate the centenary of the Easter Rising in Dublin. The revolt against centuries of brutal oppression by British imperialism began on Easter Monday, 24 April, 1916 and lasted for six days.

Although it was a minority among those who fought, the Irish Citizen Army (ICA), led by socialist James Connolly, led the uprising politically. The majority were members of the nationalist Irish Volunteers, founded in 1913 on a programme of defending Irish interests against Britain by force of arms. In total around 1,600 rebels seized prominent buildings in Dublin city centre, including, most famously, the General Post Office.

The rising has been transformed in the intervening years into a nationalist myth, marking the spiritual beginning of the establishment of the Irish capitalist state. The celebrations taking place across the Republic of Ireland this year are being funded by the state and involve all of the established political parties, the trade unions and other major institutions. An invitation has even been sent to the British royal family to send a representative.

This official sponsorship has created widespread confusion over the significance of the Easter Rising, which makes it more difficult to draw the necessary lessons from this important revolutionary struggle. A precondition for the proper commemoration of the centenary necessitates a reexamination of what took place and the context within which it developed.

World war and the betrayal of 1914

In contrast to the incessant claims that the rebellion was a national event, its roots are to be found in the global crisis of capitalism which had exploded less than two years earlier with the outbreak of World War I.

The war arose out of the deepening conflicts between the imperialist powers from the late 19th century onwards. Its causes were described by Leon Trotsky in his “*War and the International*”:

“The present war is at bottom a revolt of the forces of production against the political form of nation and state. It means the collapse of the national state as an independent economic unit...”

“By means of the national state, capitalism has revolutionized the whole economic system of the world. *It has divided the whole earth among the oligarchies of the great powers, around which were grouped the satellites, the small nations, who lived off the rivalry between the great ones.* The future development of world economy on the capitalistic basis means a ceaseless struggle for new and ever new fields of capitalist exploitation, which must be obtained from one and the same source, the earth. The economic rivalry under the banner of militarism is accompanied by robbery and destruction which violate the elementary principles of human economy. World production revolts not only against the confusion

produced by national and state divisions but also against the capitalist economic organizations, which has now turned into barbarous disorganization and chaos” [emphasis added].

Despite the Second (Socialist) International's declared opposition to imperialism and war, the majority of its leaders capitulated to their own bourgeoisie and supported the war effort. Most notorious of all was the role played by Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), which having mobilised hundreds of thousands in antiwar demonstrations only days before, voted in favour of war credits on 4 August, 1914.

When Britain entered the war against Germany and Austria-Hungary, in alliance with France and Russia, this decision had an immediate impact in Ireland—one of the small nations “who lived off the rivalry between the great ones.” A Home Rule bill, which had been promised for the best part of 50 years following the Fenian Rising of 1867, was pledged in 1912, but met with threats of armed resistance by the paramilitary Ulster Volunteers, which sought to preserve British rule and the privileged position enjoyed by the Protestant bourgeoisie. The nationalist Irish Volunteers were established in opposition to the Protestant paramilitaries as both sides began arming themselves. A rebellion by British army officers, the Curragh Incident of March 1914, in support of the Ulster Volunteers, ended with the Home Rule Bill being enacted, but “suspended” for the duration of the war, which broke out in late July.

The constitutional wing of the nationalist movement, seeking home rule as part of the United Kingdom, saw the war as an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to Britain in the hope that securing Irish recruits to the war effort would guarantee home rule on the conclusion of peace. The central figure was John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, which had concluded the negotiation of the Home Rule bill with the Liberal government in London.

In opposition, the separatist wing, led by the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), remained hostile to Britain. However, class relations had sharpened to such a point that the IRB's talk of a unified national movement against British rule proved to be a chimera.

Despite its historic backwardness, Ireland had witnessed the emergence of an extremely militant working class movement in the first years of the 20th century, which was increasingly coming under the influence of socialist ideas. This found expression in the emergence of industrial unionism, particularly in Dublin and Belfast, in which leading roles were played by Connolly and the powerful orator and organiser, James (Jim) Larkin.

Connolly, who established the first socialist party in Ireland in 1896, the Irish Socialist Republican Party, was a close ally of Larkin in the pre-war trade union struggles. He became commander of the ICA, a paramilitary force of workers set up initially in 1913 to defend strikers during the Dublin Lockout. The ICA was committed in its programme to use armed force to fight for an Irish republic.

The Dublin Lockout of 1913-14 broke out when a provocation by management of Dublin's United Tramway Company, aimed at preventing

the recognition of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU), led to a strike of tram workers in August 1913 which quickly received the support of dockers and other sections of the working class. The ITGWU won support from workers with its militant calls for class struggle, based on using “sympathy strikes” to extract concessions from the ruling elite and gradually expand workers control across industry. Police responded to protests with vicious repression, beating and injuring workers and their families, and killing several. Larkin, the ITGWU’s leader, was arrested and put on trial, but later released on bail.

The heroic struggle in Dublin drew powerful support from workers across Britain, who sent shipments of food and clothing to defeat the efforts of the bosses to starve the strikers into submission. But the British trade union leaders eventually succeeded in isolating the strike, forcing workers to return to their jobs without their demands being met.

The defeat of the lockout exposed the basic inadequacy of the ITGWU’s perspective of industrial unionism, which could not provide the working class with a political means of opposing the opportunism of the trade union bureaucracy, through the building of a revolutionary socialist party pledged to take state power and overthrow capitalism.

However, as grave as was the defeat, it was the outbreak of World War I that had the most terrible impact on the development of the class struggle and of the Irish socialist movement.

Opportunism and the Second International

Any assessment of the Easter Rising and Connolly’s role in it must proceed from an understanding that had there been a development of a revolutionary working class movement against imperialism and war beyond the borders of Ireland, everything would have taken a different course. But this was prevented by the political capitulation of the leaders of the parties of the Second International and their support for the war aims of their own ruling classes. For this reason, it was Connolly’s misfortune that the potentially closest allies of the Irish working class, their brothers and sisters across Britain, were misled by the treacherous leaders of British Labourism and the union bureaucracy, who were among the most fervent proponents of social chauvinism.

Connolly was among the minority of socialists who sharply criticised the embrace of national chauvinism by European socialism. Indeed there is no better refutation of the politically motivated portrayals of Connolly as an Irish nationalist icon than to cite his powerful writings from the period at length.

In the newspaper *Forward*, a Glasgow-based organ of the Independent Labour Party, barely two weeks after the conflict had broken out, on 15 August, 1914, Connolly declared in a piece titled, “Continental Revolution”:

“What then becomes of all our resolutions; all our protests of fraternisation; all our threats of general strikes; all our carefully-built machinery of internationalism; all our hopes for the future? Were they all as sound and fury, signifying nothing?”

In 1915, he wrote in an article, “Revolutionary Unionism and War,” of the failure of the parties of the Second International to prevent the outbreak of war:

“I believe that the socialist proletariat of Europe in all the belligerent countries ought to have refused to march against their brothers across the frontiers, and that such refusal would have prevented the war and all its horrors even though it might have led to civil war. Such a civil war would not, could not possibly have resulted in such a loss of socialist life as this international war has entailed, and each socialist who fell in such a civil war would have fallen knowing that he was battling for the cause he had

worked for in days of peace, and that there was no possibility of the bullet or shell that laid him low having been sent on its murderous way by one to whom he had pledged the ‘lifelong love of comrades’ in the international army of labour.”

The trade union leaderships and parties of the Second International in Germany, Britain and other countries submitted to the enforcement of strike bans and the vast intensification of the exploitation of the working class. Connolly maintained a vigorous opposition to such conciliation:

“In the British Empire, of which we are unluckily a part, the ruling class has taken the opportunity provided by the war to make a deadly onslaught upon all the rights and liberties acquired by labour in a century of struggling; and found the leaders of labour as a rule only too ready to yield to the attack and surrender the position they ought to have given their lives to hold,” he wrote in his newspaper, the *Workers’ Republic*, 1 January, 1916. “Were the war to end tomorrow the working class of these islands would be immediately launched into a bitter fight to resist the attempt of the capitalist class to make permanent all the concessions the too pliant trade union leaders have been swindled into conceding upon the plea of war emergencies.”

However, Connolly’s principled and courageous response to the events of 1914 was in part shaped by a syndicalist political perspective—acquired during seven years working in the United States, from 1903 to 1910, as an organiser for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). On his return to Ireland, in 1912, Connolly had united with Larkin both in building the ITGWU and in forming the Labour Party. But the two leaders conceived of the party as the political wing of the union movement, as was the British Labour Party, and it was on building the influence of the ITGWU that they focused their efforts.

With the outbreak of war, Connolly maintained that a militant industrial struggle of the working class would have provided a sufficient counterweight to the collapse of the Second International. “The failure of European socialism to avert the war is primarily due to the divorce between the industrial and political movements of labour,” he wrote in “Revolutionary Unionism and War.”

“The socialist voter, as such, is helpless between elections. He requires to organise power to enforce the mandate of the elections and the only power he can so organise is economic power—the power to stop the wheels of commerce, to control the heart that sends the life blood pulsating through the social organism.”

In truth, the incapacity of the leadership in Germany’s Social Democrats and the other parties of the Second International to resist the pressure to align with their own bourgeoisie was bound up in no small measure with their capitulation to nationalist opportunist tendencies, expressed most sharply by the right-wing trade union leaders. These developments had objective roots in the extended period of capitalist economic growth in the years prior to the war.

Vladimir Lenin drew the most farsighted conclusions from the betrayal of the Second International, attributing it to the protracted development of opportunism within its leadership. A 1914 declaration condemning the Social Democrats proceeded from an understanding that the Second International was now dead for the purposes of the socialist struggle of the European and international working class:

“The betrayal of socialism by most leaders of the Second International (1889-1914) signifies the ideological and political bankruptcy of the International. This collapse has been mainly caused by the actual prevalence in it of petty-bourgeois opportunism, the bourgeois nature and danger of which have long been indicated by the finest representatives of the revolutionary proletariat of all countries. The opportunists had long been preparing to wreck the Second International by denying the socialist revolution and substituting bourgeois reformism in its stead, by rejecting the class struggle with its inevitable conversion at certain moments into civil war, and by preaching class collaboration; by preaching bourgeois

chauvinism under the guise of patriotism and the defence of the fatherland, and ignoring or rejecting the fundamental truth of socialism, long ago set forth in the Communist Manifesto, that the workingmen have no country; by confining themselves, in the struggle against militarism, to a sentimental philistine point of view, instead of recognizing the need for a revolutionary war by the proletarians of all countries, against the bourgeoisie of all countries; by making a fetish of the necessary utilization of parliamentarianism and bourgeois legality, and forgetting that illegal forms of organization and agitation are imperative at times of crises.” (“The Tasks of Revolutionary Social Democracy in the European War,” V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Vol. 21*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974, p. 16)

From that time, Lenin, beginning with the formation of the Zimmerwald Left in 1915, worked to regroup the forces of revolutionary socialism in a new international socialist movement. Connolly was never able to take part in and have his own views shaped by these essential discussions and conflicts.

To be continued



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