

Reflections on Centenaries and Commemorations
(Discussion 6)

A Carnival of Reaction?

Labour and Partition

Dr Pádraig Yeates

compiled by

Michael Hall

ISLAND (132) **PAMPHLETS**

Published July 2021 by
Island Publications / Fellowship of Messines Association
Belfast

© Dr Pádraig Yeates / Michael Hall 2021
mikehall.island@yahoo.co.uk
<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications>

The Fellowship of Messines Association wishes to thank:
the keynote speaker Dr. Pádraig Yeates,
the discussion facilitator Deirdre Mac Bride
and those who participated in the discussion

This publication has received financial support from

The National Lottery Community Fund



Cover Design by *three creative*
Printed by Regency Press, Belfast

Introduction

The Fellowship of Messines Association was formed in May 2002 by a diverse group of individuals from Loyalist, Republican and other backgrounds, united in their realisation of the need to confront sectarianism in our society as a necessary means to realistic peace-building.

In 2020 the Association launched its ‘Reflections on Centenaries & Anniversaries’ programme. This programme comprised a series of discussions which were intended to create opportunities for participants, from various backgrounds and political viewpoints, to engage in discussion on some of the more significant historical events of 100 years and 50 years ago, the consequences of which all of us are still living with today.

The discussions also afforded an opportunity for those taking part to engage in the important process of challenging some of the myths and folklore associated with past events, by means of an open and respectful engagement with factual history.

In 2021, a further series of talks and discussions was initiated, focusing on the topic of *Partition and its legacy*. Each event was to comprise a presentation by a well-known historian, followed by a wide-ranging discussion involving invited participants from a diverse range of backgrounds.

The discussion detailed in this pamphlet had as its focus the impact of Partition on the labour movement in Ireland. The keynote speaker was **Dr Pádraig Yeates**, journalist, trade unionist and historian. His first book *Lockout: Dublin 1913*, the first major historical study of that conflict, was published in 2000 to critical acclaim. It was followed by a number of other significant works on the social, cultural and trade union history of Dublin, and the history of Ireland as a whole.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, it was not possible for the participants to meet indoors face-to-face, and so the discussion, chaired by **Deirdre Mac Bride**, was conducted on an online basis (via a ‘Zoom’ conference).

Harry Donaghy, Project Manager, Fellowship of Messines Association

A Carnival of Reaction? Labour and Partition

Dr Pádraig Yeates

Such a scheme as that agreed to by Redmond and Devlin, the betrayal of the national democracy of industrial Ulster would mean a carnival of reaction both North and South, would set back the wheels of progress, would destroy the oncoming unity of the Irish Labour movement and paralyse all advanced movements whilst it endured.

James Connolly, *Irish Worker*, 14 March 1914

Were it not for the solidarity of Labour behind the national cause in Ireland, not merely in recent years, but during the long past, the Irish cause would not be where it is today. . . . We who are in a position to gauge the advance of the Irish cause from day to day, know what your support has been to us, and what your refusal to put forward even your own special interests has meant to the cause of Ireland in the past two years

Eamon de Valera, ILP&TUC Conference, August 1st, 1921

When is a Unionist not a Unionist? When he creates disunion.

Edward Carson, *Northern Whig*, 12 December, 1918

When Connolly wrote those words in 1914, the vast majority of trade unionists of all political persuasions in Ireland would have agreed with him and, when partition came to pass, they proved sufficiently prophetic to lead many left wing activists in the Labour movement to align themselves with militant nationalism, even though, as Eamon de Valera told the ILP&TUC conference in 1921, it was Sinn Féin and Dáil Éireann that were the main beneficiaries of this alliance.

By contrast, Edward Carson had offered Belfast workers a very different choice in the 1918 general election, when Irish Labour abstained in favour of Sinn Féin.

It has often been argued that Irish nationalism was inherently progressive and Unionism reactionary. But these forces were not seen in those terms by many contemporary Northern trade unionists, who would have regarded Irish nationalism as backward and parochial, when compared with Britain and its Imperial destiny.

In fact, the inspiration for the formation of the Irish Trade Union Congress in Dublin in 1894 came from the holding of the British TUC annual conference in Belfast the previous year.

In subsequent decades the Irish Labour movement grew slowly in the shadow of the Home Rule debate, an issue that frequently dominated political life not alone on this island but in Britain as well in the decades before the First World War. During these years the Irish Parliamentary Party was the voice of Irish nationalism at Westminster and the British Labour Party and TUC took their bearings from it rather than the ITUC. In fact British Labour leaders tended to be dismissive of their infant counterpart across the Irish Sea.

.

The 1898 Local Government Act, which widened the franchise, allowed Irish Labour candidates to contest seats, usually under the auspices of the local trades council or the auspices of the Independent Labour Party in Belfast. However, many of these councillors proved as biddable as their nationalist and Unionist counterparts once elected and, at the ITUC gathering in 1902, Belfast Trades Council delegates proposed that Labour councillors should seek prior approval from a ‘recognised Labour organisation’ before voting on important issues. A Dublin delegate, P T Daly, wanted to go further with an amendment that the ITUC executive ‘take all necessary steps to formulate a scheme for the creation of a pledge-bound labour party, controlled by, and answerable to, the Irish Trades Union Congress.’ The Belfast movers of the resolution refused to accept the amendment and, although a large majority of delegates supported Daly, the amendment remained a dead letter,¹ with the ITUC executive pleading at the next Congress that ‘it was a most difficult matter to formulate any scheme at the present time which would be acceptable to the workers.’²

Resistance to a pledge-bound party was shared by conservative nationalist trade unionists such as Alderman James McCarron, Secretary of Derry Trades Council. He supported William Walker from Belfast, who was president of the ITUC in 1903, in opposing Daly. McCarron cleaved to the Irish Party because, as Joe Devlin told a conference of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in 1911, ‘Whatever rights labour enjoys in Ireland, it owes them to the Irish Party’.³

Unionist and nationalist delegates were suspicious of Daly, a printer by trade, because he was a member at the time of the Irish Republican Brotherhood’s Supreme Council and a close ally of Arthur Griffith. It would take almost another decade for the membership of Irish based unions to the ITUC to overtake British affiliates and increasingly dominate debates.⁴ This was largely due to the rise of Jim Larkin’s Irish

Transport and General Workers Union, which was not only distinctly socialist in outlook but also militantly nationalist. Indeed, Daly became one of Larkin's full-time officials, running the insurance section of the ITGWU's growing membership.

When the ITGWU was admitted to the ITUC in 1910 McCarron, who had thrice been elected president of Congress, refused to run again for the executive in protest. In 1911, the debate on Irish Labour's future was personalised in a famous debate in the pages of the Scottish socialist journal *Forward* between William Walker, Vice President of the Belfast Labour Party and James Connolly, recently returned from America who had been appointed by Larkin to the position of ITGWU branch secretary in Belfast. Walker saw the future of Irish labour as lying with its larger British counterpart, while Connolly dismissed the notion that the march towards a Socialist International lay through the British Empire.⁵

By 1912 the gulf within the ITUC had widened further as a militant, younger, largely southern-based generation of activists moved into dominant positions within Congress. Michael O'Lehane of the Drapers Assistants, a leading Sinn Féin member, was elected President that year and Bill O'Brien, secretary of the Dublin branch of McCarron's own union, the Tailors, became Vice Chair. It was Connolly, with Larkin's support, who now proposed that Congress establish a political wing in the general expectation that Labour would be a major player in the new Home Rule Parliament.

Connolly was far more explicit and ambitious than Daly had been in 1902. Not only did he propose that the ITUC nominate pledge-bound Labour representatives in elections to public bodies, but it should set aside time at each conference to debate political issues, institute a political levy of a 1s a year on members to promote Labour candidates and instruct the executive 'to take all possible action to give effect' to its political agenda. He asked fellow delegates, 'When the representatives of Ireland came to meet in the old historic building in Dublin... , were the workers to be the only class that was not to be represented?'

Some remained unenthusiastic, especially those representing British-based unions, who said that their members were forbidden to take any part in political activity either 'through their branches or through affiliation to political bodies'. George Greig, a Belfast delegate who represented the National Amalgamated Union of Labour, said that, 'If the resolution was carried it would have a very disturbing effect on trades unions' because it asked members 'to take up questions upon which

they were divided'. Another Belfast delegate said they would be 'deliberately destroying its utility if they constructed ... Congress into a political party'. Nevertheless, the dominant mood, especially among younger, southern-based delegates was to press ahead.

Some of them, such as Bill O'Brien, pointed out that resolutions sent forward to annual conferences in Britain 'had been treated with contempt'. Another NAUL delegate, John Flanagan, agreed with O'Brien, but added that, 'It was an undoubted fact' that 'the heads of the Liberal and Nationalist Parties ... were capitalistic in their views, and it was quite possible that Mr. John Redmond and his Party might be more reactionary than the present Ulster Tory Party.' This warning did not prevent the motion being carried by 49 votes to 18 against. However, little was done until 1918.⁶

There were many reasons for this. For much of 1913 and early 1914 the Dublin Lockout and the consequences of defeat preoccupied the new generation of syndicalist militants in the South, while the escalating Home Rule crisis left the ITUC in a quandary, united in its opposition to Partition but divided on how best to avoid it. Most Irish-based unions called for a devolved Home Rule parliament for the whole island of Ireland, while Northerners in British-based affiliates argued for Ireland remaining an integral part of the United Kingdom.

When delegates gathered for the 1914 Congress in Dublin, disagreements soon arose over issues such as whether proportional representation should be used to elect members to the new Home Rule parliament, whether Ulster constituency boundaries should be redrawn to give greater weight to urban areas, and whether Ulster be excluded from Home Rule? The current president of the ITUC was Jim Larkin and he gave the floor to Connolly to press for a vote on the partition issue with a motion stating that 'any attempt to exclude any portion of Ireland from the provisions of the Home Rule Bill is undesirable'.⁷

Connolly targeted Henry Whitley, a veteran NGA delegate from Belfast who was advocating Ulster's exclusion from a Home Rule parliament and accused him of trying 'to conciliate a certain bigoted section' of the labour movement. 'Every attempt ... to prevent the Nationalist opinion of Ulster from expressing itself' had to be opposed', Connolly declared. 'The Orange capitalist class had stirred up the fiercest fires of religious bigotry to prevent the working class from uniting for its emancipation.' ITGWU members in Belfast 'would resist to the death the attempt to exclude them' from Home Rule. 'The frontiers of Ireland were fixed by Nature not

by the bigotry, malevolence, or class-creed of any party.’

Whitley agreed that no party had the right ‘to cut up Ireland’ and ‘Ulster would not have it, but there were many who would oppose Home Rule to the point of giving their lives who would just as obstinately refuse to have Ireland cut up. He refused as a printer in Ulster to be separated from his fellow-printers in the South.’

When the division was taken there were 84 votes for Connolly’s resolution and just two against. So, opposition to partition remained almost unanimous, although how to avoid it remained unresolved.⁸ This pattern of nationalist delegates pushing for Home Rule, and later for an Irish Republic would continue, as would opposition by unionist delegates to any degree of Irish autonomy. Like William Walker before him, Whitley questioned the wisdom of having a separate Irish Labour Party when their class interests dictated that they affiliate to the larger and more powerful British party. However, this argument lacked traction outside of Ulster.

• • • • •

The outbreak of the Great War transformed the political landscape. An initial burst of support for the war effort among nationalists soon gave way to war weariness, throwing divided political allegiances into sharper contrast than ever. Some trade union activists, such as Tom Johnson, a Liverpoolian transposed to Belfast, sought to reconcile colleagues by mobilising them on issues that united rather than divided them. This became increasingly difficult after 1916, when many prominent Dublin trade unionists participated in the Easter Rising and Connolly was executed for his leading role in it. By 1917, when Lloyd George invited the four main trades councils to participate in an Irish Convention to salvage the Home Rule project, only Belfast and Londonderry sent delegates. Dublin and Cork boycotted the event.

When Johnson proposed that the ITUC executive seek an invitation to the Convention it was rejected on the casting vote of Bill O’Brien, his successor as Congress President that year. By now O’Brien was emerging as Connolly’s ideological heir within the movement. He was firmly aligned with Sinn Féin, indeed, he was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood at this stage.⁹

In the following year, when Johnson organised the first protests against conscription in Belfast, believing it was an issue around which trade unionists could unite, it led instead to clashes between anti-war groups and workers engaged in shipbuilding, engineering and other war related industries. He was forced to move to Dublin, where he became secretary of the Committee which organised the 1918 general strike against

conscription, and later became leader of the Labour Party in the Free State.

Besides securing the support of the Irish Party, Sinn Féin, the All for Ireland movement, the Irish Volunteers, Cumann na mBan and ITUC&ILP, the strike against conscription had the blessing of the Catholic Church. At over half of the demonstrations on the day of the general strike the chair and in many cases the principal speaker was a Catholic priest. In Cork, where the largest rally took place, the principal speaker was Fr Thomas Dowling, a Capuchin Friar and Honorary Life President of the City's Trades Council, while in Dublin William Martin Murphy, the employers' leader in the 1913 lockout gave employees the day off, whereas in Belfast and Derry workers were told they would be dismissed if they failed to report for work.¹⁰ Far from uniting workers in opposition to the war, the strike reinforced existing ethnographic divisions.

A few months later the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress did an about face and abandoned its long declared intention to contest the next general election, giving Sinn Féin a clear run to seek a mandate for independence. It was effectively a decision of the southern-based leadership, although it had the support of some prominent individual Belfast trade unionists such as David Campbell. The official reason given for the decision was that Congress always assumed the election would be called after the peace was negotiated, rather than after the armistice of November 11th, 1918. But the unspoken reality was that it had proven impossible to persuade affiliates in the South to nominate candidates or, when they did, find members willing to run against Sinn Féin.

The situation was different in Belfast, where the Labour Representation Committee ignored the Congress decision and ran four candidates. These were Robert Waugh of the ASC&J, the largest union in the shipyards, who ran in the Victoria Ward. James Freeland of the ASE, the largest engineering union, ran in Cromac, Sam Kyle of TOSI ran in Shankill and the Liberal socialist barrister, S C Porter, ran in Pottinger. They secured between 26 per cent and 22 per cent of the vote, except for Freeland whose constituency had a large Catholic electorate. Even so, he secured a respectable 17 per cent and overall Belfast Labour won more votes than the Sinn Féin candidates, Eamon de Valera and James Connolly's former secretary Winifred Carney.¹¹

The price Belfast Labour paid for cross-community votes was to downplay the constitutional issue. The notice in the Unionist *Northern Whig* for the launch of the

campaign at the Ulster Hall asked readers to ‘Come and hear the unanswerable case for the creation of a strong *Independent Working Class* parliamentary party in Ulster’, while in the nationalist *Irish News* the appeal was to newly enfranchised women workers to ‘come and hear the case for the Working People’s Own Parliamentary Party’. As we have seen, Carson was having none of it. He asked members of the newly constituted Ulster Unionist Labour Alliance at a rally rhetorically, ‘When is a Unionist, not a Unionist?’, and gave the answer, ‘When he creates disunion’.¹²



The high-water mark of Belfast trade union militancy came a couple of weeks later in January 1919 with the strike for a 44-hour week in the engineering trades. Waugh and Freeland were leading members of the strike committee, while now it was Carson who was on the defensive. For over a month in January and February the strike committee ran Belfast as a de facto ‘soviet’. By contrast, the better known Limerick Soviet only lasted a fortnight and had very little to do with class politics. It was a protest against British martial law imposed in the wake of a clash between the RIC and IRA. But it fitted neatly into the nationalist narrative, whereas the Belfast strike suited neither a nationalist nor a Unionist agenda.

Yet, if the Belfast strikers represented a challenge by organised labour to Ulster’s industrial and political oligarchy, it was resolutely non-revolutionary in intent, rebuffing approaches of support from radical socialists and other trade unions alike. The strike committee was fearful that involvement by other organisations, even trades unions, might make them appear disloyal and split their ranks. Such a stance doomed the dispute because the Belfast workers needed the support of both the British TUC and the ILP&TUC to have any hope of success.

Despite this defeat, Belfast labour remained in good shape. When May Day rallies were held throughout Ireland two months later, the largest of all was in Ormeau Park, where 100,000 workers and their families gathered. But it was held on Saturday, May 4th, 1919, not May Day itself and unlike many of the southern rallies it resolutely eschewed revolutionary slogans and Red Flags.¹³



The reasons for the continued growth of Labour were the same in Belfast as elsewhere. It was the flood tide of militancy that had begun in the lead up to the First

World War with strikes such as those of the Belfast dockers and carters led by Jim Larkin in 1907, the railway workers strike across the United Kingdom in 1911 and the Dublin Lockout of 1913. When the Great War broke out in 1914 the British Government had to make its peace with the trade union movement or face defeat by Imperial Germany. De facto trade union recognition and the creation of statutory collective bargaining structures saw wages increase and working conditions improve. Between 1914 and 1919 trade union membership in Britain rose from 3.9 million to 7.9 million. In Ireland it rose from 110,000 to 159,000 over the same period and peaked at 229,000 in 1920. Kaiser Bill proved himself to be the best friend that the British and Irish worker had.

Workers' rising aspirations were reflected in the urban local elections of January 1920 with Labour emerging as the second largest party, winning 394 seats across the country, compared with 560 for Sinn Féin and 355 for the Unionists. Labour won 18 per cent of the first preference vote nationally and over 21 per cent in Belfast. The significance of the Labour vote was not lost on Sinn Féin. It commissioned a report by Forbes Patterson, an Ulster Protestant journalist who became a convert to Irish independence during his wartime service with the Canadian Army, on how to undermine Unionism and win over Loyalist workers. His solution was simple, he told Sinn Féin to implement the Democratic Programme of Dáil Éireann. Of course, Sinn Féin rejected the idea because it would have alienated the bulk of its supporters.¹⁴

In 1919 organised workers in trade unions only comprised 7.3 ten per cent of the population¹⁵ and there were no concentrations of workers anywhere in the South to match the Belfast shipyards. The refusal of Sinn Féin to engage with industrial workers in the North, combined with mounting IRA activity in Ulster saw any possibility of working-class unity immolated in the furnace of the shipyard expulsions of July 1920.

The imposition of a retaliatory boycott of Belfast goods by Dáil Éireann, later extended to English imports, made partition a reality well before the Government of Ireland Act came into force in May 1921. In these circumstances, Labour's misfortunes in what became Northern Ireland were predictable. Not alone the ILP&TUC but the British TUC proved powerless in the face of Loyalist militants, whose actions were publicly defended by Carson and other Unionist leaders. Only Waugh's union, the ASC&J, attempted to discipline members over the shipyard expulsions and lost 2,000 of them as a result. Both the British TUC and the ILP&TUC

conferences condemned the shipyard expulsions and there were calls at both for a ban on shipments of coal and steel to the Belfast yards, but they had little effect.¹⁶

Fissures in the labour movement extended far beyond the shipyards to the engineering shops, railways and textile mills. Nor were other sectors immune. As far back as December 1918, when the ILP&TUC decided not to contest the general election, INTO members in Coleraine, Lisburn, Londonderry and Newtownards seceded and in July 1919 they were joined by other disaffected members, as well as members of the rival Irish Protestant National Teachers Union who came together to establish the Ulster Teachers Union, which still exists today.¹⁷

Meanwhile, in early 1920 Michael Collins used the Irish Republican Brotherhood's network in the craft unions in the South to establish the Irish Engineering, Shipbuilding and Foundry Workers Union. The aim was to ensure that the leadership of these unions would back Dáil Éireann and the IRA if required to do so with general strikes, such as that in support of IRA hunger strikers in April 1920. Already there had been problems with politically sensitive disputes such as the Motor Permits Strike, when British-based unions had overruled their Irish branches and reached a settlement with Dublin Castle. Within a few weeks most members of the engineering trades in the future Irish Free State had defected to Collins' new union. The biggest engineering union, the ASE found its membership in the South reduced from 8,000 to 1,500.¹⁸ From May to December 1920 there was also a munitions strike, when dockers and railway workers refused to transport troops with weapons. The only exception was the Great Northern Line where railway workers not alone operated normally but offered to go South and 'rescue' stranded locomotives. So, the Labour movement was divided almost a year before Northern Ireland was established by law.

• • • • •

One of the consequences of the splintering of the Irish Labour movement, and particularly the violence of the shipyard expulsions was the virtual isolation of the movement in Belfast from the British TUC, as well as from the ILP&TUC. The Belfast branches of the ILP had attempted to affiliate to the British Labour Party in 1919, but their application was rejected and they were referred back to the Irish Congress. When a delegation of expelled shipyard workers addressed the TUC conference in September 1920 the official Belfast delegates remained silent. The British Labour Party subsequently sent a fact-finding Commission to Ireland to

investigate conditions but it never visited Belfast and when a Special Conference was called in London to discuss its report on the Irish situation on December 29th, 1920, it failed to address the question of Ulster, concentrating instead on British state repression in the South.

Not surprisingly, it declared that the British Cabinet had ‘plainly forfeited whatever rights it may have possessed to govern Ireland’. The British Labour Party called for an end to the policy of military repression, the withdrawal of British armed forces from Ireland and recommended that responsibility for maintaining law and order should be given to the local authorities. The party also called for immediate elections by proportional representation to a constituent assembly that could devise ‘whatever constitution for Ireland the Irish people desire’.

The Labour Party had always been sympathetic to Irish self-determination but, like the Liberals and Conservatives, it was increasingly impatient that the Irish Question was a distraction from urgent domestic issues and proving divisive in its own ranks. Nor did partition have the same significance for its members as it had for Irish trade unionists.¹⁹ In short, British politicians wanted shut of the Irish Question.

.

As the Irish Labour Movement had no viable strategy to deal with the ethnographic conflict that divided members in the North, it was unable to withstand the dominant forces of Irish nationalism in the South and Ulster Unionism in the North. The debate at the 1920 conference of the ILP&TUC exposed the impotence of the Labour movement in trying to reverse the effects of the pogrom. Delegates demanded ‘drastic action’ to reinstate expelled shipyard workers, but it proved impossible to decide how this could be done. Funds were collected to alleviate hardship among the families of expelled workers but they were told to ‘fight their corner’ as there were no jobs, or houses for them in the South.²⁰

Belfast Labour was still on the defensive in May 1921 when the first elections were called to the Northern Ireland Parliament. Nevertheless, four Belfast Labour candidates ran for the new assembly. They were the Rev J Bruce Wallace, a radical London based Congregationalist Minister originally from Limavady, James Baird and John Hanna, who had both been members of the 44-hour strike committee in 1919 but had been expelled from the shipyards in 1920 as rotten Prods, and Harry Midgley, organising secretary of the Irish Linenlappers’ and Warehouse Workers’ Union (later the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers NUDAW).

All four men had campaigned for reinstatement of expelled workers from the yards and were inevitably labelled as Sinn Féin supporters by their Unionist opponents and as godless socialists by the nationalists. They faced massive intimidation in the campaign and received derisory votes.

Of the four, Midgley was the only one who would carve out a significant political career subsequently. He had been a member of the Independent Labour Party and a disciple of Connolly in his youth, helping to build the ILP Hall in Belfast before emigrating to Canada. Returning on holiday in the summer of 1914, he joined the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers with his brother when war was declared. On being demobbed in the summer of 1919 he worked briefly in Harland and Wolff before becoming organising secretary of the ILWWU. Like the majority of Belfast Labour Party members, he supported all-Ireland home rule, but with close ties to the UK. A flamboyant and frequently acerbic speaker, he built his base on a mixture of revolutionary rhetoric, practical gasworks socialism and dedicated clientelism. His speech at the 1920 May Day rally in Belfast praising the German and Russian workers for overthrowing the Kaiser and the Tsar, while also demanding jobs for ex-servicemen, rent controls and municipal reform was par for the course.²¹

In the 1921 election, the four Labour candidates ran advertisements in the *Northern Whig* and *Belfast News Letter* demanding ‘Civil and Religious Liberty!’ while in the *Irish News* they declared that, ‘We stand for an unpartitioned Ireland based on the goodwill of all who love their native land’. Partition itself they denounced as ‘an unworkable stupidity’. This failed to win over nationalist voters, let alone Unionists. When they launched their campaign in the Ulster Hall on May 17th, 1921, the platform was stormed by Loyalist gate crashers, who received a congratulatory telegram from Sir James Craig for their efforts.

All four BLP candidates, like Sinn Féin and the nationalists, vowed not to take their seats if elected to the new parliament. But they polled so poorly that the issue did not arise. The Rev Wallace had the best result with 975 votes in North Belfast, followed by Baird with 875 in South Belfast. Midgley won 645 votes in East Belfast and Hanna a derisory 367 in West Belfast, suggesting that Protestant workers were marginally more susceptible to radical socialism than their Catholic counterparts.²²

• • • • •

Inevitably, the debate on events in Northern Ireland at the ILP&TUC conference in August 1921 had a surreal dimension to it. Partition was denounced as

‘being destructive of the growing unity and strength of labour, and devised to prevent the Ulster workers from partaking of the fruits of the struggle of the industrial and political forces of the Irish working class against capitalism and landlordism’.

Delegates declared themselves ‘prepared to use all our strength and all the means at our disposal to prevent the separation of one part of Ireland from another’ and went on to debate what degree of autonomy might be granted to Ulster after the Belfast boycott had finally brought Loyalists to their senses.

They voted unanimously for a resolution proposed by Tom Johnson that the constitution of the new Irish state ‘be based frankly on labour and service... The conditions of enfranchisement should be entirely different from those which prevailed to-day’. Farm labourers would vote in the agricultural constituency, building workers in construction and shipyard workers ‘in the shipbuilding trade’. Constituencies organized in this way would make workers more aware of their class interests. The only obstacle ‘was a small body of Protestant workers who did not understand the economic position as far as Belfast was concerned, and spoke in the same voice as the employing class’. Johnson told delegates that he was confident ‘partition would die a natural death’.²³

In case anyone was in any doubt where Labour’s loyalty lay in the South, the executive invited the President of Dáil Éireann, Eamon de Valera to address the opening session of the Congress in Dublin. He told delegates that,

were it not for the solidarity of Labour behind the national cause in Ireland, not merely in recent years, but during the long past, the Irish cause would not be where it is today. ... We who are in a position to gauge the advance of the Irish cause from day to day, know what your support has been to us, and what your refusal to put forward even your own special interests has meant to the cause of Ireland in the past two years.²⁴

Of course, the ceasefire between the Dáil Éireann and British governments was less than a month old at the time and there was a sense of euphoria in the South, with trade union militancy still on the rise in areas such as engineering, transport and agriculture.²⁵

This militancy was soon to be tested by the end of the post-war boom and a

concerted offensive by the employers to cut pay and conditions. The split in militant nationalist ranks caused by the Treaty also caused division in the ILP&TUC. Early talk of using the remnants of Connolly's Irish Citizen Army to create a Workers Army under the auspices of Congress as a Third Force to counter the pro and anti-Treaty factions of the IRA came to nothing.

Indecision was the hallmark of Congress in this period. Some affiliates, such as the new Irish Engineering Union wanted to facilitate a clear run by the rival pro and anti-Treaty sections of Sinn Féin in the 1922 general election. The IWWU denounced parliamentarism as a distraction from the class war, while other unions wanted a plebiscite to be held on the Treaty, and the ILP&TUC executive considered a proposal that Labour should contest the election but sit with whichever Sinn Féin bloc won the most seats. It was left to Thomas Kennedy, a veteran of the Lockout and 1916 to tell delegates that 'it was alright talking about a Workers republic' but when they went looking for votes the question they would be asked on the doorsteps was 'whether you are for peace or war', and Labour in the South became a de facto pro-Treaty party.²⁶

The situation for Labour leaders in the North was even grimmer, but simpler as the Northern Ireland Parliament was already an established fact and after the gruelling ordeal of the 1921 election the movement achieved a surprising boost to morale in 1923 when Midgley made a dramatic comeback, almost winning a by-election in West Belfast. The opportunity arose because Joe Devlin, the nationalist leader boycotted the contest in protest at the electoral boundaries being redrawn to ensure he could not win.

Despite being attacked from both sides of the sectarian divide, Midgley with 22,255 votes was only narrowly defeated by the successful Unionist candidate Sir Robert Lynn, with 24,975. Midgley's war record stood him in good stead in Protestant areas, while he called for the release of republican prisoners in Catholic areas. His manifesto demanding better social welfare services, job creation and a tax on high incomes went down well in a constituency with 19 per cent unemployment.

His performance provided a major boost for morale that reinvigorated the movement. The Belfast Labour Party reconstituted itself as the Labour Party (Northern Ireland) in January 1924 and subsequently became the Northern Ireland Labour Party in 1930. Midgley was elected to Belfast city council in January 1924, one of two gains for Labour and when a general election was called in October he put in another strong performance against Lynn with an unabashedly socialist

programme. On this occasion he benefitted from a decision by Sinn Féin to put forward an internee, Patrick Nash, because the *Irish News* hated Sinn Féin even more than it hated the Unionists and threw its weight behind him. Midgley called for an end to internment and the release of ‘the men on the *Argenta*’ prison ship, although he told voters on the Falls frankly that an Irish Republic was not synonymous with freedom for Irish workers. By contrast, on the Shankill his meetings were broken up, his election agent Jack Beattie beaten up, members of Orange Lodges were warned that they faced expulsion if they canvassed for Labour and there was even a ditty in the *Northern Whig*, inspired by the arrival of Terence MacSwiney’s sister Mary to campaign for Nash. The ditty portrayed Midgley as a Republican candidate masquerading as a socialist. It ran:

I’m sitting on the stile Mary,
I should be on your side
But I want to gull the Orangemen
And so I try to hide
The Green Flag underneath the Red
Till polling day goes by
The Red is on my lips Mary
But the green flag’s in my eye.

When the result came in on October 30th, 1924, Lynn won by 28,435 votes to 21,122 for Midgley, and Nash had 2,688. Midgley’s performance showed that the 1923 election had not been a flash in the pan. In fact, the Unionists were sufficiently worried for Carson to make a personal appeal for voters to support Lynn.²⁷

Midgley never managed to be elected to Westminster but he held his Dock ward seat as a councillor from 1925–9 and then as alderman from 1929–43. He continued advocating radical social reform programmes in areas such as education, health and housing. He took principled and unpopular positions on issues such as the defence of the Spanish Republic in the 1930s, which saw his support squeezed by nationalists who denounced him as a crypto communist and by Unionists who attacked him as a covert republican.

He saw the rise of fascism as the biggest political threat to the left in the 1930s and advocated an alliance of all Labour parties across the British Commonwealth. Theoretically, this could include the Irish Labour Party but it remained resolutely

aloof. When Midgley won the strongly Loyalist Belfast Willowfield constituency for the NILP in 1941 it shook the Unionist establishment to the core, but it also led to conflict with anti-partitionist members of his own party including its leader, Jack Beattie.

In 1942 Midgley resigned and launched his own Commonwealth Labour Party. The NUDAW sacked him as a union organiser but his electoral support grew, especially among skilled workers. He advocated implementation of the Beveridge report and the creation of a welfare state with massive investment in housing, free education and a National Health Service, not to mention nationalisation of major industries.

In 1943 he became the first non-UUP Stormont Minister in the wartime Government. His popularity with working-class voters remained high and in 1947 he wound up the CWLP and not alone joined the UUP, but the Orange Order and Royal Black Preceptory as the price of retaining a cabinet seat and his ability to maximise the implementation of the welfare state within Northern Ireland. As the years progressed his attitudes increasingly aligned with those of the Unionist establishment. He praised the British Commonwealth as containing ‘all that is best in the human race’, denounced nationalists and Catholics as ‘traitors’, and described the Vatican and the Kremlin as the two greatest threats to democracy and freedom.²⁸

It was a long journey for a young disciple of James Connolly to undertake but like any politician, Midgley made strategic choices that he could rationalise as being in the best interests of those he represented. If he wished to remain politically relevant and pursue progressive policies, albeit ones restricted largely to what might be termed ‘welfare socialism’, he had to buy into the prevailing political ethos. There would be no significant changes in the political landscape until 1968, over a decade after his death.

References

- 1 ITUC Report 1902, pages 42-3
- 2 ITUC Report 1903, page 38
- 3 Clarkson, J D, *Labour and Nationalism in Ireland*, New York, 1978, p 254
- 4 Nevin, D (ed) *Trade Union Century*, Congress Membership, page 433, Mercier, 1994, Cork
- 5 Cork Workers Club, *The Connolly-Walker Controversy: On Socialist Unity in Ireland*, undated
- 6 ITUC Report 1912, pages 12-19
- 7 ITUC Report 1914, page 60
- 8 ITUC Report 1914, pages 70-4. Whitley no doubt voted with the majority. (No named vote was called so we cannot know for certain.)

- 9 Yeates, P. The Men ‘going into the Convention... did not own their own souls’: The Labour Movement and the Irish Convention, *Saothar 45*, Journal of the Irish Labour History Society, 2020
- 10 Yeates, P. ‘Have You All Gone Mad’: The General Strike Against Conscription, 1918, *Saothar 43*, 2018. BMH WS1766
- 11 Woggan, H. ‘Winifred Carney in the 1918 elections: Her stand for women, James Connolly and the Workers’ Republic’, *Saothar 43*, 2018
- 12 Morgan, A. *Labour and Partition*, pages 220-221, 252-6, Pluto Press, London, 1991. Patterson, H. *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, pages 121-4, Blackstaff Press, Belfast, 1980
- 13 Morgan, op.cit. page 248, Loughlin, C J V, *Labour and the Politics of Disloyalty in Belfast, 1921-39*, pages 45-6, Palgrave Pivot
- 13 Mitchell, A. *Revolutionary Government in Ireland, Dáil Éireann 1919-21*, Gill and Macmillan, pages 123-4 and 166-8, 1995
- 15 This is the total membership of unions affiliated to the ILP&TUC as a percentage of the population of Ireland in 1911. While it does not include the membership of unions only affiliated to the TUC it is based on population Census in 1911, which had grown significantly by 1920
- 16 Bell, G. *Hesitant Comrades: The Irish Revolution and the British Labour Movement*, pages 85-94, Pluto Press 2016, *Report of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress 1920*, pages 100-106 and *Report of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress*, pages 84-5
- 17 Ward, N. *Divided Loyalties – Divided Teachers*, Vere Foster Lecture 2014, Puirseil, N *Kindling the Flame, 150 Years of the Irish National Teachers Organisation*, pages 55-8, Gill Books
- 18 Yeates, P. *Irish Craft Unions in a Time of Revolution*, TEEU, 2016 and https://www.academia.edu/29175943/irish_craft_workers_in_a_time_of_revolution
- 19 Gibbons, I. *The British Labour Party and the Establishment of the Irish Free State, 1918-1924*, Palgrave Macmillan, pages 39-40, 2015. Ramsay MacDonald, the leader of the first Labour government had been William Walker’s election agent in North Belfast in the 1905 by-election
- 20 *Report of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress 1920*, pages 104-106
- 21 White, L W. Harry Midgley, *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, 2021
- 22 Walker, G. *The Politics of Frustration: Harry Midgley and the Failure of Labour in Northern Ireland*, pages 20-5, Manchester University Press
- 23 *Report of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, 1921*, pages 144-7
- 24 *Report of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, 1921*, pages 81-2
- 25 O’Connor, E. *Syndicalism in Ireland, 1917-1923*, Cork University Press, chpt 5. 1988.
- 26 For debates on the Treaty see the ILP&TUC Report of the Special Congress on Election Policy in Dublin, 21st February 1922, and the Report of the 28th Annual Conference, in Dublin, August 1922. See also Yeates, P *A City in Civil War: Dublin 1921-1924*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, pages 44-54 and McCarthy, C ‘Labour and the 1922 General Election’ *Saothar 7*, 1981
- 26 Morgan, A. op.cit 222-325, Walker, G op.cit pages 29-38
- 28 White op.cit

Zoom discussion chaired by Deirdre Mac Bride

[**Deirdre Mac Bride**] Pádraig, that was absolutely fascinating and really incisive, and very interesting in terms of the discussion of what happened to Northern labour and Southern labour. And you touched on questions I was going to ask but you covered them all. What I *would* ask is: in this period, what was happening to women who were organised into trade unions, what positions were they taking?

[**Pádraig Yeates**] That's a very good question. In the South there *was* radicalisation amongst women workers – such as Cissy Cahalan of the Irish Drapers Assistants, who was a very prominent figure in Congress, one of the very few working-class women in the South who was able to achieve a position of influence at this time; she became president of her union, for example – but generally speaking women were very overshadowed in this period in the South. The most prominent female trade unionist was Louie Bennet who like many feminists of the period came from a middle class background, in her case Unionist. She took over the Irish Women Workers' Union in 1918 when it was almost moribund and her first action was to move its head office from Liberty Hall to new offices in North Great Denmark Street. She said no respectable woman would join any organisation associated with Liberty Hall. Male-dominated unions such as the ITGWU were not particularly receptive to women members' needs at the time and had treated the IWWU as a branch of the union. Bennett realised that for the union to achieve its potential it had to have its own identity. She was a very effective union organiser and it became the largest women's union in Ireland, subsequently amalgamating with the Federated Workers' Union of Ireland in 1984. It achieved a lot, not only for its own members but for all workers in the Free State when it secured the annual two weeks summer holiday with the 1945 laundry strike.

And I suppose, the other most prominent person was Margaret Buckley who later became President of Sinn Féin. She was a member of the British Women Workers' Union, which had quite a few branches in Ireland during the First World War, mainly in the industries related to the war, and they were bigger in fact than the Irish Women

Workers' Union, but they withdrew from Ireland after the war was over, and Margaret then moved into radical separatist politics. And that seemed to be a very common pattern: women who were very active in the feminist and labour movements tended to gravitate, like Constance Markievicz – who again would have been quite left-wing in her views, a socialist in fact – towards militant nationalism, that was their outlet.

To be honest, I wouldn't know much about the role of Northern women in Belfast, but they don't seem to have been particularly prominent in political terms, nor in terms of the direction in which the labour movement was going. The movement was very much male dominated, and Edwardian values would have been to the fore, and the role of women was more constrained. Indeed, the more you look into this period the more you see women being constrained and not having the same prominence they had earlier. And where they did attempt to step out of line, the most famous example – or most *infamous* example – is probably around the Treaty debates, where you had people like Mary McSwiney, Constance Markievicz or Kathleen Lynn, actually being characterised as 'hags', and 'fanatics' and 'bitter', because they wouldn't accept the Treaty. It was very much a gender-based attack on them.

[**Deirdre Mac Bride**] I would just add to that the other thing that Marie Coleman drew attention to, which was that with the extension of the franchise huge numbers of women were not able to exercise their influence in that way, because they didn't get the vote until much later.

[**Martin Snodden**] I found that extremely interesting, Pádraig; I really appreciated the opportunity to listen into it. I do have a question around one of the women that you mentioned: Winifred Carney. And it's connected with the labour/class unity/socialist ideology that unified people in the North, some of whom travelled down South under the banner of the Irish Republican Congress, and were driven out of Bodenstown by the traditionalists in the Republican movement, the Irish nationalist movement. Winifred Carney married George McBride, who was a Shankill Road man, an Ulster Covenant signatory, fought in the 36th (Ulster) Division, and yet the

labour movement actually united such people at that time. So, what I would like to know is: whatever happened to the Irish Republican Congress afterwards?

[**Pádraig Yeates**] The Irish Republican Congress didn't last very long at all, it split. In fact, even shortly after it was formed it had split. It split I suppose between the people who were more republican and the people who were more socialist. Yet it had a long legacy, which I think was destructive in a way, or at least was interesting. When the republican movement split in 1969-70, one of the arguments for what became the Official movement, of keeping control of, if you like, the official structures of the republican movement, was that when the Republican Congress had walked out, they had the support of the majority of members within the wider republican movement, including the IRA, but they gave it up to set up a new organisation, and that new organisation failed. And I think up until very recently, if you set up any organisation that was primarily socialist or class-based it would always lose out in a contest with another organisation that was primarily based within a particular tribe, for want of a better term, within more traditional sectarian politics.

But the Republican Congress disappeared very quickly, they were ejected from Bodenstown when the Belfast contingent went down to participate in a commemoration in 1934, and they never really came back from that. The majority of young activists wouldn't follow them. Some of the most committed Congress members eventually went to Spain to serve in the International Brigades, but most Republicans stayed with the traditional republican movement, others would join the Labour Party, but the Republican Congress died out very quickly. I knew George Gilmore very slightly, I knew his brother Charlie very well; Charlie was a supporter of ours; he used to come into the *United Irishman* office and get newspapers and sell them on behalf of the movement, so they were still hanging around but they were very marginal figures by then.

[**Tim Smith**] If you look at Connolly pre-1916 and you look at the Irish Citizen Army pre-1916, and all their talk and enthusiasm about socialism... And yet after the Rising the Irish Citizen Army didn't really take part in later events – from 1919 on into the

1920s and such. Would you say that much of that would be because a lot of them said to themselves: hold on a minute, we're not going to get what Connolly really sought – which was a 32-County *Socialist* Republic – because many of the ones now in the leadership of Sinn Féin are right-wing in their attitudes and policies. And so they didn't get involved because of that?

[**Pádraig Yeates**] I think one of the problems was that the Irish Citizen Army was very small, only 228 people we know went out in 1916. Once Connolly is gone, really the political strategist is gone, you are talking about a workers' militia... If you look at the minutes of meetings of the Irish Citizen Army after 1916 it is mainly rows about the drinking club and about regulations. A few of them took part in other activities, but anyone who was very active tended to drift into the IRA at the time, so the movement was much too small to do anything. In fact, in 1922, the Irish Trade Union Congress tried to set up its own army, if you like, as a counterweight to the pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty volunteers, and they approached the Irish Citizen Army, but it was much too small, it wasn't capable of doing that, and anyway, it too split. I know a man, whose grandfather left the Irish Citizen Army and joined the National Army and was actually a piper in the No. 1 Army Band, and I know another man who was in the Irish Citizen Army as a youngster, and he went with the anti-Treaty IRA and stayed with them. So, beyond a subscription to the ideal of a Socialist republic it had no great ideological basis. It didn't have the numbers, it didn't have the intellectual or organisational resources to really survive, and it was really little more than a drinking club after 1916.

[**Tim Smith**] It has actually come out recently that they still had an organisation of sorts in existence, under Bob de Coeur. It has been revealed that they were involved in a lot of intelligence stuff, and a lot of that was of assistance to Collins.

[**Pádraig Yeates**] Probably one of the most important figures was a man called Mickey Donnelly, who was on the docks, a 1916 veteran, who was the man who initiated the munitions strike. He went up to Liberty Hall when Bill O'Brien was

running the place, and said: look, the British dockers have boycotted arms supplies to Poland to fight against the Soviet Union, can we do the same here? And Bill O'Brien said 'yes, you can'. So it actually began with Citizen Army members on the North Wall in Dublin. But again we're talking about very small numbers of people. Mickey Donnelly was a life-long trade union activist, and his son, also Michael, was president of the Dockers Union for many years. But they were individuals, they just didn't have the critical mass to organise as a movement. They also tended to reinvent themselves at times. Some of them came together again in the thirties and supported things like transport strikes by the Dublin bus workers, but these were sporadic actions, the organisation itself didn't really survive, certainly not after that first generation. You are talking about 200-odd people, most of them working-class people, most of them without a great education, many of them in casual jobs, they just didn't have the resources to develop into something more significant, unfortunately.

[**Peter Bunting**] Pádraig, that was fascinating, loved it! Could I just point out that – you were talking about the Irish Citizen Army – one of those guys, Seamus McGowan, is buried in our churchyard, here in Drumcondra. He died in 1965 and there is a 'starry plough' over his grave, he's in the Church of Ireland church there down by the *Cat & Cage* if anybody is interested in looking at his grave. The main question I wanted to ask you is this: When we look at the situation currently in Ireland there is a group called 'Trade Unionists for a United Ireland'. And I believe that they have the potential for splitting the trade union movement, as it was split many years ago following Partition. And would you have any comments in relation to that, Pádraig? Because I am aghast at the behaviour of some people who are involved in 'Trade Unionists for a United Ireland' whose sole rationale seems to be to follow the Shinnors regarding Ireland's future. And I believe that that has, and will have, consequences for a united trade union movement in Northern Ireland.

[**Pádraig Yeates**] It's a big question. As you know better than I do, Peter, unity is the lifeblood of the trade union movement, but unity has to be on the basis of

consensus, and if you introduce some issue which is divisive then you are starting from a bad place. So I take on board what you are saying. It's a problem, a huge problem for the trade union movement: how do you have a position on something so central as the question of 'Irish unity' *versus* 'maintaining the Union', and keep unity within the movement itself. I would be worried certainly that it could cause a split again, and I don't have any answers to that. I think the labour movement, despite its tremendous strength – after all, it is the biggest civil society body on these islands – but in a peculiar way precisely because it doesn't have a position on the 'supporting the Union' *versus* 'supporting a United Ireland' it is very vulnerable to further splits. And I think there is every possibility that there will be more splits. Maybe if more centralist politics develop – for example, if you look at the growth the Alliance Party has witnessed in recent times – it might need to cling to something like that, a centre ground, and work on a class basis, and keep the lid on the split issues, the things that agitate people, people on both sides. But I agree with you that it's a very very difficult position and historically it has been a burden that the trade union movement has had to carry, ever since its foundation in 1894.

[Peter Bunting] In answer to that, I have worked for ICTU for sixteen years in Northern Ireland, and I was always very conscious that we called it 'Northern Ireland', and we did this, we did that. And I think that all the work we have done over the years is being threatened now by 'Trade Unionists for a United Ireland'. And the corollary of that would be that if you had a group of Protestant people, or Unionist people who are in the trade union movement, saying 'Trade Unionists for maintaining the Union', it would be accused of being bigoted and partisan and everything else, and yet here we are having a number of very prominent trade unionists in the Republic of Ireland involved in this movement. And which I am totally against, and I am saying that as a Republican, by the way. But we are not learning from history.

[Pádraig Yeates] I agree, Peter, I agree.

[**Deirdre Mac Bride**] Peter, those are really interesting questions you raised, and it strikes me that the comment you were making, Pádraig, about Whitley, was he someone who was trying to hold things together?

[**Pádraig Yeates**] Yes, very much so. He would have been a bit older than Connolly or Larkin, he was around in the Trade Union Congress, his name comes up regularly in the minutes. Very much mainstream traditional trade unionist involved in working for better pay and conditions, housing, health, those sort of issues, who would have been very wary of anything divisive. I got the impression that most of the Belfast delegates were traditional craft workers – they came from craft unions – and they were very aware of the potential divisions and were quite moderate. The trouble is if you are holding to a more moderate position and you have someone – an orator like Connolly, for example – in full flight, it is very difficult then to promote a more moderate, a more sober argument, if you like. And I must say my own attitude towards Connolly has changed over the years, from sort of almost a hero-worship, to eventually realising more and more that this was a driven man and he was driven by an image that had more to do with – or so I feel – militant nationalism than it did with socialism.

But nationalism has always had that advantage, what with all its rhetorical flourishes and dramatic romantic images of the future, and constantly claiming that the only thing holding us back are these narrow-minded reactionary individuals, it's a very very hard argument to stand against. But I would be hopeful, although I am based down south, I would be very hopeful when you see people like Naomi Long and moderate people in the Alliance Party, just as there are good people also in the SDLP and in the UUP who are quite moderate. I have a feeling, I am hopeful that in modern Northern Ireland people are more increasingly concerned with real-life issues, than they are with following various romantic visions, whatever side they're on. That applies as much to those holding to a British Empire vision as it does to the Republican vision. I am fairly agnostic at this stage on those issues. Like Peter I am a socialist, I am not really bothered what the flag over Stormont or Leinster House

or Westminster is, it's mainly class issues that would concern me.

[**Richard Grayson**] I was just thinking, what you were saying about people in different parties who are possibly less bothered about the flag issues than they would have been in the past, I think that has been the case with the SDLP for some time, and I do think that is starting to be the case with the Ulster Unionist Party; for example, the rhetoric from Doug Beattie is quite different from the rhetoric that has been there before. And I just wonder if you have any thoughts on whether there might be some kind of realignment coming up, perhaps more along class lines than on identity politics?

[**Pádraig Yeates**] I have the feeling that there *is* a sea-change, particularly among younger people who want to focus on real issues. I also think one problem Sinn Féin has at the moment is how to keep its twin-track momentum going, about getting into government in the South and becoming the biggest party in the North. I don't know how sustainable that is, in modern Ireland. The one thing they have got going for them in the South is the incompetence of the current government, particularly on the housing issue. I know a lot of young people who will vote for Sinn Féin, not because they are overly interested in a United Ireland, but because they want somewhere to live that is affordable. That's the biggest weapon Sinn Féin have got going for them. I think if that issue was resolved, that support might diminish. It's not intense as it is, these young people are not hard-core supporters, they just want answers to problems in their lives which we brought on ourselves by pursuing a neo-liberal economic model for so long, where everything else was subordinate to the pursuit of notional growth figures, and GDP, and returns for big companies and so on. I see the legacy of such policies as a big threat, and unfortunately, as we see with austerity everywhere across Europe, it does breed extremism, it breeds simple solutions to complex problems. And my worry would be that we could be going to where some places in Eastern Europe have already gone. Looking for simple answers to very difficult questions.

[**Deirdre Mac Bride**] I found it interesting the DUP's recent conversations with the LCC [Loyalist Communities Council], which seemed to me to be a throwback to the constant need, ever since the establishment of Northern Ireland, for mainstream Unionism to keep the Protestant working class on side. And that seems to me to be the big question, that Unionism can't afford to lose that class vote.

[**Pádraig Yeates**] The big difference between Southern Unionism and Ulster Unionism was that Ulster Unionism had a massive working-class block they could mobilise, whereas the Southern Unionists were mainly landowners and business classes, so they could be sold out. But this LCC doesn't seem to be able to mobilise that many people, and hopefully that's a good sign.

[**Deirdre Mac Bride**] The problem is it's still all about 'waving the flag' and the signal that sends out can be dangerous...

[**Peter Bunting**] I would put the fact of the DUP talking to the LCC down more to the fact that they want them to protest for them. They're using the LCC and Loyalist animosity towards the Protocol as a threat to the British and Irish governments: we have these masses of people who have been engaged in violence before, so we can use them again. However, I am also hearing from *most* Loyalist groups that they're not going to fall into the trap which they fell into during the conflict, of fighting on behalf of the DUP or other Unionist parties, who then, after these Loyalists came out from prison, were then cast aside by these people – which is unlike what happened on the Republican end of things for years. So I think working-class Loyalists who were involved in the conflict, and who would be ex-combatants, are very much against getting involved in any violent type of behaviour.

However, I am also hearing *other things*... that one particular group, from what I gather, is getting involved more with these protests. And you're quite right, at the moment the initial bursts of organised violence were organised by a very small section of loyalism. But what I am now hearing, and which is worrying, is that there is a group who might well be behind some stuff in the future, and are working towards

that, and building their organisation up again.

But by and large we need to be very conscious of where we go over the next six months or so because it has got a possibility of becoming violent again, and then that leads to sectarianism, etc. And that's why I worry a lot, and am still working very hard with numerous groups in Northern Ireland towards the maintenance of peace and trying to build up what Richard was saying there about some form of mutuality along the lines of class unity. Because Northern Ireland has, and the working class here have, fallen far below the standards of what the working class have achieved in the Republic of Ireland, despite the fact that there generally has always been a right-wing government in the Republic of Ireland – and of course, you could say the same for here – but the working-class people in Northern Ireland in my view have become too dependent on welfare and that's the dangle which is always held up to them. But then due to British austerity pre-Covid they have lost a lot of that as well, and the employers here by the way can do whatever they like with employees who are not in trade unions. There is a large sector of people who are not in trade unions in Northern Ireland, who are in hospitality industry, etc., and there is also this self-employment carry-on, and bogus self-employment in the construction industry, where the plasterer's labourer is 'self-employed'. It's a nonsense, but again it illustrates how far the trade unions have moved away from ordinary working people, and the fact that we are not organising them sufficiently.

[**Pádraig Yeates**] On the nature of unions, in the South they are becoming increasingly public-sector based. So the agenda isn't as wide as it used to be. And that encourages other people to think: well, unions aren't for me. And also the highest levels of density within the union movement are in sectors like doctors, university lecturers, and so on, it's not in the traditional areas. In a funny way we are going back to the early days of the trade union movement when the craft unions were the dominant force; it was only when the Transport Union emerged with Larkin that that changed. And SIPTU is still the biggest union on this island in terms of numbers but you get the feeling that it is constantly being eroded, it is constantly under pressure,

and people like FÓRSA – which is no fault of FÓRSA – are very much more in the ascendant. I think there is a huge problem for the trade union movement North and South in terms of how does it organise the thousands of mainly young low-paid workers who are most in need of representation?

[Harry Donaghy] About half-past nine this morning I spoke outside this building here to a loyalist, someone of some influence. He was part of the UVF's negotiating team around the Good Friday Agreement, and we got into a conversation as to where we were all at currently. And how far we had all moved from the euphoria, the aspirations, the happiness even, experienced during the period surrounding the ceasefires and Good Friday Agreement. And let's not forget that it was Loyalists, former prisoners many of them, who confronted Paisley, confronted the DUP, back in April 1998, when the Agreement was in the process of being signed and confirmed, and they laid into the DUP. They reckon it was the only recorded time Paisley was seen, on camera, to turn on his big-size 14 boots and head at speed in the opposite direction!

Now, that happening back then was significant, but where are we now, today? People are again waving the flag, banging the drum and claiming "They're all out there, ready to drive us into the sea and if we don't stand united it's the end!" Now, that's more than one hundred years old that battle-cry! I intend to spend the weekend and a good proportion of next week talking again to Loyalist friends and colleagues, and asking them: why, with the exception of one or two individuals, there seems to be this hesitancy again of taking part in events like this, talks and discussions that we have organised over quite a few years now. Now, that worries me personally, because if current misperceptions and faulty arguments are not confronted, if other *counter*-arguments aren't put forward and honestly debated, then we could be in danger of losing that progressive element within Ulster Unionism and Loyalism which, at the end of the day, will have to be given the space, and the voice, to stand up to what is going on.

The rhetoric being voiced in this whole debate around the Protocol is

frighteningly similar to how things were presented by mainstream Unionist politicians on so many occasions in the past. It is also amazing just how quickly the factuality of what actually took place in the intervening years since Britain voted to leave the EU has been undermined. Despite the fact that the DUP played a major leading role in making the most contentious issue of the moment – the Protocol – real, there doesn't seem to be – with some exceptions – voices within Unionism which are saying to the DUP: well, it's *your* bloody fault, if you had've let Theresa May carry on with what she was proposing to do with a hard border in Ireland, an agreement with the EU on that, things could have been so different. But it was Unionist intransigence which helped to thwart that. And one of the most vociferous and adamant people involved in all of that was Jeffery Donaldson. So as for this nonsense about 'is Jeffery on the moderate wing of the DUP?', let's put that type of question where it deserves to be – in fantasyland!

Now, as to the big questions that we are faced with today, I agree with you, Peter, that if they are not tackled in the appropriate manner this society for years to come could be a big, big loser, and that should worry all those people who want to see something different from the failed methodologies of the past, for that is basically all we've got. Unionism is celebrating one hundred years of their state and this is the sum total result? It's like something that Dante would write about.

[Deirdre Mac Bride] I think we've come to the end of this discussion. Pádraig, what you have been covering has been really thought-provoking, and, echoing Harry, it helps to throw light on where we are now. And the challenges facing labour all the time, and Peter's comment around 'trade unionists for unification' is a timely warning, really. So I will draw this discussion to a close. Thank you all for participating.

*Island Pamphlets produced in collaboration with the
Fellowship of Messines Association*

- (113) *The Long 60s (1) The Social, Economic and Political background to the ‘Long 60s’*
- (114) *The Long 60s (2) Civil Rights Internationally and the Crisis of the 1960s*
- (115) *The Long 60s (3) The Outbreak and Development of ‘the Troubles’*
- (116) *The Long 60s (4) The Road to Sunningdale and the UWC Strike of May 1974*
- (124) *The Long 60s (5) Civil Rights – Then and Now*
- (125) *The Long 60s (6) The Contemporary Influence, Relevance and Lessons of the 60s*
-
- (118) *Reflections on 1969 (1) 1969: How do we begin to recall that period?*
- (119) *Reflections on 1969 (2) Putting up, and taking down, the barricades*
- (120) *Reflections on 1969 (3) The Battle of the Shankill, 11-12 October 1969*
- (121) *Reflections on 1969 (4) The first Peace Dividends?*
- (122) *Reflections on 1969 (5) Loyalism and Unionism under Threat?*
- (123) *Reflections on 1969 (6) The Irish Diaspora in Britain & America: Benign or Malign Forces?*
-
- (126) *Reflections on Centenaries & Anniversaries (1) The Republican Movement Divides, December 1969–January 1970*
- (127) *Reflections on Centenaries & Anniversaries (2) The Belfast & Lisburn Expulsions, 1920*
- (129) *Reflections on Centenaries & Anniversaries (3) A Land Fit for Heroes?*
- (130) *Reflections on Centenaries & Anniversaries (4) Northern Ireland 1921: A State Born in Violence*
- (131) *Reflections on Centenaries & Anniversaries (5) James Craig’s quest to secure and embed Partition*
- (132) *Reflections on Centenaries & Anniversaries (6) A Carnival of Reaction? Labour and Partition*

All the above titles are available, for free download, from

<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications>
