

Revolutionary History

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E Mail address: revhist@uk.pi.net

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Cover: The Workers International League comments on the Communist Party's change of heart on the Second World War, *Youth for Socialism*, November 1939

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Ciaran Crossey and James Monaghan The Origins of Trotskyism in Ireland

Ciaran Crossey works in the public service in Northern Ireland, and is a member of the MSF union. As a supporter of Militant Labour, he has written a number of articles for the *Militant Irish Monthly*, but this is his first full-length historical essay. James Monaghan lives in Dublin, and has been active in the Trotskyist movement in Ireland since the early 1970s. We are sure that our readers will appreciate their conscientious research and documentation, as it is surprising that this subject has not received such serious treatment until now.

Introduction

THE GREAT black poet Claud McKay once said of the US Communist Party leader James P Cannon, who later became a Trotskyist, that he could have risen to the top of any bourgeois political party. Cannon, like the Irish Trotskyists who form the subject of this article, chose a political path based on a perception of the needs of the working class, rather than one more suited to personal ambition and the furtherance of a conventionally 'successful' political career. Those who believe that Cannon should have joined the US Democratic Party will find little of interest in this study, and will undoubtedly regard the struggle of the first organised Irish Trotskyist group as an exercise in futility. Others of less decided views may find this account informative, and the struggles described admirable.

Ciaran Crossey has been careful to try, insofar as it is possible, to let the participants in this story speak for themselves. Magisterial judgements as to who was 'right' or 'wrong' in the various disputes and debates of the times are avoided as far as possible.

The most important and valid heritage passed on from this group lies in the fact of their struggle in hard times against overwhelming odds, to build a revolutionary party that might challenge the domination of Ireland by both the native bourgeoisie and imperialism, and ultimately lead the Irish working class to power. They aimed at the creation of an Irish workers' republic as part of a United Socialist States of Europe. They failed in their ambitions, but their

failure was an honourable one, particularly when contrasted with the actions of their main rivals in Irish left wing politics.

Few on the Irish left of this period could point with any pride to their record in opposing repression and upholding human rights. Sean Murray, for example, the leader of the Communist Party of Ireland, refused to make any protest at the massacres in the Soviet Gulag of numerous fellow veterans of the Lenin School in Moscow. Jim Larkin Junior, more creditably, withdrew from the Communist Party in demoralisation. During the Second World War, the Communist Party confused support for the Soviet Union and anti-Fascism with support for British imperialism, and acted as little more than strikebreakers, if not worse.

The Labour Party, then as now, preferred to purge its own left wing to fighting for the defence of the oppressed. Its leaders have been able, hypocritically, to share Cabinet posts with bourgeois parties, and yet are unable to co-exist with the left, especially the Trotskyist left, in the same party. Nothing in its actions in the period here suggested an interest in the welfare of the working class, or indeed of Socialism in even its palest pink form.

The only remaining group of note was the Republican movement, the Irish equivalent of Russia's Socialist Revolutionaries. It had so much courage, so much sacrifice, so little political understanding, preferring instead even a perverse pride at times in having no politics.

This article represents only a beginning in the writing of Irish left wing history. Much more needs to be researched. As new material is unearthed, a more definitive version will be possible. Future projects include an examination of the life and times of Michael Price, who appears to have been either written out of history by the Stalin school of falsification (for example, Gilmore's *History of the Republican Congress*), or damned with faint praise. The evolution of this militant from a Republican leader with conservative social ideas in the 1920s to a leader of the Republican Congress remains to be charted. His relevance to this article lies in the fact that it was he who opened the pages of the *Torch* to Trotskyists in the 1940s. His premature death was a great loss to Irish Socialism.

Similarly, Tom O'Flaherty is an interesting and neglected figure. He was the older brother of the author Liam O'Flaherty. Tom was both a leader of the Communist Party of the USA, and then the Communist League of America, the main Trotskyist group. After his return to Ireland, he continued his journalistic work in both English and Irish. Along with Mairtin O'Direann, he was a founder of the Irish language journal *An t-Eireannach*, which combined literature with anti-Fascism and left wing Republicanism.

The publication of Mattie Merrigan's autobiography, whose early political evolution is charted in this article, is of great importance to Irish labour history. Merrigan is one of the few trade union leaders who was not submerged in Stalinism. I believe that as the froth of Noel Browne's reputation recedes, Merrigan will emerge to be seen as the substantial leader of the left of the La-

bour Party in the past 30 years. Incidentally, Merrigan is the great 'unperson' in Browne's book.

All the above represents a strand, albeit a frayed and jagged one, linking the Republican Congress with the revolutionary groups of today. It is to be hoped that other militants will continue to explore these links. This and other work needs to be done, not just to rescue individual reputations from oblivion, but to demonstrate that there was, and remains, a strain of Irish revolutionary Socialism not contaminated by Stalinism and its abuses, a task of particular importance today, when the edifice of Stalinism has tumbled worldwide, revealing its corrupt and oppressive base.

Trotskyists of the present generation should study the history of their movement, warts and all. The old adage that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it, still holds true. In a world of barbarism, from Sarajevo to Somalia, from Ballymun to Ballymurphy, the task of preparing for a worldwide October remains to be done.

James Monaghan

This work would never have been possible without the support of Hilary and Jackie, so thanks.

The First Individuals

The first person who actively supported the Trotskyist movement in Ireland was Paddy Trench. Trench had moved from Ireland to London in 1929, and whilst there had joined the Independent Labour Party, and later the Marxist Group, a Trotskyist organisation which worked within the ILP. Whilst in London, Trench unsuccessfully worked as an artist and journalist. Despite his later writings in Ireland, no articles in his name have been located in the Socialist press of the early 1930s.

In 1936 the Spanish Civil War broke out, and Trench joined the struggle in defence of the Republic. He went to Spain, where he was associated with the ex-Trotskyist organisation, the POUM.¹ During his time in Spain, Trench made use of his artistic skills to paint a street scene of revolutionary Barcelona. Throughout his life Trench was afflicted with tuberculosis, and even in the generally warmer climate of Spain he was hospitalised, and then withdrawn to Britain.

Back in London he resumed his political activity in the ILP. John Archer, an activist since 1934, remembers seeing him at some meetings in 1937-38.² This activity continued until the death of his father in the summer of 1939, after which Trench returned to Dublin that September.

On his return he joined the Irish Labour Party, where he quickly contacted the weekly paper, the *Torch*. This paper has been described as without question one of the most popular and stimulating labour papers ever produced in

1. J Byrne, interview with C Crossey, 2 October 1987.

2. J Archer, letter to C Crossey, 30 April 1988.

Dublin. The *Torch* had contributed much to the phenomenal growth of the Labour Party in the city.³ It had been produced by the Dublin Constituency Council since May 1939, and it reflected the views of the left of the party. From his first article in the issue of 16 September 1939, Trench was to write regularly for the paper over the next three years. The paper eventually collapsed in 1944 as a side effect of the internal divisions in the Labour Party.

Given his experience with the Marxist Group in London, it didn't take him long to start working to build support for his ideas. Shortly after getting involved in the Labour Party, he convinced two young people to join him in putting forward Trotskyist ideas. Ironically, neither of them came directly from the Labour Party. Steve Daly, a taxi driver, was won from a Stalinist viewpoint, whilst Joe Noonan, 18, was won over from the Republican movement. Noonan had been an active Republican for over six years, although Johnny Byrne says that he was always more Socialistic, more Communistic than the rest.⁴ He was in Connolly House, the offices of the Communist Party of Ireland, on North Strand Street in April 1933, when it was attacked by Catholic mobs intent on burning it down.

Having won over these initial recruits, Trench and the other two started to hold regular meetings which other people from the Labour Party would attend. Amongst those at these discussions was the 16-year-old Johnny Byrne. Within weeks this initial group was joined by an experienced contingent from Britain.

The Workers International League Delegation

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the Trotskyist movement in Britain assumed that because of their resolute opposition to imperialism, they would face severe repression. According to Ted Grant, this repression included a police raid on the first day of the war.⁵ In order to ensure that at least some of the membership was able to escape internment and keep producing material, the Workers International League, which despite having only 40 members was the best of a number of groups in Britain, decided to send a group of five members to Dublin. Jock Haston and Gerry Healy were both leading lights in the WIL, and they were accompanied by Tommy Reilly, a Scottish comrade with family links in County Monaghan, George Nosedá and John Williams.

On arrival in Dublin, the delegation quickly linked up with Trench. The two groups, if such small numbers can be truly labelled as such, essentially merged, and started to function as a branch of the WIL. Trench knew them from London, and was basically in agreement with their policies. Haston and Reilly stayed with Noonan's family, and the rest with Trench in Howth, on the outskirts of town.

Byrne recalled: 'I used to go up and talk with them, marvellous discus-

3. M Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland*, p199.

4. J Byrne interview.

5. T Grant, interview with Sam Bornstein, 22 August 1982.

sions. They showed me the road, the mistakes of Republicanism. Then, of course, the bombing started in England, as the IRA declared war on England. I was still involved in all that... I became demoralised with the Republican movement, and went over to the Socialist ideas.⁶ Byrne was at this point the Dublin organiser of na Fianna Eireann, the Republican youth movement.

The combined group got down to the business of ensuring the continued activity of the WIL. They started by sending over articles for the WIL journals *Youth for Socialism* and *Workers International News*. They produced the first three issues of a duplicated paper called *Socialist Appeal*. One copy of the second edition of this paper has survived, and is now lodged, along with all the other material relating to this article, with the Linen Hall Library, Belfast. The British organisation continued to produce *Youth for Socialism* until June 1941, when it changed its title to become *Socialist Appeal*.

Along with the production of material for distribution in Britain, the Dublin comrades became involved in the usual round of activities. They sold the various papers of the group, intervened at public meetings of other organisations, and they worked in the Labour Party. In Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson's *War and the International*, a history of the Trotskyist movement in Britain, Haston remembers the Dublin period:

'We made contact with the left wing of the Irish Labour Party. Our principle contact was Nora Connolly O'Brien, who was the daughter of James Connolly, and she was one of our best contacts then. She fed us when we were bloody hungry from time to time... At the same time we made contact with the youngsters in the IRA who were fairly active. In Dublin the IRA leadership tended to be right wing, but as the youngsters tended to be Socialist, Labour Party oriented, we made contact with them, and won some of them over to the Trotskyist movement.'⁷

By the end of 1939 the forces of Marxism in Ireland consisted of the five sent over from Britain, and at least four others in Dublin. Separate from the group in Dublin were two comrades in Belfast, Bob and Elsie Armstrong, who moved over from London in late 1939. Bob at least was a member of the WIL, by this point having had an article printed in the August 1939 edition of *Youth for Socialism*.

Bob Armstrong was in regular contact with the Dublin group for discussions, and to coordinate work. He had been wounded in the Spanish Civil War, and made use of a visit to the Dublin group to meet up with some ex-International Brigaders. He had met Joe Monks in the Arihuela hospital, where Bob was getting treatment for wounds received at Lopera, and later they both served in the second company of the Twentieth Battalion. At Puertollaro the officers of the International Brigade were given a newly established mess, and Monks was active in protests against this. As Monks says, after that: 'Bob

6. J Byrne interview.

7. S Bornstein and A Richardson, *War and the International*, London, 1986, p10.

may have thought that I was Trot material, and he did visit Dublin to visit Frank Edwards and me. By that time Frank and me were confirmed Stalinists, so Bob's journey was fruitless.⁸ Nevertheless, this shows that they were rightly grabbing every chance to build the organisation.

Another example of the activity in which the Dublin comrades became involved was intervening at meetings of the Communist Party. Byrne remembers that the Stalinists used to hold meetings in Sackville Place, and the leaders of the Trotskyist group wiped the floor with them.⁹ It was originally through discussions with the Stalinists that Trench won over one of the early members, Steve Daly.

The intervention of the Dublin group in the Irish Labour Party consisted of attending local party meetings and writing articles for the *Torch*. In October 1939 Gerry Healy wrote an article that considered that supporting the call for air raid precautions meant supporting the war. This position was later changed, as they were to argue for ARP, whilst still opposing the war. Trench had a series of articles in the paper, especially after mid-1940 when Cathal O'Shannon was replaced as editor. Included in the paper was an obituary of Trotsky after his murder by the Stalinists in August 1940.

With the outbreak of the war, the WIL's expectation of widespread repression failed to materialise, so after a few months the delegation started to move back. When Haston went back in April 1940 he used borrowed Irish identity papers, as he lacked proper ones – something for which he was later arrested¹⁰ – and the only original WIL member left was Tommy Reilly.

Debate on the National Question

Did the WIL group really establish anything here? Physically the movement benefited to the extent that Reilly remained in Dublin for nearly two more years helping to guide the work of the comrades there, whilst Bob and Elsie Armstrong stayed in Belfast until 1948 providing the core of the organisation there.

Politically, the movement benefited in a number of ways, the primary one being the clarification of its position regarding the reunification of the island. In a copy of an internal bulletin, not dated but the evidence points to January 1940, there is a debate between 'Robertus', who also called himself 'Belfast (Robertus)', and the editor of *Socialist Appeal*. Mattie Merrigan has identified 'Robertus' as Bob Armstrong¹¹ (admittedly not the world's most obscure pseudonym!), and presumably Haston was the editor.

This exchange was sparked off by the articles in *Socialist Appeal* about the national question in Ireland. 'Robertus' argued:

8. J Monks, letter to C Crossey, 27 August 1987.

9. J Byrne interview.

10. Bornstein and Richardson, *War and the International*, p11.

11. M Merrigan, letter to C Crossey, 23 November 1987.

'In our opinion, the following prerequisites are essential before any attempt to supplant capitalism by Socialism can be successful: [firstly] the elimination of the border. Socialists have often posed the question, can the partition of Ireland be ended under capitalism? To this we reply, until partition is ended we can conceive only the remotest possibility of a Socialist victory. The elimination of the border is a prior necessity for a successful struggle for Socialism.'

Answering a query on his position regarding joint work with the Republicans, Robertus replied that 'we don't stand for any form of organisational or programmatic unity with the Republicans'. He called for consistent anti-imperialist propaganda in order to win the rank and file to the banner of Socialism. He stated: '... [we] would resolutely oppose any form of class truce in the interests of national unity. We are first and foremost Socialists, appraising every issue from the standpoint of the Irish and the international working class. It is precisely because we are Socialists that we are partisans of the national cause.'

Whilst the editorial board spent a lot of space dealing with the economic arguments about partition, its essential disagreement with Armstrong was over his stages approach to the border. The editorial board put the view that, given the weakness of the Irish capitalists and the division of the Northern working class, that the reunification of the island was only possible through the struggle for a workers' republic. They opposed the idea that a military victory by the IRA would be favourable, arguing instead that:

'... the ending of partition by a rising of the "Army" would be equally unfavourable. It would provoke a murderous civil war in which the majority of the workers in Northern Ireland, who are Orangemen, would see "Catholic oppression" on the march. The success of such a rising would not mean freedom for the workers to agitate, as Robertus assumes, but would only mean a military dictatorship in the North and the South.'

The editorial board restated its position that: '... with Connolly as our guide, we can boldly proclaim: "The Irish working class must emancipate itself. It perforce must free the nation." The workers of the North and South must unite for a workers' republic!'

This debate, which is still going on in Irish Socialist groups, clarified the position for the WIL. They agreed to the view that reunification was only possible through the struggle for Socialism. The points made by Robertus about opposing repression, etc, were not opposed by the majority. That was later reflected in a series of articles throughout the 1940s in *Workers International News* and *Socialist Appeal* in which the case was made against internment, police harassment, etc.¹²

12. Cf, for example, B Armstrong, 'Police Regime in Northern Ireland', *Workers International News*, Mid-February-Mid-March 1943.

A Minor Point on Gerry Healy

In this early period of Irish Trotskyism it was faced with one minor problem which has attracted disproportionate interest because of the involvement of Gerry Healy. Healy was born in Ireland, and later emigrated to England in 1928, where he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain, and then the Trotskyist movement in 1937.¹³

As has been mentioned, Healy was a part of the WIL group sent to Dublin following the start of the Second World War, but things did not run smoothly. There were a number of problems, and it would be intriguing to discover the basis of the controversy over secondary tactical issues relating to local activity which resulted in Healy's resignation from the Irish group.¹⁴ Healy resigned from the branch, and said he was going to fight against the organisation in the Irish Labour Party.

Given the distances of time, it is impossible to unearth the truth behind these events. It seems that there were personality disputes within the group, none of which can be proved now, as most of those concerned are dead. Al Richardson gives the following story:

'What really angered the WIL delegation over there is that whilst they were all living together communally, sharing their food and as often as not on the edge of starvation, after a while they found out that Healy had a Post Office savings book, and had been living off that without their knowing. This piece of secret greed and uncomradely behaviour angered Tommy Reilly and the others, as well it might.'¹⁵

The only reason there is any interest in the squabble is because of Healy's later fame. The WIL's statement then goes on to say that Healy was sent back to London after discussions between the National Committee of the WIL and the Irish group. The British comrades did not want him publicly disciplined, so they withdrew him in order to be able to make further use of his organisational talents.

The Armstrongs

With the return of the majority of the WIL delegation, the most experienced member left in Ireland was Bob Armstrong in Belfast. Bob came from Glasgow, and was originally involved in the Independent Labour Party Guild of Youth before joining the Young Communist League in 1933, then graduating into the Communist Party of Great Britain. Through his work in the CPGP, Bob participated on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, in which

13. *Socialist Outlook*, December-January 1989-90.

14. Statement of the Politbureau of the Workers International League, 15 February 1943.

15. A Richardson, letter to C Crossey, 18 August 1987.

he was wounded twice between August 1936 and mid-1938.¹⁶ His fighting career was not exactly the longest. He was in the front line for under four days before he was wounded for the first time. Over the next 15 months he refused to return to England, despite being crippled. Eventually, he deserted hospital and returned to the front. There he lasted another four weeks before being wounded again.

After that he was hospitalised and was then given the job of helping to keep the International Brigade records at Albacete, a job which would obviously be given to a trusted member.¹⁷ Following his activity in Spain he was active in working for the Dependents Aid Committee, and he spoke at various meetings across Britain. He was on the platform and addressed the meeting when Paul Robeson spoke to 3000 Amalgamated Engineering Union members in Slough.¹⁸

Throughout this period Armstrong had no problem with the policy of the CPGB. At a meeting of the Trotsky Defence Committee about the Moscow Show Trials, he became hysterical, and heckled when the issue of the Spanish Civil War came up.¹⁹ Despite this incident, his views were changing. He later wrote: 'It was only a long time after I was back in England, however, that I was able to piece together the various fragments of the puzzle and see the whole position.'²⁰

Along with other branch committee and ordinary members of the Islington branch of the CPGB, he started to raise differences at party meetings, and met with a more or less friendly response. Some of the personal responses were better than others, and it was whilst he was active in this party branch that Bob met and married Elsie McCullough.

When they put these differences into print by submitting a discussion document for circulation, the party leadership refused to distribute it to the members of the local branch, never mind amongst a broader layer of the party membership. Eventually, the hostility to them inside the party resulted in this group leaving it before they were expelled. Some of the disgraceful approaches of the party included the circulation of slanders that they were drunkards, brawlers and even anti-Semitic, and that Armstrong was a deserter, had shot himself, and had embezzled money.²¹

In April 1939 the Armstrongs joined the Revolutionary Workers League, a Trotskyist group which was active on Irish issues, and which later moved closer to the WIL.²² The RWL had established a group called the Friends of

16. *Fourth International*, April 1943.

17. R Armstrong, 'Against the Slanders', *Workers Fight*, July 1939.

18. Bornstein and Richardson, *War and the International*, p36.

19. Remembered by Alex Acheson, in Bornstein and Richardson, *War and the International*, p49.

20. B Armstrong, 'Why We Have Left the CP', *Workers Fight*, May 1939.

21. Interview with Bert Atkinson, who was one of Bob's fellow dissidents, in Bornstein and Richardson, *War and the International*, p36.

22. Just to add to the confusion, this group was originally called the Revolutionary Socialist League, the same name as the group from which it had split. The reason is that, as in Northern Ireland with the two wings of the Republican movement, there were a 'provo' and an 'official' RSL. The dissident group, which the Armstrongs had joined, maintained this name

the Irish Republic which organised public meetings, published pamphlets, etc, on the question of Irish unity. This work was instigated by Irish members like Jack Murphy and an unspecified Mr Dunne. Murphy was arrested several times for addressing meetings at Hyde Park about Britain's rôle in Ireland, and for talking about the 'bloody Union Jack'.

Elsie Armstrong, née McCullough, was from an Orange family background in East Belfast. She had moved from Belfast to London in the mid-1930s to work in the civil service as a stenographer. Whilst there she joined the Communist Party. Because of the war Elsie was transferred by the civil service back to Belfast, and as Bob was not working, he came over as well.

Belfast Activity

Whilst it is not possible to give a complete picture of the activity carried out in Belfast, enough information has survived to show them establishing a small but effective group, which despite repression, economic pressure and the difficulties of working under wartime conditions, was able to put forward the public face of Marxism in Belfast for the next eight years.

After establishing themselves in Elsie's family home off the Cregagh Road in East Belfast, Bob and Elsie set about starting work here. The initial activity was selling the new Irish paper, *Socialist Appeal*, the WIL paper, *Youth for Socialism*, and the theoretical magazine, *Workers International News*. These were mainly street sales, as Bob established a regular pitch in Cornmarket where he would sell the papers at least twice a week.

This activity quickly paid dividends as they were able to bring a number of young people around them. In November 1941 Jimmy Deane, a leading activist in the WIL, informed Millie Lee, one of the organisation's leaders, that the Belfast group consisted of about 13 comrades. One was originally from Liverpool (the source of Deane's information), three had been won from the Zionist movement, along with the Armstrongs, and seven Irish comrades.²³ Within a few months, Bob was able to say in the May 1942 issue of *Socialist Appeal* that: 'Our members are young and almost without exception, comparative newcomers to the organised labour movement.' The group met in rented rooms in Donegal Street, in the city centre. From 1943 they met in the Armstrong's house at 18 Brookvale Avenue in North Belfast,²⁴ until they found other rooms in the city centre in 1944.

Joe Quinn was one of the recruits of this period. He had been involved in the Republican movement since 1935, when he joined na Fianna Éireann, until 1939 when he left the IRA to join the Communist Party. He says that he went down to the party bookshop in Skipper Street, and offered to join: 'It was the nearest thing to Socialism to me. When they went into the war with

for a few months, before conceding to pressure and becoming the RWL.

23. J Deane, letter to M Lee, 27 November 1941.

24. Jim McLean, letter to C Crossey, 2 July 1991

Britain and America I left them.' His involvement with the group was very limited, as he was quickly interned by the RUC for three years because of his previous links with the IRA. He said that there were paper sales in the pubs around the Lower Falls, Sandy Row, the Shankill and in East Belfast. Generally they would be good sales, with an occasional bit of hassle.²⁵

As well as the street sales of the paper, Bob went about publicising the existence of a political alternative by holding public meetings or lectures. These meetings, a number of which were held in the Locarno Room of the Grand Central Hotel on Royal Avenue in the centre of Belfast, were to continue sporadically throughout the war in an attempt both to publicise the group, and to bring workers towards the organisation. To some extent these were successful, as the first contact many people made with the movement was through one of these meetings. Attendance varied at the meetings, although those present usually included Jim Hanna,²⁶ Jim McLean, Jim Truesdale and John Gunn, as well as Bob and Elsie Armstrong. Quinn said: 'There'd be three or four of us at the meetings, as the rest didn't always turn up.'

Amongst those who were recruited in this early period was Eric Thompson, a solicitor's clerk who had become involved with the Central Youth Section of the Northern Ireland Labour Party,²⁷ as had Jack McDowell and Hanna, before the Armstrongs met up with him. In the group were several young people who had been friends of Elsie's before she left Belfast for London. They, including Thompson, had been active in the Youth Hostel Association. At this stage it was very common for young people in the labour movement to go off hiking or cycling to small towns and villages around the North in an attempt to build support.²⁸

Quinn says that along with the indoor meetings, the group held a number of street meetings. The traditional spot for such meetings in Belfast was on the

25. Joe Quinn, interview with C Crossey, 19 September 1988. Quinn (1920-1990) remained around the Republican movement until his death. He left the Provisional Republicans to join Republican Sinn Féin in the 1980s over the question of taking seats in the Dáil, the Southern parliament.
26. Jim Hanna subsequently moved to England, and later back again before settling in Mullingar. He is a member of the Irish Labour Party and the Labour History Society.
27. The Northern Ireland Labour Party was formed in 1924, and was linked with the trade unions. A moderate Social Democratic organisation, it adopted an increasingly strong Unionist stance in the late 1940s. [Editor's note]
28. Jack McDowell, who was associated with the Trotskyists in 1941-42, remembers that when he was active in the CYS they would regularly go off cycling around the North: 'We used to go out to the different villages and distribute the gospel. There was a group in London called the Clarion Club who did similar things. I remember one vivid recollection. We went to a little place called Culgary Mills, a settlement of terraced houses, no decent sewage. It was sat on a hill with cobbled paving. The mill was on the opposite side of the valley. An archetypal situation with the landlord boss and the tenant worker, couldn't find a better microcosm of the whole situation. We distributed the literature, I remember these people standing at their doors listening to us spreading our evangelical message. We really were inspired and enjoyed it. That must have been really very early in the war, and continued up to 1941.' (J McDowell, interview with C Crossey, 3 April 1991) McDowell was later active in the British Labour Party for a number of years. He later moved back to Belfast, where he eventually became active in the Green Party, becoming its Northern Ireland Chairman by 1990.

steps of the Customs House, down near where the Liverpool boat docked. Amongst others, the Communist Party had been holding street meetings here since the early 1930s. The Customs House was a good venue, as it was on the main public transport route to East Belfast. Changes brought about by the war caused a decline in the popularity of attending meetings at the Customs House. When the Germans bombed Belfast in May 1941, they killed substantial numbers of people, and wrecked a part of the city centre. The bomb site around the junction of High Street and Bridge Street was adopted by the Trotskyists and several other organisations as a meeting place. For the next six years Trotskyist meetings were held there on Sundays, with a regular 200 people listening. Even allowing for the fact that this was the era prior to television, and therefore going for walks and listening to street meetings were popular forms of cheap entertainment, the meetings were very successful.

The purpose of the meetings was obviously to help publicise the group, and to win recruits.²⁹ At one meeting Bob Armstrong spoke about the rat-infested slums of the Carrick Hill estate, and to prove his point he produced a rat in a cage which had been caught in the estate.³⁰ As usual, many of these public gatherings were attended by RUC Special Branch members Mooney and Morwood.

Along with the public meetings and streets sales of the paper, Armstrong oriented to the CYS, the NILP and to industrial disputes. Strikes were still continuing, despite the government, the bosses and the Communist Party of Northern Ireland³¹ all uniting in the façade of national unity to defeat the Fascists and defend the Soviet Union. In the November 1942 issue of *Socialist Appeal*, Armstrong produced an account of a major industrial dispute involving over 2000 engineering workers. This centred on moves by the staff to work on Sundays as a means of pushing up their take-home pay and to boost production for the war. Management said it would not be profitable, and so barred the factory doors. When the workers turned up on the Sunday morning, the two shop stewards were arrested, which led to the strike in defence of the union.

Whilst the CPNI was tied into trying to resolve the dispute, the Trotskyists came out in support of the workers. They distributed copies of a leaflet produced by the London comrades, and thanks to the attention to detail by the 'impartial' government we have a copy which was preserved in the files of the Northern Ireland Cabinet Office. It declared:

29. However, at one meeting the result was different. After the initial attack on Russia in June 1941, the WIL spoke out against the inactivity of the Western powers, and called for the creation of a Second Front to relieve pressure on the Soviets. As Jack McDowell was speaking one man shouted up at him to ask what was he doing to help reach this demand. McDowell says he couldn't answer the man, so went away and thought about it. The next day he joined up at the forces recruiting office in town, serving the next four years in the navy. (J McDowell interview)
30. J Quinn interview.
31. The Communist Party of Ireland was established in 1933. Its Southern section was dissolved in 1941 because of its falling membership and problems in respect of its support for Irish neutrality. The Northern section, which fully supported the Allies after June 1941, became known as the Communist Party of Northern Ireland. The Southern section was relaunched as the Irish Workers League in 1948. [Editor's note]

'Russia must be defended! But how? By giving up strikes and accepting the bosses' programme, as the ex-Communist Party demands? No. The workers may agree to halt the class war, but the bosses won't. If we sacrifice our rights in the name of "industrial peace" or "defence of the Soviet Union" they will grow bolder in their encroachments, and Fascism at home will be the outcome. Then the Soviet Union will be crushed. If we cannot defend our trade union rights we clearly cannot defend the Soviet Union... Only working class political power can save the Soviet Union. Only by defending ourselves on the industrial front can we prepare for political power.'

The leaflet supported three of the five demands of the strikers, attacking the last two which demanded class collaboration to increase production instead of workers' control, and for an impartial arbiter, something the WIL said was wrong, as 'on all important issues this "impartial" arbiter will prove to be an employer's man. In class society there are no impartial judges.'³²

The Central Youth Section

Towards the end of the 1930s there was a rise in the support for the NILP, and one of the consequences of this was the emergence of the Central Youth Section, basically a Belfast Young Socialists, in 1938. At least five of those later involved in the Trotskyist movement were in the CYS, McLean, Hanna, McDowell, Thompson and Betty Graham.

McDowell says that it was one of the best youth groups that had existed in Ireland for a long time. He says they met every month in the Electrical Inspectors Union rooms in Lower Ann Street, by Queens Bridge.³³ Whilst attendance could fall to 30, he claims that the average would run up to 100. The CYS was an active group, and would hold regular political discussions where someone would prepare a paper and introduce the discussion.³⁴ Hanna was elected Assistant Secretary at his first meeting after he was proposed by Harry Midgley Junior, son of the leader of the party, and a friend of McDowell's.³⁵

Because this was a sizeable Socialist youth organisation, it attracted the attention of the Young Communist League. Jimmy Cosby, later a leading trade union official and a Stalinist representative, was one of its committee members. After a period of activity and discussion, the core of the CYS came under the influence of the Stalinists. McDowell says that he 'could never find out what the difference was over ideology, can't think of a major political issue

32. *Socialist Appeal* leaflet. A copy is held in the Cabinet Office files, Northern Ireland Public Record Office, Cab 9c/22/1. Milotte has wrongly attributed this leaflet as being one given out during the Belfast engineering strike in 1944.
33. The street directory does list union rooms in 93 Lower Ann Street, but they belonged to the engineers and boiler-makers.
34. J McDowell interview.
35. Jim Hanna, interview with C Crossey and J Monaghan, 10 April 1991.

where we took a different line. In fact we were constantly uniting in activity'.³⁶

In the early 1940s the leadership of the NILP, especially Harry Midgley, grew more and more openly sectarian and pro-Unionist. The CYS objected to this process, and McDowell says that on some pretext or other the entire CYS was suspended from the NILP, including young Midgley. The NILP eventually set up a new CYS under its control.³⁷ Not surprisingly, the comrades re-entered it.

The group continued to operate independently after its suspension, and the influence of the Stalinists grew. The left eventually took it over when Hanna moved a motion calling upon the CYS to 'change the whole way the movement was going. This motion was saying we should be involved in leading issues of interest to the people of Belfast. For instance, message boys for chemist shops, what wages did they get? What hours did they do? Issues like that. I said the Central Youth Section was more like a social club, as we went off hiking across mountains, bicycle rides, etc.'³⁸ McLean says its 'leadership was middle class and had a genial and kindly Socialism. It was all very middle class and piddling.'³⁹ When this motion was backed by the Stalinists present, those against it left the meeting. Those who left included Billy Kennedy and Harry Midgley Junior.⁴⁰

After this, the CYS and the Young Communist League seem to have been basically interchangeable. Hanna and McLean, as members of the CYS, were able to sit in at Communist Party meetings in the shipyard to discuss industrial action. At one of these was Andy Boyd, a future leader of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers, who said: 'Do we want to help the war effort? Yes. Would any strike hinder the war effort? Yes it would. Therefore are we for the strike? No we're not.'⁴¹

Hanna and McLean did not accept this, and used their position on the Apprentices Committee in the shipyard (of which Hanna was Secretary) to bring the apprentices out in support of the workers, something which only rarely occurred, as the unions generally didn't call apprentices out. After that the Communist Party took action against them. Hanna describes the scene:

'Betty Sinclair brought me into her room, said she'd heard I was associated with the Trotskyist Fourth International, that I did it openly and didn't even try to hide it from them. She said I was supposed to be in the CP, but that I couldn't be a member of both groups. She might not have mentioned Armstrong's name, but she said I was expelled for my association with the Trotskyists.'⁴²

36. J McDowell interview.

37. *Irish News*, 29 January 1941.

38. J McDowell interview.

39. J McLean, letter to C Crossey, 2 July 1991.

40. J McDowell interview. Billy Kennedy is the father of Lawrence Kennedy, currently the leader of the Conservative Party in Northern Ireland, and Harry Midgley Junior was later a research worker for the Conservative Party in England.

41. J Hanna interview.

42. J Hanna interview.

Hanna says that he was active in the CYS and never formally joined the Communist Party, but since when do facts get in the way of Stalinists or right wingers when witch-hunting Marxists? To drive home their attacks on Hanna and McLean, the Communist Party also moved against them in the CYS. Hanna was responsible for some of the money belonging to the CYS, £2.10s from a social. Stupidly he'd used some of the money himself, intending to replace it before it was asked for at the meeting, but the Communist Party quickly moved on this pretext. Cosby demanded the money, and when it wasn't immediately forthcoming moved Hanna's expulsion from the CYS. Having been hounded from the Communist Party and the CYS, it was at this stage in 1941 that Hanna and McLean formally joined the WIL at a meeting in the Armstrongs' house.

Given the importance of an orientation to young people in the building of the revolutionary organisation throughout history, the organisation continued to look towards the Labour youth organisation as a potential source of members. When Betty Graham joined the Labour League of Youth (the CYS) in 1945 or 1946 she says she met the Trotskyists, and joined the Fourth International.⁴³ She was from a Protestant background, and her political history shows the confusion which exists here because of the additional twists of sectarianism. She received her political education from an aunt and uncle who not only taught her *The Red Flag*, but also the loyalist song *The Sash* and the Republican *Kevin Barry*.

Work in the Northern Ireland Labour Party

Whilst direct evidence has not yet been found, that is to say, minutes of meetings, etc, Hanna has memories of Bob and Elsie Armstrong participating in the East Belfast Labour Party early in the war. The Armstrongs lived with Elsie's family on the Cregagh Road in East Belfast before moving to their own place in North Belfast in early 1943. He says that Elsie would be listening to the discussions whilst knitting. She spoke on a number of occasions to oppose any acceptance of piece-work because of the divisive effect it had. In the shipyard, the majority of the workforce remained hourly paid during the war, whilst staff at Shorts were on a piece rate bonus system. Given the wartime production demands, the Shorts workers ended up with between 150 and 200 per cent of the shipyard wages.⁴⁴

Bob Armstrong, writing in the May 1942 issue of *Socialist Appeal*, said that a report in *The Times* 'that there was to be an investigation into the "Communists or people with Communist ideas in the Belfast Labour Party" assuredly refers to us'. That complaint may have something to do with resolutions like the following which was passed by the East Belfast Labour Party on 25 May 1941, and which was publicised in the June 1941 issue of *Socialist Appeal*:

'To All Belfast Workers

'The Stormont government demands conscription to relieve its unemploy-

43. M Lennon, J O'Brien and M McAdam (ed), *Across the Water*, p129.

44. M Maguire, 'The Belfast Engineering Strike, 1944', *Militant Irish Monthly*, April 1985.

ment difficulties, and as a means of utilising unorganised female labour to undermine trade unionism.

'Conscripts, unlike volunteers, will have their jobs guaranteed, they say. Yet Greenwood, Cabinet Minister, predicts there will be seven million unemployed when peace returns. The frenzied war boom will cease. Victorious or defeated, Britain will emerge from the war with most of her former dominions and South American markets lost to the United States. Foreign trade will dwindle and few ships will be required. How then will conscripted shipyard workers, for instance, get their jobs returned to them?

'The British government is coquetting with the idea of conscription here with a view of intimidating Eire into surrendering the ports, or immersing Ireland in internal strife and fishing in troubled waters. British imperialism and its puppet Stormont government will bear the sole responsibility for whatever strife is provoked.

'We stand for conscription of labour by capital neither under a green flag nor the Union Jack. The right to command labour must belong to labour alone. So long as the basic means of production belong to the exploiters, and the civil service and armed forces are commanded by their representatives, we oppose conscription. For us the class criteria is all decisive. The question is: conscription of whom, by whom, and for what ends? A Socialist Britain or Ireland would probably need conscription to combat the blockade or intervention by world capital, but that would rather be the organisation of the producers, because no parasitic class would exist to oppress or expropriate.

'True, the British workers have been conscripted, but that began before the war. At this stage when the mismanagement and rapacity of British imperialism are opening the eyes of workers on both sides of the Channel, it would be shameful to submit like sheep. The working class, independent and self-reliant, must lead the struggle against conscription.

'The postwar collapse of industry will drive the capitalists everywhere towards Fascism. Passively to accept conscription now would be to cultivate the habit of surrendering positions in advance.

'But, are we not opposed to Hitler's victory? Yes, we are against the Hitlers everywhere, including those at home. The only way to victory over Fascism lies through victory over capitalist imperialism, which breeds Fascism. The capitalist class — look at Vichy! — will betray us to Hitler, or strive to impose their own brand of Hitlerism upon us whenever it is in their own interests to do so. Smash Hitlerism at home first. Demand workers' control of the banks, factories and armed forces. Until then, a militant class front against conscription!

Repression

One feature of political life in Belfast was the increasingly common repression by the police and the employers. Bob Armstrong described the latest attacks in the May 1942 issue of *Socialist Appeal*:

'We have been, of late, subjected to a campaign of threats and intimidation from both the Home Office and the Stalinists. My interrogation at the Special Crimes Department was, some of it, utterly fantastic: "Are you trying to break the Anglo-Soviet Pact? Do you consider Stalin's government legal? Aren't you trying to disrupt the Communist Party?" Anonymous letters are the latest tactics: "Fifth Columnists beware! The government is watching you." They have even written to one comrade's father. We anticipate that letters to employers will be the next step.'

The number of questions Armstrong faced about his opposition to Stalin shows that the anti-war position must have had some impact at a stage when the CPNI was fully supporting the war and calling for maximum productivity from the workers.

The prediction about letters to employers came true sooner than expected when a sustained campaign of harassment began in late 1942. One comrade, 'who was very enthusiastic, hard working and valuable, has been rendered destitute — no dole, etc, due to victimisation'.⁴⁵ This report goes on to say that the Belfast organisation intended to maintain the victimised member until he found a means of earning some money, so the WIL launched a Belfast Fund which raised £56.6s.6d, what was then nearly six months wages, for the apprentice comrade. They were also realistic about his chances of getting back to work, and did not think it would be easy for someone politically discriminated against to find work anywhere else in Belfast.

This member, who like a number of others was from the South of Ireland and had come North when industry had expanded during the war, was 'victimised from his employment, following an interview with the police': 'He obtained another job in another Belfast factory. Before he actually started work he received a letter stating that owing to "reorganisation" his services would not be required. It is clear that the police informed the employers that he was "undesirable", and thus prevented him from getting work in Ulster for the purpose of forcing him to leave.'⁴⁶

Within days of that incident the screw was tightened yet again with the detention of Pat McKeivitt, a plumber who worked in Harland and Wolffs. The February 1943 issue of *Socialist Appeal* gives details of McKeivitt's background. His record included membership of the Dublin District Committee of the Plumbers, Glaziers and Domestic Engineers Union. During a building strike he 'did consistent picket duty for nine months. Last summer he was one of the leaders of a strike at a Crumlin building job in defence of shop stewards' rights.' McKeivitt was arrested on 29 December and was questioned about his political activities, although he had never been a member of any other political group than the WIL.

Whilst he was detained the comrades instituted a Release Committee, and appealed for support from the British organisation, which responded by circu-

45. Belfast Branch Committee, letter to T Grant, 23 December 1942.

46. *Socialist Appeal*, February 1943.

lating an appeal to its members and other groups on the left. As a part of the campaign, Armstrong wrote to the Belfast and District Trades Council seeking to be allowed to speak to it about this clear case of victimisation. In his letter, Armstrong pointed out that McKeivitt was a trade unionist, a member of the Irish Section of the Fourth International, and that he had no contact with any illegal movement.

On 8 January 1943 the *Belfast Telegraph* carried this report: 'Miss Betty Sinclair, moving that the deputation be not received, said she understood the authorities intended to send McKeivitt back over the Border. The Trotskyist movement was against the war effort and its politics were not of the working class.' That disgraceful and typical Stalinist attitude ended the discussion, and the Release Committee was refused permission to address the meeting. As it turns out, Armstrong was unable to attend the meeting himself, as will be explained below. When the February 1943 issue of *Socialist Appeal* said that the 'political renegades at the head of the so-called Communist Party in Ulster, have cooperated as stool pigeons and informers', it appears to be accurate enough. Allegations of Communist Party links with the RUC were also made by the IRA during the war.⁴⁷

As forecast by Sinclair, McKeivitt was in fact deported. The interesting thing to note is that this admission was made before his wife, the Release Committee, or his solicitor were informed. Presumably the Stalinists had better links with the Special Branch than anyone else...

To keep up the pressure, the RUC arrested Bob Armstrong on 6 January, and held him for 18 days in Crumlin Road jail under the Special Powers Act. He was arrested whilst leafleting in the city centre against the Special Powers Act and the detention of McKeivitt. Whilst he was detained Armstrong had a number of discussions with members of the Republican movement which helped in the later development of the organisation.

Following this arrest, the organisation locally and internationally began a series of protests, sending telegrams to the Home Office, to Stormont, and so

47. Links between the Republican movement and the Stalinists had altered dramatically over the years, from quite close contact in the early 1920s and again in discussions in the 1930s, to outright hostility during the war. One incident which did not help things was recounted by Vincent McDowell, when he was interviewed by Jim Monaghan. McDowell, who was later in the Socialist Republican Party in Belfast after the war, tells how the Republicans wanted to buy a printing press from the Communist Party. Arrangements were made, but at the last minute the Communist Party reneged on the deal. As a military organisation, the IRA moved to resolve the problem. They sent a raiding party to the Communist Party rooms, which put everyone, including Betty Sinclair, up against the wall, and took the machine. Milotte confirms these memories on page 203 of his book. Milotte gives more serious examples of the problems between the two groups. He details statements by Billy McCullough, speaking to the Communist Party's congress of 1942, when he condemned the IRA in the strongest possible terms for helping only 'the enemies of progress'. Milotte then says that some Belfast units of the IRA believed the Communist Party was actively assisting the police in putting Republicans behind bars. Following the arrest of a special IRA intelligence unit which was composed of Protestants, and which Milotte says the Communist Party had entered by having one member in it, some Republicans wanted to execute Betty Sinclair and Billy McCullough. The Northern commander, Hugh McAteer, withheld permission.

on. Independent Labour Party MPs promised to raise the issue in Westminster once parliament reopened if he was not let out. The February 1943 issue of *Socialist Appeal* reported that the Release Campaign had the support of the WIL, the Irish Unemployed Workers Movement, the Socialist Party of Northern Ireland,⁴⁸ and Paddy Agnew, a Stormont MP. Aneurin Bevan and other left Labour MPs also took up the case, and protested to the Home Office in Westminster. Millie Lee, the Acting Secretary of the WIL in Britain, wrote on 30 January 1943: 'Owing to the magnificent response of militant workers both in this country and Belfast sending resolutions to the Northern Ireland Prime Minister, and rendering financial assistance, the desired result has been obtained and cde A [Armstrong] released.'

This was a rather concentrated burst of repression, but it did not end there. Throughout the existence of the Belfast group, it was subject to regular attention, with Special Branch officers sitting in at political meetings, raids on the office, detention of members, etc. The repression did have its effects on the organisation, as at least one of the comrades was deported and some of the others dropped out of activity. When Armstrong was released from Crumlin Road jail, the only ones active were himself, Elsie and Thompson. By early 1944 Thompson had left the group, although he was later involved again, finally leaving after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, as he thought that such a development ruled out Socialist revolution.⁴⁹

In a follow-up article, in the Mid-February-Mid-March 1943 issue of *Workers International News*, Armstrong explained under the title of 'Why the Trotskyists are Under Fire':

'The Trotskyist movement has not been singled out on account of its smallness, but because its programme is feared. A movement threatening to disturb the caste rift, upon which the Stormont regime uneasily balances, is to be feared above anything else. The Stormont regime fears not an alliance between the IRA and the Trotskyists, but the passing over of the glorious Falls Road proletariat from IRA utopianism to the revolutionary Socialist programme.

'For that we will not require to pander to the illusions of the IRA or any other organisation which stands apart from and against the programme of the revolutionary working class. We need no cat's paws. We turn to the dauntless working class youth of the Falls Road and strive to win them, not by nursing outworn prejudices, but by proclaiming the power of proletarian methods of struggle against you and your class. The Irish section of the Workers International League demands: 1. That the internees be released or brought to trial; 2. The repeal of the Special Powers Act; 3. A united front of all working class organisations against the arbitrary rule of the police.'

48. The Socialist Party of Northern Ireland was the continuation of the old Independent Labour Party branch after the disaffiliation of the ILP from the British Labour Party at a special conference in July 1932.

49. Telephone call to Mike Thompson, Eric's son, from C Crossey, 20 May 1988.

Within months of those incidents, another arrest was made in Ann Street, in the centre of town, whilst one of the comrades was selling papers. He was using a poster with the slogan 'Churchill's Cheating Russia', when a middle class female Tory took exception and called in the RUC. The RUC man threatened to 'smash his skull, knock his head off, break his jaw, etc'. The report goes on to say that most of the crowd were indignant about the cop's behaviour. The poster was seized, and the seller was marched to Chichester Street barracks.⁵⁰

Dublin

With the departure of four of the members of the WIL delegation back to London, the Dublin organisation in early 1940 consisted of Trench, Daly, Noonan, Byrne and possibly one or two other young ex-Republicans, although Byrne, at least, was quickly to follow the others over to England. In a letter from 1940, Trench says: 'Your absence, has of course been a blow to us, but it is an advantage at the same time because it is making us get together more and work out the things we can do without your assistance; and so in the end it will lead to sound activity all round, which you will be able to supplement when you come back.'⁵¹

After the departure of the British delegation, Trench and the rest in Dublin agreed to finalise an almost ready edition of *Socialist Appeal*, but following that they decided not to produce a regular monthly journal, but to publish a series of pamphlets: 'The next issue, already in preparation, will deal as fully as we know how, with the crisis plan, both theoretical criticism and how to cope with the situation it creates in the party.' Whilst Trench goes on to mention further plans for pamphlets on unemployment, etc, no evidence has been found that the plans came to fruition.⁵²

Despite the loss of these experienced members, the Dublin group quickly developed its activities, especially within the Irish Labour Party and amongst the unemployed. The 20 April 1940 issue of the *Torch* carried material from Thomas Reilly, Secretary of the Dublin Unemployed Workers Movement, based at 51 North Great George's Street, Dublin, about the organisation of the unemployed. He wrote that the unemployed must be 'brought into the fold of organised labour', and that the tasks for the DUWM demanded: 'A programme of minimum demands has to be prepared and adhered to, every attempt to use the unemployed against striking workers in any way has to be met, for unity is the first essential condition. To the unemployed not already organised we appeal to you to join at once and help us fight a united struggle.' As an article from early 1940 says: 'This organisation has already taken to the streets, and is pursuing a vigorous policy for work or full maintenance. They actively fight the bourgeois policy of divide and conquer, and unity between the employed and unemployed is their aim.'⁵³

50. *Socialist Appeal*, Mid-June, 1943.

51. Extract contained in the Haston Archives.

52. Letter to J Haston in the Haston Archives.

53. Extract in Haston files.

All the activity occurred at a stage when the government planned to force people onto work schemes to entitle them to some money. In protest against this the DUWM led a number of demonstrations in April 1940. In a 'Letter from Dublin. For members only', dated 29 April, Trench gives an example of the government's attitude to these demonstrations:

'DUWM meetings were banned two days in succession. On the second day, being unable to hold the meeting, they went up O'Connell Street to Parnell Monument and turned round to come back the other side. When returning they were attacked by the Guards without provocation and some were badly battered. The following were arrested: T Dunne, Steve Daly, and Tommy (WIL), and taken to Bridewell. It is understood... that they will probably be charged under a certain section of the Offences Against the State Act.'

They were in fact briefly interned in the Curragh.⁵⁴ In the 11 May 1940 issue of the *Torch* there is an article on the period the two comrades spent in the Curragh. It exposes some of the politically backward elements of the Republican movement. Some of them threatened Dunne and Daly with violence, resulting in them being kept in isolation. The paper said the best remedy for this attitude was a dose of Connolly's works, that they should read the readily available pamphlets by Connolly.

Trench goes on to say: 'The DUWM agitation centred around the new formation of labour camps on the turf bogs.'⁵⁵ This campaign succeeded in forcing the government to withdraw that scheme because, even under duress, the unemployed refused to go on it. As well as this successful agitation, the group also worked within the Labour Party. Rayner Lysaght reports that Trench had been Secretary of the Pearse Street branch from at least November 1939. In a discussion between Byrne and Lysaght, Byrne said he was also a member of this party branch.⁵⁶ Tommy Reilly was the first Secretary of the Crumlin branch, which generally stood well to the left of the party. Incidentally, Crumlin is also where supporters of the *Militant* first won a base in the Dublin area in the 1970s.

Further details of their activity are given in Lysaght's document, unfortunately only given a limited circulation as a Peoples Democracy education bulletin in 1981. He says: 'In practice, the Dublin Trotskyists were activists.'⁵⁷ Amongst the various examples he gives is their major rôle in the opposition to Fianna Fáil's anti-trade union legislation, which would have curtailed the right to build the unions, along with various other restrictions on their activity.

Through the struggle against these laws a Council of Action was estab-

54. Milotte, p187.

55. Extract in Haston files.

56. Conversation between J Monaghan, Rayner O'Connor Lysaght and C Crossey, Dublin, 27 August 1991.

57. R O'Connor Lysaght, *Early History of Irish Trotskyism*, p7.

lished, and, although the union leaders dropped out of it after the immediate issue had been won, the Dublin WIL helped to maintain it for a while, during which time it carried out agitation on such questions as housing.

The activity in the Labour Party can be glimpsed from the annual reports of party conferences. At these events Trench moved a series of motions putting forward the general position of the Trotskyist movement. Lysaght reports: 'Trench's political struggles included demands for a sliding scale of wages, for more measures of nationalisation, and against the removal, under clerical pressure, of the workers' republic as the party's constitutional aim.'⁵⁸

In his position on the war, Trench argued for 'a conception of Irish neutrality as a positive move against the war. He urged that Irish Labour should use the 26 county state's position as a base from which to contact anti-Axis resistance movements and the anti-colonial movements in the lands of the democratic imperialists. In 1941 Trench persuaded the Labour Party conference to pass a general motion on positive neutrality, with only William O'Brien and three others opposing. The next year, however, a more detailed motion was defeated overwhelmingly.'⁵⁹

The local branch of the WIL was affected by the continuing problem of emigration. As mentioned earlier, at least two of the members had moved to Belfast for work by the end of 1942. Byrne had also gone, in his case to London via Liverpool. He stayed active with the WIL until his deportation back to Ireland in early 1945, when he resumed activity with the Irish organisation. Tommy Reilly, the last remaining comrade from the 'exile' delegation, was back in England by October 1941, when he was supposed to write a report on the situation in Ireland.⁶⁰

By late 1942 the Dublin group had fallen off to such a stage where the membership consisted of a small group of comrades which included Paddy Trench, who was very ill with tuberculosis, Mattie Merrigan, a student at Trinity called Niall, Steve Daly and 'Jim Kelly'.⁶¹ Branch meetings were held in the Boilermakers Union Hall, in Gardiner Street.⁶²

Merrigan, who later became President of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, was won to the cause by Bob Armstrong, who met him in the house of Mrs Flannagan-Monks in Crumlin in 1941. Flannagan-Monks had a strong political history, having been involved with the revival of the Irish Citizens Army in the 1930s. The ICA had originated from the wing of the Republican Congress led by Michael Price and Nora Connolly O'Brien. Flannagan-Monks became active around Trench's group, and was at this stage in the Irish Labour

58. Op cit, p8.

59. Op cit.

60. J Deane, letter to M Lee, 27 October 1941.

61. Belfast Committee, letter to T Grant, 23 December 1942. I have used inverted commas here because in a letter to J Deane, dated 24 December 1942, from 21 Upper Liffey Street, Dublin, he signs the letter 'Jim Kelly (John)' who had transferred down from Belfast where he was a member of the local committee.

62. M Merrigan, letter to C Crossey, 23 August 1987.

Party.⁶³ Merrigan's involvement was to last for the rest of the existence of the Trotskyist group in the 1940s, after which he had a long career on the far left of Irish politics.

In an interview with Sam Bornstein in 1974, Merrigan gives an outline of some of the activity:

'Sales of the paper were limited. Limited to the extent that we had basically four or five people who at any time would be involved in distributing and selling literature. We probably sold about maybe 10 dozen copies of the paper a month. That was the *Socialist Appeal*. *The Militant* was less frequent in its delivery, by reason of the shipping and mail situation. But *The Militant* apparently sold because it was an American paper, and anything with a sort of American flair or orientation would catch the imagination of Irish people rather than an English publication.'⁶⁴

In a further letter from early 1943 by 'Joe', references are made to problems in the Dublin branch. He reports: 'It is a surprise to our central organisation that Paddy Trench is still a member of the group. We were under the impression that he had left us a long while ago.' Joe goes on to dismiss a proposal by some younger comrades to split away from the branch, and to set up a separate group: 'Even if all your criticisms are correct, it would be the most harmful stand possible for young comrades to commence with a split. Rather the difficult process of trying to unify and work with a middle class group who stand on the same programme than commence a struggle from the start.' Whilst 'Joe' had problems with Trench, he was personally willing to continue working with the majority of the branch, giving them the names of contacts he had, as well as arranging the delivery of the British papers.⁶⁵

Curragh Trotskyists?

One of the few publicly available accounts of the origins of Irish Trotskyism is given in a section of Mike Milotte's book, *Communism in Modern Ireland*. He claims that the largest single group of Trotskyist supporters in Eire was comprised of IRA men interned at the Curragh Internment Camp, and that they outnumbered the Stalinists.⁶⁶ This is a great exaggeration.

Milotte mentions Eoin McNamee as one of those in the group. McNamee, originally from Broughdearg, Co Tyrone, was already active in his local IRA unit by the time he was 16. As very little was happening, politically or in any other sense, he migrated to London. In 1935 at the age of 17, he became interested in Socialism. He found his way into the Republican Congress, which was then active in London. The London leadership included Michael Kelly, Char-

63. M Merrigan, letter to C Crossey, 22 October 1987 and 8 December 1987.

64. M Merrigan, interview with S Bornstein, 15 April 1974.

65. 'Joe', letter to 'John', 4 February 1943, in the Deane Archives.

66. Milotte, p188

lie Donnelly (who was killed in Spain fighting for the Republicans), Sean Mulgrew and Tommy Patton.⁶⁷

During his time in London, McNamee retained a leading position with the IRA, being at various stages London Intelligence Officer and Battalion Adjutant, whilst also keeping up links with the Socialist movement. In a letter to Haston dated 19 September 1945, Byrne said 'that lad McNamee said he thinks he knew you in London', a memory he repeated nearly 40 years later: 'In London he met Jock Haston, then Ted Grant. I don't know whether he joined or became a loose sympathiser.'⁶⁸

McNamee was back in Ireland by early 1940, at the latest, and was appointed Operations Officer, though a bit to the left of the usually apolitical Belfast people. He was appointed Quarter Master General at an Army Conference in December 1941, and briefly served as Chief of Staff before getting lifted and interned on 23 May 1942.⁶⁹ He contacted the WIL by writing to *Socialist Appeal* and *Workers International News*. Throughout 1941-43 there were several letters printed in these journals requesting subscriptions to the papers, ordering pamphlets, etc.⁷⁰ Whilst links did physically exist between the

67. TP Coogan, *The IRA*, p206. Charlie Donnelly deserves a mention. M O'Riordan, a leading member of the Communist Party of Ireland, wrote a history of Irish involvement in the Spanish Civil War, *The Connolly Column*, in which he states that Donnelly was a member of the CPI. Donnelly was obviously involved in the Republican movement here, then with the Republican Congress in London, before finally going to Spain to fight for the Republic during the Spanish Civil War. Donnelly's life has now been documented in a pamphlet by his brother Joseph, *Charlie Donnelly: The Life and Poems*. Joseph explains how his brother's politics came out in the most surprising circumstances, including during a game of billiards: 'Once during a game with Charlie, the table became a battlefield in the Russian Civil War and for the first time I heard the name Trotsky and how he had created the Red Army out of a rabble and had finally broken all resistance to the revolutionary forces... I learnt from Charlie that Trotsky was then on the run, and the first important victim of the purges.' (p39) Joseph goes on to say that at a meeting after the murder of Kirov in 1934, Charlie was attacked as a 'Trotskyite', although he was still in the CPI during the Spanish Civil War. In the 8 June 1935 issue of *Inprecorr*, a newspaper produced by the CPGB, there is an article by Charlie Donnelly (Irish Republican Army) about the discussions between the Free State government and the British. He states: 'The meaning of the settlement talk is simply that the near approach of war makes it necessary for imperialism to conclude its attempt to break Republican resistance and secure Ireland as a war base, and that the statements of the Free State government show that, as far as it is concerned, the economic collapse of the Free State under its policy has made the time ripe for an imperialist victory.' He goes on to say that any settlement which left Ireland in its current status, and which identified Ireland with the British war interests, 'will be repudiated and fought not only by the Republican movement, but by everybody who wishes Ireland to escape the horror of participation in an imperialist war in which she has no interest'. Despite his involvement with the Stalinists, these incidents would indicate that at the very least he had sympathies with the Trotskyist movement.

68. A McCabe, letter to C Crossey, 24 July 1987.

69. Cf J Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army: A History of the IRA*, pp177, 217, 225.

70. For example the Mid-March 1943 issue of *Socialist Appeal* carried a request, dated 22 March 1943, for JP Cannon's *Socialism on Trial*, and the WIL document *Preparing for Power*. The individual concerned also asked for back copies of the paper and pamphlets. The Mid-January 1944 issue shows that someone called 'NM' took out a subscription for *Workers International News*.

internees and the organisation, that is as far as it went. Byrne told the author: 'They probably did consider themselves Trotskyists in opposition to the Stalinists. Eoin told me that they used to have great discussions on Stalinism, Trotskyism, etc, in the Curragh.'

CC: 'So they were sympathisers?'

JB: 'That's right, we'd no members there.'

CC: 'Did anyone from the group ever go up and visit them?'

JB: 'No. We only met up with Eoin after he got out.'

Jim Savage, an internee from the period, was involved in the Connolly Study Group. This was initiated by Neil Gould, and also involved Michael O'Riordan, the long-time leader of the Communist Party. Savage says that the Connolly Study Group was 20 strong.⁷² Byrne did say: 'As far as we can see they gave the Stalinists a run for their penny.'⁷³ Whilst sympathisers did exist, none of them appear to have become actively involved in the Trotskyist movement after their release.

Whereas Milotte may have succumbed to a desire to grab the limited evidence and turn these sympathisers into a Trotskyist group, some Stalinists have gone to the opposite extreme, and have tried to deny any links at all between the Trotskyist movement and sections of the prisoners.

Savage writes that McNamee 'was never left wing in the first place, and never showed the least interest, only in the Republican movement'. Savage also rules out any debates over the Soviet Union, and goes on to say that the Stalinists thought that 'it was up to us to support the war effort, which did not go down well with some of the old Republicans as England was fighting on the same side as the USSR'.⁷⁴ This obviously overstates his case, as we have a number of sources who link McNamee with Socialist groups in London and Dublin, along with written evidence of links between the papers of the movement and internees.

The links in this case are but one example of where the Irish Trotskyists, because of their determined opposition to imperialism, repression, etc, were able to influence some members of the Republican movement, something which is more clearly shown in the developments in Belfast at the end of the war.⁷⁵

Cork Independents?

Eamon Corcoran, a Republican who was around the organisation in Dublin, has told Jim Monaghan of a group of Trotskyists which developed independ-

71. J Byrne interview.

72. J Savage, letter to C Crossey, 6 June 1988.

73. J Byrne, letter to J Haston, 19 September 1945.

74. J Savage, letter to C Crossey, 6 June 1988.

75. This view is disputed by J Bowyer Bell, who states in a letter dated 10 June 1993 to C Crossey, that it was not 'the Trotskyists' position on any issue that influenced the few [dissidents] but rather their opposition to the orthodox Communists'.

ently in Cork. This group centred around an American sailor called Carrol who sailed on the *City of Vancouver* into Cork.⁷⁶ Presumably he was a member of the American Socialist Workers Party, as he sold *The Militant*. Corcoran says that the group rose to have 10 members, but collapsed before the end of the war. Whilst none of the other survivors in Dublin or Belfast can remember such a group, it is not impossible. Bornstein and Richardson give a number of examples where activists in the army, navy, etc, did build new groups or link up with others from different states, such as Egypt, Israel, Germany and Italy. If such a group did emerge, it unfortunately did not make any links with the other comrades in the rest of the island.

Revival of the Movement

The year of 1944 saw a general revival in the fortunes of the Trotskyist movement, North and South. In the North there were a number of important developments industrially, the key event being a major strike in the Belfast shipyard. In the South there were developments in the Irish Labour Party and in the unions. The combined interventions in these developments resulted in a growth of the organisation from a handful back up to about 20 within a few months.

Whilst the CPNI gave its full support to the war effort, as a part of its strategy for the defence of the Soviet Union, the Trotskyists kept up their arguments for the independence of the working class. A result of that approach was that they believed that the class war could not be suspended until after the war. Any strikes which developed received their full support.

In the course of the war sections of the working class were affected by jingoism, but even so the majority was still aware that whilst the media could talk about the 'nation' and so on, the ones being forced to make sacrifices were the workers. Despite legislation introduced to make strikes illegal, a substantial number did occur during the war. The Mid-April 1943 issue of *Socialist Appeal* lists the following as being on strike at that stage in Belfast — 4000 transport workers, dockers, painters, welders, blacksmiths and busmen. One of the most substantial industrial disputes that occurred during the war was the Belfast engineering strike of 1944.⁷⁷ On 25 February 500 fitters went on strike demanding an increase of one shilling an hour, putting them near the average wage in Shorts, one of the other big engineering plants. The trade union leaders tried to keep the workers in the yard, but the directly elected shop stewards, mainly NILP members, said that unless the full claim was met they would 'place the full strength of the workers in Belfast behind the men on strike'.

By 8 March 4000 were on strike, rising to 22 000 by the 22nd. Despite pressure by the CPNI and the Northern Ireland Prime Minister Basil Brooke,

76. To add credence to this story, there was a ship on the *Lloyd's Register*, the *Vancouver City*, which is close enough, in the years 1943-44.

77. Cf M Maguire, 'The Belfast Engineering Strike, 1944', *Militant Irish Monthly*, April 1985.

who called the strike an act of sabotage, the strikers held out and rejected various minor compromise offers. Having failed to end the strike by persuasion and minor concessions, the government decided to use repression, and arrested the five leading shop stewards for organising the strike. As Marxists have pointed out, in cases where the material interests of the capitalist class come under threat, the so-called impartiality of the system comes apart, as it openly backs the capitalists.

At the court the judge, Major McCallum, said: 'The law has been broken, and broken deliberately, callously and calculatingly. There is only one cure for such sabotage, and that is imprisonment.' Having had his bit of bile the judge sentenced them to three to five months hard labour in Crumlin Road jail in North Belfast. The strikers were told they could get out on bail and appeal against their sentences, but James Morrow, the leading steward, refused the offer on their behalf, saying that it was the government's responsibility to let them out, and that if they were not released the government would have to take responsibility for the consequences.

After the court case widespread anger swept through the working class in Belfast. The following day engineering workers all over Belfast met to demand their release. To increase the pressure, the workers then went on the biggest strike in Belfast since 1919. Between the court appearance on Monday and Thursday, the numbers out rose to over 40 000 engineers, with other groups of workers pledging support as well.

The CPNI had resolutely opposed the strike from the start, and used its influence to try to resolve the dispute. By Thursday night they had got Belfast Trades Council to agree to call the action off, by asking the shop stewards to sign the bail application. Under this pressure the five signed out on the Friday, thereby ending the strike.

This massive industrial mobilisation forced concessions from the government and the employers. The workers won an eight shillings a week rise until an overall 27.5 per cent rise was given to the whole industry. The shop stewards won recognition to negotiate wages and conditions, there was to be no victimisation, and those sacked were to be reinstated, and at the quickly arranged appeal all the charges were dropped.

The CPNI, which had gained widespread support on the back of the Red Army and Russia's rôle in the war, suffered because of its actions in this dispute. Party leaders like McCullough publicly condemned the strikers, and party members went into work — they scabbed. What Bornstein and Richardson say in their study of the CPGB also applies to the local variety of Stalinism.⁷⁸ The Stalinists' new policy placed them alongside the management, and in opposition to trade unionists of every description.

Out of the intervention during the dispute and because of the disgraceful rôle played by the Stalinists, the Trotskyist group was able to recruit a number of new people from them. In a letter dated 21 August 1944 to the British Section of the Fourth International, Armstrong says: 'All our new members came

78. S Bornstein and A Richardson, *Two Steps Back*, Ilford, 1982, p97.

from the CP, together including Harry Beckett from East Belfast, who had been an ardent young Stalinist.'

International Affiliations

From the start of the Trotskyist movement in Ireland, the Irish membership was effectively a part of the British group, the Workers International League, a situation which was to continue until the Irish comrades formally separated to establish the Revolutionary Socialist Party in July 1944. The origins of the RSP are important, because there were differences of opinion between the WIL and the mainstream of the Fourth International, differences which affected the attitude of the leadership of the International to the comrades.

Bornstein and Richardson reject the idea that the decision in late 1937 by sections of the Revolutionary Socialist League to split away and set up the WIL was based upon purely personal factors, an allegation which was made at the founding conference of the Fourth International in 1938. They argue that it 'was a break with all previous practices and habits of work, from a propagandistic style to one of active intervention inside the labour movement'.⁷⁹ One of the leaders of the rival organisation, the RSL, gave this description of the organisation: 'They were more inclined to go straight to the workers in general rather than to the workers via organisations: they were prepared to go straight to the workers who didn't belong to anything — if you had a union card then that was it.'⁸⁰ At the split the WIL took four of the RSL's branches and one third of its members. They started with a positive attitude, and instead of turning in on themselves, as the other groups were doing, they set to work seriously inside the working class.⁸¹ By mid-1938 the WIL had established itself as a serious, growing organisation outside the RSL.

Because of its small size, the organisation was unable to send a representative to the founding conference of the Fourth International, which was held in Paris in August 1938. Although they could not attend, the WIL sent a letter to the Fourth International asking for affiliation as a sympathetic group. The hostile attitude of the leadership of the International to the WIL is shown by their turning down this request, and the harsh language they used about the WIL. This attitude survived the years. When the political descendants of these people produced the records of the founding conference, the WIL's letter was excluded, leaving only the leadership's denunciation of them to create an unbalanced image of events.

Given the fact that the WIL was outside the Fourth International, it was inevitable that discussions were held in the organisation over how to resolve this question. Material going over this ground has been found in the Haston archives.

One tactic which was discussed was for the Irish comrades, who were really

79. Bornstein and Richardson, *War and the International*, p4.

80. Op cit, p5.

81. Op cit.

members of the WIL, to apply separately for affiliation to the Fourth International. The reasoning behind this was that if the International could accept the different policies of the WIL in Ireland, why not also accept them in Britain and allow the British WIL into membership as well? The first application appears to have been made in 1940, according to a letter dated 16 July 1940 from 'Stuart' (Sam Gordon) to Trotsky. The extract says: 'The Irish group, a copy of whose paper was sent [to] you, has requested affiliation. We would like an opinion as to procedure in such a case, particularly since we have no previous personal contact and we do not have detailed data regarding that group.'⁸² As an aside here 'Stuart' seems to be, as the saying goes, economical with the truth. On 15 May 1940 Paddy Trench wrote to Stuart replying to an earlier letter of 20 April. So to say that there had been no personal contact is misleading.⁸³

This tactic failed, as can be seen from this extract from a letter by 'Eric Clapper' (Sam Gordon), at that stage the acting Secretary of the International, cited in a letter dated 26 May 1943 from Bob Armstrong to Haston: 'We would be glad to welcome you as our local representative, but you understand that cannot be done as long as you consider yourselves a section of WIL, irrespective of our own future relations with WIL. It is our firm hope that this last question will be solved in the very near future and, I feel quite certain, in a favourable manner.' This seems to be the first raising of the issue of separation from the WIL by the Irish comrades. Gordon's letter goes on to say that the question of the future links between the Irish and the British would, of necessity, have to be sorted out between them on an equal standing.

These arguments came up in an internal debate involving Trench, Armstrong and the London comrades on this question sometime in late 1941. Armstrong said that the British comrades had condemned the idea of independent affiliation. He said that Trench's reasons for it 'were weak and in fact the product of narrow nationalist psychology. He seemed to suspect you of organisational aggrandisement and wrote of your West Britainism tendency. Further I was completely against Trench's affiliation to the Fourth, because in my view, he is incapable of organising any sort of active group. Trench seemed to consider affiliation to WIL harmful, whereas I have always considered it essential.'⁸⁴

Armstrong pointed out the numerical, political and organisational weaknesses of the Irish group, and agreed with Haston that they needed to maintain the current links with the WIL. In a number of letters Armstrong referred to a subsidy given by the WIL to the Irish organisation in that the money raised by sales of *Socialist Appeal* could be held onto here to help in the local work, something which Hanna also remembers in his interview. Furthermore, in a letter dated 23 December 1942 in reply to a suggestion from London that they send a full-time organiser to Dublin, the Belfast committee argued that

82. Trotsky Archives, folder 6, file 1607.

83. Trench's letter is in the Trotsky Archives, T2 14218

84. B Armstrong, letter to J Haston, 26 May 1943.

the strength of the Irish organisation was in Belfast, and that if resources were available they should send £2 per week to help in Belfast. Should the comrades, however, insist on sending a full-time organiser to Dublin, the Belfast committee suggested either Haston or Healy.

Armstrong's view at this point on the issue of separation was that 'the deeply rooted Irish consciousness of considerable sections of the workers may make a formal separation expedient, when we are sufficiently developed to influence large masses... In short that is the music of the future.' Basically, the problem centred on the fact that the British and Irish differed politically from the majority of the Fourth International, and it could be said that the approach of the International's leadership was to use the issue of affiliation as a means of splitting a rival group. A few of the problems which could have arisen over early affiliation would have been whether the Belfast and Dublin members would have to stop selling *Socialist Appeal*, and use instead the *Militant*, the paper of the RSL, and if emigration occurred, would they have to join the RSL rather than the WIL in Britain? John Archer reports that he had the impression that the WIL consciously kept the Irish membership at a distance in order to avoid contact with the different ideas of the RSL.⁸⁵

With the development of events in Britain, the success of the general approach of the WIL became apparent as it grew to have 300 members, whilst between 1939 and 1944 the RSL had split three ways. Given these changes, the International Secretariat moved towards encouraging fusion between the various groups, and eventually in March 1944 they merged to establish the Revolutionary Communist Party, with a membership of 400. The conference was well attended, and amongst others present were Byrne and Bob Armstrong representing branches in London and Belfast, whilst Merrigan was there from the Dublin branch.⁸⁶

The position of the Irish group was considerably changed by the fusion, as it removed the problem of the WIL's being outside the Fourth International. On 21 August 1944 Armstrong said that after the establishment of the Revolutionary Socialist Party in July 1944, and further discussions about the Fourth International, they favoured a separate affiliation to the Fourth International. He said that all the members were in favour, citing three reasons:

- '1. Right from the start the habit of regarding themselves as a leadership should be acquired.
- '2. There is a very strong nationalist sentiment among the workers, including even the Protestants.
- '3. Irish domestic politics are complicated, and whilst that is all the more reason for seeking advice and guidance from Britain, it is nonetheless the reason for being absolutely prepared to take the initiative in highly complex situations, as it is on the one hand perhaps difficult to follow events from the

85. J Archer, letter to C Crossey, 30 April 1988.

86. Ann Keen, a founder of the WIL, states that Armstrong was present (letter to C Crossey, 5 November 1987). Merrigan said that he was the delegate from the Dublin branch.

outside and, on the other hand, there may not be sufficient time to report and seek advice.⁸⁷

The end result of all this correspondence was that in July 1945 the International Secretariat recognised the official status of the Irish group as of 20 July 1944.⁸⁸

The Irish Section of the Fourth International, which was now called the Revolutionary Socialist Party, continued to play its rôle in the International. It distributed leaflets from the European Executive, helped out in campaigns against the repression of the Indian Marxists, participated in debates, and attended the next conference in 1946, the summer school of 1947, and finally the 1948 Congress.

Formation of the Revolutionary Socialist Party

The revival of the movement, North and South, saw a growth in the number of comrades to around 20. This included a group of between six and eight experienced comrades who were evenly split between Dublin and Belfast. The newer layer was mainly young people, and included some who had been won from the Communist Party in the Belfast shipyard.

The new organisation was launched at two meetings in Belfast and Dublin in July 1944. The Belfast meeting was attended by about 10 members, three of them from Dublin. In turn four of the Belfast members went South over the weekend of 12 July. Hanna remembers that he and McLean cycled down, stopping over at the youth hostel near the border. He describes the meeting as being in some poky union hall, and that the Belfast group included him, McLean, Bob Armstrong and Harry Beckett, who was a new recruit from the shipyard Communist Party. There were about seven or eight Dublin members there, including Merrigan and an older woman, who was presumably Mrs Flannagan-Monks.⁸⁹

Merrigan says that the meeting agreed to establish two Secretaries, himself and Bob Armstrong. They held discussions on the national question, on the struggle against Fascism, on the defence of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers' state, as well as the possibilities for Socialism in the postwar period.⁹⁰

The launching of the Revolutionary Socialist Party came on a high tide of industrial and political struggles, and the next few months saw the group make progress. One sign of this was the obtaining of rooms in both towns for

87. Armstrong is citing a passage from his letter dated 26 May 1943 to Jock Haston.

88. D Logan, letter to J Haston, 27 July 1945. In November 1944 the European Executive had already noted that in Ireland there was 'now a group sufficiently strong and homogenous for them to be recognised as a national section, and as a result their *Theses on the National Question* are a document of the International Secretariat'. *Bulletin of the European Section of the Fourth International*, November 1944).

89. J Hanna interview.

90. M Merrigan, letter to C Crossey, 23 August 1987.

the first time. Previous to this the organisation tended to move around to whatever accommodation they could get. In Belfast the comrades acquired rooms in 36 Gresham Street, off Royal Avenue in the city centre. In Dublin the rooms were in 5 South Leinster Street.

A part of the increased activity was the production of a small, four page document called *TUC Betrayed: O'Brien and Co Bare Their Teeth: Throws Workers into the Arms of Reaction*. This was distributed around Dublin, attacking the right wing split in the Irish Congress of Trade Unions organised by William O'Brien. He was opposed to the existence of British-based trade unions and the rôle played by the Larkins, both Jim and Jim Junior, in the Labour Party. Merrigan had been on the Dublin Constituency Council, representing the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union, when he helped get the endorsement of Larkin as a candidate for the Labour Party.⁹¹

1945-1946

Following the formation of the RSP, the Trotskyists set about building the new section of the Fourth International. This meant a continuation of the general work of paper sales, public meetings, education of the members through study groups, etc.

Joe Quinn, who had been recruited during 1941, was released after a three year period in Derry Jail, where he had been detained for his links with the Republican movement. In an interview he describes that after his release in December 1944 he went to his home town of Newry. Despite being isolated, about 40 miles from the other comrades, Joe was able to do his bit. Armstrong sent him copies of the paper, which he would then sell at the Warrenpoint Harbour estate at the rate of a couple of dozen papers per issue.⁹² Armstrong also attempted to maintain contact with him by visiting Newry on each holiday occasion. Unfortunately, the only contact in the town, Patrick McGeow, who was a shoemaker, had emigrated by the time Quinn had arrived. Quinn did occasionally go to Belfast to attend meetings. He can remember the street meetings and the banner, or scroll, with the inscription of the Revolutionary Socialist Party on it.

Hanna and Thompson also remember doing pub sales. Thompson says that they also did estate sales, on which they would also distribute locally produced leaflets. Hanna says that he did sales in the Markets area of Belfast. Hanna thinks the paper order was about 1500 per issue of the monthly *Socialist Appeal*, a quite large number of papers for the small group to sell. Eventually, the group accepted that sales had fallen away, and wrote to the circulation department in London cutting the order to 300.⁹³

91. *Saothar*, no 12, 1987. This is the annual journal of the Irish Labour History Society. [Larkin was elected on a Labour ticket to Dublin City Council in 1942, and was elected as a TD for Dublin North-East in the general election in 1943. Editor's note]

92. J Quinn interview.

93. B Armstrong, letter to J Haston, 6 December 1946.

Hanna was involved in a variation of the tactic of entrism when instead of going into a labour movement organisation he joined the Young Christian Workers. The YCW was a Catholic youth organisation set up by the church in 1944 in order to cut across the involvement of young Catholic workers in the labour movement. The CPNI had a couple of meetings on the Falls broken up by these people. After discussing it with the group, Hanna joined the YCW in order to see if there was anyone good at the meetings. In the short time he attended Hanna briefly spoke at one meeting on conditions in the shipyard for young workers. Unfortunately, there seems to have been no good people present, and this diversion was quickly ended.⁹⁴

As the war came to an end there was a mixture of developments for the RSP. The radicalisation of society during the war resulted in a growing likelihood that the British Labour Party would win the general election. This was also accompanied by widespread deindustrialisation, as the need for war products dried up. In April 1945 the comrades issued a leaflet, under the title of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (Irish Section Fourth International), advertising a public meeting on the redundancies. It called upon the Belfast workers:

'... to rely on their own independent class power. Do not be driven onto the streets. Fight for the spreading of work by shorter hours at the same wage rates as present — for wages to rise alongside prices — for the opening of the bosses' books for workers' inspection to expose concealed profits — for the inauguration of public works under workers' control and financed by taxing the capitalists to produce useful goods for the workers.

'No one sacked until an alternative job exists!

'No makeshifts!

'No false divisions into dilutees and "craftsmen"!

'Unite to smash capitalism!

'For Workers' Power!'

In the run-up to the elections, meetings were held in Dublin and Belfast. A good crowd attended the Belfast meeting, whilst 40 attended in Dublin. This meeting was held in the new offices in 5 South Leinster Street.⁹⁵

Just when they thought things were going well, the RUC again began to pay attention to what was going on. The Belfast office at 36 Gresham Street was raided in January. The rooms were ransacked, and those present were asked for their names and addresses. The comrades rightly refused to give these details. The Mid-February 1945 issue of *Socialist Appeal* says that the RUC had made 'endeavours to place informers in their midst, and before this raid a stooge was attending their study circle. The Belfast meeting was attended by a detective Lightbody who had been involved in spying on strikers and

94. J Hanna interview. This variation by no means ends the theme. Milotte recounts a number of occasions when the Stalinists carried out entry work into the IRA and the Orange Order.

95. J Byrne, letter to J Haston, 19 September 1945.

giving testimony against the shop stewards jailed in 1944.' After yet another raid on them, Harry Diamond, a Republican Socialist MP at Stormont, asked the Northern Ireland Minister of Home Affairs, Edmund Warnock, some questions in Stormont. According to the 'Yes Minister-speak' of Warnock there was no raid, but the RUC had:

'... visited this address for the purpose of attending a meeting arranged by the Revolutionary Socialist Party. The names of those present were taken, as well as their private addresses and occupations, but they were not asked for their places of employment. The government does not use its powers against working class organisations. It is in power by the votes of the working people of Ulster, but it does and will continue to use its powers against any organisation which seeks by unconstitutional action to promote revolution.'⁹⁶

Diamond's second question asked if it was appropriate that seven police raid a meeting of 11 people. The Minister's reply, on behalf of the RUC, was that they were 'agreeably surprised to find that the meeting was a colossal failure, and that it was quite unnecessary in the circumstances to send seven or eight policemen there. We thought from the amount of propaganda that this association was using that this meeting would have been of sizeable proportions, and they were agreeably surprised to find that it was not.' As this was not a public meeting, it is not overly surprising that only a dozen or so people should be present. The RUC did, however, seem to recognise the effective work of the organisation in advertising itself.

The second conference of the RSP was held in Belfast over the first weekend of August 1945. Byrne said that they discussed North-South liaison and tactics, and that Bob Armstrong was writing theses on the Irish party.⁹⁷

A regular part of the Belfast activity were the Sunday afternoon street meetings held in Blitz Square, High Street. At these meetings the newer members were trained in the arts of public speaking, papers were sold, and generally the group was advertised. Betty Graham, who'd been recruited through the CYS, made her first public speech there, opposing the monarchy, in 1947.

Dick Montague, who went on to become the mainstay of the World Socialist Party of Ireland, which is linked to the Socialist Party of Great Britain, was one of the people introduced to Trotskyist politics through these meetings. Montague had been a member of the Republican movement, and had served time in the Crumlin Road jail for arms offences. Before and during his time inside Montague started to reconsider his politics, and was still doing this when he stumbled across the street meeting in 1946: 'At this meeting there were a few people, the group had a banner, the Revolutionary Socialist Party. I later found out they were a Trotskyist group. The speaker was Jim McLean.' Montague adds: 'I asked a few questions of McLean, I was perceptive but politically ignorant. As they did not disagree with anything I said, I joined... I became associated with them, sort of evolved into membership

96. Northern Ireland *Hansard*, 18 October 1945, columns 727-728.

97. J Byrne, letter to J Haston, 19 September 1945.

without being asked or moved as a member. At that stage the membership was eight or nine.⁹⁸ He remembers that he was quickly asked to speak at one of these meetings, after only one or two weeks. He spoke to about 100 people on Unionism and nationalism.

In Dublin, Byrne had returned to activity after his deportation from Britain early in 1945. He wrote to Haston later that year about events. They were selling *Socialist Appeal* and the US paper, *The Militant*, on O'Connell Street on Saturdays and Sundays, and 'so far it's going pretty well. We come across some good militant workers who lost all hope of the class struggle over Stalin betraying the world working class.'⁹⁹ Yet again the Stalinists played their part in the harassment of the members. Byrne reported: 'The Stalinists got the police to arrest me one Sunday morning at the Cathal Brugha Street-O'Connell Street corner for selling the paper. I said I would still sell it. The only thing they could get me on was not having a licence, I'd never thought of getting one... I was summonsed for the paper sale and got fined.'¹⁰⁰

There had been a number of industrial disputes in which the organisation had intervened, involving butchers, laundry workers, etc. Whilst all this had not resulted in any recruits, the Trotskyists were confident of growth, and had set a target of between 10 and 15 new recruits within three months.¹⁰¹ This target was partially set because they won two good contacts from the public meeting on the British elections.

As a part of the development of the RSP, Armstrong wrote a perspectives document on the national question which was carried in two editions of *Workers International News* in 1945.¹⁰² The document deals with the position in Northern Ireland as the war was drawing to a close. As such, it was not intended as an Irish document, and contains very little about Free State events.

Armstrong goes over the background to and the reasons for the maintenance of partition. Even in 1945 the North was a financial drain on the British Treasury, but the fear of rival imperialist powers was enough to persuade the establishment to hold onto the North as a military base, as well as maintaining the naval bases in the Free State. Correctly, the document states:

'Irish bourgeois nationalism had already exhausted its mission as a vehicle for the development of the productive forces before any real development took place. International Socialism alone can ensure a fresh upswing in production for Ireland; and it is precisely for this reason that the one uncompleted task of the bourgeois revolution, national reunification, can only be achieved by the proletarian revolution.'

98. R Montague, discussions with C Crossey, 21 and 28 November 1987. Montague remains a prominent member of the World Socialist Party of Ireland.

99. J Byrne, letter to J Haston, 19 September 1945.

100. J Byrne, interview

101. J Byrne, letter to J Haston, 19 September 1945.

102. *Workers International News*, April and July-August 1945. This document was also partially reprinted in *Fourth International*, April 1944. It is these extracts to which Rayner Lysaght refers in his history.

In an answer to those who thought then, as some still do today, that we should argue for unity first and then worry about the social structures of society, he goes on to say: 'National unification under the capitalist system, by plunging the hostile Protestant proletariat of the Northern industries into permanent unemployment, would either head straight to the social revolution or to Fascism. There could be no middle way.'

Armstrong cuts to the bone the 'republicanism' of the Irish bourgeoisie. He states that the patriotism of the Irish bourgeoisie is 'inseparable from its property interests', and that they were able to see a virtue in partition in that 'it keeps the working class — the supreme enemy — divided'. He then contrasts the pro-British attitudes of the rich ranchers and their allies with the patriotism of the working class: 'This is an ennobling sentiment, notwithstanding the poisonous bourgeois chauvinism mixed into it by the capitalist politicians and their reformist and Stalinist hangers-on who will at all times seek to manipulate the freedom-loving aspirations of the workers for their own reactionary ends.' The article then deals with the rôle of the Catholic church, the persecution of which over the centuries served to reinforce its hold over the working class. The impact of this, combined with national oppression, was to fuse nationalism with Catholicism. In a strange image Armstrong talks of the 'mass display of Catholic icons' as a means of 'flaunting their irreconcilable hatred for imperialism'.¹⁰³

Despite an inclination by some comrades to go for a strong public campaign against these religious beliefs, Armstrong argued instead that 'the repressed workers will throw away their icons as soon as the ideas of Socialist internationalism begin to take shape among them... Only when the last traces of the old soil are finally ploughed under will the materialist philosophy grow to full bloom and the old religious nonsense be banished forever.' Not surprisingly, he exposes the rôle of the Church as a 'colossal weight on the side of the counter-revolution'. The labour movement was therefore required to expose this in order to isolate the reactionaries.

After dealing with this pernicious aspect of Irish politics, Armstrong explains the rôle of Orange ideology amongst the working class. He attacked Craigavon for his statements about a Protestant government for a Protestant people, and Brooke's declaration that he wouldn't have a Catholic worker on his estate.¹⁰⁴ 'While the alternatives confronting the Protestant working class seem limited to a choice between fraternising with the nationalist workers in the soup kitchens of an Irish republic, or upholding the continuance of the British connection, preference for remaining within the imperial state is a simple matter of common sense bread and butter politics.' Armstrong points out that during the war there was a change of conditions due to heightened

103. A similar mixture could also be seen during the upsurge of Solidarity in Poland in 1980 when the church played a major rôle in Solidarity's campaign against the Stalinist regime.

104. Sir James, later Lord, Craigavon (1871-1940) was the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland from 1921 to 1940. Sir Basil Brooke (Lord Brookeborough, 1888-1974) was the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland from 1943 to 1963. Both were landowners, members of the Orange Lodge, and reactionary Unionists. [Editor's note]

working class political consciousness and the spirit of solidarity due to the relatively high employment levels, and to the rôle of the USSR during the war.

This process was reflected in the growth of the NILP, a huge expansion of the CPNI, and a small but growing band of the most advanced workers in the Fourth International. One other aspect of this period was a weakening of support for Unionism, but Armstrong warned against any belief that this was permanent. The support of Protestant workers for Unionism would 'only be cut clean through by a process of revolutionary surgery'. An example of the backward tendencies lurking below the surface was the legislation on the duration of residence used against the Eire workers as a means of harassment. The only local labour and trade union organisation to protest against this was the Trotskyist movement.

A major section of the document dealt with the nationalist working class and the Republican movement, and lists repression and victimisation as being the source of support for the Republicans.

Campaigns by the labour movement against poverty, unemployment and repression could have altered the political development of Northern Ireland. Armstrong goes on to say that a clear campaign against repression, for example, arbitrary searches, prison conditions, etc, could build support for the left:

'In short, by making a public display of samples of the British "democracy" being daily meted out to hundreds of Ulster citizens, a Civil Liberties Council has a revolutionary rôle to perform. It can hasten the downfall of the regime. It can set on fire the conscience of the whole community, shaming and shocking even the Protestant petit-bourgeoisie into protest. The fight for civil liberties is an integral and immensely important aspect of the class struggle.'

The article also makes a sideswipe at the Stalinists. In their newspaper, *Unity*, of 13 March 1943, they stated that they wanted to change the Special Powers Act, not by abolishing this pernicious piece of repressive legislation (of which the South African government was later to say it would scrap all its apartheid laws if it could adopt it), but by replacing it with the Emergency Powers Act from Britain as a 'fairer' method of repression.

The end of the war saw a downturn in the labour movement. The problems facing the RSP were not unique. The end of the war, accompanied by rising unemployment, disillusionment with the NILP, and even the victory of the British Labour Party in the general election creating further illusions in the possibility of reforming the system, all this combined to make life very hard for all the far left. The membership of the Communist Party collapsed. Milotte states that the CPNI had grown from a prewar membership of a few dozen to a peak of 1000 members organised in 32 branches by 1943. By the end of the war this had slumped to eight branches.¹⁰⁵ Armstrong says that the CPNI was effectively back to its membership of 1932.¹⁰⁶ The Socialist Party of

105. Milotte, p209.

106. B Armstrong, letter to J Haston, 6 December 1946.

Northern Ireland had developed into the Socialist Republican Party after a number of released prisoners joined it, but eventually even this disappeared.¹⁰⁷

The downturn badly affected the RSP, and on 12 December 1946 Armstrong wrote to Haston in London about the 'virtual crack-up of the group here. One consequence of this fall off in numbers was a cut in the order of *Socialist Appeal* by more than 50 per cent to 300 per issue.¹⁰⁸ The Belfast group had already cut the order for the American paper *The Militant*.' He goes on to say that they 'have almost no membership left, but we are plugging away hoping for a break. The Dublin situation is equally bad. As you can imagine, all this is extremely disheartening after so much hope and such hard work over so long a period.' This period, however, still ends on Armstrong's hope that 'a fresh break will come'.

Publication of the *Workers Republic*

Consistent activity and an orientation to young workers, however, quickly resulted in new growth for the organisation. Within three months of reporting the collapse of the group, Armstrong could report to Haston on 12 March 1947 that they had 11 members in Belfast, with three more in Dublin. They also had a number of 'promising contacts', and a number of people, like McDowell, an ex-member, on the fringes.

In this letter Armstrong also asked for assistance in getting a job with the National Council of Labour Colleges, a group with which Haston had links (and for which he later worked). He was asking for help, as financially he had been dependent on Elsie for years, and a job would also help stabilise the newly-enlarged Armstrong family following the birth of their daughter Leonora, and so help the local group. Nothing came of the application.

One major development in this period was the decision of the comrades to start the production of an Irish paper, the *Workers Republic*, with the first edition being produced in May 1947. Ronnie Stirling, who had been active in the WIL in Glasgow since 1941 and had only just moved over to Belfast, wrote to Haston on 16 June about this first issue: 'The comrades launched the paper on the basis of a revival of their work, they had 500 at a Connolly demonstration in early May.' This was followed by 400 at a street meeting in early June, 'against 100 at the CP meeting held at the same time, same place and with the same topic. Our meetings are now being very heavily policed.'

The entire print run of 1500 for this first edition sold out, and so they proposed going to 2500 copies for the second one. Because of problems with the printer, Stirling complained of a 'very cheap looking job'. As well as typing errors by the printer, his mistakes also meant the group had to cut down a few of the articles. Despite these minor problems, the production of the 12-

107. The Socialist Republican Party was formed in 1945. Its leading figure was Harry Diamond, the MP for the Falls Road. An anti-partition organisation with some Protestant support, it helped to establish the Northern section of the Irish Labour Party in 1949. [Editor's note]

108. Even at 300 per issue, that is a very high level of sales per comrade.

page paper marked a great step forward for the organisation. Finances as usual played their rôle in the process. Joe Quinn says that the paper only came out because Bob Armstrong pawned his gold watch to pay the printer, redeeming it from the sales.¹⁰⁹

The lead article of the first edition was tied in with the Connolly centenary commemorations in May. It stated that Connolly's legacy had been perverted by the likes of Fianna Fáil, the Fascist fringe, and elements of the republican movement: 'To revive the genuine tradition of Connolly among the youth, and among the members of the labour movement generally, is the major task of *Workers Republic*.' After critically outlining the history of the Communist Party, and the stages theory of the Socialist Republican Party – the lessons of 1916. The Easter Week proclamation 'was revolutionary nationalist in tone, and capitalist liberal in content... It was far from a foregone conclusion that, once the British power had been vanquished, a new native capitalist state would take its place.' It concluded this section by pointing out that if the Russian Revolution had spread to the West, the Citizens Army Revolution was one of the factors that helped the conservative elements to stabilise the new Free State.

The article concluded with a review of the pro-Unionist split from the NILP, the Commonwealth Labour Party, and the other groups, the NILP and the Irish Labour Party.¹¹⁰ It said:

'... [the] emergence from within the movement of left wing opposition tendencies, revolutionary or pseudo-revolutionary, is inevitable... However, to consummate the revolution would require a labour rank and file trained in the programme of Marxism and in the spirit of Connolly's tradition, and a leadership altogether different in quality from the present lazy leaders. The crying need of the hour is for the development of a tendency within the labour parties basing itself on the programme of the *Workers Republic*.'

This line would seem to be linked to developments in Britain. After the Labour Party's victory in the general election, and the start of a postwar economic upswing, there was discussion amongst the RCP's leadership about where they should orient their work. The minority, led by Gerry Healy, argued for immediate entry, which it then proceeded to implement. The majority, led by Haston and Grant, argued that they should continue with the open party, the RCP. The speed of events led quickly to the decline of the RCP, and

109. J Quinn interview. The only surviving copies of the paper have surfaced in the USA, and a copy of the first issue is in the archives of the US SWP.
110. The Commonwealth Labour Party was set up by Harry Midgley in 1942. Strongly pro-British, it held to a right wing Social Democratic orientation. It collapsed when Midgley defected to the Unionist Party in 1947. The Irish Labour Party was formed in 1914, has always been linked with the official labour movement leadership, and has often formed coalition governments with conservative parties. [Editor's note]

eventually all the comrades still politically active (and that was a lot less than in 1945) ended up in the Labour Party. The call, therefore, for the creation of a Marxist group in the various Labour Parties here seems to fit in with that general orientation. It also harks back to the earlier work of the Irish members inside a range of political organisations, including the Irish Labour Party, the NILP, the Communist Party and the Labour Youth group.

The second issue of *Workers Republic* appeared in July 1947 (despite being dated Autumn 1947).¹¹¹ Amongst the articles is material on Stormont, an appraisal of the IRA, along with pieces on the Irish Labour Party, the unions and international notes. The main article, which deals with proposals made by De Valera, ends with the following points:

'An intensification of the class struggle is inevitable, whether under the existing set-up or under a United Dáil. This is dictated by the continued decay of world capitalism. Periods of reaction or passivity will give way to periods of revolutionary development. Meanwhile the task of the vanguard is to separate itself resolutely from all the claimants of split [partition] which operate under the guise of national unity – Fianna Fáil, Anti-Partition League, etc. The task is to expose openly all the vested interests – Northern, Southern, British, landlord, capitalist, church politicians – and ceaselessly propagate and organise towards the goal of the Workers' Republic, a republic which will rest on socialised property, democratically controlled by the workers and peasants, irrespective of what religion they profess or dialect they speak.'

Who Wears Connolly's Mantle?

In Dublin the comrades were also active around the various Connolly commemorations, and a copy of the leaflet of May 1948, *Who Wears Connolly's Mantle?*, survives. It may be coincidental that this leaflet reads like an early *Socialist Worker* leaflet, but Tony Cliff was resident in Dublin at this stage, and was in contact with the few members left. He had originally come over from Palestine to Britain to combine his studies with work for the Fourth International. He was initially a strong advocate of the theory that the Soviet Union was a deformed workers' state, and so was used by the International to argue against some of the leaders of the British RCP who were promoting a state capitalist position. In one of life's little ironies, both sides switched, so that Cliff has since been a strong advocate of the state capitalist position.

The leaflet talks of the danger of a third and fourth world war, leading to extinction, as long as capitalism survives. Whilst the capitalists have no worthwhile future to offer, the leaflet also attacks the Soviet Union, saying:

'The new social formation in Russia has absolutely nothing in common with the free Socialism envisaged by Lenin and Trotsky; nor does it bear any re-

111. Fifty copies of the second issue were sent to Haston in July 1947.

semblance to the type of working class democracy envisaged by Connolly or any other true Socialist – a society in which the freedom of the worker-producers, the dignity of the human beings and the right of self-determination of national tendencies would be secured.’

It goes on to talk of the repression in the USSR, and the ‘tyrannical, anti-Socialist, barbarous and totalitarian nature of Stalinism’.

As well as dealing with the crimes of the imperialists and the Stalinists, the leaflet attacks the entry of the Irish Labour Party into a coalition government. This problem of the leadership’s craven worship of the ministerial car and pension has been one which has plagued the labour movement in the South throughout the years. Connolly is quoted, attacking them for ‘their unprincipled participation in a capitalist coalition’. It said that the ‘only road for Irish labour is to break the coalition, and begin the struggle for a United Socialist Ireland, and for the development of real workers’ democracy, not only in Ireland, but throughout the world’.

International Involvement

As the Second World War was coming to an end, the Fourth International made strenuous efforts to ensure the continuity of the revolutionary traditions for which they had fought. Even as the war was proceeding, the European Executive Committee was re-established at a secret meeting in 1944, starting the process of linking up the various national groups and giving a lead to the re-emerging groups. Both prior to the war and during the course of it, the Fourth International had come under attacks from the Stalinists and the imperialists. Whilst Trotsky is obviously the best known of the victims of these attacks, he was not alone, and the Fourth International was seriously depleted of leading cadres by the end of the war.

Along with the links to the WIL in Britain, the Irish comrades maintained contact with the US SWP, who supplied them with papers, etc. The RSP was also in contact with the Workers Party, the group led by Max Shachtman after his split from the SWP in 1940. This split was over the class nature of the Soviet Union, with the bottom line being whether one should argue for the defence of the Soviet Union in time of war. The political extension of Shachtman’s ideas led him to drop the workers’ state argument, moving to a bureaucratic collectivist approach, and ultimately to a virulent anti-Communist line in later years. Because of these links, the Irish members supported the call for discussions between the SWP and the Workers Party, and sent a resolution on this subject to the Fourth International, which was then printed in the SWP *Internal Bulletin* for March 1946. In August 1946 Armstrong and Merrigan wrote a document called *In Defence of ‘Revisionism’*, which defended the ideas put forward by the Workers Party. In a letter to Millie Lee on 16 April 1947,

Armstrong said that ‘the majority of us have reached conclusions similar to the WP(US)’.

In this process of redevelopment after the war, the Fourth International organised a conference in 1946 in Paris. One of the most notable things about this meeting was that on the third day the French police raided the discussions, and detained all the delegates. With the exception of the three Americans who were handed over to the US Embassy, the rest were held in police custody. George Breitman, who was a delegate from the US SWP, says that whilst the rest were held by the police, the meeting continued with the election of an interim International Executive Committee. He was elected in his absence. Armstrong was an RSP delegate at this meeting, and is remembered by John Archer, as they had some discussions on Armstrong’s time in custody in Crumlin Road jail.

The first postwar conference of the Fourth International was followed up by a summer school in Paris in July 1947, which was attended by Ronnie and Seaga Stirling and Bob Armstrong. This was in turn followed by a Congress of the Fourth International in March 1948.¹¹² The period between the two international gatherings had seen a rapid political development with the start of the postwar economic upturn, and the consolidation of Stalinist control in Eastern Europe. Given these developments, it is not surprising that there should be a number of bitter debates at the Congress.

The opening was marked by a vote on whether the meeting should be considered a conference or a Congress. Armstrong was amongst those who argued that there had not been adequate preparation, and so the meeting should only discuss the documents, and not take a final position. This was rejected by an overwhelming majority, with the result that Armstrong basically abstained from intervening in the rest of the meeting. There were 13 commissions, and he was on none. The only document on which he can be said to have taken a strong position, rather than abstaining or missing the vote itself, was the majority’s theses on the USSR. He voted against it and for a minority resolution put forward by himself, Munis of the Spanish section, and Chaulieu from France. That received six votes for, 24 against, with four abstentions.

Along with these events, the comrades played their part in international defence campaigns. In one case in particular they got a resolution opposing the repression of the Bolshevik-Leninists of India by the British authorities passed by an Amalgamated Engineering Union branch in the shipyard: ‘This branch of the AEU demands the immediate and unconditional release of Philip Gunawardene, leader of the United Bolshevik Leninist Party of India, Burma and Ceylon, who is dying of starvation and neglect in a British prison hospital in India.’ Copies of the European Executive’s statement on prospects after the war were distributed around the labour organisations in the Dublin area.

112. The difference between a conference and a congress is that the latter can make binding decisions, etc.

Disintegration

After the revival of the group in 1947 and the publication of at least two editions of *Workers Republic*, things turned for the worse in 1948. Because Bob Armstrong was financially dependent on Elsie, when her employers decided to switch her back to London, from where she had initially been transferred to Belfast, there was very little he could do about it except go along. The consequences of this on the Irish group were devastating. After the emigration of the Stirlings to Canada in the spring of 1948, Bob was the only real cadre of the group, so his planned departure was going to leave a relatively politically inexperienced group behind, even though a few of them, like McLean, had been members for nearly five years.

In August 1948 Byrne visited Belfast for the International Secretariat. His *Report on the Irish Section*, dated 25 August 1948, is reproduced below.

'I have visited the Belfast group as promised. I had a discussion with the comrades there on the dissolution of the section following upon some comrades leaving for England. Bob Armstrong's wife was transferred by her employers from Belfast to London. As he was the most advanced comrade, the group thought that it was impossible for the group to carry on, and it was decided that anyone who wanted to go to England should go. They made it clear that those who went to London would join neither the RCP, nor the entrust group, but will build an independent group inside the Labour Party. Four comrades went to London, one broke from the organisation due to demoralisation, and of the three left in Belfast two are joining the Labour Party, but have made it clear that they refuse to be under the discipline of the Fourth International, and will put over their own independent line inside the Labour Party. (They take a Shachtmanite position on all questions.) The third member is already in the Labour Party. He is a former member of the RCP and still adheres to the Fourth International, but feels that he can do very little by himself. As far as I can judge, the position in Belfast at the moment is rather hopeless, as we have no one there who can win workers over [to] the Fourth International position. The comrades there openly state that they have done no activity at all, not even meeting as a group, for the past six to eight months. I have come to the conclusion that we shall have to concentrate our efforts on Dublin.

'In Dublin we have lost one comrade. He is a Shachtmanite, and is almost completely demoralised. He has not met us for the past two months. He defends the position of the Belfast comrades with regard to disbanding the Irish Section. There are two comrades left, one in the Socialist Youth (Stalinists) and the other, myself, active in the trade union movement. I am a member of the National Executive Committee of the Workers Union of Ireland (with a membership of 24 000), a member of Dublin Trades Council, was a delegate to the Irish Trade Union Congress for the last two Congresses, and am on the Branch Committee of my own union (Corporation Workers). I am in the Irish Labour Party, but it is very dead, and there is no prospect of quick returns.

'The Socialist Youth (Stalinists) with a membership of about 60 is very

active. I think this is our best field of recruitment, and as it is impossible for us, because of lack of forces, to work openly, we consider it best to work inside the Labour Party and the Socialist Youth.

'We shall do our best to maintain and build the Irish Section of the Fourth International.'

In these final months the Belfast branch therefore had eight members; Bob and Elsie Armstrong, Billy Burroughs,¹¹³ McLean and four others. The two remaining comrades in Dublin were Merrigan and Byrne.

After Bob and Elsie left, McLean and Thompson followed them to England, although Thompson had dropped out before he migrated.¹¹⁴ Basically, as Byrne indicates, the Irish section collapsed, as none of the remaining comrades in Belfast carried on any activity. In Dublin the two comrades carried on for a while, but after a period of isolation they also moved away from organised Marxism. Both ended up as left wing individuals in the Labour Party who continued to read the material sent to them by the British and American organisations, but who had nothing to which to recruit anyone.¹¹⁵

The group mentioned in Byrne's report, the Socialist Youth, was set up by elements of the Communist Party and Labour activists from the Crumlin area of Dublin. A report in the *Irish Democrat* said that it had recently experienced rapid growth, and now had 100 members. Even if one accepts Byrne's lower estimate of 60 members, it is no wonder that the remaining comrades attempted to maintain their political identity by joining that force.

This article is an attempt to outline the history of the original Trotskyist organisation in Ireland, a history which we believe shows the vitality and determination of the Marxist comrades here. The impact they had may well have been small, but at least the working class was offered an alternative to the class collaboration of the Communist Party and Labour Party leaderships, North and South. After the demise of the Revolutionary Socialist Party in 1948, Marxism, as an organised force, was absent from the Irish political scene for the next 14 years.

113. Billy Burroughs has not been politically active since the RSP, but is still a convinced Marxist.
114. Bob and Elsie Armstrong moved to London, where they became involved in the Anti-Partition League. Bob was the editor of the London branch's journal, *The United Irishman*. Whilst he was in the APL, he met Sean MacStiofain, who remembered meeting him and recorded it in his autobiography. Armstrong apparently wrote some articles attacking the rôle of the Catholic Church in Ireland, something which did not go down too well with the old timers in London. Little else is known of their later political career, except that they had occasional links with some of the other Irish comrades, exchange of cards, etc, and that on at least one occasion they visited Ireland in the late 1960s. During the visit they met Joe Quinn. Before they died both Bob and Elsie were attracted to the political line of *Fight Racism, Fight Imperialism*, which was sympathetic to Irish Republicanism. David Yaffe, editor of *FREI*, apparently delivered the obituary speech at Bob's funeral.
115. Mattie Merrigan continued to be active on the left of Irish politics. He rose to become President of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. He has been in and out of the Labour Party several times. He was a founder member of the Socialist Labour Party, a split off from the ILP, in the 1970s. Johnny Byrne was active in the labour movement for the rest of his life.

List of people interviewed

Billy Burroughs, Belfast, 26 May 1989
 Johnny Byrne, Dublin, 2 October 1987
 Jim Hanna, Dublin, 10 April 1991
 Jack McDowell, Belfast, 3 April 1991
 Mattie Merrigan, Dublin, 27 August 1991
 Dick Montegue, Belfast, 21 and 28 November 1987
 Joe Quinn, Belfast, 19 September 1988

Sources of material, information and advice

Linen Hall Library, Belfast
 Hull University (Haston Papers)
Revolutionary History
 John Archer
 Rayner O'Connor Lysaght
 Prometheus Library, New York
 Central Library, Belfast
 National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh
 Marc Mulholland, for proof reading and encouragement
 Rob Bell, for general help and major proof reading

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Appendix: Further Material on Trotskyism in Ireland

I: Tom O'Flaherty (1889-1936)

EMIGRATION HAS always been a problem facing the radical movement in Ireland, as a substantial number of young activists are forced to leave the country to look for work. One example of those activists who left the island over the years was Thomas (Tom) O'Flaherty.

O'Flaherty, who was a brother of the author Liam O'Flaherty, emigrated to the USA in 1912, and shortly afterwards joined the Socialist Party. With the radicalisation following the Russian Revolution and the First World War, there was a movement to establish a Communist Party, and O'Flaherty was one of its founding members.

Because of the active rôle he played, he quickly rose to the leadership of the Communist Party of the USA. The 6 January 1922 issue of *The Voice of Labor* reports that he was elected as an alternate member of the party's Central Executive Committee. O'Flaherty was also one of the CEC's delegates to the party convention in August 1922, which was held under conditions of clandestinity at Bridgeman, when it was raided by the FBI as a part of its campaign to suppress the left.

One of Tom's main jobs for the movement was writing for the party press. He was one of the most respected and popular writers in the revolutionary press of the United States. An obituary says: 'He was the first editor of the weekly, *The Voice of Labor*, in Chicago, official organ of the Communist Party of the United States. He was on the staff of *The Worker*, and later on the *Daily Worker*, official organs of the Communist Party.'¹ In 1926 O'Flaherty was also the editor of the *Labor Defender*, newspaper of the International Labor Defense organisation.²

Along with his direct involvement in the Communist Party, O'Flaherty was also active in Irish politics. In 1921 and again in 1923, when the paper was revived, O'Flaherty was the editor of *The Irish People*, which was produced by the Irish-American Labor League. Following the jailing of Jim Larkin in the early 1920s, O'Flaherty was active for a while in the Jim Larkin Defense Committee, speaking on various platforms. All aspects of the US intelligence community seem to have

1. *New Militant*, 6 June 1936.
2. Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist's Odyssey Through the 'American Century'*, New Jersey, 1995, p27.

been involved in spying on the left, because there exists a US military intelligence report about him trying to obtain money for the Larkin Defense Campaign in June 1921, whilst an FBI report of 26 January 1922, declassified in 1987, says that he spoke at a mass meeting on Boston Common on 20 June 1920, along with Michael T Barry and Kathleen O'Brennan, who represented the Irish Transport and General Workers Union from Dublin.³

He also wrote the introduction to G Schuller's pamphlet *James Connolly and Irish Freedom: A Marxist Analysis*. The pamphlet was originally produced by the Workers (Communist) Party of America in 1926, but the pamphlet is more generally available in the Cork Workers Club series.

As events developed in the 1920s, O'Flaherty moved to support the Left Opposition, for which he was expelled from the Communist Party in November 1928. Given his prominence in the party, the Left Opposition thought this was a great gain, and advertised the fact in the 15 December 1928 issue of *The Militant*. Whilst in the Communist League of America, the Left Opposition group there, he wrote for the press, including a column for *The Militant* in 1932 which he called 'On the Spot' and signed 'Ride 'Em'. He was co-editor of *Producers News* in Plentywood, Montana. He supported the call for the creation of a 'farmer-labor party', and worked with the Lovestoneites, a right wing split from the Communist Party, to produce a common paper. For these reasons, the CLA dropped him from membership in 1931. Whilst the Prometheus Research Library book on James P Cannon states that O'Flaherty left the movement in 1931, there are some references that suggest that he was readmitted in 1932.⁴

Suffering from tuberculosis, he returned to Ireland in 1934, finally dying from it on 19 May 1936. He is memorable, if not for any public activity here, but for the fact that he was the first Irish Trotskyist living here. There are no records of political activity by him in Ireland, but it is not ruled out that the sudden appearance of a number of articles about Ireland in the international press of the Trotskyist movement was linked to his arrival here, one example being that *The New International*, produced by the Communist League of America, carried an article in its April 1936 issue called 'Kathleen Ni Houlihan's Newest Saviour', which dealt with the attitude of the Communist Party to the Republican Congress debates over the concept of the Workers' Republic.

His obituary finishes with these lines: 'He remained a revolutionist and a Bolshevik to the end.'

II: George Weston: An Early Activist

I have uncovered some references to an Irish activist which, although they are not directly linked to this study of Trotskyism in Ireland, are something in

3. The information here is from letters from Sean Prendiville to Jim Monaghan.
4. *James P Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, New York, 1992, p590.

which I believe readers will be interested. George Morris, an Irishman, was a founder member of the Communist Party of Great Britain who worked under the name 'Weston'. Harry Wicks calls him British, but in this case in the absence of other details, I will side with Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson.

Some information concerning Weston is to be found in Bornstein and Richardson's *Against the Stream*, and Wick's biography, *Keeping My Head*. He had become an early supporter of Trotsky, despite being attached to a Soviet intelligence department. His official job was with the International Red Aid, which often functioned as a cover for such operations.

Weston's claim to fame is that when James P Cannon smuggled out a copy of Trotsky's critique of the draft programme of the Communist International, a document which helped to persuade a layer of people to begin the struggle against Stalinism internationally, he had Weston's help. Bornstein and Richardson recount the incident:

'All the documents were under tight control, the same applied to the copy seen at the time by James P Cannon and Maurice Spector, and in fact the one that in the end was smuggled out of the country was obtained and spirited out of the country by George Weston. He and his family were returning to Britain at the same time as Cannon and Spector were going back to America, and the epoch-making document was taken out of Russia and concealed in a teddy bear belonging to Weston's son, and then handed to Cannon before they parted in Berlin.'

This story originates from a memorial volume to Cannon, *James P Cannon As We Knew Him*. This account also says that he was known in Moscow as the 'Mad Irishman' for talking freely about Trotskyism.

Prior to his rôle in smuggling this document out, Wicks says that Weston was able to use his job, which involved travelling to Berlin, to make 'contacts with the Left Opposition there'. He goes on to say that Weston 'may well have been crucial in the germination of Trotskyism as an international movement. He should not be suppressed from the record.'

Weston remained active in the various incarnations of the Left Opposition in Britain throughout the 1930s, with John Archer remembering seeing him at a conference of the Revolutionary Socialist League in early 1939.⁵ Unfortunately, there is no evidence of him having played any rôle in connection with the movement here. Whilst a few references are made in Bornstein and Richardson's *War and the International* about his later activities in the Revolutionary Socialist League in Britain, these are very limited, and there is also no information in respect of any later political involvement.

5. J Archer, letter to C Crossey, 30 April 1988.

III: A Brief Visit

In the period following Hitler's victory in 1933, a significant number of Trotskyists went into exile, and amongst them was Paul Kirchoff, who was also known as Eiffel. He spent some time in Ireland during 1933, and at least three letters from him to Trotsky have been found in Trotsky's archives.⁶ The notes to *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement 1934-40* mention Kirchoff, saying that he was a member of the IKD, the German Trotskyist group, who moved to America where he joined an ultra-left split from the American section.⁷ There is no real evidence that Kirchoff had any effect on the Irish political scene.

IV: Trotsky in Exile

Amongst the things of which the Western governments keep reminding us are their love of freedom and democracy, and the defence of the individual. Like most things about the capitalist system, these only apply to those whom the system likes. Leon Trotsky was forced into exile after the consolidation of power by Stalin. Following his initial period in Turkey, Trotsky was forced into a number of moves before finally being given permission to live in Mexico.

To find shelter, approaches were made to Ireland for asylum. In August 1930 William O'Brien, the Secretary of the Irish Transport Workers Union, contacted the Cosgrave government, but was turned down with Cosgrave noting that 'Russian bonds had been practically confiscated', a reference to the failure of the new regime to pay back a loan from the 1920s. Cosgrave's closing comments were that he 'could see no reason why Trotsky should be considered by us'.⁸

In 1934 a number of separate attempts to get him into the country were made. Bob Purdie, writing in *Irish Labour History News*, no 1, Summer 1986, gives some details of one attempt. James Maxton, the leader of the Independent Labour Party and MP for a Glasgow constituency, made approaches to Eamon de Valera about asylum for Trotsky. The government's response was that this was 'quite impossible'. Purdie links this to the developments which were then occurring in Ireland, that is to say, the Blueshirts, Ireland's home-grown Fascist movement, and the potential around the Republican Congress to build a sizeable left force. The growing political polarisation in Ireland is one reason why, shortly before this application for asylum, the process actually went the other way in one case. Jim Gralton, an Irish citizen, was deported to America by de Valera because of his radical political activity. At almost the same time as Maxton's application, there was a similar one by Jean Longuet, the Vice-President of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the French Parlia-

6. Letters T2 2206, T2 2207, T2 2210.

7. LD Trotsky, *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement 1934-40*, New York, 1979, p915.

8. Cf Andy Pollak's article in the *Irish Times*, 31 July 1995.

ment, and grandson of Karl Marx, who offered his assurance that Trotsky would give 'an absolute pledge not to take part in any political activity' in Ireland if given refuge. De Valera also turned this request down.⁹

V: CLR James

In December 1935 CLR James, a leader of the British Trotskyist organisation, the Marxist Group, visited Dublin to speak at a public meeting on the developments in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) after it had been invaded by the Italians. James was to continue to be active in Trotskyist politics for the next 10 years, in Britain and America, before going on to a long career in which he was an influence upon substantial numbers of anti-colonial activists throughout the colonial world. He wrote a series of books, the best known of which is *The Black Jacobins*, about the slave revolt in Haiti in the 1790s.

Workers Voice, produced by the Communist Party in Dublin, carried a violent denunciation of James over this meeting. Amongst other things, he was condemned for 'devoting his main conclusions to a most irresponsible attack on the Communist Party and the Soviet Union'.

The report says that James made three allegations about the Stalinists: that they were revising Lenin's theses against all imperialist wars, that the Communist International was misleading the world working class in the interests of Soviet foreign policy, and that a Russian Young Communist had warned French youth not to carry a resolution against capitalist war, as this would betray the working class of the Soviet Union.

Pat Devine, a member of the Communist Party of the USA who had been deported back to Ireland, replied for the Communist Party. With the usual politeness we all expect from the Stalinists, he accused James of 'lying consciously or unconsciously'. To attack the Soviet Union was 'to line oneself on the side of the obscurantist anti-working class elements in the country. It is to solidify oneself with the Bishop of Derry, who this week denounced Communism and the Workers' Republic. With German and Italian Fascism, British imperialism and Japanese militarism.' This reasoned tone continues:

'Those responsible for bringing the lecturer to Ireland and Mr James himself should remember that reactionary though certain sections of the Irish working class leadership is, this is the first attempt inside the revolutionary forces to try and disseminate such lying counter-revolutionary propaganda against the Communists. Such Fascist activity has been left to the clergy and the Duffy and Cosgrave movement up to date.'

This meeting was organised by the group around Nora Connolly O'Brien, the Irish Citizens Army. Whilst he was here, James met with Nora Connolly, Mick Price and others in the non-Stalinist wing of the Republican Congress,

9. Cf Eilis Ward's letter in the *Irish Times*, 9 August 1995.

all of whom had run-ins with the Communist Party over its policy on the Republican Congress.

One result of this visit was an exchange of letters between Nora Connolly and Trotsky, which is reprinted below. After the Dublin meeting, James organised a meeting in London at which Connolly spoke about Ireland. Coming out of this exchange of visits, Ken Johnstone, the Secretary of the Marxist Group in Britain, wrote a report to Trotsky giving information about Ireland. After receiving this report from the Marxist Group, a reply was sent by Trotsky's secretary, Erwin Wolf. Wolf was later killed by the Stalinists in Spain.

When I was collecting material for this history I contacted Anna Grimshaw, James' secretary, to check his memories of this period. On 16 June 1987 she wrote to Jim Monaghan regretting that he couldn't provide any details of the visit, but she did relay his impressions of those he met here: 'He said that he didn't really understand what it meant to be revolutionary until he went to Ireland. The English "revolutionaries" — Marxists, Trotskyists, ILPers — were of a very different kind, and this he saw clearly after talking to the Irish comrades. The latter really understood armed struggle and revolutionary conflict. Even allowing for any tendency to give a rosy report of his attitude, this is still a good appreciation of the membership of the Irish Citizens Army.'

VI: Correspondence between Nora Connolly O'Brien and Leon Trotsky

These letters, dated 28 April and 6 June 1936, were first published in *Workers Republic*, journal of the League for a Workers Republic, Dublin, no 122, 1989. The spelling in Trotsky's letter has been corrected where necessary.

Dear Comrade

A comrade here has promised to get this letter to you. First to introduce myself. I am the daughter of James Connolly, a worker in the Socialist movement all his life, and as you know, Commandant General in the Rising of Easter Week in 1916. He was executed.

I learn that you are extremely interested in Ireland, and the development of the revolutionary movements here. If you desire it, I would gladly supply you with whatever items of information you require. There is not at present any Labour paper, but there will be by the end of May. I will send you copies if you wish them. There is one paper issued by the National Revolutionaries, the Irish Republican Army, and one issued by the CP. These also I will send if you wish.

I hold an official position in the Irish Citizen Army, I am a member of the Irish Labour Party, and am in close touch with the officials of the Irish Republican Army.

The Labour Party recently adopted a new programme and constitution,

the first step towards achieving the leading rôle in the revolutionary movement in Ireland. The new programme is not yet a correct revolutionary one, but it is such an enormous advance on the previous one, that we are not indulging in any carping or cavilling criticism. Through it they can supply an alternative to Fianna Fáil (the majority Republican party in the Irish parliament, An Dáil) as by adopting James Connolly's doctrine of the twin ideals of national and social independence they have ended the divorce between the national and Labour movements. This programme will be ready shortly. I could also send you a copy.

This is not much of a letter, really it is only to establish contact.

Nora Connolly O'Brien

Dear Comrade

I was very touched by your kind letter. A great deal of circumstances prevented me from writing to you immediately. I always have been greatly interested in Ireland, but unfortunately my interest remained only platonic. I never had the opportunity to study in detail Irish history and politics. Since my early days I have got, through Marx and Engels, the greatest sympathy and esteem for the heroic struggle of the Irish for their independence. The tragical fate of your courageous father met me in Paris during the war. I bear him faithfully in remembrance. I made up my mind to read your book about your father in the very next time.

The revolutionary tradition of the national struggle is a precious good. Would it be possible to imbue the Irish proletariat with it for its Socialist class struggle, the working class of your country could, in spite of the numerical weakness of your population, play an important historical rôle and give a mighty impulse to the British working class now paralysed by the senile bureaucracy.

I take the liberty to send you in the same time my little book, *In Defence of Terrorism*.¹⁰

VII: Max Shachtman Visits Ireland

In 1938 Max Shachtman, at that time a member of the leadership of the International Left Opposition and of the US Socialist Workers Party, visited Ireland as he travelled to Europe for the founding conference of the Fourth International. At that meeting it was stated that 'there were reports of contacts already established or in the offing with significant revolutionary groups in the colonial countries and for the first time in Ireland'.¹¹ I would be inclined to put this down to the enthusiasm of the

10. The first English language edition of Trotsky's book was published under the title *The Defence of Terrorism (Terrorism and Communism)*. The copy referred to here was probably of the second English edition published in London in 1935 under the title *The Defence of Terrorism*. The edition published in London in 1975 has the correct title, *Terrorism and Communism*.

11. *Documents of the Fourth International: The Formative Years (1933-1940)*, New York, 1973, p163.

founding conference, as there is no evidence that he met anyone who later played a rôle in Trotskyism over here. Presumably the reference is to the remnants of the Irish Citizen Army, which had been contacted in 1935-36. Whilst here he did meet Geoffrey Coulter, a former member of the IRA Army Council, and a veteran of the Republican Congress. Coulter had been a deputy editor of *An Phoblacht*, the paper of the Republican movement. Rayner O'Connor Lysaght says that he had been swayed to Trotskyism by the developments during the Spanish Civil War.

VIII: Later Years: Trotskyism in Ireland, 1958-70¹²

Towards the end of the 1950s, the Socialist Labour League from Britain did recruit a few individuals in Ireland, but nothing substantial came of this. This foothold did develop later into an apparently substantial SLL group here which worked in the Northern Ireland Labour Party. They quickly established control of the Young Socialists, which they ran for the next two years. They also had a base in the Draughtsman's Union in the shipyards. A leading recruit from the Communist Party of Great Britain in the late 1950s was Brian Behan, brother of Brendan. Behan was an industrial organiser for the CPGB in the building industry, and continued in this rôle for the SLL. He developed Anarchist ideas, and split during a dispute with the SLL leadership, taking the Dublin branch with him.¹³

Unfortunately, the ultra-left policies of the SLL in general were also applied here, so that in 1964 the SLL and the Young Socialists walked out of the NILP and into the political wilderness. Considering that the 1960s saw the development of civil rights agitation, the Loyalist reaction to it, and the growth of worldwide politicisation, it was shocking to see that the SLL was nowhere to be seen. An organisation which allegedly had widespread support in 1964 had collapsed by 1966, had only a few individuals in 1969, and made no impact on events, although branches of the SLL existed in Derry, Belfast and Dublin, at least on paper.

Apart from the SLL, attempts to revive Marxism in Ireland were centred around Gery Lawless. Lawless was a Republican prisoner in the 1950s, and whilst inside read a range of Socialist material. Upon his release he ended up in England where he initiated the Irish Workers Union and then the Irish Communist Group. This was a mish-mash of different political strands, including some who later ended up establishing the Irish Communist Organisation, which subsequently developed into the British and Irish Communist Organisation.¹⁴

12. The information in this section is based on two documents, plus other information gathered independently. The documents are Rayner O'Connor Lysaght's *Early History of Irish Trotskyism*, the other is Dermot Whelan's *The Socialist Labour League and Irish Marxism (1959-1973): A Disastrous Legacy*. This was produced by the League for a Workers Republic in 1973, and reprinted by John Archer in 1989.
13. His version of the events can be found in his book, *With Chest Expanded*, London, 1964.
14. This was a Maoist group which tended towards rabid Republicanism. By 1971-72

The ICG split in late 1965 into its Maoist and Trotskyist wings. The Trotskyist wing, the Irish Workers Group, existed for a period in Britain, but without any support in Ireland. In its early period, the IWG held a number of discussions with the *Militant* group in Britain. When the debate inside the IWG developed over Maoism, Brendan Clifford wrote documents attacking Trotskyism and the application of the theory of Permanent Revolution to Ireland. The reply was written for the Trotskyist faction by Ted Grant, who was at that time the political editor of the *Militant* newspaper. A slightly abridged version is available in Ted Grant's *The Unbroken Thread*.

By May 1967 the IWG had set up a branch in Dublin, to be followed a few months later by the Belfast branch, and then one in Dundalk. They set up a paper called the *Irish Militant* (nothing to do with the later group), and a theoretical journal, *Workers Republic*. The IWG lasted a short period before it collapsed in late 1968. It suffered two splits that year. After a factional discussion on three topics – the national question, party building, and Gery Lawless and his rôle in the organisation, the minority faction withdrew on 17 March 1968 to set up the League for a Workers Republic. This faction was led by Sean Matgamna and Paddy Healy, and took the majority of the Dublin branch of the IWG. Disillusioned by the in-fighting in the IWG and attracted by the potential mass student movement in the North, the Belfast branch effectively ceased operating when they joined the newly developing Peoples Democracy in October 1968. This was a radical youth group in and around the Civil Rights Association. I think it could best be described as radical, but definitely not a Marxist group, with some of its leadership describing themselves as 'post-Trotskyist'.

The League for a Workers Republic built up its base through the growing Young Socialist organisations which seem to have been semi-formal sections of the two Labour Parties. In the North the left wing of the NILP and the Young Socialists moved in a number of directions. Eamon McCann is now one of the leaders of the Socialist Workers Movement, whilst some of those active in Derry YS joined the *Militant*.

By the early 1970s there were a number of groups claiming to be Trotskyist: the League for a Workers Republic, the League for a Workers Vanguard, the Movement for a Socialist Republic, *Militant* and the Socialist Workers Movement, as well as possibly some other grouplets.

they somersaulted into rabid Unionism, developing the 'two nations' theory, whereby the Protestants in Ireland should have separate national rights. They continued to degenerate politically, and in one memorable case when one of their members was giving advice to the Loyalist Association of Workers, the organisers of the reactionary Loyalist stoppage against power-sharing in 1974, his politics were discovered, and he was physically ejected through the window.

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