

Irish Democrat

If he were living now Connolly would have rejected the EU

Anthony Coughlan

James Connolly (1868-1916) was the Marxist socialist who was military commander of the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin that started Ireland's war of independence.

His life and writings are relevant to the left in Britain and across Europe today because of how they show that socialists, leftwingers and the labour movement generally should be the foremost defenders of national independence and national democracy as essential prerequisites for obtaining the social reforms and better world they seek.

Today the European Union has made the national question, the issue of who should make the laws, the central issue of European politics everywhere.

Should it be the national parliament of one's own country in an independent sovereign state, or should it be the supranational EU Commission, Council of Ministers and Euro-Parliament in Brussels?

States like Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and others that once ruled huge empires and laid down the law for others are finding out nowadays how having to obey European Union laws has made national independence the main issue for them.

Connolly was executed by the British government for seeking to carve an independent Irish state out of the United Kingdom during World War I.

For that purpose he allied his trade union defence force, the Citizen Army, with the radical democrats of the Irish Republican Brotherhood to his political right in the Easter Rising.

By analogy, Britain's Labour Brexiteers are in the Connolly tradition when they co-operate today with Conservative, Ukip and other Brexiteers on their political right to help take back control for the British state and escape from the coils of the European Union treaties.

These treaties enshrine the classical capitalist laissez-faire – free movement of goods, persons, capital and labour – as constitutional principles on a continent-wide scale.

They are the first constitution in history to be drawn up entirely in the interest of High Finance and Big Capital, without the slightest democratic element. They amount in effect to a contract not to have socialism.

Their provisions would make the programme of Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party impossible to implement. That is why the most urgent political task for Labourites and socialists in Britain today is to implement the result of the 2016 Brexit referendum and get the whole of the UK out of the EU – really out of it, not just half way in and half out. For the EU is the face of modern imperialism in our part of the world today.

THE LEFT AND THE EU

The left in Britain whether Labourite, Communist or Trotskyite, has always found the European Union problematic.

This is because EU integration, the shift of ever more powers from the national level to the supranational one in Brussels, poses the issue of national independence and national democracy so acutely.

Many leftwingers find this embarrassing. They prefer to concentrate on economic issues, for on political ones such as national independence they fear being found on the same side as the right. Their political sectarianism makes this hard for them to cope with.

Yet the classical socialist position is clear, as Connolly's life exemplified.

It is that leftwingers should eschew "economism" and should seek to give a lead on democratic political questions as well as economic ones. They thereby put themselves in the best position to win political hegemony in their respective countries and to implement left-wing economic measures in due course once they are in control of an independent state.

Marx and Engels took it for granted that socialism could only be achieved in independent national states. In the Communist Manifesto of 1848 they wrote: "Though not in substance, yet in form, the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle. The proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie."

They supported Irish independence from Britain. Engels wrote to his friend Kugelmann: "There are two oppressed peoples in Europe, the Irish and the Poles, who are never more international than when they are most national."

When James Connolly was awaiting execution for his part in Dublin's Easter Rising he speculated on how the international socialist press would interpret the rebellion: "They will never understand why I am here. They will all forget I am an Irishman."

Outside Europe the proposition that the left should be the foremost advocates of national sovereignty would be taken as self-evident. The strength of communism in Asian countries like China and Vietnam rests on its identification with nationalism. The appeal of the left in Latin America is largely based on its opposition to Yankee imperialism.

Only in Europe do so many leftwingers regard the defence of national independence in face of EU integration as "right-wing" and therefore by definition reactionary.

They thus hand over the championing of national independence and democracy to the political right, while their own working-class supporters leach away.

This is the main reason why the continent's Social Democrat parties are in crisis everywhere these days.

They have abandoned the defence of the nation state and national democracy because of their love affair with the supranational EU. Instead of advancing the left, they are left politically high and dry!

UPHOLDING IMPERIALISM

This failure of Europe's left to grasp the contemporary centrality of the national question in the various EU member states is due primarily to the fact that the main countries of Western Europe – France, Germany, Britain, Italy, Spain and so on – were all imperial powers in their day.

Historically, their mainstream labour movements identified with that imperialism and its colonial accompaniments. With honourable if marginal exceptions the national labour movements in these countries supported their respective national bourgeoisies in going to war with one another in 1914-18.

Connolly in Ireland and Lenin in Russia were different from the others in that they sought to turn that imperialist war into a civil war in accordance with the policy resolutions of the Second International.

They sought the defeat of their own national warmongers by leading revolts against them during that war.

In the second half of the 20th century transnational capital became predominant over national capital in the advanced industrial world.

In response Europe's Social Democrat and Labour parties shifted from backing their national capitalists to backing European-based transnational capital in supporting its main political project, the construction of a supranational power, the EU/eurozone. Tony Blair, Peter Mandelson and their continental opposite numbers became ideological missionaries for this project.

Europe's peoples on the other hand are turning against it all over the place. They are learning the hard way that EU membership has deprived them of their national democracy, that the EU and its

institutions have hollowed out their nation states, leaving their governmental institutions formally in being but with their real power sucked out of them.

Hence people in the different countries want their national independence back. They want to take back control. It is only a matter of time before they emulate Britain's referendum voters and seek to leave the EU and thereby contribute to its break-up.

James Connolly if he were living now, would surely be a Brexiteer. The evolution of his thought on the relation between national independence and socialism is set out in Desmond Greaves' definitive biography, *The Life and Times of James Connolly*, which established such basic facts as that Connolly was born in Edinburgh, not in Ireland, and that as a young man he served in the British Army.

As Greaves described Connolly's ideological evolution, he was inclined at first to identify national independence and socialism.

Later in his life he distinguished them as the political and economic aspects of one process. Finally, in the lead-up to the Easter Rising, he reached the conclusion that they were two stages of one democratic reorganisation of society, each involving economic changes which it was the function of political change to promote.

To understand the national question, which is the principal political issue in Europe today, it is worth going back to learn from Connolly.

5th June 2018

Anthony Coughlan is Director of the National Platform EU Research and Information Centre, Ireland, and is Associate Professor Emeritus of Social Policy at Trinity College Dublin.