

Adrian Grant, University of Ulster, Magee College, Derry, Northern Ireland (UK):

Irish Socialist Republicanism, 1909-1936. PhD Project.

The Irish socialist republican movement of the early twentieth century was an attempt to harness the power of the workers and small farmers to fight for the establishment of a workers' republic. Workers' issues and the Irish national question have always been closely linked but the twentieth century saw a determined effort to build a movement that could achieve independence from Britain and build a socialist state. This movement included trade unionists, socialists, communists and republicans. The socialist republicans of the era have been studied in passing before by historians of republicanism who have generally treated the movement as an IRA splinter group that emerged in reaction to republican defeat in the Irish Civil War (1922-23). Other, more comprehensive studies have identified James Connolly as the greatest influence on the movement. By deconstructing the supposed theoretical incompatibility of Connolly's ideological thinking, the "myth" of socialist republicanism is revealed. This relentlessly negative approach to the topic and reliance on evidence from left-republicanism ignores a large, and vitally important, part of the movement.

This study aims to highlight the hugely important role played by trade unions in the creation of the socialist republican movement and the role of Irish and international communism in its development in the inter-war years. The formation of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) by Jim Larkin in 1909 was the beginning of a mass socialist republican group. The union openly expressed its socialist republicanism from its formation and drove the movement in its early years. The Irish labour movement played an essential role in the Easter Rising of 1916 and during the War of Independence (1919-21). Therefore socialist republicanism was a force in Irish society long before the defeated republicans moved to the left in the 1920s and 1930s. The Irish Labour Party and the ITGWU accepted the Treaty settlement which created the Irish Free State in 1922. This left socialist republicanism in a much weakened state. It was at this point that leftist republicans (from the IRA), radical socialists, radical trade unionists and communists took over a much smaller socialist republican movement.

This part of the project will focus on the role played by international communism in the manipulation of Irish radical political forces throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The Communist Party of Ireland (CPI) and other radical parties and groups were, at different times, affiliated to the Comintern and played crucial roles in the many socialist republican enterprises of the period. The Comintern's decision to initially back Jim Larkin in the 1920s had a significant impact on the revolutionary potential of the movement as did its decision to then focus on anti-imperialism, which resulted in closer cooperation with the IRA. International Communism's class against class and united front policies had played a significant role in shaping Irish radical politics. Other external influences also had a great effect on Irish socialist republicanism. The church and state inspired 'red scare' of the 1930s led to a split in the IRA and the formation of a Republican Congress of socialist republicans. Again the Comintern played a significant role in this group. The Congress was recognised as a potentially strong group but when an organisational programme was debated at the end of 1934, the CPI and a number of ex-IRA members disagreed with their Congress colleagues which resulted in a split. This was just one of a number of incidents in which the Comintern directed CPI played a major role. The Irish socialist republican movement was all but finished by 1936 but again emerged in the 1960s.

The main aim of the research is to show that the IRA was not the behemoth of Irish socialist republicanism. It began in the labour movement and was driven by the labour movement in its first ten to fifteen years. In the 1920s and 1930s, the role of trade unions, socialists and communists was crucial along with that of leftist republicans. This approach to the topic should demonstrate that the movement was not based on contradictory ideology or theoretical inconsistency, but on a practical politics rooted in trade unionism. It evolved in the 1920s and 1930s into a radical alternative voice which was much needed in the highly conservative Ireland of the time.