James Connolly

Harp Strings

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This month I wish to say a few words about signs of progress. As Socialists we have to spend so much time and energy pointing out the decrepitude and imbecility of capitalist society, so much time and energy in rousing our fellow slaves to a proper hatred of the degrading conditions under which we live and suffer, that we are apt to overlook the thousand and one factors that are making for the regeneration of the social order.

It is well to be discontented; it is well to have a heart hot with passionate hatred of injustice; it is well to be a rebel against a social system that makes for iniquity; it is well to be ceaseless in your denunciations of the wrong that sitteth in the seats of the mighty, but it is also well to have a hopeful spirit, and an eye to note and appreciate all those manifestations of social activity, organized and unorganized, that indicate the stirring of the human conscience, the restlessness of the human intellect under capitalist conditions.

Let the 'canting fed classes' purr their approval of the preachers of contentment and resignation, I at least wish to reserve my tribute of praise to the men and women who succeed in arousing in their fellows a divine discontent with a system 'conceived in sin and begotten in iniquity'.

Discontent, my friends, is the fulcrum on which the lever of thought has ever moved the world to action. Therefore blessed be discontent: Let no man repress within himself the stirrings of hatred of injustice, of discontent; they are the manifestations of the divine impulse towards better things, the workings of the leaven that shall transform the soulless slave into the perfect freeman.

Discontent! Let us see: Have we anything to be discontented with. I quote from a report in the Chicago Daily Socialist the following description of conditions in the South, as they were told by a delegate from that territory:

'Little children five years old have to go out and hoe cotton in May, June and July,' he said. 'In August and part of September they go to school.

'In September the cotton picking begins and the parents of these little children drive them like so many little ponies back to the cotton fields and drive the little tots to work. It takes constant driving and watching to make them work.

'Later the weather begins to get quite chilly and fires are built where these little workers stop now and then to warm their little toes and fingers. They don't seem to understand why they have to be driven away from these warm fires back to the frosty fields.

'Finally these people reach the starvation point and are no longer able to work. Then they begin to borrow, beg and finally steal. They lose all moral sense and the landlords drive the families away from the farms.

'The cotton field paupers then become slaves in the factories of the large cities of the South and sink to the lowest depths.'

That is bad, and so some workers are foolish enough to be discontented. But the officials of the capitalist republic of the United States are also discontented. Thus I see that Admiral Robley D. Evans (Fighting Bob), realising that there is a weakness somewhere, rises and in his bluff, sailor like manner demands a remedy. And what is his remedy?

'We need 48 more battleships.'

I am not sure that he meant this as a remedy for the oppression of little children by the capitalist class of the United States, but I am sure that he imagined the need, real or imaginary, of more battleships to be the only thing worth talking about.

And I am also sure that the capitalist press of the United States acquiesced in his point of view, for his remarks were heralded far and wide whilst the awful conditions pictured in the report I have just quoted are scarcely deemed worthy of an occasional paragraph.

Such is the capitalist conception of statesmanship. Untold fruits of the perverted ingenuity of men to be devoted to the task of destroying human life, but at best cold neglect or a passive indifference to every suggestion for the preservation and ennobling of the lives of the workers.

Nevertheless how the heart of the patriotic American must have throbbed within him as he read of the splendid reception given to the US fleet upon the Pacific coast, how he must have felt honored when he reflected that those noble vessels, so ably manned by such a gallant crew, were American, and that he, as an American citizen, was honored also in the honors so lavishly heaped upon 'his' sailors and 'his' fleet.

Of course those poor oppressed little tots of children working in the cotton fields are American also, and by analogy every cruelty and every outrage inflicted upon them are also inflicted upon the 'honor' and 'patriotism' of the whole American citizenship that tolerate such a state of affairs, but then as the great American press does not draw that moral of course the great American public does not allow it to impair its digestion.

As a once favorite writer of mine has said: 'Such is modern civilization: brilliant and beautiful where it rises into the sunlight, but within it is full of dead men's bones—the bones of the poor who built it.'

But what about those signs of progress. Dear, oh, dear, my imagination has led me away from my subject, as it always does when I stop to reflect upon the anomalies of this social system we are living under. My thoughts run 'a seachrán', as my father used to say when he would set me to do ten minutes work and find me an hour after sitting, dreaming with the job not yet commenced.

The first sign of progress I wish to note is the formation of the new organization in Ireland whose program will be found on another page—The Irish National Union of Workers. I have as yet no definite information about the persons who drafted that program as I have seen none of their names except that of their secretary, Councillor P.T. Daly, therefore I am judging only from my knowledge of the labor situation in Ireland when I hail that movement with pleasure.

I know P.T. Daly personally. He is a young man, a compositor by trade, and with an absolutely clean record. His first participation in public life was as a speaker at meetings in connection with the Old Guard Benevolent Union, an organization of veterans of the Fenian movement, and of those who subscribed to the principles of that movement.

Most of the members of this body were earnest whole-souled enthusiasts, but quite a few, especially those who joined during the Centenary Celebrations of the Rebellion of 1798, were wire-pullers who desired to use the Old Guard for personal purposes. I have always classed Daly among the former number.

Fortunately for him he had read most of the literature sold by the Irish Socialist Republican Party, and all of the literature published under the authority of, and by that body. In fact as a compositor he had helped to set it up, as it was printed to a great extent in the shop where he was employed. Such reading helped, no doubt, to steady him at a time when much foolish matter about the 'union of classes' was being preached in Ireland.

Since then he has become a Sinn Féiner, been elected to the Dublin City Council, and has always, so far as we know, lined up on the right side.

Hence whilst it is more than possible that we do not see eye to eye with the new movement in all things we hail it with delight for two reasons: First, Whilst unmistakably Socialist it is unquestionably Irish; Second, It is in honest hands.

A bit of Irish history is apropos. The Irish Local Government Act of 1899 first gave the Irish workers the right to vote in municipal affairs. Immediately upon the passage of this act the Trade and Labor Associations all over Ireland formed bodies for the purpose of contesting municipal elections in the interests of labor. When the elections came these bodies under the name of Labor Electoral Associations contested everywhere against the nominees of the Home Rule and Conservative parties.

The result was surprising. The success of the Labor Electoral Associations was only limited by their own lack of courage. Everywhere the Irish working-class had rallied to the standard of labor and elected their men with surprising majorities. Conservatives and Home Rulers alike went down in defeat not only in the large cities, but in small urban constituencies as well.

In most places practically the whole ticket was elected, and in the city of Limerick the labor men obtained a majority in the City Council, electing the mayor.

It was a moment full of promise for the Irish Labor movement. Had the men elected been men with a true understanding of the situation, had they understood their class position in society, or even been as responsive to the class spirit as the men and women who elected them (for even the women had votes), or had they even grasped the fact that as they were elected in defiance of the opposition of the Irish capitalist politicians they should respond to the will of their supporters by remaining an independent party, the whole history of Ireland during those few years would have been altered for the better.

But they were for the most part weaklings like Alderman Fleming of the North Dock Ward in Dublin, or ignorant spouters like Alderman Kelleher of Cork, and knew no better than to form alliances with the old time politicians. As a result they disgusted their own supporters, and their actions on the City Councils stemmed the tide of Labor instead of clearing the way for its progress.

In the midst of this upheaval the Irish Socialist Republican Party, the only organised body of Socialists in the country who stood for the Marxist doctrines as understood by International Socialism, could not remain passive if it would be true to its mission. It was however in the position where a false step would have done incalculable harm to the revolutionary cause.

It made no false steps. On the launching of the Labor Electoral Association it recognized that although that body was by no means Socialistic it was a spontaneous manifestation of the class spirit on the part of the Irish workers, and therefore worthy of encouragement and support. Accordingly its speakers and its paper, the Workers' Republic, vehemently urged the election of the candidates of the Labor Electoral Association.

When, after election, the representatives of that body proved unworthy of their trust the Irish Socialists regretfully, but firmly opposed them. And when in following elections the same body abandoning their former independent attitude formed alliances with capitalist parties of Home Rulers and Unionists the Socialists were unsparing and effective in their denunciation.

This was not inconsistency. It was in conformity with the duty of the Socialist as laid down in the Communist Manifesto, that we must not be a sect standing apart from the general labor movement, but be instead a part of the movement, that part which comprehends the whole line of march, in the midst of the interests of the moment takes care of the interests of the whole, and pushes on all other sections of the working class.

This requires encouragement where encouragement is desired, and opposition and censure where opposition and censure are deserved.

I have no authority to speak for Socialists in Ireland to-day, but I believe that they will meet the new movement in the same spirit. Unlike the Labor Electoral Association this new movement is organized in harmony with the central principle of Socialism—the achievement of common ownership in the means of life by and through the organized working class; unlike the mere political Socialist it recognizes seemingly the absolute necessity of combining the economic and political organizations of labor, and in a true spirit of constructive revolution it depends upon the development of the class feeling amongst its members to clarify any obscurity or rectify any omission in its present program.

That is one good sign of progress.

Here is another. As you all know by this time Spailpín is unequivocally a proletarian Socialist, and would rather depend upon the class instincts of the man in the workshop than upon the knowledge of those estimable Socialist men and women who belong to the classes who live upon our labor. Indeed the wisest of these 'intellectuals' are of a similar mind upon that matter.

When Marx had to choose between throwing in his lot with the intellectuals of the Socialist sects of his time, or with the rough men and women with whom he formed the International he unhesitatingly chose the latter. He did so even although the intellectuals at least understood the workings of capitalist society and were able to analyse it, and the working class Internationalists were not.

He knew that once their feet were set upon the right track all the instincts of the working class would lead them aright, and that their material interests would co-operate in the good work. Time has proven his wisdom on this point.

But much as I insist upon the working class as the prime factor, even although a correspondent recently called me an intellectual, yet I hope I will never make the mistake of overlooking or slighting the value of the co-operation of the really educated classes in the work of Socialism.

I want all the intellectual Socialists whom we can get but I have little use for the Socialist intellectual. Now that is a cryptic saying you can ponder over while I am trying to work in the next paragraphs.

Read carefully this chunk of wisdom. If you found it as hard to read as I did to formulate you would either value it highly or—not read it at all.

The decadence of capitalist society is evidenced on every field in which human thought expresses itself; it is seen in the trend of science, in the uprooting of all old beliefs, customs and orthodoxies, in the shakings and readjustments of religious doctrines to suit the new conditions, as is illustrated in the Christian Socialism of Protestantism and the Modernism of Catholicism, it is evidenced in literature, art, and the drama, and in each and every case in which such manifestation comes within the ken of a Socialist it is his duty to recognize the good work that may be in it without abandoning his own view point.

Capitalist society is like an old barrel which has been packed to the rim with unfermented yeast; as soon as the yeast begins to ferment and swell it will burst the old barrel and come streaming out in every direction between the hoops. He is a fool who hails the yeast running to waste as Socialism, he is a greater fool who denounces the activity of the yeast as a capitalist trick; the wise man is he who hails it as a sign of the new life stirring within and breaking through the old environment. The new life will take care of itself obedient to the laws of its creation.

Well, why this thusness? This is apropos of many things. More particularly is it apropos of and an introduction to the following speech of Mr W.B. Yeats in Dublin. Mr Yeats about 4 years ago made a tour of the colleges and intellectual centers of the United States on behalf of the Irish Literary Revival and was everywhere honored and feted. He is an intellectual Irishman, poet, author of many plays, and a son of the Yeats whose fulsome flattery of our race aroused my ire some months ago. Here is what he says of the Irish bourgeoisie—the capitalist class of Ireland:

'Ireland at the moment,' he said, 'is running the danger of surrendering her soul to the bourgeoisie, and to a worse bourgeoisie than ever fought in France—to an ignorant, undisciplined bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie of France was disciplined, and it had great qualities. If they were to make the people great, the first to be fought was the bourgeoisie, so that the latter might get disciplined. They, artists, stood not for some pleasure, but for the laborious, disciplined soul, because all fine art—everywhere in which there was a personal quality—was the result of long labor. Art for art's sake was an intolerable toil. Any man could make himself popular if he took a few moral sayings, a few conventional moral platitudes, and put them into pictures, verses or stories. But such a man would be forgotten in ten years, although during that ten years he would be popular and would gain wealth. In art and literature the unconventional always seemed the immoral, because it was not the accustomed. It was easy for a man with his mouth full of commonplaces to sail to popularity. The bourgeoisie of Ireland, being undisciplined and untrained, were, therefore, essentially immoral. At this moment this bourgeoisie were attacking every artist who was sincere, or who was doing unconventional work, and in doing that it was merely doing what everyone said it would do, and what every bourgeoisie had done in this world for the last 200 years.'

My hand goes out to W.B. Yeats. Also my memory goes back to a certain quiet but earnest discussion in which Miss Maud Gonne, Mr W.B. Yeats and your humble servant were the sole participants in the lady's reception room in a hotel in Nassau Street, Dublin, when Mr Yeats was urging the necessity of a union of classes, even to the extent of inviting loyalists to join the '98 Executive Committee, and, remembering all that, it seems to me that the speech just quoted shows progress and a better appreciation of the forces that make for or against the uplifting of the human race.

Certainly the intellectuals of Ireland are beginning to see a great light. It is not so long since it would have been impossible to find an Irish Scholar who would admit the essential bond between the language and industry of a people, or rather the dependence of the former upon the latter. In the Workers' Republic I once pointed out to some of my Gaelic friends that capitalism was their real enemy, that for 600 years Irish had withstood every attempt of England to uproot it by force of arms from its place as a spoken tongue, and that it was only when English goods invaded the Irish market that the Irish tongue gave way. As I said, 'the cheapness of English products paved the way for the introduction of English speech.'

This is or was the application to Irish history of the Socialist position that the economic conditions of society—the social system—are the determining factor in shaping history. Now here comes one of our greatest Gaelic scholars, Eoin Mac Néill, and in an article in the Gaelic monthly magazine, Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge, attacks his fellow Gaels for their neglect of this point, and for their dependence upon tradition to restore Gaelic to its place in Irish life, instead of applying themselves to show it to be adaptable to the needs of modern industrial life.

I remember that some years ago a Cork priest urged in favor of Gaelic that it was full of reverent phrases, and was suitable and moulded to holy expressions whereas English was the language of unbelief. The poor sagart did not seem to realise that he was really arguing that Irish was unfit to express certain forms of thought. If this were true it would have been an argument against Irish not for it.

I quote a part of Eoin Mac Néill's article and wonder if he realises that his appreciation of the essential truths of Socialism has enabled him to see this deduction from Socialist premises. It is a long article, but you can tell your good lady that you are better employing your time reading this than trying to drink a brewery out of business.

About 300 years ago, when printing became general, the languages of modern civilization woke up. Till then they had been content with folklore, or with forms of literature that were closely akin to folklore. The literature of the working mind was monopolised by Latinists. One by one the different languages began to break the monopoly. Intellects were keen in those days, and it was clearly perceived that the new art of printing made it not only possible but imperative to write for the multitudes whom Latin could not reach. The vernacular languages set themselves to conquer the entire world of literature and thought.

Even Irish began. This was particularly the great achievement of Seathrún Céitinn (Geoffrey Keating), the clearest and most inseeing Irish mind of his time. Céitinn realised that the Middle Ages were come to an end, that the literary forms of the annals and the uraiceacht were, as the Yankees say, back numbers, that a literature that was to hold its own must seize on the inheritance of Latin and conquer the whole domain of the expression of the working mind. Accordingly, he essayed for the first time to reduce the whole history of Ireland, annalistic and legendary, to straightforward literary form. He also applied the same straightforward literary form to the subjects that were then foremost in all men's thoughts, the great questions of Christian doctrine. He introduced logical and philosophical exposition of difficult matters directly from Latin into Irish, exactly what was being done in the other languages of civilization.

The Latinity of his Irish has been censured. To some extent the censure may be just, but one would like to hear or read the trenchant terms that Céitinn would have applied to the doctrine, implied if not asserted, that the conversational forms of our grandparents or the narrative forms of the traditional storyteller, forms quite familiar to him, were adequate for a theological treatise or for a scientific defence of the sources of Irish history.

Hardly had the victory of the modern languages over Latin been secured, when the whole situation began to take on a new phase. The world's industry had heretofore been based mainly on tradition and experience. The whole knowledge necessary to every craft had passed directly from the journeyman to the apprentice. Gradually the developments of physical science as well as of technical mechanics wrought a great revolution. I need not describe the change. It is enough to point out that 200 years ago industry was practically independent of written thought. Its basis was purely empirical and traditional. At the present day, every form of industry except that of the most primitive peoples has become intimately dependent on physical science. The quill that Céitinn held may have been shaped by himself from a feather plucked from a neighbour's goose. The pen in my hand has been manufactured by Galvani and Isaac Watt, by Kelly the steelfounder and Lord Kelvin, and by a host of other men, theoretical and practical, whose sole contact, however, with this pen itself has been through vernacular literature. No language that cannot make that sort of contact can ever hope to thrive in the world we live in. Man must earn his bread in the sweat of his brow, and since it has come to this, that literature has an essential function in the earning of every man's bread, people will throw away a language by whose literature they cannot live.

All these things are signs of progress. They show that Socialist philosophy is conquering the mind of the world.

In my notes last month I challenged the Gaelic American to give an account of the suppression of the Peasant by Cardinal Logue, apropos of the visit of His Eminence to this country. The day after the publication of the Harp I received a marked copy of the Gaelic American of the issue of January 19, 1907, in which a full account of the matter appeared. The person who so kindly sent me the paper misunderstood me if he believed that I doubted the willingness of the Gaelic American to expose such a matter 3,000 miles away from the scene of action. What I did mean to convey was that, as the Cardinal had honored us with a visit, an exposure of his dictatorial action in the past, if made now, would do more to make him and his like realise that clerical oppression was a two edged weapon to use than would any amount of newspaper exposure which did not interfere with his plans.

'The price of liberty is eternal vigilance', and the liberty of the press can best be safeguarded by making its enemies realize that they are apt to be struck at and punished in the moment that they least expect or desire it.

Now that Cardinal Logue is here a concerted press campaign against him for his action against the Irish Peasant would be a lesson his cloth would take seriously to heart, and never forget.

Well, well, my notes this month have covered a wide range! It is another proof of the wide spread range of Socialist influence. Perhaps also it will serve to convince you that there are more things in Socialist philosophy than you dreamed of before. If it does it will help to satisfy

SPAILPÍN.