

The Irish question in history

Ever since the general election of 1885 when, according to R. Barry O'Brien, the genius of Parnell compelled Gladstone to propagate the Irish question in England, the English Liberals have assumed an attitude of pity and commiseration towards Ireland. That country is an unfortunate sister nation—cartooned in picturesque rags with a broken-stringed harp—riven with internal discords and steeped in poverty. Her sons, we are told, emigrate in streams because they are denied the right of self-government. It were, perhaps, more true to say that Gladstone and the Liberals generally have recognised the value of Home Rule as a shibboleth to lure workers of both countries into the frothy whirlpool of capitalist politics.

The great mass of the Irish workers live out their lives troubling themselves about Home Rule no more than the ordinary English worker concerns himself about Liberalism. Still less would they interest themselves were it not for the campaign of lies, threats, and gloomy prophecies continually waged by the Irish ruling class and their agents, for it is among that class that discord reigns, and the sympathy of the English Liberals is for their brother capitalists in Ireland, who carry their political differences to such an extremity that capitalist class law and order are threatened and the workers themselves are being supplied with precedents and weapons for an organised movement along the line of physical force.

There is no essential difference between the capitalists of England and Ireland. Both are characterised by the same greed for gold, the same ambition for power, the same hypocrisy and corruption. When the capitalists of Ireland in the 18th century, handicapped by the restrictions placed on their trade by the English Government pleaded, as a part of the British Empire, equal trade rights with the manufacturers of England, the latter, with their usual bigotry and selfishness, utilised all the machinery at their disposal—chambers of commerce and political organisations—to maintain their monopoly of the world's markets and exclude Irish capitalists from successful competition with them. Nor is discord common to the Irish ruling class alone. The struggle for power between the landed aristocracy and the trading section in England has more than once reached a stage of bitterness equal to anything that has been seen in Ireland.

If the workers of Ireland would but dip into the history of their masters' country, their faith in Home Rule as a panacea for their troubles would quickly vanish. The leaders they now so patiently tolerate would be suspects and criminals. For like Lloyd George, who swore that three years of Liberal rule would wipe poverty from out the land, the Irish Nationalists bait their ambitious schemes with fair promises of prosperity for the working class.

When the workers of Ireland, grown desperate with poverty and excessive toil, have fought their masters for a slight improvement in wages and conditions, have the Nationalists extended help or sympathy? On the contrary, they have always been on the side of the oppressors. Right through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the political leaders of Ireland were engrossed in the question of their rights and powers to govern Ireland. Every hostile movement by sections of the people—though admittedly the outcome of poverty and injustice—was met with brutality and oppression. The Irish Parliament in the eighteenth century frequently solicited England for aid to put down the armed risings of famished peasants.

Arthur Young, Fitzgibbon, and many others depict in eloquent language the dire poverty of the agricultural labourers—a favourite pastime with the well-to-do, even to-day—at the mercy of the numerous gangs of middlemen who rented lands from absentee owners, and sublet them again and again, till the labourer had to work out the rent of his plot at fivepence a day. Even then his exploitation was not complete, for out of his product he still had to fatten the lying and treacherous priests with tithes.

Politicians, absentees, middlemen and priests were all Irish—the usual patriots; their love of country measured by their opportunities to filch wealth and snatch positions. The same motley crowd we are acquainted with to-day; money changers, exploiters, and kidnappers. Seats in the House of Commons or in the House of Lords were bought and sold like cheese and pork. Bribery and corruption were nearly as rampant as to-day.

Though the Irish working class were ruled by their own countrymen, though they had a parliament and a House of Lords all to themselves, they were goaded to desperation and lawlessness by the poverty and oppression they suffered at the hands of their rulers. And those rulers, like their descendants held them in the loftiest contempt. The working class were often described by Irish legislators as “ignorant savages”, and Grattan, with a candour that would be impolitic to-day, summarised the attitude of the master class of his time towards the workers in the following crude sentences:

“The best method of securing the Parliamentary constitution is to embody in its support the mass of the property, which generally will be found to include the mass of all talents. For if you transfer the power of the State to those who have nothing in the country, they will afterwards transfer the property”.

The class that owned “the mass of the property” in Ireland exercised, during the last twelve years of the eighteenth century, absolute control over the political machinery; yet through all the fluctuations of trade the poverty of the workers increased and all their efforts—chiefly taking the form of the boycott—were suppressed with fury by their countrymen, who took no steps to alleviate their misery or redress their grievances. Exactly how much the representatives of property cared for their country or its independence was shown in their final act of betrayal. Grattan, who was in a position to know the facts, stated that not more than seven of those who voted for the Union were unbribed. This was the culminating treachery of rulers who had preached the perfidy of England, and demanded the fullest measure of self-government as the only means by which the wrongs of the Irish people could be redressed. Twelve years after their demands were conceded, they, for personal bribes, handed their country over to the enemy.

The intervening years have not changed the position unless it is for the worse. The working class are still held in the same contempt by their rulers. Corruption and bribery have increased, though constant practice in deception and fraud have qualified our rulers to conceal their crimes by sophistries and an affectation of dignity and rectitude. Here and there in the history of the Irish movement, since the Union, a man has stood out from the rest, honest in his beliefs and implacable in his hatred towards the enemies of his country, but the majority have been sordid place-hunters and cared nothing whether they sat at Westminster or Dublin. Their ambition, like that of the labour leader, is to sit on the governing assembly, share the power, and take any additions to their fortunes that might come their way as a result.

But if Ireland has been a hunting-ground for ambitious politicians, it has also been the home of ignorant and superstitious leaders. Catholic priests and Protestant clergy have used their influence and authority to foment religious strife, which had no existence till after the Union. The Catholic priests were so deeply involved in the political game that they helped to collect the forty thousand pounds that Parnell squandered on himself and Mrs O’Shea. Everyone knows the methods of the Protestant clergy; how the orthodox Church bolsters the Tories and the Non-conformists buttress the Liberals, and both assist to rope in the workers to the support and sanction of capitalist government.

At the first mention of a Franchise Bill in Ireland the Protestants declared against its extension to the “ignorant Catholics”, and the same attitude is apparent to-day in the objection of Irish Protestants to Home Rule, on the grounds that it would give the Catholics political control. Whence comes this opposition if it is not the result of conspiracy between clergy and politicians?

The Irish movements of the eighteenth century, the “white boys”, the “oak boys”, etc, were movements of the workers. Sometimes they were directed against the middlemen and sometimes against the tithe system, though not often the latter. They were secret organisations and the Government found it extremely difficult to deal with them. But when they developed into an open volunteer movement, widely extended, and holding congresses at Dublin and elsewhere, the Government quickly permeated it with their tools and agents and subverted it to their own uses, finally incorporating it in the regular Army. Since that time the working class of Ireland have never succeeded in organising for anything without the help or interference of capitalist tools or agents. The Fenians were nobbled by Isaac Butt and outwitted by Parnell. All their organisations from the “Land League” to the “Ulster Volunteers” or the “Molly Malones”, have been composed of workers bluffed and cajoled by political prostitutes and adventurers.

The main fact that claims our attention is that Ireland has been subjected, from the commencement of the capitalist period, to various forms of government—government by undertakers appointed by the British Cabinet, self government, partial and complete, and government by representation in the British House of Commons. But under none of these forms, nor in the changing of them, can it be claimed that the working class were affected. It is true that poverty has become more general and acute over the entire period, but that is due to the development of the system, and is common to every capitalist country.

The latest blunder of the Irish working class is in the support given to the Sinn Fein movement, which seeks to establish a republic, with the examples of France and the United States before them proving conclusively the futility of such an experiment to abate their ever-growing poverty.

The form of government makes no difference to the workers. Government implies subjects, and under the capitalist system of society the actual governmental machinery, Parliament, councils and judiciary, etc., are representative of the capitalist class—the necessary machinery for ruling a subject class composed of wage-slaves.

The boasted equality of modern society is thus seen to be a fraud. For if there existed a real equality there could be no governing class or government, but only administrative assemblies charged with the administration of things in accordance with the wishes of the majority. But capitalism being a system wherein one class governs another, where one class is idle yet wealthy, and the other class producing wealth yet always poor, neither equality nor democracy can exist, the latter only being possible when the former is present.

Private ownership in the means of wealth production is the dominant feature of capitalism, and distinguishes the capitalist from the proletarian. Society is divided into classes: those who own the means of wealth production, and those who own nothing but their labour-power. The latter is the governed class, the compulsory sale of their labour-power to the capitalist is the capitalistic form of slavery, and imposes on the workers the entire labour of producing wealth which is never theirs. That wealth is continually piled up in a superabundance, owned by the ruling class, proving conclusively that they govern to a purpose, and that capitalist government is a deliberately organised and maintained form of robbery and oppression, as governments have always been. Capitalism everywhere tends to reduce the workers to a minimum standard of subsistence, and steadily encroaches on their paltry rights and liberties.

The slavery of the Irish worker is no better and no worse, in this respect, than that of other workers in other lands, and under different forms of government. The Irish capitalist is a fair example of his class the world over.

It is a false notion of the Sinn Feiners and Nationalists that the Irish workers must struggle for national independence before they can tackle the problem of poverty. But the working class everywhere is under one capitalist government or another. To split territories, set up new governments, or to re-establish old ones will not help them nor even simplify the problem. Their only hope lies in the speedy establishment of Socialism. They must join hands with the workers of the world, and make common cause against the ruling class. They must make ready for the last war—the war of classes, in which classes must be abolished and a real equality established on the basis of “common ownership and democratic control of all the means of life”.

F. Foan

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