



THE “LEGACY” OF JAMES CONNOLLY

By Liam McNulty

As one study of James Connolly poetically put it, any attempts to discuss the legacy of Ireland's premier Marxist revolutionary are complicated by the fact that Connolly has become “a vessel into which each man can pour his dream.”

One remarkable thing about these “dreams”, however, is that many neglect what is central and consistent about Connolly – his class-based opposition to capitalism, including his innovative theories and practice of industrial unionism – and often highlight that which is weaker, less stable or more transient in this thinking: the complicated and sometimes ambiguous relationship of his Marxism to Irish history and republicanism, his analysis of Unionism or his attitude towards Catholicism.

Revolutionary industrial unionism

This is unfortunate. Connolly's contemporary, the Belfast-born future leader of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) Arthur McManus, wrote that Connolly was “a man whose whole life was unquestionably devoted very definitely to work in, and on behalf of, the revolutionary working-class movement [and] whose activities had been so essentially working class, as to have him recognised in many lands as a great revolutionary leader of working class struggle.”

Influenced by the US socialist Daniel De Leon, Connolly embraced a form of revolutionary industrial unionism generates which saw organisation at the workplace level as the scaffolding of the future Workers' Republic.

From his time as an IWW organiser in New York, he learned firsthand the weakness of craft unionism and its capacity to disorganise the working class as a whole. He drew the conclusion that

industrial unionism was not just a better form of trade unionism but could generate the forms of solidarity necessary for socialism.

Then, inspired by Larkin's efforts in building the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), Connolly developed a theory of the “sympathetic strike” as form of class struggle based upon an ethic of solidarity, and of reciprocal rights and duties, which creates “a higher conception of mutual life.”

And then, in the wake of the ITGWU's defeat in the Dublin Lock-Out of 1913-14, Connolly also developed a critique of bureaucratic industrial unionism in the British labour movement. From around 1910 onwards, Connolly saw that in Great Britain “amalgamations and federations are being carried out in the main by officials absolutely destitute of the revolutionary spirit,” reinforcing “the temper and spirit of the sectionalism those organisations were meant to destroy.” This he said, was “the old, cold wine of Craft Unionism” being poured into “the new bottles of industrial organisation.”

Much of this innovative and insightful contribution to socialist thinking is absent in the “Connollys” which have followed his death.

Claiming Connolly for Catholicism

Rather, until the 1960s, it was Connolly's nationalism which provided the central reference point, owing in no small part to the dramatic events of his martyrdom as a leader of the 1916 Easter Rising.

Indeed, such was the myth that developed around Connolly that he was subject, in the words of an early biographer, Desmond Ryan, to the “partisan claims on his corpse” by Catholics, republicans and reformist Labourites. Latterly, we can add, too, Stalinists, Trotskyists and populist left-republicans.

The process began early, within a year of Connolly's death, with the publication of *James Connolly: A Study of his Work* by “Gerald O'Connor” (the pen-name of Gaelic League activist Seán Mac Giollarnáth), downplaying the importance of Connolly's socialism to his vision of an independent Ireland.

A few years later, in 1920, Éamon de Valera, then President of the revolutionary Irish Republic, addressed a conference of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and invoked the name of Connolly, “whom many of you knew personally”, on account of Connolly's involvement in the American labour movement. Though Connolly may have been a socialist, stated De Valera: “Much of what the modern socialist is groping after was already a fact in the social system of ancient Ireland”.

That same year, a more explicit attempt was made to claim Connolly for Catholicism. A priest, Reverend Coffey, wrote a series of articles on Connolly in the *Catholic Bulletin*. Downplaying Connolly's Marxism, Coffey sought to claim him for the principles of Catholic social teaching, based on the teachings of Pope Leo XIII in his 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1891) and developed by writers such as G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. Viewing property as a fundamental right, these thinkers saw capitalism and socialism as equally flawed. Instead, they favoured co-operatives and small businesses and, in Belloc's case, looked backwards to an idealised view of the guilds of the Middle Ages. A similar attempt was made in 1921 by Rev Lambert McKenna's *The Social Teaching of James Connolly*, published by the Catholic Truth Society.

In 1924, even Connolly's old comrade Constance Markievicz, by then an abstentionist Sinn Féin TD, conceded that Connolly was a socialist but said that meant only the “application of the

social principle which underlay the Brehon laws of our ancestors”. Though Connolly stood for socialism, she wrote, “it was the socialism of James Connolly and of nobody else”.

This downplays the extent to which Connolly was formed in the context of an international movement. His particular synthesis of socialist propaganda, industrial unionism, labour representation and insurrectionism may have been unique, but its elements owed much to Hyndman, De Leon, Hardie and others.

These attempts accentuate two particular sides of Connolly – his attempt to construe socialism as a modern-day realisation of an extinct communal Gaelic social order and his denial that socialism necessitates any fundamental philosophical break with religion – to the point that they can rightly be dismissed as tendentious caricatures.

What must be admitted, however, is that Connolly's thought developed over time, often in contradictory ways. Much of his writing was agitational, geared towards very specific audiences or controversies which are not always obvious without an understanding of the context. Moreover, there are some real ambiguities in his thinking, make it possible to construct more or less plausible and mutually contradictory Connollys by freezing particular elements in time, cherry-picking quotes or accentuating themes in a partial manner.

The lack of any definite Collective Works of Connolly, and the sloppy or dishonest way that his writings have been published in the past, only add to the problem. Workers' Liberty is redressing this, with its “Unexpurgated Connolly” series. Previous efforts along similar lines have been made by Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh and Red Banner,

continued on page 12,13, 14 →

and Irish historian Conor McCabe is currently rendering a tremendous service by collating a complete picture of Connolly's writings from the original sources.

Labourism

Setting aside the more outlandish claims on Connolly, it is perhaps the distortions with the most grains of truth which are the more deceptive.

The Irish Labour Party, for example, is always quick to trace its lineage to the motion moved by Connolly at the 1912 conference of the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) "that the independent representation of labour upon all public boards be, and is hereby included among the objectives of this congress." Congress's political wing subsequently evolved into the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (ILPTUC), which became simply "the Irish Labour Party" in 1930.

Former Labour Party TD Joanna Tuffy went so far as to say that it was Connolly's "life's work to set up such a party." What that elides, however, is Labour's disavowal of the Workers' Republic (i.e. of Connolly's true life's work) in 1939, at the urging of the Catholic hierarchy operating through the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), its eschewing of left-wing radicalism and its willingness to prop up governments led by Ireland's right-wing party Fine Gael. Such factors led American historian Emmet Larkin to describe it, with some justice, in 1964 as "the most opportunistically conservative Labour Party anywhere in the known world."

Left-republicanism

One other key way that Connolly has been instrumentalised in the twentieth century is to legitimate a turn to social agitation, and away from purely apolitical militarism, on behalf of various movements within Irish republicanism.

Some of this builds on real ambiguities in Connolly's thought. Connolly's famous phrase that "The Cause of Ireland is the Cause of Labour, the Cause of Labour is the Cause of Ireland" was intended to mean that the national revolution and the social revolution would flow together, under the leadership of the Irish working class.

This was because, in Connolly's view, the conquest of Ireland was political and it was social; capitalism was essentially a foreign imposition which destroyed an old communistic Gaelic social order and socialism was seen as a return, but on a higher material level, of the communal way of life. Added to this, we find, especially in Connolly's earlier writings such as *Erin's Hope*, the view that capitalism in Ireland was impossible because it did not have the ability to produce domestic industry or agriculture in the context of global markets. Thus, if nationalists were consistent they would throw their lot in with the working-class to uproot capitalism.

As Sean Matgamna [has argued](#): "Connolly meant to convince revolutionary nationalists to become social-

ists; but this identification of socialism with 'complete' national freedom, the equation of the degree of capitalist rule with the degree of English rule, made it quite plausible later to give 'socialism' meanings other than working-class emancipation."

This blurring of the lines between proletarian socialism and "consistent" republicanism was evident in the first attempt to construct a Connolly-inspired form of populist left-republicanism.

This was inaugurated in the Irish Civil War, when one anti-Treaty leader, Liam Mellows, denounced the "stake in the country" people who backed the Treaty. He called on the anti-Treaty forces to adopt a social programme to raise the urban and rural working-class and small peasantry behind its banner.

Mellows had been influenced by efforts of the young Communist Party of Ireland (CPI), who met with the Comintern's Mikhail Borodin in July 1922 in London. Borodin said of the anti-Treaty forces that it was "really laughable to fight the Free State on a sentimental plea." He asked of the anti-Treaty IRA: "What the hell do they want a Republic for?"

Though its thinking was reflected in Mellows's "Notes from Mountjoy", the Irish communists failed to persuade the IRA chief of staff, Liam Lynch, to adopt a social programme based on land redistribution and state ownership.

However, this was an essentially nationalist movement seeking to harness social agitation, land agitation, strikes, for its own purposes; as a sort of ballast for republicanism. It was not the same as the working class achieving independence in the process of its fight for socialism.

The IRA experimented, again, with social agitation in the early 1930s, forming a short-lived political party, Saor Éire, in 1931, which was soon banned.

In 1934, the left of the IRA tried again to form a party, and walked out when the proposal was narrowly defeated. The resultant Republican Congress was hobbled by a split from its very inception, with delegates dividing between Peadar O'Donnell, Frank Ryan and George Gilmore proposing for a populist cross-class "front" to form a "republic" and Roddy Connolly and Michael Price proposing a political party to fight for a "workers' republic."

Gilmore who was deeply involved in the project, described the Republican Congress as an effort to set "the republican-minded people of Ireland... on what can be called a Tone-Connolly approach to their emancipation."

Thus, the 20th century Connolly was fused with the 18th century bourgeois revolutionary Wolfe Tone; the implication being that Tone appealed to the "men of no property". Tone made that appeal, however, as a purely external adjunct to the bourgeois revolutionaries; not as the key revolutionary agent of social transformation. That is crucial, all-defining, difference.

The Republican Congress adopted

an inaugural statement:

"We believe that a republic of a united Ireland will never be achieved except through a struggle which uproots Capitalism on its way. We cannot conceive of a free Ireland with a subject working class; we cannot conceive of a subject Ireland with a free working class."

The latter is a paraphrase of Connolly. The first sentence, however, achieving a republic of a united Ireland "through a struggle which uproots Capitalism on its way" is confused. It places the united Ireland as the primary goal, and the struggle against capitalism as secondary, or as just the means to the end. The fundamental principle is, therefore, a nationalist one.

It is instructive, perhaps, to compare it to Connolly's statement in 1909, reflecting on the foundation of his Irish Socialist Republican Party in 1896: "When it was first initiated the word 'republic' was looked upon as a word to be only whispered among intimates ... The thought of revolution was the exclusive possession of a few remnants of the secret societies of a past generation, and was never mentioned by them except with heads closely together and eyes fearfully glancing around; the Socialists broke through this ridiculous secrecy, and in hundreds of speeches in the most public places of the metropolis, as well as in scores of thousands of pieces of literature scattered through the country, announced their purpose to muster all the forces of labour for a revolutionary reconstruction of society and the incidental destruction of the British Empire."

The "incidental destruction of the British Empire" is just that, incidental, or happening as a result of the mustering of "the forces of labour for a revolutionary reconstruction of society."

Stalinism

Since the publication of C. Desmond Greaves's biography of Connolly in the 1960s, Connolly's socialism has been more widely recognised.

As Peter Graham, a Trotskyist later involved in the armed left-republican group Saor Éire, recalled (in *Workers' Fight*, No. 7, June 1968), following the half-centenary of the Rising: "The writings of James Connolly, which prior to then had been read little, and then only by the older 'hands', began to be read more widely. The younger generation found through his writings that he was not quite as the Christian Brothers in school taught – 'only the 7th leader of 1916'. They found in his writings Connolly the revolutionary, the worker, the union organiser and Marxist."

However, Greaves assimilated Connolly into the Popular Frontist politics of the Communist Party of Great Britain. He was the main ideologist of the [Connolly Association](#), which the CPGB used to attract Irish workers in Britain to Stalinism by accommodating itself to bourgeois Irish nationalism.

The Stalinists had form with Connolly. The British Communists even went so

far as to publish a selection of Connolly's writings on the war in early 1941, at a time when Stalinist Russia (and therefore the CPGB) was in an alliance with Nazi Germany. The collection did not, however, remain in print for very long. The Nazis invaded Russia on 22 June 1941 and soon afterwards the book was pulled by its publisher, Lawrence & Wishart, as the Stalinists rolled full square behind Churchill.

Though much more scholarly, and including valuable primary research, Greaves's influential biography *The Life and Times of James Connolly* (1961) was nevertheless part and parcel of the CP ideological project. As a national hero in Ireland, Connolly was a useful vessel for transmitting "Marxism-Leninism" into Ireland, even at the expense of a proper understanding of his thought.

These writings were hugely influential, however, in the turn in republican politics in the 1960s. Greaves headed the Connolly Association, linked to the CPGB, and Association members Anthony Coughlan and Roy Johnston would become close with the leadership of the IRA around Cathal Goulding.

This sets the stage for the third attempt by republicans – the first being Mellows and the second the efforts of O'Donnell and Gilmore in the 1930s – to use Connolly to legitimate a turn away from narrow militarism towards social agitation.

In 1969, at the Easter commemoration, Goulding said: "today there is a place in our organisation for every man who believes in the goal of Connolly, the goal of the Workers' Republic."

As well as Greaves, Gilmore made a return, arguing in his mid-60s pamphlet "Labour and the Republican Movement" that "if there is to be any future for the Irish people as a free people, it must depend upon a return by organised Labour to the politics of James Connolly."

A review appeared in May 1967 in *Irish Militant*, which was the paper of the Irish Workers Group. In it, the pointed comment was made: "Being a republican first and a socialist second, he concludes that Republicanism, to succeed, needs Labour. No doubt this is true: but for us the question must be, does the working class need Republicanism?"

Official and Provisional IRA

It was these attempts to embrace wider social agitation and political action which fed into the famous split in 1969/70 between the Official IRA and the Provisionals.

Predictably, Connolly was used to justify the politicisation of what become the Officials. Not that the Provos would give Connolly up, however. Even the most explicit anti-communists, Daithí O'Connell and Seán Mac Stíofáin, would claim Connolly. They were at pains, like Markievicz fifty years before, to argue his socialism was specifically of the Irish homegrown variety.

Thus, O'Connell argued: "Those who propagate an alien social philosophy are doing a disservice to the Irish nation. They forget that within Ireland, North and South, are the brains and talent to fashion a society suitable for our own people. Let us never forget that James Connolly admired Tone because he imitated nobody; let us be true disciples of Connolly by striving for the originality of thought which he himself attained in his day. Connolly found his inspiration in the Republican philosophy."

The implication is, of course, that a German philosopher by the name of Karl Marx had nothing to do with Connolly.

Provisional Sinn Féin had a policy of Éire Nua, New Ireland, based on a hodgepodge of nationalisation, co-operatives and Catholic social credit theory. It nodded to the pantheon of Wolfe Tone, James Fintan Lalor, James Connolly and Patrick Pearse, and commented that: "It is significant that all these men, though influenced by the revolutionary movements of their times, visualised for a free Ireland a form of society based in its fundamentals on the old Gaelic system – an economy of owner workers grouped into co-operatives for particular functions of agriculture and industry."

Connolly's attempts to root Marxism in an Irish soil, therefore, are used by Irish republicans to create a particularly "indigenous" species of social republicanism without reference to Marxist socialism or any other "foreign" influences.

A crucial context for the Provisionals' attempt to create a specifically Irish "socialism" was, of course, the increasing embrace of USSR Stalinism by the Officials and their political wing, Sinn Féin – the Workers' Party (latterly just the Workers' Party).

The Officials' Easter statement of 1975 assured its imprisoned supporters that they "may draw comfort from the knowledge that we grow in strength, and remain committed to the ideals of Tone and Connolly." In the very same issue of *The United Irishman* paper which the statement appears, it is also heralded that in Eastern Bloc Romania poverty was now "only a memory".

The party's 1978 publication *The Irish Industrial Revolution*, with its emphasis on developing the state sector and central planning, was promoted as "[t]he first study of its kind since James Connolly's *Labour in Irish History*."

As the Introduction states, it "sets forth a plan for the construction of a modern urban society, resting on a powerful industrial base", which is "to be built by the application of the hand and brain of the Irish working class, aided by modern technology and working through the form of State companies, to the processing of our great natural resources, our land, forests, mines, gas and oil."

In its promotion of top-down state-led economic development, it owed much more to Stalin than to Connolly.

The Officials would have been better to recall Connolly's famous warning that "state ownership and control is not necessarily Socialism – if it were, then the Army, the Navy, the Police, the Judges, the Gaolers, the Informers, and the Hangmen, all would all be Socialist functionaries, as they are State officials."

Probably, however, in enthusiastically welcoming East Germany's industrial development, the Officials did indeed see the Stasi as an organisation of Socialist functionaries.

Connolly and the Protestant workers

Next, there is the issue of Connolly and the Protestant working class. It is undoubtedly the case that Connolly hoped for the unity of the Catholic and Protestant working-class. In 1898, he proclaimed that: "To keep the people of Ireland, and especially the workers, divided is the great object of all our politicians, Home Ruler or Unionist. And our great object in this journal [the first iteration of the *Workers' Republic*] will be to unite the workers and to bury, in one common grave, the religious hatreds, the provincial jealousies and mutual distrusts upon which oppression has so long depended for security."

The problem, as ever, is how. First of all, Connolly hoped that common economic struggle would overcome the division in the working-class. The episodic unity of Catholic and Protestant workers won by Larkin in the 1907 dockers' and carters' strike in Belfast provided a sketch of what this would look like, and Connolly picked up the theme by organising a Non-Sectarian Labour Band for rallies in 1911 and 1912.

The second iteration of Connolly's position was that the settlement of the Home Rule issue would, finally, remove a major source of working-class division, paving the way for the development of class politics. Writing in a series of articles between March and May 1911 in the Glasgow ILP newspaper *Forward*, Connolly wrote that the "question of Home Government, the professional advocacy of it, and the professional opposition to it is the greatest asset in the hands of reaction in Ireland, the never-failing decoy to lure the workers into the bogs of religious hatreds and social stagnation." With Home Rule granted, it would "throw the Irish people back upon their own resources, make them realise that the causes of poverty, of lack of progress, of arrested civic and national development, are then to be sought for within and not without ..."

It was on the basis of this analysis that Connolly urged the creation of an Irish Labour Party. As "Socialists we are Home Rulers," he wrote, "but that on the day the Home Rule Government goes into power, the Socialist movement in Ireland will go into Opposition."

The mass Unionist opposition to Home Rule from 1912 onwards demolished this optimistic scenario. Connolly's understanding of the nature of

Unionism significantly underestimated its roots, its strength, its power. Connolly saw Unionism as the doomed ideology of the declining landowning class. "A real Socialist movement cannot be built by temporising in front of a dying cause as that of the Orange ascendancy," he wrote as late as August 1913, "even though in the paroxysms of its death struggle it assumes the appearance of health."

Underpinning this view was Connolly's claim that "there is no economic class in Ireland today whose interests as a class are bound up with the Union", implying that Unionist resistance to Home Rule was simply an anachronism. Its roots, he implied, were therefore shallow: "Only the force of religious bigotry", Connolly argued, "remains as an asset to Unionism."

As the British government considered partition, Connolly took the view – common to the Irish labour movement – that no Home Rule would be preferable to Home Rule with partition. At the same time, he dismissed the "wooden guns of Ulster" and even suggested, at one point, that the Liberal Government "use its armed forces to make an ascendancy clique beaten at the polls recognise the machinery of the law", i.e. impose Home Rule by force. That was the third iteration.

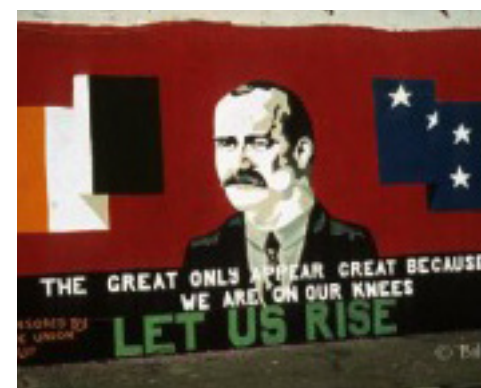
Fourthly, in embarking on the Easter Rising, Connolly hoped that an intensification of nationalist struggle would culminate in a political and socially free Ireland, for the "cause of labour is the cause of Ireland, the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour." The Protestants, as the largest component of "labour" on the island of Ireland, were conspicuously absent as a factor.

This overview has, necessarily, been schematic. These positions evolved, and overlapped, in response to fast-moving events. Subsequent "Connollys", however, have been constructed by a pick and mix method of choosing the iteration of Connolly's views most consistent with the author's viewpoint.

For Paul Bew, Henry Patterson, and Peter Gibbon – aligned with the Workers Party – Connolly's analysis of Unionism represented a crude Second International-era understanding of ideology as mere manipulation and must be thrown over completely in favour of an approach informed by French Stalinist Louis Althusser.

The Trotskyist movement in Ireland, however, has retained a positive view of Connolly.

For the late Peter Hadden, the Socialist Party of Ireland's main theorist in the North, for instance, the emphasis was very much on the "first" Connolly: "The struggle to unite Catholic and Protestant workers against sectarianism and the bosses remains a central task for socialists in Northern Ireland." Hadden argued that: "All his political life, James Connolly courageously sought to unite Catholic and Protestant workers, and workers of no religion, to resist the bosses, the bigots and imperialism,



and to fight for socialism." (*Socialism Today* 102, July-August 2006).

Though it stands for a 32-county socialist republic, a similar approach is often taken more recently by the Socialist Workers' Network (formerly the SWP) and its wider umbrella group People Before Profit (PBP) who in elections, in Eamonn McCann's words, stand for "neither Orange nor Green" and focus on "bread and butter issues" of water charges or cuts to public services.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the Irish Republic Socialist Party (IRSP), has attacked both the SWP and the Socialist Party for "economism", citing none other than Connolly as an authority.

Gerry Ruddy, in a 2007 polemic against McCann, wrote that the SWP "has consistently downplayed the importance of the anti-imperialist and national liberation struggle in Irish politics. This trait they share with the Socialist Party. Both parties yearn for the 'normalisation' of the class struggle – a classic economism that Lenin, Trotsky, Connolly and [IRSP founder Seamus] Costello consistently attacked."

Particularly illustrative of our point, however, is the case of Michael Farrell who managed to combine two contradictory "Connollys" in relatively quick succession.

Farrell was the leading spirit of People's Democracy (the left-wing student-based wing of the Civil Rights Movement which moved, via critical support for the Provisional IRA, towards the "Mandelite" Fourth International). In 1970 he wrote a pamphlet, *The Struggle in the North*, opening with two quotes from Connolly.

He writes that the "resistance of the Protestant workers will be hard to break down but at the moment they are drifting in a vacuum, a prey to Fascism, but at the same time more receptive to socialism than ever before because their allegiance to the Unionist party is finally being destroyed." Continuing, Farrell argues that: "There is no point in trying to trick the Protestants. It must be made clear that imperialism is the root cause of the problems of Ireland, North and South. But these people can be won if they see that a Socialist Republic is not Rome Rule in disguise and if they are recruited to an organisation of genuine socialists fighting Green Tory gombeen men in the 26 Counties as vigorously as the Orange Tories in the North."

In its conclusion, Farrell calls for Catholic and Protestant workers "fighting the immediate battles of the



Workers' Liberty

& Solidarity

workers on both sides of the Border", culminating in the "fight for Connolly's Socialist Republic."

This contained a nod to the first Connolly, to "unite the workers and to bury, in one common grave, the religious hatreds", within an overarching emphasis on the final, 1916, Connolly.

However, by 1973, with even more shades of the pessimistic "third Connolly" (override the Protestants), Farrell was arguing in *The Battle for Algeria* the Protestants were a settler-garrison equivalent to Algerian colons and there was "no point appealing to them as a fellow-workers because they have no working-class consciousness."

After the experience of the 1974 Ulster Workers' Council (UWC) "strike", when Protestant workers brought down the short-lived power-sharing executive, People's Democracy warned of a loyalist takeover akin to the Nazi rise to power in Germany in 1933, and called for the "united strength of all anti-imperialist military organisations" to resist (*Unfree Citizen*, 9 June 1975).

This approach to Protestant workers as colons and fascists has been [criticised recently](#) by Kieran Allen of the Socialist Workers' Network who also bases part of his analysis, of course, on Connolly's efforts to unite workers across the sectarian divide.

War

Finally, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Connolly's anti-war writings have been invoked by supporters of Russia, proponents of the view that the war is an "inter-imperialist" conflict in which socialists cannot take sides and supporters of Ukraine's right to resist Russian imperialism.

Kieran Allen [writes](#) that the "invasion of Ukraine has unleashed a barrage of pro-war propaganda. Armchair generals urge greater NATO intervention and have little hesitancy in contemplating the prospect of nuclear war. They call for ever more sanctions on Russia, telling the population it is their patriotic duty to bear the costs."

"The parallels with World War One in 1914 are striking. Then and now it was the weaker imperial power than began a new era of global conflict..."

"In Ireland, James Connolly was the foremost opponent of that war. His first instinct was to challenge the propaganda of his own side and this meant opposing the Home Rule Party led by John Redmond... Connolly opposed the invasion of Belgium but indicated that it was used by Britain to justify its own imperial ambitions."

The implication is that, much like World War One, this is an inter-impe-

rialist conflict and that Connolly's focus on opposition to "the propaganda of his own side", or at least of the British side, is the correct one.

This has been [challenged](#) by Conor Kostick, of Independent Left, who argued, reasonably, that Connolly's position on the self-determination of small nations points towards the conclusion that "Connolly would be on the side of Ukraine's workers in their resistance to invasion, their willingness to use whatever weapons they can obtain and to fight alongside Zelenskyy, even while making the point that the fight would be more effective without neo-liberal policies holding it back."

On the subject of Ukraine taking arms from NATO, Kostick comments that "you should take advantage of divisions among imperial powers to get arms for the national movement of an oppressed nation" and emphasised "how far Connolly was prepared to go to get military assistance from Germany, whilst retaining his opposition to all empires including the German one."

Politically, on the issue of Ukraine, Kostick is undoubtedly correct, and Allen's use of Connolly's more general anti-war attitudes obscures the specific issues at play in the war in Ukraine.

What must be pointed out, however, is that Connolly had multiple and evol-

ving approaches to the First World War, not all of them politically useful as a basis for one's approach.

Initially, in August 1914, Connolly issued general anti-war propaganda, thundering against militarism and bemoaning the collapse of the Second International parties into mutually warring nationalities. Writing for a wider British socialist audience in *Forward*, the paper of the Glasgow Independent Labour Party (ILP), Connolly wrote that the consequence of socialists backing their 'own' side in the war was "that the socialist parties of the various countries mutually cancel each other, and that as a consequence socialism ceases to exist as a world force..."

Co-existing with this position was the view, expressed in his very earliest comments on the war in the *Irish Worker* on 8 August, that: "Should a German army land in Ireland tomorrow we should be perfectly justified in joining it if by doing so we could rid this country once and for all from its connection with the Brigand Empire that drags us unwillingly into this war."

Connolly did raise the slogan "We Serve Neither King Nor Kaiser" on the masthead of the *Irish Worker* and on a banner outside Liberty Hall, as Kostick points out. Nevertheless, Connolly did also pick a side in the war and [he picked Germany](#). His lesser-evilism was explicit: "the instinct of the slave to take sides with whoever is the enemy of his own particular slave-driver is a healthy instinct, and makes for freedom."

So far, so consistent with the idea that oppressed nationalities can exploit the differences between imperialist blocs in service of their own national liberation. However, Connolly went further. First of all, as Brian Hanley has argued, he "eulogised Germany as a modern, progressive state and ignored or played down the reactionary nature of German imperialism."

Moreover, he argued that the German Empire was "a homogenous empire of self-governing peoples" which contrasted favourably and contained "more of the possibilities of freedom and civilisation than" Britain's. This completely ignored Germany's colonial dependencies in Africa, and downplayed the German atrocities in Africa which the German Social Democrats had denounced.

In the *Workers' Republic*, Connolly published a gushing interview with the Kaiser by the pro-war German Social Democrat Anton Fendrich. In it, the Kaiser described the socialists as "splendid fellows" and Fendrich asserted of the German ruler that "there is no

doubt that he understands the aims of the Radical Left in parliament far better and has more sympathies for them than the world knows."

All of this undercuts the claim that Connolly merely took arms from Germany and offered no political support for the Central Powers.

The parallel with Connolly, then, is arguably not with those who take the principled position of combining support for Ukraine's right to arm itself while offering no positive support to NATO but of those who support both Ukraine and NATO against Russia.

Conclusion

The key point to get across, then, is that Connolly's legacy is a complex one. As an agitator and an organiser, his thought was action-oriented and evolved in response to events. He therefore bequeathed different fragments to different movements, especially due to the circumstances of his final months. An engagement with Connolly provides a dose of much-needed inspiration and is a guide to thinking rather than a source of ready-made answers, complete with a quote for every occasion.

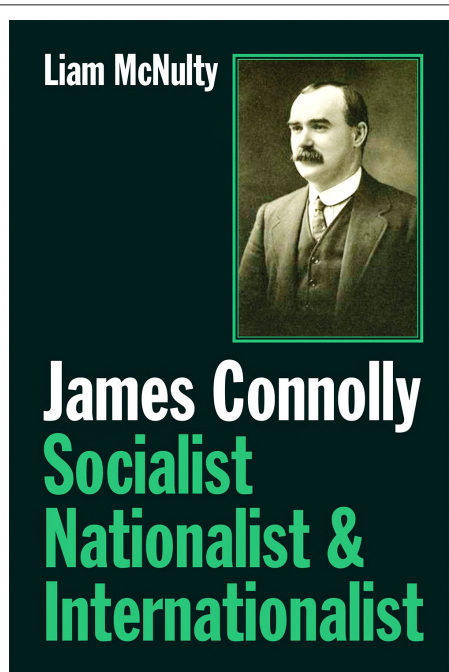
That is not to say, in closing, that all varieties of Connolly are equally true. Any account which obscures that Connolly was a socialist and a revolutionary Marxist, inspired by the international socialist and syndicalist movement, and not a narrowly Irish figure, is a distortion.

Similarly, Connolly was a remarkably eloquent propagandist for socialism and against the ills and evils of capitalism, not merely a social reformer or someone inspired by Catholic social teaching.

Indeed, the class struggle ran like a red thread through Connolly's life, as a socialist and a trade union organiser. Further, he based his vision of socialism on the class struggle, of creating instruments of struggle in the industrial union and ethics of solidarity that would prefigure the future Workers' Republic.

Finally, though Connolly's analysis of Unionism's grip on the Protestant working-class can be queried, his commitment to Irish self-determination and concern for the national question make it a stretch to claim him for an economic politics that ignores the issue of national division in favour of a narrower focus on trade union issues.

The task, as ever, is to combine workers' unity on the economic front with a democratic programme that can overcome national division. Connolly can help but the thinking is ours to do. □



This book discusses Connolly not just as an Irish hero, but traces how he was shaped by and responded to the international socialist and labour movement of his time.

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