

James Connolly and the Irish Citizen Army

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The role of the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) in the 1916 Rising tends to be overlooked, or is portrayed as an auxiliary movement that played a minor role during the Rising. The ICA was a revolutionary army that grew out of the trade union movement during the Lockout in 1913. The idea of a defence force for workers had been in the air for some time as the locked-out workers were subject to assaults and intimidation by the police and the hired thugs of the employers. After Bloody Sunday in August 1913, both Larkin and Connolly were convinced that workers needed an organisation of their own to protect picket lines and union meetings from assault. The actual proposal to form a citizen army did not originate in Liberty Hall but in the conservative sheltered cloisters of Trinity College Dublin. At a meeting in the rooms of the Rev. R M Gwynn on 12 November 1913, Captain Jack White proposed a 'drilling scheme' for locked out workers and that a fund be opened to buy boots and staves. Jack White was an upper class Protestant supporter of Home Rule, public school educated, and a former member of the British Army who had fought in the Boer War. He approached Connolly with the suggestion, offering his services to train and drill any organisation that was set up. The next day at a rally to welcome Larkin home after his release from jail, James Connolly addressed the rally and in a dramatic announcement told the assembled crowd that they were in a 'state of war' and:

The next time we go out for a march I want to be accompanied by four battalions of our own men. I want them to have their own corporals and sergeants and men who will be able to 'form fours'. Why should we not drill men in Dublin as well as in Ulster. When you come down to draw your strike pay this week I want every man who is willing to enlist as a soldier to give his name and address, and you will

be informed where and when you have to attend for training.

Within a fortnight the first 'red army' anywhere in the world had been formed; 1,200 had enrolled and drilling had commenced under the command of Captain James White in Croydon Park. In reality the difference between those who enrolled in a fit of enthusiasm and the numbers who turned up for training was substantial. The ICA was not exactly a 'Red Army' perhaps a 'Red Guard' is a more apt description. On 27 November the ICA held its first march through the Streets of Dublin. Connolly explained the purpose and reasons for the formation of the ICA in a British socialist newspaper that December:

As a protection against brutal attacks of the uniformed bullies of the police force, as well as a measure possibly for future eventualities arising out of the ferment occasioned by the Carsonism in the North.

Connolly may have been conscious of the potential use of such a force when properly trained, 'but 'future eventualities' were far from the mind of the majority of the founders'.

The Citizen Army was never central to the dispute; even if it made the police more circumspect about attacking the workers. It also functioned as an outlet to counter the demoralising effect of idleness and unemployment. It was an army without uniforms or rifles, which at times made it an object of laughter on the streets of Dublin. But as Connolly was to recall 'its presence had kept the peace at labour meetings and protected the workers from the 'uniformed bullies'. It also prevented evictions'. As the dispute petered out in early 1914 attendances at parades diminished and the organisation was practically moribund.

In late January 1914, as the strike petered out, it seemed to a number of ac-

tivists that the ICA had ceased to be relevant. Republican ideology ran deep in the Dublin working class, and in the changed circumstances, a number of workers transferred their support from the ICA to the Irish Volunteers. The active membership had fallen to about fifty. On 24 January 1914 Sean O'Casey, who was the secretary of the ICA published in the *Irish Worker* 'An Open Letter to the Workers in the Volunteers'. O'Casey appealed to the workers of Ireland to stand by the ICA, and not to be taken in by the 'chattering well-fed aristocrats' who run the Volunteers, and not to 'drill or train for anything less than complete enfranchisement' and for 'the utter alteration of the present social system'. Over a number of weeks O'Casey argued for the independence of the ICA, and its development a force for socialism in Ireland. Larkin was the driving force behind the ICA at this stage and would not have published these articles unless they represented his position.

Defeat and Reorganisation

The decimation of the ITGWU in the course of the Lockout took its toll on the union and its leaders. Connolly, as always was indefatigable; working hard to rebuild the union. However, the political ground had shifted. The outbreak of the war in August 1914 ended the strike wave in Britain. In Ireland workers had little fight left in them; and for the next while sheer survival and rebuilding the union was the main priority. Larkin was physically and mentally exhausted. The terrible defeat had left Larkin in the position of a working class general without an army. Never a man to stand still and drawing on his last reserves of strength he threw himself into rebuilding the Irish Citizen Army. The two strands that made up the core of Larkin's politics were syndicalism and republicanism. Given the dearth of working class militancy Larkin's republican politics came to the fore. On 28 March 1914 a *Manifesto to the Workers of Ireland* was issued. It was signed by the leaders of the labour movement, but it bears the stamp of Larkin's hand, protesting at the proposed exclusion of the North in the Home Rule Bill.

If it is lawful for Carson to arm, it is lawful for us – the workers – to arm; if it is lawful for Carson to drill, it is lawful for us to drill.

Larkin called on the workers of Ireland to rally in Dublin to protest at:

The suggested amputation of Ireland's right hand, the exclusion of Ulster and the criminal and traitorous conduct of a class-conscious group masquerading as Army Officers, who have set themselves up as a military Junta evidently determined to thwart the will of the people.

By this time the ICA was in bad shape, the penalty of dismissal which the employers held over the heads of workers who associated with the ITGWU frightened hundreds of men into abandoning their connection with the Citizen Army. That was one aspect of the decline, but the creation of the Volunteers was one of the most effective blows which the Irish Citizen Army received. Thousands that had originally attached themselves to the Citizen Army passed over into the more attractive and better organised camp of the Volunteers.

Larkin reorganised the ICA and a new constitution drafted. Money was raised for uniforms and equipment. Tents were procured and summer training camps were organised in Croydon Park.

What was significant in the new ICA constitution was the absence of class politics. Not once is the working class mentioned; instead, vague generalities, about the 'people of Ireland' and 'Irish Nationhood', that would not be out of place in the constitution of the most conservative nationalist organisation, dominate the document:

1. That the first and last principle of the Irish Citizen Army is the avowal that the ownership of Ireland, moral and material, is vested of right in the people of Ireland.
2. That the Irish Citizen Army shall stand for the absolute unity of Irish nationhood, and shall support the rights

and liberties of the democracies of all other nations.

3. That one of its objects shall be to sink all differences of birth, property and creed under the common name of the Irish people.
4. That the citizen Army shall be open to all who accept the principle of equal rights and opportunities for the Irish people.

The original draft was amended so that clause two included the following: 'to arm and train all Irishmen capable of bearing arms to defend and enforce its first principle'. A fifth clause added at Larkin's suggestion at least nods towards the working class ethos of the ICA:

Every enrolled member must be, if possible, a member of a Trades Union recognised by the Irish Trade Union Congress.

A Council of twenty-four was elected, though this included Thomas Foran, the ITGWU president, and Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, a well known pacifist; both of whom were most likely elected for their influence rather than their military prowess. The ICA was an organisation of workers, an extension of the trade union movement, rather than an organisation of socialists: 'its ranks included many quite sophisticated socialists, but its training was military, not political'.

Captain White knocked the ICA into shape. The members worked hard at drill and military tactics evenings and weekends. Guns were obtained by any means possible. There were great discussions as to whether they would be classified as combatants and be protected by international law in the event of hostilities. Initially, each citizen soldier wore a blue armband and officers a red armband. Captain White put in an order for fifty uniforms of dark green serge from Arnott's outfitters. The battalion looked smart and military kitted out in the new uniforms, topped off with the famous slouched hat, worn in the same style as the South African Boers, one side pinned up with the

union red hand badge engraved with the initials ICA. The first consignment of uniforms engendered a sense of pride among the citizen soldiers; it demonstrated that they were in fact a real army that could stand comparison with the Volunteers at the Bodenstown parade or on any other public occasion.

Rebellion in the Air

Larkin had worked tirelessly over the previous seven years in Ireland, and had reached a point of mental and physical exhaustion that even his indefatigable spirit could not overcome. His friends and comrades urged him to take a break. He decided to travel to America, to raise funds for the union and to explain to American Labour the position of the Irish workers. In his farewell message Larkin announced that Connolly would take command of the Irish Citizen Army. At the end of October 1914, after Larkin's departure, Connolly arrived in Dublin and within days made his mark on the city, hanging a large banner across the front of Liberty Hall proclaiming: 'We serve neither King nor Kaiser – but Ireland'. Over the following months Connolly worked hard to rebuild the ITGWU and the ICA.

The resurgence of the ICA coincided with an upturn in the political atmosphere. Opposition to the war was growing, especially as the threat of conscription in Ireland increased. The split in the Volunteers had convinced the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) that now was the time to strike against the old enemy. A hint of rebellion was in the air and Connolly in the pages of the *Workers' Republic* fanned the flames.

Beginning in May 1915, in a series of articles in the *Workers' Republic*, Connolly tried to develop military tactics for modern revolutionary warfare. He set out the basis for a 'people's warfare' based on the experience of the revolutionary upheavals starting with the bourgeois revolutions in the nineteenth century and up to the socialist revolution in Moscow in 1905. In particular he was trying to develop a strategy for urban warfare such as the Citizen Army might be called upon to participate in. Connolly was certain that the British would not use cannon in

Dublin. His Marxist background convinced him that capitalist England would not destroy capitalist property in Ireland. Therefore the insurgents should occupy positions that were 'not a mere passive defence of a position valueless in itself, but the active defence of a position whose location threatens the supremacy or existence of the enemy'. Nine months later his military tactics would be tested to the hilt. On 30 May 1914 Connolly wrote in the *Irish Worker*:

We believe that there are no real Nationalists in Ireland outside of the Irish Labour Movement. All others merely reject one part or another of the British Conquest – the Labour Movement alone rejects it in its entirety and sets itself to the reconquest of Ireland as its aim.

This article, along with a series of articles that Connolly had published in the *Irish Worker* in 1912 was the basis for his pamphlet *The Reconquest of Ireland*, which was published by the ITGWU in 1915. In the *Irish Worker* Connolly laid out the path that led to the execution yard in Kilmainham jail just over a year later. This article is the key to understanding the direction that Connolly took the Citizen Army after he took command. His aim was to put labour in the forefront of the national struggle. Given the crisis thrown up by the war in Europe, the ICA would be the catalyst that could unite all sections of the nationalist movement in a revolutionary fight against the British presence in Ireland, while maintaining its political independence within the broader movement. In the months before the Rising all ICA members were asked to confirm their support for the Rising. They were asked three questions:

Are you prepared to take part in the fight for Ireland's freedom?
Are you prepared to fight alongside the Irish Volunteers? Are you prepared to fight without the aid of the Irish Volunteers?

Significantly they were not asked if they were prepared to fight for a workers republic, or precisely what they were fighting for.

Perhaps, it is only fair to leave the answer to that question to James Connolly. A few weeks before the Rising in the pages of the *Workers' Republic* he stated: 'The Irish working-class, the only secure foundation upon which a free nation can be reared'. Whether the ICA's participation in the Easter Rising was the correct course of action, and on what political basis, has been a matter of dispute and contention ever since.

This was always going to be a difficult political tightrope for Connolly to walk. The danger of liquidating the labour movement into the broader nationalist camp was always present, or of making political concessions that marginalised the labour programme in the name of unity. Many on the left believed that Connolly had lowered the red flag in favour of the green flag and that 'Labour had laid its precious gift of Independence on the altar of Irish Nationalism'. Captain Jack White in his autobiography first published in 1930 reflecting on his resignation from the ICA gives credence to this position:

If I had stayed with the Citizen Army instead of going off in a huff to the National Volunteers when the Transport Union appointed a committee to clip my wings and control me, I believe I could have merged National and Labour ideals instead of leaving the merger to come the other way round.

The Road to 1916

The question as to whether the Irish Volunteers or the Citizen Army should fight a defensive or an offensive war was a political, tactical and moral question that divided both organisations. Connolly's position was political rather than moral and whether the rebellion was a defensive or offensive war just a tactical question. If the British intervened to disarm the Volunteers or the ICA, or introduced conscription in Ireland then he would fight a defensive war that would have mass popular support. Connolly was a

Marxist and supporter of the Socialist International. In 1907 the congress at Stuttgart had passed a resolution that, in the event of an Imperialist war, the duty of socialists was to do all in their power to stop the war, and use the crisis to overthrow capitalism. Connolly was determined to turn the imperialist war into a class war. As he told Cathal O'Shannon: 'I have missed the opportunity before, but I won't miss it this time'.

On 19 January 1916, fearful that Connolly's strident demands for a rebellion would alarm the British Authorities and undermine their own plans, the IRB met with Connolly to discuss the situation. Connolly had declared that if the Volunteers were unwilling to go ahead, the Citizen Army would. The tone of Connolly's public demands for military action can be gauged from the pages of the *Workers' Republic*. On 22 January he issued a ringing call for action: 'the time for Ireland's battle is NOW, the place for Ireland's battle is here'. The IRB informed him of their own plans for a rising that Easter. He was told that Roger Casement was in Germany organising arms and ammunition to be shipped to Ireland. After three days of intense discussion and debate with Padraig Pearse, Sean MacDiarmada, and Joseph Plunkett he agreed to be co-opted onto the Military Council, thereby cementing the military alliance between the Volunteers and the Citizen Army.

England's Difficulty – Ireland's Opportunity

In the decade before the Great War the United Kingdom experienced a series of crises that were almost unprecedented in modern times around the struggle for constitutional reform in the House of Lords, the series of strikes that were part of the 'great unrest', the fight for the vote for women, and the issue of Irish Home Rule. In Ireland the crisis was at its most extreme. The British Officer class in Ireland had effectively mutinied in March 1914 on the issue of whether they would obey orders to suppress armed resistance to Home Rule by the Ulster Unionists. The country was awash with arms; three civilian armies were drilling and

armed, and as the sun set over the last day of July 1914 it appeared that the rival parties were on a collision course. The outbreak of the Great War on 4 August engulfed Britain in a crisis that dwarfed its problems in Ireland. Prime Minister Asquith shelved the problem by putting the Home Rule bill on the statute books, but postponed its implementation until after the war ended. He also provided that the bill would not be implemented until statutory provision had been made for the exclusion of the Ulster counties. In this way he managed to appease both the constitutional nationalists and the unionists. But as FSL Lyons noted; 'It was, of course, an illusion. The Irish problem had been refrigerated, not liquidated. Nothing had been solved, and all was still to play for'. Given this crisis both the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Irish Citizen Army were determined to strike a blow that could end British rule in Ireland.

The Citizen Army had 340 members leading up to the 1916 Rising and about 175 mustered for action on Easter Monday. The majority were attached to the garrison in the GPO and in the College of Surgeons. The ICA was the first unit into action. Just after midday on Easter Monday a contingent of the ICA attempted to take Dublin Castle, but they were beaten back. Seán Connolly of the ICA, a fine young actor with the Abbey Theatre, was the first casualty suffered by the rebels during the attack.

The GPO was occupied as much for its symbolic nature as for its military significance. The tricolour which came to symbolise the nascent Republic flew over the GPO, but Connolly ensured that the Plough and the Stars was hoisted over the Imperial Hotel, owned by his old adversary William Martin Murphy. The occupation of the Jacob's biscuit factory had little strategic or military value and Connolly may have ordered it to be occupied in retribution for the owner's conduct during the lockout in 1913. In Fairview a company of Volunteers and the ICA tried to destroy Annesley Railway Bridge in order to prevent the British from reinforcing the garrison by train. The ICA occupied the Dublin and Wicklow Manure Company which overlooked the bridge

possibly in retaliation for the difficulties encountered by the ITGWU in 1915 in trying to unionise the company. By occupying Jacob's factory and the Dublin and Wicklow Manure Company, Connolly and the Citizen Army were putting down a marker that the revolution had social and economic objectives as well. On the eve of the Rising, at an assembly in Liberty Hall, Connolly had instructed his comrades in the Citizen Army that:

In the event of victory, hold on to your rifles, as those with whom we are fighting may stop before our goal is reached. We are for economic as well as political liberty.

The rebellion in April 1916 was dominated by the nationalist politics of the IRB and the more conservative politics of the Irish Volunteers. But, this was leavened by the support of James Connolly and the Irish Citizen Army who saw the opportunity to light a flame that might inspire socialists across Europe to oppose the war and turn their guns on their own ruling class. Despite the failure in military terms of the 1916 Rising, almost eighteen months later the Russian working class did precisely that. The war in Europe was one of the decisive factors that pushed Connolly and the nationalists into an armed conflict with the British state. In doing so Connolly had won a place for the working class in the emerging struggle for Irish independence.

Aftermath

Two leading members of the ICA, James Connolly and Michael Mallin, were executed after the surrender and eleven were killed in action. Connolly's execution after the Rising left the ICA leaderless and without any political direction.

The historical significance of the ICA, what D.R. O'Connor Lysaght has called its 'heroic period' was between 1913 and 1916. He also points out that there were considerable changes, both tactical and strategic in the composition and strategy of the ICA in that period. Only five of the original twenty-four members of the Army Council mobilised on Easter Monday 1916, and the two senior commandants of the ICA, Connolly and Mallin, had not been on the earlier body. Frank Robbins, who was close to Connolly politically, writes of the problems in the Citizen Army in the aftermath of the Rising. Many of the old working class members had resigned and the newer recruits had little or no loyalty to the union. Also, the relationship with the Irish Republican Army was strained as a result of the continuing endeavours of the IRB to bring the ICA under their control.

The ICA fought in the War of Independence and on the republican side in the Civil War, but were totally isolated from the working-class movement and only played a support role with no independent class position during those turbulent years. It struggled on until 1935 before dissolving to form the nucleus of the left wing of the Labour Party.

Much ink has been spilt in the socialist press debating whether Connolly and the ICA were right to participate in the Rising. But history has justified Connolly's position; what ended the Great War was the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the German Revolution in early November 1918. Connolly had hoped the revolution in Ireland would 'set the torch to a European conflagration' that would sweep away capitalist and bondholder. With hindsight it is easy to say they should have waited until the situation both in Ireland and internationally was more favourable. But it is to Connolly's, and the comrades of the ICA's, credit that they had the courage to act when they did.