

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

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*This is the concluding part of a two-part series. Part one was posted on August 9.*

As explained in the WSWs series on the 1916 Rising, “Any assessment of the Easter Rising and [James] 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.” [5]

Knox states that the 1916 rising “led to a revolution which in 1919-1921 created over 100 soviets.” However, in his haste to contrast revolutionary, soviet-creating Irish workers with the backward British, Knox ignores the immense radicalisation that also swept across Europe, including Britain, in response to the October 1917 Revolution in Russia. He also omits reference to the circumstances of the Irish soviets’ suppression.

The movement in Ireland was directed both against British imperialism and against the Irish capitalists and large farmers. It expressed the huge class tensions and the attractive power of the Russian revolution internationally to workers and the oppressed.

A soviet—a democratic workers’ council of action—emerged from a two-week-long general strike and workers’ control of Limerick in 1919 in opposition to the British Army’s declaration of a Special Military Area. Some 15,000 workers struck, then regulated and organised the distribution of supplies. But the soviet was betrayed by the Irish Trade Union Congress, the local Sinn Féin mayor and the Catholic Church.

The same year, a general strike in Belfast which coordinated successive transport and power workers strikes, shut down the shipyards for a month. The strike committee, which took the form of a soviet, organised the distribution of power supply and was in contact with workers in Glasgow and London. At the time the authorities, rightly, viewed the Belfast strike committee as a far greater threat than the IRA.

In 1920, most towns in Ireland saw some form of general strike. Between 1921 and 1923, hundreds of extended occupations and strikes took place, some of which hoisted a red flag and declared themselves to be soviets. All were eventually suppressed, not by the British Army, but by the IRA, or, after the Anglo-Irish Treaty and partition, by both pro- and anti-treaty forces. [6].

Events in Ireland took place simultaneously with a major intensification of the class struggle in Britain.

Prior to the war, in 1911, during the “Great Unrest,” transport workers

in Liverpool launched a general strike which was confronted by 3,500 troops and resulted in the killing of two workers. Winston Churchill directed the cruiser HMS Antrim to the Mersey. Troops were also used against workers in South Wales.

Even during the war, despite the cultivation of a patriotic war fever and the historic capitulation of the Labour and the trade unions, class struggle continued, particularly in the engineering industries on the Clyde river.

These tensions reached a new peak after the Russian revolution and the end of the war. Less than three months after the Armistice, Churchill dispatched tanks to confront thousands of workers demanding reduced hours in Glasgow. Mutinies took place with increasing frequency in the navy and army including in opposition to British intervention against Bolshevik Russia. Some 10,000 soldiers in the port of Folkestone refused to follow orders and organised which vessels arrived or left. In August the same year, a battleship, HMS Valiant, was once again dispatched to the Mersey. [7]

In January 1919, there was a general strike in Glasgow at the same time as that in Belfast, involving 100,000 workers. It ended in savage conflict with the police on “Bloody Friday” and the government sending in the army.

Only the leadership of the trade unions saved British capitalism. Above all, in 1921, the “Triple Alliance,” which unified large and powerful sections of the working class in the mines, transport and rail, was prevented by its own leadership from a decisive confrontation.

Over this entire period, one of British imperialism’s greatest fears was that the possibility of the struggle against the brutalities of colonial rule in Ireland forging an alliance with the politically radicalised working class in Britain. Preventing this was a major factor behind all the political calculations of the British ruling class, including its troublesome wing in the North.

In the event, the Anglo-Irish Treaty that created the Irish Free State and partitioned off the North, worked well for British imperialism. In power, the Irish bourgeoisie immediately showed its true colours. It prosecuted a bloody civil war against anti-treaty forces using British artillery and armoured cars that led to up to 4,000 deaths, including 77 executed Irish republicans. The class movement that led to the soviets was suppressed, while the Irish trade unions proved themselves no better than their British counterparts—having sided with the pro-Treaty government in the civil war.

The worst impact of the Treaty was in Protestant Ulster, where thousands of Catholic workers were burnt out from their homes and hundreds were killed in street battles.

Class tensions in Britain finally culminated in the historic 1926 General Strike, which immediately involved 4 million out of 5.5 million workers. But by this time the situation in Ireland had been brought under control.

Only with an established Marxist political leadership could the working class have fully taken advantage of a situation which was pregnant with revolutionary possibilities on both sides of the Irish Sea. But in 1919, no comparable party existed in Ireland or Britain to replicate the role played by the Bolsheviks in Russia.

Although a Communist Party had been established in 1921 in Britain, by 1926 it had already come under the disastrous influence of Stalinism and the perspective of “socialism in one country.” Stalin’s intervention in 1926 ensured the lessons of the 1921 “Black Friday” betrayal of the Triple Alliance by the union bureaucracy were ignored. Instead, the perspective “All Power to the [TUC] General Council” was imposed and the general strike was defeated. [8]

The revolutionary impulse that led to the formation of a Communist Party in Ireland was similarly aborted by the development of Stalinism.

Thereafter successive Irish governments were generally willing to do the bidding of the British. The Irish state integrated the Catholic Church into every aspect of its operations, and upheld all manner of social backwardness. Over the border Protestant Ulster, with its ferocious anti-Catholic discrimination, gerrymandered elections and paramilitary police, was correctly described as “John Bull’s political slum.”

Only in the late 1960s did these arrangements begin to unravel. As the Trotskyists of the Socialist Labour League pointed out, the primary concern dictating the British Labour government’s dispatch of thousands of troops to the North in 1969 was not geo-political, but the threat of a powerful working class movement uniting across the line of partition, breaking up the sectarian Orange state and posing a revolutionary challenge to capitalist rule in Ireland and Britain.

This occurred during a new period of immense revolutionary struggles by the working masses globally, which rocked all the major imperialist powers. In Britain, the class struggle escalated to an intensity greater than between 1919 and 1926.

Knox opposes this approach, arguing that partition was, above all, shaped by Britain’s geo-political concerns relating to Ireland.

Such concerns, of course, are real. Ireland has for centuries been a strategic location for British war planners, seeking to secure shipping lanes to the British mainland while preventing it becoming a launch-pad for invasion from the west. However, when presented with power, the Irish bourgeoisie repeatedly proved its willingness to succumb to the interests of its imperialist hegemon in these matters.

Under the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, the South’s main ports—known as the “treaty ports”—were made available to the Royal Navy. When the British government finally agreed to hand them back in 1938 it was not long before the Irish government, with the outbreak of World War II and the British/US need to develop Northern Ireland as a key military outpost, quietly allowed Allied overflights and interned German prisoners of war.

During the Cold War, Northern Ireland again played a critical role in NATO’s war plans against the Soviet Union. Although Ireland refused to formally join NATO, the military alliance was, as Knox himself admits, reliant on Irish radar support. More recently, Shannon airport became an important stopover for NATO and CIA rendition flights. All these examples show to the extent to which claims of Irish neutrality are a hoax—and have been for decades. Rather what is always characterised by the actions of successive Irish governments is the continual bending of the knee to the strongest imperialist power.

Once upon a time this was undoubtedly in the direction of British imperialism, but now the Irish bourgeoisie is pulled between reliance on its former colonial master and agricultural export market Britain, the major destination of its industrial exports, the European Union and the largest source of external investment, the United States.

The real issue behind our disagreement with Knox is over the bankrupt perspective of Irish nationalism, versus the struggle for socialist

internationalism. It is over to which social force workers in Ireland should orient, facing, as they do, an unrelenting assault on their living standards and a breakdown of European and world capitalism, of which Brexit and the revived political crisis in Northern Ireland are an expression.

Should they seek alliances with one or other imperialist power, or with the international working class, including its British contingent, on a perspective of world socialist revolution? Should they follow the map of geopolitics, or that of the class struggle?

Knox’s view is the former—and this is the significance of his uncritical, if not glowing, references to the EU, despite Irish workers’ recent experience with the EU-led “troika” of the European Central Bank, the IMF and the European Council which imposed billions of austerity cuts on social spending.

Knox rests his forlorn hopes on “an Ireland bristling with EU rockets and air defences” as a means of protecting the Irish economy from the pressure of its former British hegemon. Under conditions of intense instability and growing inter-imperialist rivalry, with, moreover, the future status of the Northern Ireland border under Brexit entirely unresolved, such harebrained notions resolve to a modest proposal for war between Britain and the EU!

In opposition to Knox’s economic nationalism and politics reduced to imperialist intrigue, we insist that workers in Ireland, in Britain, in Europe and internationally must unite against a common enemy to end all national divisions through social revolution. This perspective must find political expression through the establishment of an Irish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which the formation of the Socialist Equality Group is a vital step towards accomplishing.

*Concluded*

#### **References/further reading:**

5: One hundred years since Ireland’s Easter Rising—Part One, Jordan Shilton, posted on 26 March 2016

6. For example: Irish Soviets 1919-23, Robert Nielsen, posted on 8 October 2012.

7. Simon Webb, *1919: Britain’s Year of Revolution*, Pen and Sword History (2016), Kindle location 578.

8. Stalin, Trotsky and the 1926 British General strike, Part Three, Chris Marsden, posted 30 December 2008.



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