

The Levellers and Irish Freedom

Originally published in Worker's News
Paper of the Workers International League

Published by Republican Socialist Publications, 1997



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PREFACE

The period of the English Civil War is best known in Irish history for Cromwell's invasion of Ireland, and his infamous delaration that the native Irish had but two options: to go to "Hell or Connaught." The meaning of these words from the mouth of the Puritan bour-geois leader was that the Irish could either withdraw to the barren western-most province of Ireland or be dispatched by Cromwell's troops to where he was certain Papists spent their eternity.

In fact, Cromwell's Act for the Settlement of Ireland (August 12, 1652) provided for the expropriation of the owners of some two-thirds of the land of Ireland, and for transplantation of the bulk of the Irish population to Connaught. While never fully carried out, a great deal of Irish land passed to London merchants who had lent money to the English Parliament, and to soldiers in lieu of wages.

The importance of this work, then, is to bring to the fore an alternative perspective - that of the emerging counterpart to the ascendant English bourgeoisie, the revolutionary English working class.

During this period of revolutionary tumult, a section of the infant working class gained a a distinct consciousness of its own class interests. In doing so, they offered a glimpse of the very different relationship that might exist between socialist republics in Ireland and England than have been found between the two nations to date.

In the words of the Leveller leader Walwyn, "the cause of the Irish natives in seeking their just freedoms...was the very same with our cause here in endeavouring our own rescue and freedom from the power of oppressors." It is this vision, flickering but an instant during the heat of revolutionary upheaval, which makes plain why, in the words of James Connolly, "the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour, the cause of labour is the cause of Ireland."

The Irish Republican Socialist Committees of North America are proud to return this essay to print, doing our small part in keeping this flame of working class solidarity alight.

Long live a 32-county Irish Workers' Republic!

Long live an English Workers' Republic!

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THE LEVELLERS AND IRISH FREEDOM

The English Revolution of 1640-1660 was the world's first bourgeois revolution, a class struggle with the reactionary forces of the feudal aristocracy, the established Church, the large merchant monopolists and Charles I on one side, and the bulk of the House of Commons, the gentry, the emerging bourgeoisie and the masses on the other. But beneath this division, the opposition to the King was split from the beginning.

Initially, aristocrats such as the Earls of Essex and Manchester led the armies of Parliament, with support from the conservative Parliamentarians and London merchants who all wanted a compromise with the Royalist forces. They were opposed by the more radical Puritan Independents in the army and Parliament - typified by Oliver Cromwell who effectively reorganised the Parliamentary forces so that they were led by men of ability and ideological commitment rather than those of noble birth of high status. The first civil war began in 1642, and by 1645 Cromwell had established the New Model Army whose famous Ironsides - disciplined cavalry made up of committed volunteers from the lower gentry and others of the middling sort - were key to victory a year later. The end of the first civil war brought to power the large Presbyterian faction in Parliament who represented the powerful merchants in London and were supported by the independent Scottish Presbyterian forces to whom Charles had surrendered.

Whilst the revolution had been developing in England, the Irish clans had taken advantage of the divisions among their English rulers and staged a rebellion in 1641,

driving out many of the Protestant settlers who had taken over their lands. From the beginning the Irish Rebellion and the English Revolution were dialectically interlinked. However, the situation in Ireland was even more divided than that in England. Only the clans, led by Owen Roe O'Neill, had a consistent policy and any unity. Both the King and Parliament denounced the rising, but both were too occupied by domestic matters to come to the aid of the Protestant settlers.

In Ireland, the English forces were split down the middle with those loyal to Charles holding Dublin and the Pale, whilst Parliament supporters held Derry city and part of the surrounding area. A force under Lord Inchiquin (Murrough O'Brien) held Cork, and regularly switched sides during the course of the rising. The clans, together with others in the Catholic Confederation (formed in 1642), held the rest of the territory. Even the religious divide was often a confused picture, with some Presbyterian settlers joining the rising due to their own oppression by the Anglican Church of Ireland. The Royalist forces contained many Catholics as well as Protestants, and many of the Catholic Anglo-Irish gentry had allied uneasily with the rebels. Treaties were constantly made and broken between all the sides until O'Neill, disgusted by the intrigue, broke with the Catholic Confederation over their deals with the Royalists and Inchiquin, and took the field with an independent Irish army.

In England, one of the main concerns of the Presbyterian conservatives was to disband the New Model Army, which they rightly believed was a dangerous centre of political and religious radicalism. But there was an added problem - Ireland still had to be reconquered. This was not simply a matter of aiding fellow Protestants; shortly after the start of the rising many merchants and gentry (including Cromwell) had loaned large sums of money for the purpose of suppressing the rebels, and the return of this investment was to the confiscated Irish land. In 1647, Parliament moved to disband the New Model Army, offering a fraction of what was owed to soldiers whose pay was months in arrears, and called for volunteers for Ireland.

These actions were resisted by the army for a number of reasons - the pay offered was an insult; most thought they would be used as mercenaries rather than as fighters for liberty; and Baptists and other Puritans feared Presbyterian intolerance. Soldiers' councils were formed by many regiments and Agitators elected. The junior officers followed the lead of their troops and elected their own representatives. The senior officers, known as the Grandees, feared this movement, but they feared the Presbyterian Parliament more. Cromwell and the Grandees moved to take control of the Agitators in an effort to use them against the Presbyterians, whilst at the same time moderating them.

However, the radicalism was not confined to the army. The group known as the Levellers had grown rapidly, becoming in effect the first organised political party. Their leaders included the popular John Lilburne, who was politically on the right of the group and a defender of private property, and the early communist, William Walwyn. The Levellers drew up a radical programme that included demands for the separation of Church and state, together with a religious toleration that would include Catholics, Jews and atheists (remarkable for its day), annual elections, universal male suffrage and a redistribution of wealth. The Levellers were the left wing of the English Revolution, but they were also a contradictory phenomenon. Whilst they fought against all the remnants of feudalism, they also resisted the effects of the rise of capitalism. They represented artisans and others from the

middle layers of society, although they also had a large following among the London poor. They rested on the social groups that were being torn apart by the transition to capitalism, some of whom would become capitalist producers and farmers, whilst the rest would be forced into the ranks of the propertyless proletariat.

The political programme of the Levellers was argued over at the famous "Putney Debates" in October and November 1647 between the assembled soldiers and their officers. Shortly afterwards, a Leveller-inspired mutiny at Ware was put down by Cromwell. Further actions of the Levellers were postponed, however, by the outbreak of the second civil war in 1648, when Charles headed a Scottish Presbyterian army. The fighting was quickly over, and two things resulted; the victorious Cromwell initiated a purge of Parliament that removed the Presbyterians and put the Independents in power, and, in 1649, Charles was executed and a republic proclaimed.

Now in power, Cromwell and the Independents sought to carry out the plans for Ireland's reconquest, and for similar reasons to the Presbyterians. After the defeat of the conservatives to his right, Cromwell moved against the radicals to his left. The four main Leveller leaders, Lilburne, Walwyn, Richard Overton and Thomas Prince were arrested and held in the Tower of London for treason. In a bid to pacify the army, three months' back pay was granted, but on condition that the troops go to Ireland. It was not enough. In 1647, the soldiers' councils had agreed not to disband until the liberties for which they had fought the King had been secured. Now, two years later, calls went out to elect new Agitators, but this time the army was split along class lines and the radicals had to confront Cromwell, their formerly popular general, directly. The Levellers already viewed Cromwell as a new dictator and Parliament as part of the oppression of the people. In *The Bloody Project*, written in 1648, Walwyn wrote:

"The King, Parliament, great men in the City and Army, have made you but the stairs by which they have mounted to honour, wealth and power. The only quarrel that hath been, and at present is but this, namely, whose slaves the people shall be."

In 1649, opposition to Ireland's reconquest began to take the form of political solidarity with the Irish rebels, rather than a dispute over pay that characterised the 1647 opposition. In *The English Soldiers' Standard*, probably written by Walwyn in the Tower, English liberty and Irish freedom became combined:

"For consider, as things now stand, to what end you should hazard your lives for the Irish: have you not been fighting these seven years in England for rights and liberties, that you are yet deluded of? And that too, when as none can hinder you of them but your own officers, under whom you have fought? And will you go on still to kill, slay and murder men, to make them as absolute lords and masters over Ireland as you have made them over England? Or is it your ambition to reduce the Irish to the happiness of tithes upon treble damages, to excise, customs, and monopolies in trades? Or to fill their prisons with poor disabled prisoners, to fill their land with swarms of beggars...? Or if you intend not this, or would be sorry to see no better effects of your undertakings, it certainly concerns you

in the first place, and before you go, to see these evils reformed here; that when occasion shall justly invite you thither, you may carry a good platform in your hands, such a one as possibly they will never fight against."

This passage is remarkable. Against the arguments of Parliament that Ireland would remain a dangerous threat as a possible base for a Royalist or foreign invasion unless it was reconquered, the Levellers believed it was possible to make Ireland a free, independent and friendly neighbour on the condition that England was free from its own internal oppression. On the one hand, this showed an ignorance of Irish society; the lower level of economic development meant that the emergence of Irish Levellers was not possible as those social groups did not exist. It was not entirely without basis; in Ireland, O'Neill had made it clear that he mistrusted the Royalists, and had made a truce with the English Parliamentary forces under General Monck. Monck's superiors in England ordered the truce to be broken; any possibility of the Irish rebels and English radicals finding common cause had to be removed, and the leaders of the army and Parliament also wanted the Irish lands for themselves.

The Levellers' arguments were well received by the troops about to leave for Ireland. On May Day, 1649, a regiment of cavalry in Salisbury refused to proceed and elected Agitators. When the officers fled, the men elected their own to replace them. They were quickly joined by other regiments, and published their views in a remarkable tract called *The Soldiers' Demand*. Many of the complaints were similar to those of 1647, but now something new appeared:

"What have we to do in Ireland, to fight and murder a people and nation (far indeed they [the Grandees] are set upon cruelty and murdering poor people which is all they glory in) which have done us no harm...? We have waded too far in that crimson stream already of innocent and Christian blood."

In Oxfordshire later the same month, another body of Leveller-inspired troops made preparations to march on London. However, Cromwell moved quickly, and with loyal troops (many of whom were ex-Royalists) he surrounded the insurgents at Burford and defeated them. The Levellers had been defeated where it mattered most - in the army, where the power of the English state resided. The ruling class had been saved by Cromwell, and they were well aware of it: the Royalists at Oxford University gave him an honorary degree, Parliament gave him a fortune in money and land, and the City oligarchy lavishly entertained him at a thanks-giving banquet.

The revolt was a serious threat, but it only affected a minority of the army - perhaps a few thousand active rebels, with many thousands more deserting rather than fight in Ireland. The majority of the New Model Army remained cautious and passive. Many in the army, of course, were not unwilling to go to Ireland in what they saw as the rescue of their fellow Protestants, and of those that took up arms to resist the Irish reconquest not all had a clear political and moral objection. Nevertheless, for a time the vanguard of Levellers inside and outside the army held sway over the rest, and pointed to a radical alternative to the Cromwellian Settlement.

The army was purged of its most outspoken radicals and the rest were bullied into

submission, although not before further localised revolts had taken place. By September, Cromwell had managed to land a force of 10,000 troops in Ireland. The rest, as they say, is history. Cromwell ordered the massacres at the Drogheda and Wexford garrisons and the Irish rebels were subdued with great cruelty, whilst the English troops were paid in Irish land.

History is often a contradictory process. What Cromwell achieved by his dictatorship over the English state until his death in 1658 was a country made safe for capitalist development, so that the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, or the Glorious Revolution of 1688, could not turn the clock back - the basic social gains of the bourgeois revolution remained intact. In the 1640s, the productive forces of society were such that they could not provide a firm basis for the kind of society the Levellers wanted. Only the brutal exploitation of capitalism that greatly built up the productive forces could one day provide the material basis of a society free from poverty and hunger: a socialist society. The colonial policies initiated by Cromwell in Ireland and the West Indies were intimately connected with the rise of capitalism; the trading profits that were made from sugar, tobacco, slaves and other commodities created in part the capital that would be needed for the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century. It was this latter capitalist economic revolution, a revolution made possible by the events of 1640-60, that created not only the material wealth necessary for socialism, but also the tool to achieve it - the proletariat, capitalism's own grave-digger. Therefore, paradoxically, the defeat of the radicals in 1649 has made possible the victory of socialist revolutionaries today.

In Ireland today, British troops still hold on to six of the 32 counties. The events since the Cromwellian conquest have often hidden from view the necessary link between Irish freedom and British workers, a link recognised by the Levellers. Today that link must be reforged, and necessarily so, in for Ireland, both North and South, there exists a powerful working class that has been artificially divided. Only a struggle that is based on the goals of socialism can unite Irish workers, both amongst themselves, and with those in England, Scotland, Wales and the rest of the world against our common enemies - the capitalists.

The present British ruling class gained its position not by gradual reform but by a revolution which was defended by force of arms. Today, the working class will only be sure of obtaining a socialist society, free from violence and exploitation, if it is prepared to follow its rulers' example.

As Trotsky said in 1925:

"The English bourgeoisie has erased even the memory of the revolution of the seventeenth century, and recasts its entire past in the form of 'gradual changes.' The vanguard of the English workers should discover the English Revolution and should find in it, under its ecclesiastical garment, the powerful conflict of social forces. Cromwell was by no means a 'pioneer of labour', but in the drama of the seventeenth century, the English proletariat may find great precedents for revolutionary action."

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From:

The English Souldiers Standard

**to repair to, for Wisdom and Understanding in these doleful
backsliding times**

What-ever they may tell you, or however they may flatter you, there is no less anger lies at the bottom of this business for Ireland, and therefore it behoves every one of you to lay it to heart: an before you resolve upon a new Engagement, first see a new Representative of the Army established, by the free Election of every Regiment; and refer your selves to their Counsel and advice in all things, to be disposed of as they shall see cause; and neither admit of disbandings, nor of new listings, nor of any undertaking for Ireland, or any other service, but as that Counell shall advise.

For consider, as things now stand, to what end you should hazard your lives against the Irish: have you not been fighting these seven years in England for Rights and Liberties, that you are yet deluded of? and that too, when as none can hinder you of them but your own Officers, uner whom you have fought? and will you go on stil to kil, slay and murther men, to make them as absolute Lors and Masters over Ireland as you have made them over England? or is it your ambition to reduce the Irish to the happinesse of Tythes upon trebble dammages, to Exise, Customs and Monopolies in Trades? or to fill their prisons with poor disabled prisoners, to fill their Land with swarms of beggars; to enrich their Parliament-men, and impov-erish their people; to take down Monarchial Tyranny, and set up an Aristocratical Tyranny; or to over-spread that Nation as this yet is, with such Wasps and Hornets as our Lawyers and their Confederates? Or if you intend not this, or would be sorry to see no better effects of your undertakings, it ertainly concerns you in the first place, and before you go, to see those evils reformed here; that when occasion shall justly invite you thither, you may carry a good platform in your hands, such a one as possibly they will never fight against: And it would be much more to be wished, that you might overcome them by just and equall offers, then by strength and force. And except you begin and proceed thus, how you will satisfie your consciences, is not discernable.

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