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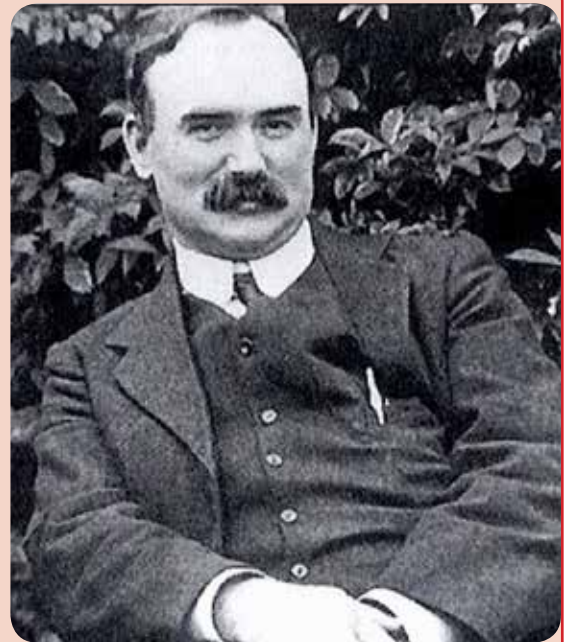
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Trade Union Left Forum Series

JAMES CONNOLLY AND THE POLITICS OF TRADE UNION STRUGGLE

To mark the one hundredth anniversary of the 1913 lockout the Trade Union Left Forum has chosen to reprint a number of James Connolly's important articles on the politics of trade union organisation and struggle.

Connolly is without doubt Ireland's great working class intellectual and organiser. His politics were unceremoniously class politics. To his understanding of history and his choice of strategy and tactics for his day he brought class analysis rooted in the works of Marx. He unapologetically represented his class in all aspects of life and struggle including union organisation, national freedom and cultural expression. Everything he did was with the aim of furthering the cause of freedom for working people, in which he understood the need to overthrow imperialism and build socialism – a society based in the ownership of the means of production by working people.



In suggesting a way forward for the union movement of the day Connolly understood the need for that to be placed within the context of class struggle. Union structures and tactics had to reflect the needs of class struggle, both economic and political. The trade union movement had to be both an industrial and political expression of working class people and could not afford to leave politics to others.

This should be born in mind when looking at the state of the trade union movement today. It is not good enough merely to remember the workers militancy in 1913, we must also remember the politics that inspired them. Revolutionists should not remain silent but should actively participate in their unions to promote change to

represent the needs of class struggle today with the same ultimate aim as James Connolly – the building of socialism.

The Trade Union Left Forum, in a small way, is part of that struggle.

STAY UP TO DATE!

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Irish Trade Union Congress (June 1901)

In trade unionism they have a platform broad enough, and an ideal lofty enough, for every Irishman ... One of the things most needed – after improved education and training – is capital ... There is always a great volume of Irish capital seeking investment outside Ireland ... But if, with improved educational facilities, the people of Ireland show themselves capable of making Irish investments remunerable, there is no doubt but plenty of capital will be forthcoming, all the more so as, owing to its enormous increase in these lands, there is a very great difficulty in finding investments at once sound and satisfactory. We, then, as organised workers, can say to those of our countrymen who, loving their country, desire to do her a service, and who control her capital: – “Let us join hands.” This is easily possible. Is it too much to hope for and expect such a union between the classes which represent Capital and Labour? I think – in fact I am assured – it is not, but if it is, let the workers of this country, used as they are to bearing heavy burdens, take the task of the industrial regeneration of Ireland upon their own broad shoulders. Let the workers of Ireland come to her rescue by the establishment of people’s banks.

Temperance orators, in their desire to awaken in the minds of their hearers a proper horror of the debasing effects of the liquor habit, are fond of searching the records of the police courts for cases in which crimes have been committed in the delirium of intoxication, and holding up the criminals in such cases as “horrible examples”. In the near future the student of society who desires to find illustrations of the debasing effects of a policy of compromise upon the minds of working class leaders, or of the intoxicating effects upon the brain of a formerly sensible man produced by the appearance of a body of reporters ready to take down a verbatim copy of his speech for the newspapers of their capitalist jury-masters – such a student will instinctively turn to the reports of Irish Trade Union Congresses, and so turning find “horrible examples” in abundance.

The excerpt we print above from the speech of Mr Bowman, President of the Trade Union Congress at Sligo, is a case in point. We are only stating what every workman knows to be the fact when we say that the delegates to Trade Union

Congresses are, as a rule, not the flower of the working class, but are rather the intriguers who, because they are willing to perform (for a cash consideration) the drudgery and routine work of trade unionism, are allowed by the too indulgent rank and file to work themselves into positions of notoriety and to pose as leaders. Yet as unintelligent and unimaginative as such delegates generally are, we question if there were a dozen present at Sligo who did not feel that the president’s appeal to capitalists to come and exploit the Irish workers – for that, stripped of all its tawdry rhetoric, is what Mr Bowman’s address meant – an appeal coupled with the assurance that Irish workers could make “Irish investments remunerative”, i.e. could make good, fat profit for their master – was an appeal which was to the last degree insulting and humiliating to the working class of this country.

A Socialist in the position of Mr Bowman would have striven to infuse into the minds of his hearers a spirit of revolt against the system that holds them as its slaves, a system that tortures them with want in the midst of locked-up storehouses

of plenty; a Socialist would have taught the workers to manfully take their destiny, politically and socially, into their own hands; Mr Bowman taught them to whine for capitalists to come and exploit them. The wage received by 87 per cent of the wage workers of Ireland is less than £1 per week; Mr Bowman tells them to achieve the industrial regeneration of Ireland by establishing “people’s banks” out of their savings!!! Out of the savings of men who support a family on less than £1 per week?? This is what the capitalist Evening Herald termed a “splendid statement”.

We do not grudge Mr Bowman the praise of the capitalist newspapers; he has fairly earned it, fairly earned the praise of the journalistic champions of the master class. But there were some Socialists, we believe, amongst the delegates to that Congress and we mean to have an explanation of their silence on that occasion. Were they afraid that they also might be accused of personal enmity to the president if they dared to criticise him? If they were, it is not of such stuff revolutionists are made.