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Plea For Socialist Unity in Ireland

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All thoughtful men and women who observe the political situations of their countries must realise that Ireland is on the verge of one of the most momentous constitutional changes in her history. Some form of self-government seems practically certain of realisation, not because of the increased fervour of the national demand, nor yet because, as Tory bigots blatantly assert, of the position of Mr. Redmond, but from the fact that there is no economic class in Ireland today whose interests as a class are bound up with the Union. The Irish landlords who had indeed something to fear from a Home Rule Parliament elected largely by tenant farmers, as would have been the case in the past, have now made their bargain under the various Land Purchase Acts, and, being economically secured, are now politically indifferent. Only the force of religious bigotry remains as an asset to Unionism.

It may be assumed that the 12th of July parade in Belfast this year will be exceptionally large, as every effort will be made, and no money spared, to make an imposing turnout in the hopes of, at the last moment, averting Home Rule, but the parade will be as the last flicker of the dying fire which blazes up before totally expiring. A spell of bad trade in Belfast might have enabled Orange orators to stir up rioting among idle mobs, but the rush of good trade we are at present enjoying destroys any chance of such senseless exhibitions. The Orangemen of today may hate the Pope, but he hates still more to lose time by rioting, when he might make money by working, and in this he shows the "good sense which pre-eminently distinguishes the city by the Lagan."

Home Rule, then, is almost a certainty of the future.

What are Irish Socialists doing in these circumstances? Are they exhibiting any Statesmanlike grasp of the situation, or are they still peddling along on sterile street corner theorisings without making any effort to consolidate their forces to seize the greater opportunities that are almost at their doors?

Let me attempt to answer this question.

There are in Ireland today two forms of Socialist organisations - the Independent Labour Party and the Socialist Party of Ireland. The former is strongest in the North, the latter strongest in the South, although it also has an active Branch in Belfast. The question which naturally arises as to whether there is any fundamental difference in policy or tactics between those two parties can be best answered by stating the attitude of the Socialist Party of Ireland (S.P.I.) towards the Irish Branches of the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.). The S.P.I., then, is so convinced of the need of unity among Socialists in Ireland that it is ready at any time to have a joint convention with the I.L.P., and to give to the delegates of such convention the power to debate and agree upon all questions of tactics, policy, and name for a new organisation to embrace all sections of the movement in Ireland. It believes that these questions which divide Socialists are not serious enough to warrant separate organisations in the one country, but can well be debated within one organisation; it maintains that the points upon which we disagree are not nearly so serious as the points upon which we thoroughly agree, and that there are more serious points of divergence between the various sections of the I.L.P. (or of the S.P.I.) than there are between the I.L.P. and the S.P.I., as organisations. What, then,

keeps the two organisations divided? Laying aside all questions of personality, personal ambitions, and personal jealousies as being accidental and inessential, it may be truthfully asserted that the one point of divergence is that the I.L.P. in Belfast believes that the Socialist movement in Ireland must per force remain a dues-paying, organic part of the British Socialist movement, or else forfeit its title to be considered a part of International Socialism, whereas the Socialist Party of Ireland maintains that the relations between Socialism in Ireland and in Great Britain should be based upon comradeship and mutual assistance, and not upon dues paying, should be fraternal and not organic, and should operate by exchange of literature and speakers rather than by attempts to treat as one two peoples of whom one has for 700 years nurtured an unending martyrdom rather than admit the unity or surrender its national identity. The Socialist Party of Ireland considers itself the only International Party in Ireland, since its conception of Internationalism is that of a free federation of free peoples, whereas that of the Belfast branches of the I.L.P. seems scarcely distinguishable from Imperialism, the merging of subjugated peoples in the political system of their conquerors. For the propagation universally of our ideal of a true internationalism there is only required the spread of reason and enlightenment amongst the peoples of the earth, whereas the conception of Internationalism tacitly accepted by our Comrades of the I.L.P. in Belfast required for its spread the flash of the sword of militarism, and the roar of a British 80-ton gun. We cannot conceive why our Comrades should insist that we are not Internationalists, and that we cannot be, unless we treat the Socialists of Great Britain better than we treat the Socialists of the Continent, or of America, or Australia.

This is a unique conception of Internationalism, unique and peculiar to Belfast. There is no 'most favoured nation clause' in Socialist diplomacy, and we, as Socialists in Ireland, can not afford to establish such a precedent.

Observe how this peculiarly Belfast attitude affects the development of Socialism in Ireland.

As everyone acquainted with Ireland knows, Nationalist Ireland contains all the elements of social struggles and worrying political theories. The fight of the landlord against the tenant, and the capitalist against the labourer, and vice versa, has ever waged in Ireland as fiercely as elsewhere. In the Nationalist ranks the democrat and the aristocrat, the revolutionist and the opportunist, all fight their battles, and, though weaker than the others, the Socialist also holds his own and delivers his message.

But in all this warring the advanced sections of Nationalist Ireland have looked in vain for help to the 'sturdy Protestant democracy of the North.'

At last, however, there arises in Belfast the Independent Labour Party, and hope of assistance springs up in the breasts of the battlers in the South. At last reinforcements are coming, it is thought, Protestant and Catholic working men and women can now unite as they have not done for a century in a common warfare against our common enemy. But slowly the news penetrates to us that Belfast refuses to recognise Ireland; its Labour men are so busy cheering Labour victories in England that it can give no time, nor hope, nor even encouragement to the men and women who are pioneering in Ireland. Finally, Belfast runs a Labour candidate, who declares publicly that he will vote against Home Rule or National Freedom, and the conviction spreads throughout Ireland that the rise of the I.L.P. in Belfast means nothing for social democracy in Ireland, but is simply the sign of a family quarrel among the Unionists.

Finally, I.L.P. men, delegates to the Irish Trades' Congress, vote at that gathering against the establishment of a Labour Party in Ireland. And this crime against the rise of a native Labour movement is committed in the name of Internationalism!!!

I have a great admiration for Comrade Walker, of Belfast, and I regretted the manifesto issued against him by the Irish Socialists during his Leith contest, but I am glad that he was defeated in North Belfast. This victory would have killed the hopes of Socialism among Irish Nationalists the world over. Not only in Ireland, but all over the continent of America and Australia, wherever Irishmen live and work, a vote given by Comrade Walker in the House of Commons against Home Rule would have filled the Irish with such an unreasoning and inveterate hatred of the cause that they would be lost to it for a generation. But imagine what our situation would have been in the rest of Ireland if the only Irish Socialist M.P. had voted against Home Rule. The cause in Ireland would have been completely discredited and damned. Nor would his opposition to Home Rule have softened the wrath or averted the hatred of the loyalists. Amongst the loyalists the I.L.P. in Ireland are believed to be Home Rulers, but, as they refuse to organise on an Irish basis, amongst the Home Rulers the I.L.P. are looked upon as Unionists-Labour Unionists, it is true, but still Unionists. And Unionism in Ireland means Toryism.

Now what is going to be done! Another Irish Trades' Congress is at hand, and already I see from the agenda that the same crime is being planned against the idea of a Labour Party in Ireland. The Trades' Council of Dublin have a motion in favour of the establishment of a Labour Party in Ireland; the Trades' Council of Belfast have a motion recommending, as the best means of securing Labour representation, that Trades Unions in Ireland be recommended to join the Labour Party (in England). The Dublin motion sets an example which every Trades' Council in Nationalist Ireland would follow: the Belfast motion would be limited in its following to Belfast. But then the Socialist movement would be saved the danger (?) of the rise of a political Labour movement in Ireland. So would Irish capitalism and clericalism.

Is it too late to appeal to our Belfast Comrades of the I.L.P. to come out of their impossibilist position? Why sacrifice all Ireland for the sake of a part of Belfast? The Socialist Party of Ireland asks them what harm can come from organising on the basis of Irish political life, in view of the fact that in a few years some form of legislative independence is sure to be established in Ireland. Are we to wait until that event occurs, and then rush around trying to do by means of meetings and oratory what should have been prepared for by long and patient organising and upbuilding? If the first elections in Ireland to a Home Rule Parliament finds the forces of Socialism unprepared to enter the field, there will be an awful responsibility at the door of some party, but not at the doors of the Socialist Party of Ireland.

We, I repeat, are willing and anxious to sit down in Convention with our I.L.P. Comrades in order to frame a programme and decide upon a policy and name for a Socialist organisation in Ireland, provided that it be conceded that such organisation be controlled in Ireland, recognise Ireland's right to self-government, and maintains equal friendly relations with Socialists of all nations, irrespective of the Government under which they live.

Is that too much to ask for?

James Connolly

P.S.

* From Forward, 27th May 1911.:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1911/connwalk/1-socunity.htm>