

Biden’s “Irish roots” and the attack on migrants

Tom Mackaman

21 April 2023

US President Joe Biden recently concluded a four-day trip to Ireland to mark the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. Supposedly meant to contain “the Troubles” between Protestants and Catholics, the Agreement actually codified and perpetuated the region’s sectarian division, the better to divide and exploit its working class.

The Agreement is now unraveling under the pressure of sectarian and national political cliques backed variously by the British, European, American, and Irish ruling classes, an outcome predicted by the *World Socialist Web Site* 25 years ago. It seems that even the White House had dim hopes for Biden’s effort to “patch up relations between the UK and the EU,” as his “time in Northern Ireland was kept as short as possible”—only 15 hours on April 12, according to one account, the better half of which was spent in bed. Biden passed most of his time on the other side of the partitioned island’s border, in the Republic of Ireland.

There was little work to be done there either. Besides the ongoing attempt to dragoon this traditionally anti-imperialist people into the NATO war machine, the tour’s purpose, as was widely acknowledged in the US media, was to prepare public opinion for the announcement that Biden will seek reelection in 2024. More specifically, the trip was meant to dust off Biden’s credentials as a man of the people, “Joe from Scranton,” whose blue-collar roots in Pennsylvania trace back to Ireland—in other words, to push a counter-narrative to his reputation as “the Senator from Du Pont,” a Delaware career politician who has spent a half-century in Washington doing the bidding of the corporations.

The US media, as ever, could be counted on to play its role. The press corps followed the president through the Irish countryside raising hymns to his “immigrant heritage.” The *New York Times* took the lead, authoring several thinly disguised campaign advertisements. One began in the following, maudlin terms:

President Biden climbed the stone stairs of an ancient castle in the Republic of Ireland on Wednesday and paused to look out toward an iron-gray Irish Sea, where his maternal great-great-great grandfather set sail for America in 1849...

In another, one could all but hear the pipes calling from glen to glen:

In front of St. Muredach’s Cathedral on the banks of the River Moy in Ballina, the town where his ancestral Irish relatives came from, President Biden drew from his family story to share a message of hope and optimism with the people of Ireland and to the rest of the world — a message that could fuel a final presidential campaign.

And so president and press traveled between castle and cathedral, issuing forth panegyrics to the “American dream” of immigrant mobility that Biden supposedly embodies. Meanwhile, back in America, hundreds of thousands of immigrants remained jailed in concentrations camps that Biden oversees, a gulag that features the forced separation of parents from children. The *Times*’ coverage in Ireland maintained a discreet silence over this aspect of the “American immigrant experience.”

The *Times* prudently left actual history alone, as well. To really study the Irish immigrant experience is to learn about social and political oppression under capitalism. It is a history that holds up a mirror to the present, into which Biden and the American media would prefer not peer.

Immigration, migration—in short, the mass movement of people—has been integral to all modern history. At its heart, it is a centuries-long story of the dispossession of the rural poor from the land, and their conversion to wage labor, an outcome achieved through the penetration of the capitalist market and attendant shocks such as war, famine, depression, and disease. It is a history that stretches from the enclosure of the common lands in 17th century England to the 500 million-strong migration of Chinese peasants from farm to city over the past few decades—to the Central Americans, Caribbeans, and others imprisoned today in America’s sprawling “immigration detention system.”

Ireland holds a special place in this history. It was among the first countries to be colonized (in early modern history) as England embarked on the path of capitalist development from the 1600s on—especially after the Act of Union in 1800, which imposed “free trade” on Ireland, devastating its rural manufacturing and repositioning it as England’s agricultural periphery, dominated by landlordism. “The Union delivered the death blow” to Irish industry,” Marx later observed.

Then, in the 1840s, Ireland was among the first nations to suffer a *modern* famine—that is, one created largely by the market and enforced by the state. This propelled the world’s first massive, crisis-provoked emigration, for which North America was the primary destination. During the potato blight of the 1840s and early 1850s, out of a population of upwards of 8 million, 1 million Irish died of starvation and disease, and another 2 million emigrated.

The potato, the humble tuber that triggered Ireland’s disaster, was itself critical to the primitive stage of capitalist accumulation. A New World crop heavily cultivated in the Inca Empire of the Andes, the potato was returned to Europe by the Spanish conquerors. Landlords learned it could fill up peasant stomachs, and that in this way more land could be turned over to agricultural production for cash in the emerging global capitalist market. Peasants resisted the food at first, most famously in Russia, where riots against its forced introduction occurred in 1834 and again in the early 1840s. But smallholders and tenants, as in Ireland, soon enough began to cultivate the crop, which could feed families while leaving aside land for market purposes.

The Inca cultivated thousands of varieties of potato. But the plant’s genetic diversity narrowed in Europe, and still more in Ireland, where a

few types, notably the “Irish lumper,” dominated. Lack of diversity helped ensure that when the 1840s brought to Ireland *phytophthora infestans*, the scientific name of the fungus that caused the blight, it wiped out nearly the entire crop, threatening starvation for Ireland’s cottiers, tenants, and laborers. Potatoes rotted in their stores and in the ground.

A Vermont traveler in Ireland in those years, Asenath Nicholson, reported testimony she had heard from Irish laborers over “the curse” of the potato. They had told her that “the landholder sees we can live and work hard on [potatoes], he grinds us down in our wages, and then despises us because we are ignorant and ragged.” Nicholson captured this sentiment in verse:

*'Let darkness and the shadow
of death stain that day when
first the potatoe was planted
in this green isle of the sea*

—“Shades of Ireland” (1850)

Like all the famines that have followed Ireland’s, this was not just a natural disaster. There was in fact plenty of food. It was simply that the Irish poor could not afford it. Among those who starved, or died of famine-caused disease, the great majority were “the smallest farmers and labourers who lacked the purchasing power to command alternative food supplies at prevailing prices,” as one historian put it.

While the poor starved, Ireland continued to export great quantities of food, the best of it bound for the tables of England’s aristocrats and capitalists. In 1847, over 800,000 gallons of butter, and 9,992 calves for veal, were exported across the Irish Sea. Some historians, looking at port records, believe that food exports from Irish ports actually *increased* during the famine. But rather than returning the food to the countryside and distributing it, the British military was deployed to protect the ports’ warehouses from the starving.

Like today’s immigrants fleeing Central America to El Norte, or those fleeing Africa across the Mediterranean to Europe, the Irish were blamed for the crisis inflicted on them.

Sir Charles Trevelyan, who oversaw the British government’s response to the Famine, thought that the problem arose from the “character of the people” and worried assistance would make them “habitually dependent on Government.” The *Times* of London viewed the potato blight as “a blessing.” It would help the Irish peasants learn “steadiness, regularity, and perseverance.” British Prime Minister Peel suspected “exaggeration and inaccuracy” in the reports of mass death coming from the neighboring island.

For his part, Prince George, Duke of Cambridge, was not worried. He advised the Irish peasants that “rotten potatoes and sea-weed, or even grass, properly mixed, [have] afforded a very wholesome and nutritious food.” After all, he said in 1846, “Irishmen could live upon anything.”

Prince George, who himself was not known to skip many meals, was wrong. There were probably 8.5 million Irish before the famine. The population, still only 7 million, never recovered. Hundreds of thousands emigrated to the US on “coffin ships,” frequently rife with typhus, then labelled “ship fever.” Like the Central Americans hounded and arrested at the American border today, the 1840s Irish were refugees.

In 1846, Peel used the Famine as a motivation to repeal the Corn Laws, which had protected Britain’s landed gentry from foreign competition, artificially elevating bread prices. This measure, a concession to the mass working class Chartist movement, provided no short-term relief to the Irish. Its result in the longer run was to ensure that Ireland’s corn (grain) production was “deprived of the English market now, as by the Act of Union [it had been] deprived of its own,” further impoverishing the

island.

The exodus of “emigrants and exiles” as historian Kerby Miller calls the great Irish emigration, began before the Famine, first with Protestants from Ulster—later called “Scots Irish” in American English—and continued for decades after. Between the Famine and the Great Depression, emigration “claimed more than half of each rising generation,” writes Patricia Lysaght. Among them, evidently, were some of Biden’s ancestors who settled in Scranton.

In the US, the Irish came in at the bottom of the industrial heap. Bloody anti-Catholic riots broke out, most notably in Philadelphia in 1844, which was only quelled by 1,000 state militia. The newcomers were also subject to the first great anti-immigrant political movement. This was the American or “Know-Nothing” Party, which obscured the burning labor question of the day—slavery—behind the veil of anti-immigrant politics, much as today’s politicians, Democratic as well as Republican, employ anti-immigrant politics to suppress the most basic reality facing workers today—that the working class is an international class, that labor knows no borders.

Abraham Lincoln refused to support the American Party. In 1855, at the peak of nativism’s popularity, he wrote to Joshua Speed:

As a nation, we began by declaring that “all men are created equal.” We now practically read it “all men are created equal, except negroes.” When the Know-Nothings get control it will read all men are created equal except negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics.' When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.

Lincoln was swimming against a strong current. The population in the northern states was heavily composed of small farmers and shopkeepers. For these middling types, independence had a literal meaning: they had no masters, a word that came to be replaced by the neologism “boss,” derived from Dutch. This helps explain both the hatred with which northerners viewed slavery, and the common view that wage labor—then still relatively marginal in the economy—was only a temporary status. As Lincoln put it in an 1859 speech in Milwaukee,

The prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land, for himself; then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him.... If any continue through life in the condition of the hired laborer, it is not the fault of the system, but because of either a dependent nature which prefers it, or improvidence, folly, or singular misfortune.

With such thinking it was a deceptive step—though one Lincoln refused to take—to progress from blaming the individual for remaining a wage worker, to blaming an entire group, the Irish, for their own poverty.

In the world of the antebellum, Lincoln’s thinking seemed plausible—indeed, he himself embodied it, rising from grinding frontier poverty to the presidency, and with only a few years of formal education. Yet already by the 1850s, the development of American capitalism meant that there would be a few who would own a great deal, and many who could own nothing at all. The Irish arrived, as a rule, without any wealth and, as opposed to the contemporaneous mass German immigration, without marketable skills, except their capacity for backbreaking labor.

The majority of the Irish found their way to the hardest and lowest-paid forms of labor: longshoring, canal digging, track laying, and laboring positions in coal mines.

Some Democrats in the North, recognizing what would today be called a “wedge issue,” stepped forward to present themselves as the defenders of the Irish, and the Catholic Church. In reality, the Democratic Party had little to offer the immigrants other than the negative logic of the two-party system. The antagonists of the Irish, such as the crusading Protestants and the emerging industrial capitalists, tended to be in “the other” party: the Whigs, the Know-Nothings, and then the Republicans. This, along with forms of patronage from “city machines” like New York’s Tammany Hall, was enough to draw many Irish into the Democratic Party.

The paradox was that the Democratic Party was dominated by the southern slavocracy. There could be no shared interest between poor Irish workers and these aristocrats, whose spokesmen condemned northern workers as “greasy mechanics and mudsills,” and who resembled more than any other section of American society the landed aristocrats of Ireland. To consecrate the inter-regional marriage, the Democratic Party’s northern wing—politicians and press alike—promoted vicious anti-black racism. The economic oppression of the Irish, combined with Democrats’ promotion of racist politics, prepared the climate for the infamous New York City draft riots during the Civil War, an explosion of July 1863 that targeted anything associated with free blacks and the abolitionist movement.

The riots were episodic, and many other Irish immigrants opposed slavery and fought for the Union in the Civil War. But the immigrants’ antebellum experience with American politics predicted a longer-term problem—the subordination of the working class to the capitalist Democratic Party, a history that Biden, in his appeals in Ireland to his immigrant and “working class roots,” would continue.

The American two-party system has never been able to satisfy the needs of the working class. This was demonstrated in dramatic fashion not long after the Civil War, as Karl Marx had predicted.

The war gave birth to a new society, in the North as well as the South. The rapid development of industry sharpened the class divisions that, with the mass Irish immigration of the 1840s, had only begun to come into relief. The catalyst of it all was coal. Demand reached new heights, growing the fortunes of the owners and the ranks of the coal miners. This is why Scranton, where Biden’s ancestors settled, attracted many Irish immigrants. Founded in 1856 with the anthracite coal industry already a few decades old, Scranton became the region’s largest city and home to the early American iron industry.

A dozen years after Lincoln’s assassination, the coal region provided an arena for some of the most violent episodes of the class struggle, including the traumatic events of 1877. That year, 20 Irish workers were hanged in the anthracite region, framed up by the coal bosses as members of a secret society called the Molly Maguires. Ten were executed on a single day, Black Thursday, June 21, 1877. Two days later, several Irish laborers were gunned down in Scranton, which was in the midst of a general strike, part of the vast working class rebellion associated with the Great Railroad Strike.

If Biden or the writers for the *New York Times* know anything of this history, it is little wonder that they leave it aside in favor of semi-mystical talk about “hope” and “perseverance.” Those factors that cause immigration today are not so different than those that brought the Irish immigration of the 19th century—war, famine, disease, and persecution born of capitalism. Then as now, politicians use anti-immigrant politics to obscure the fundamental problems of society, which now, far more than even the 1840s, are global in nature.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:



wsws.org/contact