

The Independent Workers' Union. Class, Nation and Oppositional labour Movements in Ireland from 1900 to the Celtic Tiger

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the rise of the Independent Workers' Union in Ireland, north and south, in relation to the bifurcation of trade unionism on the Island, from 1900 until the demise of so-called Celtic tiger in the early years of the twenty first century. It is argued that two competing ideological and political trajectories defined the major divisions in the Irish labour movement and where given added impetus with the formation of two separate states after 1920. One tradition was committed to an idea of a progressive British empire, while the other was born of a movement linking together trade union, class and national autonomy. A trade union with a long history and recent past, the IWU represents a labour movement formation whose tradition extends the latter: it is committed to developing forms of opposition to state and capital. If more subdued since the partition of the island, this tradition was reignited with the implosion of social partnership in the South and the rise of the new sectarianism in the north. Neo-liberalism, with its consequent assault upon labour and its various institutions more broadly, provided additional impetus to the creation of the IWU in 2004. The article also assesses its various alternative union and community organising strategies.

Keywords: Independent Workers' Union: historical divisions within Irish labour: Home Rule: Passive revolution: Strikes in Belfast 1919: Partition: Celtic Tiger: Sectarianism.

Introduction.

Unionist¹workmen who have so staunchly supported their leaders in the past [should] continue to bear themselves as men worthy of this great cause in which their whole future and that of the community is involved².

At present you spend your lives in sordid labour and have your abode in filthy slums; your children hunger and your masters say your bondage must endure forever. If you would come out of bondage yourself must forge the weapons and fight the grim battle³.

When a group of Irish trade unionists gathered at the Victoria Hotel in Cork city on 3rd April 2004 to form the Independent Workers Union (IWU), they would be making a clear declaration about the role and purpose of trade unionism not just in Ireland but more widely. Their argument would be that trade unions have distinct interests in representing the needs of the working class, that this presumes sustained opposition to the employer and that of necessity it requires a political engagement with the state, capital and the many working class constituencies throughout both jurisdictions on the island. They were stating their determination to build a new type

of labour organisation in Ireland. In fact they were identifying with what is a long, though until recently dormant, tradition in the Irish labour movement: the identification of class autonomy with a wider political, sometimes national, autonomy. This article considers the nature of the IWU, a union with a recent history and a long past, and its place in the traditions of Irish independent labour movement politics. Our argument is that the division of the Irish Labour movement in the early twentieth century took shape in the two states that developed after the partition of Ireland in 1920. This saw the consummation of two developments of social and political incorporation. One development depended upon the early incorporation of skilled (mostly) Protestant working class organisations that led to their support for the Northern Ireland state. This had been achieved in a number of ways as early as the formation of ostensible autonomous labour unions after 1900. The second development depended upon support for the new Irish state (the 'Free State') by the labour movement in the South.

The important point to note is that the rise of both states required an already divided working class and labour movement. This would necessarily ensure a weakened labour movement: in the north, sectarian social relations on which the statelet depended, required trade union support and this was guaranteed by the promise of rewards flowing from participation in the Empire. In the South, labour support arose from the promise of better times to come: after the country had 'caught up' of course. Yet it is important to remember that by the time of state formation the respective labour movements were already divided and led by the now dominant conservative forces. Trade union radicals throughout the country, including the insurrectionists, had been defeated by 1920. Indeed, and while it is not the over-riding focus of this chapter, we would argue that the division of the island of Ireland depended upon the division through defeat-incorporation of the working class and its institutions.

For the IWU, there would be no intention of seeking membership of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions nor was it interested in working within the then dominant Social Partnership arrangement established south of the border in 1987. For the IWU, working class quiescence was not to be equated with assent to a politics of shared interests with capital as understood by the accommodationist agenda of Social Partnership. If the IWU has a long lineage, why had it taken so long for the emergence of an opposition to what had become a dominant hegemonic tradition sporting its then headline success of Social Partnership and institutional accommodationist-quiescence in the South, and to the sclerosis of the labour movement in the North? To understand these failures North and South it is necessary to link them to the defeat of radical, often quite powerful, labour movement currents dating back to the period before and after the Partition of Ireland in 1920. Limitations of space prevent anything more than a broad sweep narrative in which we identify the formation of critical moments in the development of radical, and subordinate, labour traditions.

Before assessing the significance of the IWU in the Republic of Ireland during and after the debacle of Social Partnership, together with the political basis of Social Partnership, we trace the persistence of two traditions defined specifically by labour's relationship to questions of social, and effectively class, independence and national autonomy. While both developed in the context of the uneven development of capitalism in Ireland one was aligned to the establishment of economic and

ideological links to capital while the other developed in response to this, sustaining to various degrees, traditions of anti capitalist insubordination. While the two states established after partition necessarily led to the formation of typically distinctive labour movements, nevertheless, the persistence of a politics of insubordination, though muted for much of the twentieth century, re-emerged in the period when the mythology of the Celtic Tiger was about to unravel. The development of the IWU against the backdrop of the latter and the Social Partnership agenda (below) and in the north of Ireland, in response to the outworking of the Belfast Agreement (1998) against the patina of neo-liberal economic strategies, raises at least two issues of immediate importance.

First, in considering the character and role of the IWU it is necessary to take stock of one of Heather Connolly's arguments⁴, drawn from her research on SUD in France. She reminds us that however distinctive and innovative trade unions are, and especially new ones, it is nevertheless critical to recognise the fundamental tension between their organisational character and their social movement identity. However exciting the early days may be, the force for social and organisational stasis, including bureaucratic domination, will at some stage have to be reckoned with. While we recognise the political, not to say, social saliency of this argument it does not suggest a time frame for when oppositionalism dies and bureaucratisation prevails. Connolly's observation is paramount here. We recognise that the IWU cannot escape what may be the fate of all labour movement organisations in a capitalist society and notably so the sooner political and ideological inertia sets in. Especially we recognise this given that it chimes with one aspect of our argument, specifically, the retreat signalled by the dominant current in the labour movement that pined for Social Partnership in the Republic of Ireland (1987). SIPTU (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union) was after all, though it took many twists and turns of strategy and change of state to get there, the remnant of that great movement for, in at least one instance, insurrectionary trade unionism: James Larkin's Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, the mainstay of James Connolly's Irish Citizens' Army in 1916.⁵

The second point to consider is not whether it is possible to maintain the potency of a 'new' union in the current conjuncture so much as what is it that a new union would seek to achieve in the current period of neo-liberal restructuring.

The rise of different notions of trade unionism and class politics in Ireland

The character of nineteenth century industrialisation was indelibly linked to sectarian social class and spatial relations throughout the country. The consequence of Irish Unionist (and subsequently Ulster Unionist) hegemony, mostly in the more highly industrialised north east, promoted a set of clientalist class relationships which, even when set in the context of highly skilled and unionised craft occupations, predominantly in shipbuilding and engineering, sustained relations of patronage and brokerage between Protestant workers and Ulster Unionism⁶. While this is not the place to debate the interstices of the history and sociologies of this trajectory, suffice to say that the subsequent ideologies of accommodation and subordination can only be made sense of in this context. Moreover, these patterns of sectarian affiliation and social subordination also marked the nature of *class antagonism and opposition* to the rule of capital within the organised Protestant working class. That is to say that however antagonistic and confrontational Protestant labour movement politics might

be, they would later (sometimes sooner) defer to a form of trade unionism which at the time was promoted as being the more progressive, more about labour, but most importantly, by being committed to the Empire, above sectarianism. Yet, on the contrary, this was a form of trade unionism and political engagement that in fact perpetrated another form of sectarianism: a sectarianism understood as central to organised labour in the form of a labour movement praised for its adherence to a new social democracy: social imperialism in defence of the British empire as expressed by, amongst others, Ramsay MacDonald and the Social Democratic Federation.

It is important to recognise this otherwise it is easy to either overestimate the possibilities inherent in early twentieth century Irish labour movement politics and especially those emanating from the trade unionism of Protestant working class, or to deny not only potential for change but also what was actually achieved despite divisions. We need to be able to recognise the limitations to pan-working class opposition to the rule of capital in this era. Nevertheless, as has been recognised by a range of commentary on the period, both sympathetic⁷ and critical⁸, these struggles were often profound. Indeed, the kinds of class conflict that rocked Irish society between 1907 and 1923 were largely unknown to most of the rest of Europe never mind Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) with the obvious exceptions being Russia, Germany and Hungary. Ireland, after the great secular struggle of the dockers' and carters' strike of 1907 witnessed the hugely significant 1913 Dublin lockout and attack on the ITGWU led strike, a struggle which though ending in the union's defeat was to have immediate consequences for the course of the radicalisation of sections of the Irish labour movement. Indeed, it was from amongst the ranks of the defeated Dublin working class and workers from elsewhere in the country that support for Connolly's Irish Citizen's Army, Europe's first working class militia, was garnered. This history is important given the contemporary difficulties in establishing a coherent, secular and politically autonomous labour movement throughout Ireland, North and South. In short, our argument is that the failure to sustain a broad, cross sectarian labour movement derived from the bifurcation of labour along sectarian cross-class lines. Having said that, the out workings of this set of cross-class ideologies and affiliations were by no means inevitable. What were the origins of the divisions within labour?

Divisions in Irish Labour: Belfast social democratic trade unionism and the rise of an autonomous labour movement

Although the rise of a coordinated Ulster Unionism and the struggle for Irish independence between 1905 (the Ulster Unionist Council was formed in 1905) and 1923 underwrote the already developing political fragmentation of labour, the rise of a *socially* autonomous labour movement necessarily depended upon an association, and in critical instances, leadership of, the movement for Irish autonomy. We write 'autonomy' rather than 'independence' because it is important to recognise the relationship between a new and vibrant form of trade unionism, James Larkin's early 1900s syndicalism, and the reaction by the mainstream and British-based labour movement to struggles which though originally economic, often broke the bounds of conventional trade union strategy. In effect, Larkin's Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) set up (1908-9) in response to the failure of the British labour movement to follow through in their initial support for unskilled, mostly Catholic, workers in Belfast and elsewhere, was not originally concerned with the politics of Irish national independence. Moreover, in their initial motivational

moments, the ITGWU's struggles rarely departed from conventional trade union agenda. While the National Union of Dock Labourer's (NUDL), which led the dockers' and carters' strike in Belfast in 1907, was significant in pushing the struggle in Belfast, it was adamant in defining it in purely trade union terms.

The NUDL's leadership had profound implications for Belfast and, more broadly, Irish labour. In the first place Larkin, their leading Belfast organiser, argued that the direction of the dispute and its subsequent settlement was being determined in the interests of those in Britain who failed to understand the economic situation in Ireland. Second, for Larkin, Irish trade union autonomy derived from the need for class autonomy. In effect, the trade union trajectory of skilled Protestant workers who had been highly prominent in support for Belfast's unskilled dockers and carters, led them back to the politics of 'Protestant' Unionism. This was premised on an economic interpretation of class and class opposition which was to all intents and purposes a social democratic and reformist view of the role of labour within the 'nation' – i.e. Britain. What is more, it was a Britain whose empire was seen as progressive and, for many, and especially workers in Protestant labour's view, benevolent. While in many respects Protestant workers held Larkin in high esteem his view of the need for separation – the setting up of the ITGWU – and ongoing commitment to class struggle was anathema to a labour politics premised on the beneficence of British class patronage. The principal Protestant trade unionist and protagonist of this line was William Walker, President of the ITUC who argued, in what was referred to as Bread and Butter socialism, that Irish trade unions should be concerned only with matters defined by British trade unions. When the dockers' and carters' dispute ended, skilled worker support petered out and minds focussed once more on more parochial work place concerns.

Yet, it would only be a matter of time before Larkin, supported by Connolly, (who returned to Ireland in 1910), would draw the conclusion that a distinctive labour movement with a broad working class agenda, could only deliver working class autonomy where it to do so in a distinctive Irish national context. This inevitably, of course, would lead them away from the 'Bread and Butter politics' of Belfast Protestant (trade) unionism but it would also lead them to develop a working class politics that would *distain the idea of nation as such*, in the interests of labour and class. This did not mean that national autonomy was unimportant and far from it, but it could only be understood as a condition for working class independence. This radical politics can be identified in Larkin's early ITGWU as it emerged from those forces, including the NUDL, behind the 1907 Belfast dockers' and carters' strike. Subsequently, this dynamic was critical in the development of the politics of the 1913 Dublin Lockout, the 1916 Irish Citizens' Army, sustained principally by elements within the ITGWU, the so-called 'Limerick Soviet' of 1919, and finally, the notable role of railway and other transport workers in supporting the War of Independence from Britain (1919-22). What was the character of this ideology of Protestant labour politics and how can we define its social and political character?

Social Democracy, Labour and Imperial Ideology: The domination of Loyalist ideology within labour in Belfast.

Between the early 1900s and 1919, an ideology, which we define as Loyalism, developed to provide 'Protestant labour' with its central and defining political character. This can best be understood as a social-democratic ideology which

emphasised the centrality of Irish labour within the British Empire. Loyalism took different forms and was accommodated by different labour organisations in Ireland. It helped to sustain a labourist hegemony based upon a particular view of national and class leadership (leadership of Protestant workers and domination of labour as a whole)⁹. One can argue that Loyalist hegemony was of greatest value to a section of capital during a key period of political crisis in Ireland - the period of the Third Home Rule Bill, 1910-1914. We can understand this period in Gramsci's terms as one of 'passive revolution' or bourgeois restoration with a restricted hegemony¹⁰. Loyalism was a central aspect in Protestant labour politics in Belfast where it was crucial to the development of particular class ideologies for the predominantly Protestant trade unions in the city, helping to make sense of the issues of the day in Protestant labour's terms. Class was subordinated to nation in a way which inhibited pan-working class unity - the subordination by exclusion of Catholic labour. Exclusivism, which included Protestant working class preferment in employment, was developed as a set of workplace and other social and welfare practices that depended upon relationships of quiescence. Furthermore, this saw trade unions abjure political engagement – unless in support of Irish-Ulster Unionism and most dramatically in support of Carson's campaign for the Solemn League and Covenant in 1912 – and certainly in terms of participation with Catholic workers in most circumstances. Indeed, one of the interesting features of the dockers' and carters' strike was that, momentarily, this understanding was severely tested. The use of physical coercion (of Catholic labour) would have to wait until the legislation of relative autonomy for what became Northern Ireland as defined by The Government of Ireland Act, 1920. We now turn to the nature of the class struggle in Belfast after the First World War. Had Unionism's 'triumph' in 1914 with the defeat of the 3rd Home Rule Bill foreclosed all possibility of pan-working class struggle?

1919: Red Belfast?

Edward Carson, leader of the Ulster Unionists publically endorsed Belfast's shipyard workers' efforts during the First World War. His intervention was an important boost to their determination to reduce the working week from fifty-seven to forty-four hours and re-establish pre-war trade union rights. This was an ambitious campaign led by the Engineering and Shipbuilding trades Federation and somewhat more than shipyard workers were demanding in the rest of the country.

The strike mobilized workers in a variety of industries. A strike committee was set up comprising workers from the two shipyards (Harland & Wolff and Workman & Clark¹¹), transport and docks, electricity, gas and textile employees and by the end of January, Belfast was at a standstill. In the first place this was to support the general principle of a reduction in working hours, but it was also promoted as a significant expression of class solidarity that might force the employers into consideration of the workers' demand.¹²

In fact, from the beginning, the strike committee's marches and demonstrations were avowedly British and maintained what can only be called a determinedly insular course, in spite of the role played by the ITGWU. The very idea of 'Ulster' came to frame the activities of skilled Protestant trade unionists. This is crucial because it highlighted the extent to which trade union parochialism limited the possibility for those in Belfast to link up with other Irish labour developments in a country that was in a state of incipient political, and in some places social, revolution. The strike

committee was ultimately not so hostile to the intervention of the Protestant Ulster Unionist Council. Behind this coalescing of interests between Ulster Unionist employer and Protestant skilled worker was a commitment by the latter to what we term Loyalist social democratic trade unionism. Finally, we should remember that the power of a patronage reliant upon aspects of cross class sectarian commitment extended beyond the factory floor to social and personal life, as was evidenced in forms of employment dependant housing¹³.

This ideological current was dominant in the strike committee and it was essential to the parochialism we have identified. No one could underestimate the trials of Belfast labour in general, from December 1918 until February 1919 (the Belfast general strike). Yet given what we know about the ready alliances between Protestant Unionist employers and skilled workers, the idea that the strike could take a more politically progressive trajectory is belied by its limited social and political character. The truth of the matter is not just that 'labour Unionism' was a combination of class and non-class notions of 'labour' and 'nation'. At root it signified in heart and soul, the negation of a *socialist* politics, however vehemently it ushered in a strong trade unionist ideology. But it was nevertheless an important labour ideology. Labour (Protestant) unionism in Ireland was an articulation of exclusivist trade unionism and sectarian privilege against largely unskilled and poorly paid, Irish Catholic workers. The latter benefitted little from insular Belfast-centred struggles but the important point here is that in the end labour Unionism undermined Protestant labour too. Its 'socialism' precluded a socialism that would unite labour for it was premised on the belief that Ireland's future lay with an inherently beneficent Britain. This was the stuff of Loyalism. It is surely significant that when labour next held a strike of such proportion in Belfast, it was against the sharing of political power with Catholics - the Ulster Workers Council strike of 1974.

What can be said about these two exemplary episodes (1907 dockers' and carters' strike and the 1919 Belfast strike) is that the underlying basis of Ulster Unionist success was an alliance forged by the hegemony of Protestant capital. The ideological lynchpin in the alliance of Protestant capital and labour was labour's Loyalism: trade unionist commitment to the British Empire and Ulster Unionist ideology. For sure, there were numerous instances of oppositional activity within the Protestant working class but while on occasion they achieved remarkable levels of ideological engagement with capital¹⁴ at least two things need to be borne in mind. First, despite the many individual Protestant trade unionists who bravely supported their fellow Catholic workers, and most conspicuously in the shipyard expulsions immediately after Partition, solidarity was a rare event and very much an activity pursued by a minority of Protestant workers. Additionally, this solidarity was always febrile as was most poignantly demonstrated in the catastrophic collapse of the Outdoor Relief movement in 1932 when Ulster Unionist sectarianism infamously succeeded in driving a wedge between Protestant and Catholic workers. Second, even when workers influenced by notions of anti-capitalist politics mobilised, these were more usually evident in support of international struggles. The most prominent of these of course was the support given by labour in Belfast in support of Spanish Republicans which saw many Protestants going to fight in the International Brigade. These vital significant acts however would do little to force the kind of seismic shift necessary to challenge whatever new versions of William Walker's Bread and Butter socialism would appear from one era to the next. Trade unionism was principally about labour

relations and work place rights and not about politics per se. In other words, at no point in the history of the Northern state would the labour movement seek to develop an oppositional political trade union agenda, notable exceptions (including those referred to above) notwithstanding.

Continuing with our broad theme of the subordination of radical labour movement concerns to those of quiescent labour institutions in Ireland, we now turn our attention to what went on in the South of the country after 1923.

The historical background to Social Partnership in 1987 and the response by labour. Privatisation and the 'success' of the Celtic Tiger

At first glance it may seem curious that despite Ireland's revolutionary experiences in the period from before the First World War until the end of the Civil war in 1923, the labour movement should have subsequently displayed so little of this legacy of sometimes insurrectionary, anti state struggle. But we can see that in the North the scope to sustain an oppositional form of trade unionism was compromised by Bread and Butter labour politics. This social and institutional blockage ran from 1920 and was continually reaffirmed throughout the period of the insurgency in the late 1960s while in the other new state, what would become the Republic of Ireland, labour was to remain at a distance from the levers of power.

As elsewhere in Europe, the Irish labour movement was divided in its approach to the state and capital. The split was nevertheless not merely along left-right lines but was also influenced by divisions in the wider body politic and in particular, the struggle for national independence and the civil war that followed. The Irish civil war has been described as more Girondist against Jacobin than Bourgeois battling Bolshevik. It was in many ways a struggle between Ireland's haute bourgeoisie on one side and the peasantry in alliance with many of the petit bourgeoisie.

Unlike Britain or Germany, the working class was a minority during the first six decades of the 20th century in the unindustrialised 26 counties of Southern Ireland. There was an understandable belief in working class circles that they needed allies in order to make progress. Connolly had attempted to overcome this numerical disadvantage by building an alliance with insurrectionary republicans and their rural, small-farmer supporters. The potential of a radical working class acting in close accord with an insurrectionary peasantry was not lost on conservative forces in Ireland after independence. For decades the establishment strove by a series of means to prevent this occurring. Right wing labour leaders herded their supporters into an accommodation with capital and away from insurrectionary republicans while conservative republicans under the leadership of Eamon de Valera offered support to the working class on condition that 'Labour must wait'.

With no clear class interest in the outcome of the Civil War, workers were split in their loyalty. A conservative labour movement leadership accepted the Treaty and acted as the loyal opposition during the early years of the newly created 26-County Free State. Many workers, especially those who had served with the British Army in the First World War, followed the union leadership while as many others (often those who had been part of the IRA during the independence struggle) favoured the anti-treaty position. In time this was to lead to one of the anomalies of Irish politics. The Irish Labour Party and its supporters in the trade union movement grew closer to the

right wing Fine Gael party and on several occasions joined together to form coalition governments. Opposing this alliance for most of the 20th century was Fianna Fail, the parliamentary party that had emerged from the anti-treaty side of the civil war. Fianna Fail was populist, clientelist, opportunist and pursued a pro-business albeit mildly Keynesian economic strategy. Many working class people viewed Fianna Fail as the only viable alternative to the ultra conservative Fine Gael.

Nevertheless, in the decades after independence, the establishment viewed organised labour in Ireland as truculent at best. A series of strikes in the immediate post-Second World War years contributed to the fall of a Fianna Fail government in 1948. This became even more of an issue for Fianna Fail when the party returned to office under Sean Lemass in 1957. The new leader, inspired by T.K. Whitaker's 'Programme for Economic Development'¹⁵, began to encourage the development of an Irish industrial base. Lemass's efforts were, however, diluted by labour militancy. According to McAuley¹⁶ writing in the Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland in 1967.

In the period 1956-65 the amount of working time lost through industrial stoppages of work in Ireland was greater than in all but three of the eighteen countries [...]. Ireland's relative position, deteriorated during this period. In the five years 1956-61 Ireland ranked thirteenth and in the five years 1961-65 she ranked second. In both 1964 and 1965 she headed the list.

This pattern was continued into the next decades. In the 1970s, an average of 583,978 days was lost per year. In the 1980s, the figure was 317,078 days per year.

It was little wonder therefore that the Social Partnership policy received such a welcome from state and business when it was delivered in 1987. Industrial unrest declined dramatically in the following years and while the new found wealth arising from the 'Celtic Tiger' era undoubtedly helped ease frustrations, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) determination to adhere to a non-conflict policy also had a major part to play in the new found atmosphere of harmony. A series of roll-over agreements were signed and adhered to throughout the course of more than twenty years of Social Partnership. This spirit of harmony and understanding was to end, however, when circumstances changed with the economic crash of 2008. The finances of the Republic of Ireland, both public and private, were in a shambles and the trade union movement found itself helpless and unable to intervene under the circumstances. With a series of blows against working people, state and business effectively jettisoned the ICTU.

When public sector workers, the mainstay of trade union membership in Ireland, were forced to accept pay cuts in late 2009 and then threatened with further severe reductions, Congress was only able to negotiate a feeble compromise known as 'The Croke Park Agreement'. In return for delivering the government's austerity programme, public sector workers and their managers made a commitment,

to work together to change the way in which the Public Service does its business so that both its cost and the number of people working in the Public Service can fall significantly, while continuing to meet the need for services and improve the experience of service users.

Further highlighting the powerlessness of the ICTU, the Irish High Court ruled on 7 July 2011 that legislation delegating powers concerning pay and conditions to Joint Labour Committees (JLCs)¹⁷ was unconstitutional. JLCs regulated conditions of employment and set minimum rates of pay in certain sectors where conditions tended to be poor. Organised labour in the Republic not only suffered the humiliation of having one of its cherished victories effectively abolished but in the process, was receiving a warning from government not to take counter action in defence of the less well off.

The impotence of the ICTU was obvious from its overall inability to prevent rightwing governments and aggressive employers implementing a policy of cuts to living standards. Worse though was the response from the largest union SIPTU and the ICTU over which it has a major influence. Faced with the most severe economic recession since the 1950s, the leadership of the Irish trade union movement adopted, in practice, a policy of amelioration.¹⁸ They supported the Irish Labour Party when it again joined a coalition government led by the right-wing Fine Gael, arguing that Labour's presence in cabinet prevented the attack on workers from being harsher still.

This effectively illustrates the fault-line within organised labour in Ireland. Does it seek to ameliorate conditions for working people within the capitalist system or does it seek to transform the system that exploits labour?

The IWU

The Independent Workers Union was never in any doubt as to its position. At its second annual conference in 2005 it adopted a policy of demanding that an income ceiling of €100, 000 per year be introduced. Although a very handsome sum by the standards of most working people, this concept if implemented would prepare the ground for a transformation of economic relations within Irish society. In the following years the IWU supported calls to reject European Union treaties that were designed to lead to greater domination of the continent by neo-liberalism. Before it had been founded a decade, the IWU had moved to promoting a different approach to organised labour in an attempt to address the changing terrain on which the economy was built in the 21st century. One of the model's the union adopted, community unionism, was not new but had not been widely recognised in Ireland as a means of dealing with the impact of globalisation on labour.

IWU recognised that the shift in labour from manufacturing to service industries North and South, the exponential growth in agency work and part time employment, the marked rise in immigration post-2004 and the large numbers employed in small private enterprises hostile to unionisation required new forms of organising. The union activists combine traditional trade union recruitment activities (eg leafleting factory gates, press coverage, establishing workplace committees) with creative direct action, street theatre and protest (against, for example, privatisation in the public health service and cuts in welfare provision); the hosting of meetings with small groups of workers in informal settings (houses, bars, community centres, car parks); and links with community organisations to instigate local community based projects. Home-helps, migrant factory and agricultural workers, café, hotel and bar staff, recycling plant employees, as well as public service NHS workers have added to the ranks of the organisation. Furthermore, counter to claims of inherent migrant worker

passivity, in several areas and workplaces, significantly in the north of Ireland, it has been unionised migrant workers who have been winning contracts and improved conditions for themselves and their Irish born colleagues.

Community trade unionism is distinct from unionising the community and voluntary 'sector' towards which both Unison and SIPTU recently employed officials. Rather it recognises that in any working class neighbourhood today in Ireland; i) people are as likely to be unemployed as in work and there are a number of broader social and class issues impacting on people that the union movement must engage with; ii) working people are likely to be employed by a plethora of different individual businesses. This highlights the extent to which in the absence of a large industrialised workforce with its everyday place-based collectivism (walking through the same gates and sharing shifts, canteens and breaks), efforts must be made at the neighbourhood level to enable solidarity between currently disparate workplace struggles and issues confronting friends and family. It may not be surprising that the approach has been most popular in two areas of Derry and Belfast in the north of Ireland with stubbornly high unemployment and associated social problems but also with a strong history of resistance to a state sponsored discrimination which manifested itself in civil rights marches through to armed insurrection. (In 2014, IWU members won seats in Derry and Enniskillen council elections). This brings us to the additional challenge of community trade union organising in the North especially where the state reproduction of sectarian division manifests itself in the polarisation of working class communities and, within these, localised structures linked to political party or paramilitary interests¹ that often militate against class solidarity. The task for a militant trade union seeking to make Connolly's and Larkin's socialist labour legacies meaningful to communities emerging from a tradition of militarist Republicanism, whilst at the same time appealing to working class Protestants, understandably cautious following 35 years of conflict, and whose political representation has been particularly reactionary, is not to be underestimated.

In the public sector in the North the union, after winning gains for community mental health workers stepped up its campaign against privatisation in the health sector. In its conflict with management, it also challenged the accommodation between the organisation and pre-existing unions. In another area of the political economy, migrant workers in a recycling plant sought union support against discrimination but soon found that formal and informal economy practices overlapped. Paramilitary threats to union members and organisers, including subsequent attacks on workers' property, have illustrated starkly the challenges to union organisation posed by the changing character of the working class in the northern part of the island.

Given also the relatively high density of union membership in Ireland's public sector it is perhaps unsurprising that the IWU has not made the large breakthrough given that recruitment of private sector and precarious workers is an arduous process. Coupling this approach, however, with the targeting of larger, rural based workplaces in geographical areas surrounding established union offices is having some success. In addition IWU members recently set up a workers co-operative café, arguably the first of its kind on the island, which has become both a social centre and a hub for organising activity. This development has increasingly attracted young people to the

¹ This often may mean violence or the threat of it as a means of dealing with dissent.

union, including the unemployed, politically committed activists, students and ideologically sympathetic Spanish, Basques and Catalans. A further and welcome challenge is linking this activists' dynamism with the ongoing requirements to service the diverse union membership within new and traditional economies.

Conclusion

If the labour movement in Ireland after Partition divided on the basis of different clientalist affiliations, these arose out of a period of vociferous trade union combativity that was avowedly political. In the north, subordination on the basis of support for one section of Irish capital (Unionism) undermined a growing and defined trade unionism that was anti-capitalist in energy and ideology. Partition allowed this divided labour movement a degree of comfort in the illusion that it was (whether North or South) sustaining state formations in which it would underpin and sustain variant forms of what it took to be progressive citizenship.

Since the end of the twentieth century the changing secular composition of the working class, in part wrought by the current phase of neo-liberalism, is creating new difficulties for labour organisations that grew out of the post war fordist Keynesian compromise. In Ireland, North and South, patterns of trade union affiliation derived from the respective trajectories of very different types of dependent, subordinate variants of welfare state economies, have been severely tested. The Irish labour movement never fully recovered from the division of the country in 1920 and its over-eager pleading to be heard in the councils of the powerful (labourist welfarism now under assault in the North side by side with a humiliated labour sponsorship of Social Partnership in the South) only serves to demonstrate its many current political limitations. This is of course despite the many brave commitments of union members on both sides of the border. The new political economies in the North and South, differences notwithstanding, require a redrawing of the boundaries of precarious employment, extending into the welfare state (historically more limited in the South and more recently febrile than in the North) through privatisation, 'flexibility' and work intensification. Since the sociological basis of the labour movement(s) has changed and while in the North, especially in the period since the Belfast Agreement of 1998, it has been dependent largely on the maintenance of the public sector, trade unions need to find new sources of vitality on the basis of where their potential new memberships reside.

If the new political economy is driving labour harder and on the basis of increasingly weakly regulated precarious employment relations, unions must respond to those in whose interest they claim to exist. That should necessarily push them to engage more vociferously where capital is wreaking havoc with peoples' lives which means where they experience work, should they find employment, and in their communities, which are impacted by the presence or absence of work. It also suggests that the *nature of the work* that people do also impacts on their community participation and the nature of their social life more broadly. Increasingly, the temporary and precarious nature of insecure employment, where institutional regulation is weak or absent, means that the labour movement will not be in a position to passively engage capital and the state in what are becoming enfeebled forms of participation. This will necessitate a new political project that in the cases of Ireland north and south takes unions back to the future of Larkin and Connolly: trade unions that challenge the fundamental causes of inequality and social subordination.

Acknowledgements

Notes

¹ Unionist/ism: not to be confused with trade unionism. When referring to the anti Irish independence political movement we write Unionist/ism/ Irish/Ulster Unionist/ism. When referring to trade unionist/ism lower case 'u' is preferred. (Irish) Unionism sprang to life in the late 19th century as the political movement dedicated to the preservation of Ireland within Britain. The wellspring of Unionism was opposition to the Irish Home Rule Bill of 1886 (the second was in 1893 and the third and final Bill was introduced in 1912). Unionism was in the first instance a political alliance between Protestant industrial capital and labour in Ireland (notably skilled Protestant workers and industrialists in Ireland's north east and mainly in Belfast, notably in the engineering and shipbuilding industries) and elements within the Conservative Party in Britain. It successfully defeated the three Home Rule Bills. The objective of Home Rule had been to bring a measure of legislative autonomy for the whole of Ireland (within the British Empire) but the outcome of the defeat of Irish Home Rule in a movement led by Edward Carson, a Dublin solicitor who distained any aspect of autonomy for Ireland, was not so straightforward. In what was to become one of the great ironies of the period a degree of home rule was precisely what was delivered as a result of Carson's campaign: for the six north east counties only which had not been the intention of the original Unionist movement (see inter alia Buckland, 1973, 'Irish Unionism').

² From a resolution passed by the Ulster Unionist Council *Belfast Newsletter* July 10th 1912. Cited in Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, 89.

³ James Larkin, *Irish Worker*, 27 May 1911.

⁴ Connolly, 'Union Renewal in France'.

⁵ There is also the issue of 'political' failure even where a radical union is created such as occurred with the Irish Locomotive Drivers Association (ILDA) established in a process that began in 1998 under direction of Brendan Ogle. ILDA is now part of Unite's power workers section. The ILDA, was confined to one sector and did not develop across both jurisdictions. ILDA wanted to leave SIPTU but was refused and when Mick O'Reilly gave them TGWU recognition Bill Morris moved rapidly against the latter and set in motion the sequence of events that resulted in formation of IWU.

⁶ Gibbon, *Origins of Ulster Unionism*.

⁷ Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*; for the period between Partition and the prorogation of Stormont see Bew *et al.*, *The State in Northern Ireland*.

⁸ Farrell, *The Orange State*; Bell, *The Protestants of Ulster*; O'Hare, *Divine Gospel of Discontent*.

⁹ Protestant Labour's sectarianism was not only anti-Catholic for it was also rooted in a distinctive British-centred nationalism, although after 1920 an idiosyncratic if marginal ideological current began to emerge around the idea of an 'Ulster nation', exemplified by groups opposed to the IRA such as the Ulster Defence Association and the reborn Ulster Volunteer Force during the long insurgency beginning in 1969. The intellectual origins of contemporary views on 'Ulster nationalism' can be traced to Ian Adamson, *The Cruthin: A History of the Ulster Land and People*.

¹⁰ Anderson, *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*; Gramsci, 'Notes on Italian History' and 'State and Civil Society'; Mouffe, 'Hegemony and the Integral State in Gramsci'.

¹¹ Traditional sectarian mobilization threatened Catholic workers in Harland and Wolff's and Belfast's other shipyard, Workman and Clark's. These two were the largest single employers of skilled Protestant workers in Belfast and the craft pride and exclusiveness they valued was related to their anti-Irish Catholic sectarianism. The latter ideology founded and supported a series of exclusionary practices as was evident in the case of the shipyards where frequent attacks upon Catholic workers were a critical aspect of local anti-Catholic repression. The yards employed around 20,000 workers of which a small minority were Catholics and during the period of Ulster Unionist agitation against Home Rule these workers felt the full force of sectarian discrimination. Information from *Report on Disturbances in Belfast Shipyards in 1912*. cited in Patterson, *ibid.*, p88. Yet, while there was significant and historical physical and ideological abuse of Catholic shipyard workers it is easily forgotten that an important number of Protestant workers paid dearly for their support of their fellow Catholic workers (they were referred to as 'Rotten Prods').

¹² *Northern Whig*, Jan. 29th.1919. Cited in Patterson, *ibid.* p103.

¹³ See Messenger, *Picking up the Threads*, p. 219-22

¹⁴ See Farrell, *ibid.* for an account of exemplary moments

¹⁵ <http://www.finance.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=5294>

¹⁶ McAuley, Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland, 1967..

¹⁷ A Joint Labour Committee (JLC) was established by a statutory order of the Labour Court under the Industrial Relations Act 1946. It was an independent body made up of equal numbers of employer and worker representatives appointed by the Labour Court, with a chair appointed by the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation.

¹⁸ George Gilmore wrote about James Connolly in a lecture for a symposium organised by the Dublin City Trades Council in the 1970s;

‘... It is hardly necessary to remind Irish workers of James Connolly's life-long work as a Trades Union organiser. There can be no question in our minds as to the relevance of that side to his work in the circumstances of today. When, however, we come to consider as a more comprehensive question of the relevance of Connolly in 1970 we are thinking not only of his work as a Trades Union organiser, but of his whole political outlook in which that work was contained and, very much, of his view of Irish politics in relation to world politics.

There always have been, and probably still are, sincere and devoted Trade Union workers who see the function of working-class organisation as beginning and ending in the amelioration of the lot of wage-earning people within the capitalist system of society. If any of us accept that view of working-class struggle, we must, I think, dismiss Connolly's political teaching as irrelevant. He never held that view.

If, on the other hand, we believe, as he believed, that working-class struggle for better conditions within the kind of society in which we live must, to achieve a worthwhile result, be pushed ahead to the overthrow of the social system that rests on the exploitation of the working classes, and to the organisation of society on a socialist basis instead - if we accept that as our task - then we can, to some purpose, consider the question of the relevance of Connolly's teaching to the tactics of today ...’

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