

Irish nationalism versus socialist internationalism: A reply to a reader—Part one

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9 August 2017

In an article published June 24, “Conservatives seek toxic alliance with Democratic Unionist Party,” I wrote the following:

“Partition was imposed by the wealthy Protestant Ulster based capitalists to defend their industrial interests from the revolutionary threat posed by the working class by carving off the industrial North and imposing sectarian divisions by pogrom and systematic religious discrimination against the Catholic minority.”

This annoyed WSWS Disqus commentator NoddyKnox, who replied:

“In the matter of Ireland you appear to have absorbed the prejudices of the British hegemon by osmosis. ... Ireland was partitioned to retain a British military foothold and bridgehead on the island of Ireland to allow them to secure their western flank from European attack and ensure their continued access to the north Atlantic—critical for a maritime trading nation and the sine qua non without which they could not access their global empire.”

This is not the first such criticism by Knox, whose remarks generally assert that whereas Irish workers are revolutionary, British workers are hopelessly in thrall to their imperialist masters.

In reply to an April 4 article by Julie Hyland, “UK Prime Minister May silent on war threats against Spain over Gibraltar,” Knox wrote, after having cited the 1867 Fenian Rising and Proclamation:

“Given that the Irish Rising of 1916 was against the greatest empire in the world at that time and took place in the heart of that empire, that it stopped conscription into the imperial army, that it led to a revolution which in 1919-1921 created over 100 soviets in a country 350 miles by 150 miles—given all this it seems incredible that ‘socialists’ would dismiss it and tell the Irish to ‘look to their brothers across the UK’ for their future.”

Later in the same thread, he complained:

“Where was the British working class in 1916? Absent. Where were they in 1845-51, when 3 million Irish were killed and ejected in just 5 years? Nowhere. Where were the British working class in 1969 and the 1970s when the Irish rose again? Nowhere to be seen, except in their traditional position of providing the bulk of the personnel to come to Ireland with guns to walk the streets and quash the Irish.”

Delving further into history, he suggested:

“The English working class came to an accommodation with their merchant classes and aristocracy centuries ago, an accommodation which has sustained through all the vicissitudes. Through the Peasant Revolt and the English Civil War the English leadership learned to fear and respect the English peasantry and conceded rights to them that ensured relative peace for centuries. It also created a leadership adept at managing their people and responsive when needed.”

And in conclusion:

“By keeping the British working class away from the most radical

political tradition on the two islands via sneering and denunciation you effectively make common cause with the British ruling establishment who similarly sneer, the better to keep their people away from one of the richest intellectual political traditions which is in closest proximity to them.”

In reply to an earlier article of mine, “European Council endorses Irish unification in hardline negotiations over Brexit,” posted May 8, Knox warned:

“An Ireland bristling with EU rockets and air defences could lock down Britain and cut it off from the Atlantic as well as from NATO supply lines.”

He went on to issue an overheated hymn of praise to the Irish nation:

“The waters around Ireland are the richest fishing grounds in the EU. There is also oil and gas, it is suspected in abundance, around Ireland. These have not been developed because a developed Ireland has traditionally been a threat to Britain —wealthy, populous and following its own economic, military and foreign policies, as it has the resources to do, would be considered a direct threat to Britain’s hegemony in this region.”

Knox proceeds from insisting that the British working class is hopeless to exalting the nationalist revolutionary traditions of the Irish working class, which he demands British workers should emulate. Advocating a more self-sufficient Ireland, he makes clear that this “independence” will proceed under the protection of EU weaponry and on the basis of capitalism.

Knox proceeds with similar abandon when dealing with British history. He lumps together disparate events separated by centuries and epochs of economic and social development, with the sole aim of backing up his ludicrous assertion that the last serious challenge mounted to Britain’s rulers was from the peasantry.

This is not the place to take up every aspect of Knox’s absurd conflation of the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt, Oliver Cromwell’s execution of King Charles 1 in 1649 in the midst of the revolutionary strivings of the English bourgeoisie, and social reformism as it emerged in the latter part of 19th century capitalist Britain. However, contrary to Knox’s assertions, from the first appearance of large-scale industry in the late 18th century, the fact is that the fate of workers in Ireland and Britain has been intimately and irrevocably tied. Workers in Britain confronted the same class enemy as the brutally oppressed working population of Ireland. The liberation of either depended upon the liberation of the other.

From the first, as a direct consequence of the barbarism of British rule in Ireland, among the most exploited and tempestuous elements of the working class in Britain itself were those forced to emigrate from Ireland.

The fight for the People’s Charter demanding parliamentary reform and near universal male suffrage, in the mid-19th century in Britain mobilised millions in the first political movement of the working class in history. It

drew much of its leadership and dynamism from Ireland, including leading figures of both the “moral” and “physical force” wings of Chartism, Feargus O’Connor, and Bronterre O’Brien.

Knox’s indictment of British workers for their alleged passivity during the Irish famine is grotesque. Workers were launching strenuous, but unsuccessful efforts to wrest political power from the world-dominating British imperialist bourgeoisie. It was this latter class, not the working class, which ruled Ireland, maintained its economy in forced backwardness, and insisted, in the interests of moral rectitude and *laissez-faire* capitalism, that famine relief should be suspended while grain exports continued. [1]

In a 1984 essay, historian Bernard Reaney wrote:

“There are a variety of reasons why Irish men and women in England may have supported Chartism. They were part of a mass proletariat in the making, and could share common perceptions of exploitation and political exclusion with English workers. The Irish immigrant industrial worker had a double motive for supporting Chartism, which linked the workers’ denial of political rights with their low social status. Chartists were for complete severance of English political power in Ireland, whereas [bourgeois nationalist leader Daniel] O’Connell was willing to settle for the return of the pre-1801 Dublin parliament...”

“The example of [Irish republican] Robert Emmet’s execution evoked a profound sympathy amongst English radicals. The Northampton Chartist and first historian of the movement, Robert Gammage, recalled that he was converted to Chartism by reading Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man and Emmet’s ‘speech from the dock’. Dramatisations of Emmet’s trial were performed by Chartist groups and his fate was identified with those who fell at Peterloo, and with that of the Tolpuddle Martyrs.” [2]

None of this matters to Knox, when he asserts that British workers are as equally to blame for oppression in Ireland. In similar fashion, in his account all Irish are equally oppressed.

During the famine, Knox states that “3 million Irish were killed and ejected in just 5 years.” Who does this refer to? Were the priests, the Protestant clergy, the landlords, their thugs, the administrators or the police killed and ejected? No. It was the poorest, most oppressed rural workers and peasants that suffered during the famine.

The 1867 Fenian Proclamation, which Knox cites, clearly understood the need for the unity of the Irish and English oppressed against their common enemy:

“History bears testimony to the integrity of our sufferings, and we declare, in the face of our brethren, that we intend no war against the people of England—our war is against the aristocratic locusts, whether English or Irish, who have eaten the verdure of our fields—against the aristocratic leeches who drain alike our fields and theirs.”

In 1870, Karl Marx explained how the English ruling class had been able to undermine the unity of Irish and English workers. He conceded, two decades after the collapse of Chartism, that “the English bourgeoisie has not only exploited Irish poverty to keep down the working class in England by *forced immigration* of poor Irishmen, but it has also divided the proletariat into two hostile camps... in *all the big industrial centres in England*, there is profound antagonism between the Irish proletariat and the English proletariat” (emphasis in the original).

To overcome this, and strike a blow for social revolution in England, Marx, speaking for the General Council of the First International, called for workers to defend the Fenian prisoners. He wrote further:

“[I]t is a precondition for the emancipation of the English working class to transform the present forced union (that is, the enslavement of Ireland) into an equal and free confederation, if possible, or complete separation, if need be.” [3]

Despite its radical left-wing form, however, the Fenian proclamation, even if it had been implemented in full, was limited to the creation of a bourgeois democratic republic in Ireland. A capitalist state independent of

Britain might have emerged but this would have quickly led to class war and created the conditions for socialist revolution—necessitating above all else a unified struggle of the British and Irish workers.

In the event, the Fenians were suppressed, but the threat of Home Rule of one form or other and separation from British markets drove the powerful industrialists based in Ulster into open rebellion by 1912-14.

The Ulster crisis of the early years of the 20th century was but one expression of the world crisis, which finally led to world war and revolution. It exposed for all time the bankruptcy of national programmes based on the prospect of peaceful development of one or other, or alliances of, capitalist nation states.

Knox ignores such an understanding and ends up sneering, “Where was the British working class in 1916?”

In 1916, and even more apparent today, the only viable resolution of the crisis of the nation-state system in the islands of Ireland and Britain—expressed to an extraordinary degree in the absurd position of Northern Ireland—is through the forging of an alliance between workers in Britain and Ireland, North and South, Protestant and Catholic, for the establishment of socialism in Britain, Ireland and Europe.

But for this to take place required and requires a reckoning both with social reformism in Britain and bourgeois nationalism in Ireland.

Undoubtedly, Ulster’s bourgeois minds were focused in their opposition to Home Rule by events such as the Dublin transport strike of 1913 for union rights and improved pay and conditions against a combination of employers, the press and the Catholic Church. The Dublin strikers had widespread support from workers, but the trade unions in Britain had, in the decades after the demise of Chartism, emerged as pillars of respectability, representatives of a narrow privileged labour aristocracy, bought off with social concessions and promises of class peace. No assistance was offered and the Dublin strike was defeated. [4]

To be continued

References/further reading:

1. Tim Pat Coogan, *The Famine Plot*, Palgrave MacMillan (2012) p. 82.
2. Bernard Reaney, *Irish Chartists in Britain and Ireland: rescuing the rank and file*, Saothar, Vol. 10 (1984), Irish Labour History Society pp. 94-103.
3. The International Workingmen’s Association, 1870, Confidential Communication on Bakunin.
4. The Irish trade unions, the pseudo-left and the Dublin lockout centenary, Jordan Shilton, posted 5 February 2014.



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