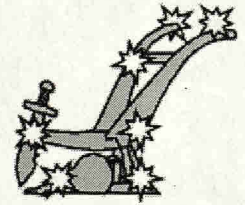


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IRISH DEMOCRAT

Campaigning for a united and independent Ireland, established 1939



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History of the Connolly Association

Over sixty years campaigning for Irish unity and independence

The Connolly Association (CA) was founded sixty years ago at a meeting in Doughty Street, Central London in 1938. Many of those attending the meeting had either been members of the London branch of the Republican Congress or the League against Imperialism. Some had been active in the Irish Self-Determination League of the 1920s.

Originally called the Connolly Club, its aims were: to work for the complete freedom of the Irish people; provide a social and cultural centre for those promoting the teachings of James Connolly; arrange public meetings, discussions and lectures explaining Connolly's ideas; and to show solidarity with oppressed nations and peoples throughout the world - sentiments continued in the present CA constitution.

The CA's paper *Irish Freedom*, was first published in January 1939, being renamed the *Irish Democrat* in 1945.

The first major campaign undertaken by the Connolly Club was in the Frank

Ryan Release Campaign, in support of the Republican Congress leader and International Brigade commander. The campaign, involving extensive lobbying of British and Irish politicians, trade unions and the Labour Party, exemplified the methods to be used by the organisation throughout the years.

The establishment of branches soon followed, initially in Liverpool, Birmingham, London, and then in Manchester, Glasgow, Coatbridge, Portsmouth, Northampton, Oxford and Cambridge.

The war years and after

The period of the second world war saw the CA campaigning to preserve Irish neutrality and in defence of Irish workers in Britain. The 1945 general election gave the organisation hope that the new Labour government would carry out its long held policy of Irish self-determination.

However, by 1949 the Atlee government had passed the Ireland Act, which preserved the unionist position in the six counties. During this period the CA puts its main efforts into welfare work among the Irish in Britain, coming under fierce attack from, among others, the Catholic Church, which accused the organisation of being a 'communist front'.

Although the CA had communists in its ranks, its included many Labour Party member and those with no party affiliation. The CA had always maintained a non-party political stance whilst recognising that the best hope for Irish self-determination lay with the election of a Labour government at Westminster.

Responding to the passing of the Ireland Act of 1949, the CA held protest meetings and produced a pamphlet, *How to End Partition*, setting out the CA's policy of working in the trade union movement to win support for justice in Ireland's. In the 1950s the CA's work, particularly in relation to sales of the *Irish Democrat*, increased dramatically. There were meetings in Hyde Park every Sunday afternoon. A full-time worker was appointed and the paper was given a more professional look.

The 1950s was also the height of the anti-colonial struggle across the world. This was reflected in the columns of the *Irish Democrat*.

The CA's stepped up its trade union. Numerous pamphlets were published aimed specifically at trade union members and a conference organised. *Irishmen make good Trade Unionists* was part of the CA's attempts to persuade the trade union movement to tackle issues of concern to the Irish community.

New impetus was gained in 1955 as the Association adopted a new constitution and added to its title, becoming the Connolly Association and the Irish Self-Determination League.

On the issue of partition, the Association stressed that the six counties were being systematically eroded, politically, culturally and economically as a result of Britain's continued claim of sovereignty. and it called upon the labour movement to take up an anti-partition policy.

Civil rights and the EEC - the 1960s

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the CA through the pages on the *Irish Democrat*, influenced those trade unionists in Belfast who first proposed

the idea of establishing a civil rights movement to expose unionism in the six counties. The Association continued to organise meetings throughout Britain and a number of new branches were established.

In the 1960s the *Irish Democrat* set out a 'three-pronged attack' for ending partition without violence: the building of a movement for basic civil liberties and democracy in the six counties with the aim of winning over a section of the unionist population; to calls for an end to partition; unity of national opinion in the twenty six counties to put pressure on the Dublin government to actively promote reunification and a campaign in Britain to make Ireland the cause of the labour movement.

In 1961, the *Irish Democrat* was the first paper in Britain to warn of the dangers in Britain's entry in to the Common Market. The CA then, as now, adopting a policy of resisting attempts to subvert national democracy by an unelected European superstate.

By 1968 the civil rights campaign in the six counties was at the height of its activities with demands for a bill of rights increasing in Britain also.

The regime at Stormont was unwilling to meet the democratic demands of the movement and in September 1968 the *Irish Democrat* warned, "unless something is done soon to end the injustices which exist in British-occupied Ireland there is going to be an explosion there". With the civil rights demands ignored, the explosion took place. The *Irish Democrat* recorded numerous meetings, pickets, petitions and resolutions being put to various organisation as the crisis unfolded.

1970s: the violence erupts

The CA put forward the argument that only the British government could affect a change in the deteriorating circumstances and the campaign for a bill of rights became the main focus of Association's work at this time. This work intensified following the introduction of British troops onto the streets.

The entry of Britain into the EEC was an important political development. The CA's 1971 annual conference in Manchester urged opposition to the EEC on the grounds that its object was the creation of a vast multi-national imperialism which would destroy the internal democracy of the nations by handing over the most important decision making to an unelected bureaucracy, and lead to the build up of another world power block.

Indignation at the events of Bloody Sunday in January 1972 led to another upsurge in activities. Within hours of the horrendous events of that day, the CA brought out a special bulletin on the incident and distributed it widely. At CA meetings throughout Britain members called for the resignation of the Home Secretary and for a full and independent inquiry.

The CA was also concerned about growing demands for the abolition of Stormont and. found itself somewhat isolated in warning of the dangers of ending Stormont and giving all powers to London. The Association saw this as yet another example of imperial control taking away even a small amount of local decision making. The CA viewed Stormont not as an undemocratic monster of its own making but one which was driven to excess by its imperial master.

The unfolding political drama of the period 1968-72 brought many new members

into the Association, a large number second-generation Irish. The CA moved to new premises during this period and established an Irish bookshop, which was to be the only specialist Irish bookshop in Britain until the 1980s.

Welcoming the IRA truce in 1972 , the CA called for its renewal when the talks between the Provisionals and the British government broke down. Although the Association did not desire the new military campaign it saw it as a response to intolerable provocation.

Following the imposition of Direct Rule in 1972 the CA looked to a bill of rights to be included in any new devolutionary arrangements. The CA argued for the opening of a constitutional road to a united Ireland whilst taking a longer-term view in the interests of seeking the support of some unionists. It also set out the need for the British government to declare its intention to withdraw.

The imposition of internment led the CA to call for a committee to co-ordinate opposition to it, the Emergency Provisions Act (EPA) and actions by British military forces.

The Ulster Workers Council strike in 1974 led to the collapse of Sunningdale. The CA condemned it as "a challenge to democracy and socialism by some of the most reactionary forces in these islands", published a pamphlet, *Fourteen Days of Fascist Terror*, and organised a speaking tour of Belfast trade unionists.

Following an upsurge of bombings in England in the mid-1970s, the Irish community were subjected to the draconian powers of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Sales of the Irish Democrat declined as outlets for sales were closed.

The CA criticised the bombing campaign as counter productive, at the same time calling for the Irish community to oppose reactionary measures used against it, and questioning the validity of the convictions of the Birmingham Six.

In the absence of moves toward devolution for the six counties, the 1976 CA annual conference decided that the main political task was the need to win Labour's support for an anti-partitionist policy.

However, by the late 1970s the Connolly Association had become increasingly concerned by the British government's failure to deal with the 'Irish Question'. Irish neutrality was also under threat due to NATO interest and increasing European integration and the CA took up the issue as a means of interesting the growing peace movement in the Irish question.

The Thatcher decade: 1980s

Following the defeat of the Labour government in 1979, the Labour Party reassessed its Irish policy, which for a decade had reflected the views of Britain's military and civil service establishment. The CA lobbied hard for Labour to adopt a policy of reunification. In 1981 Labour adopted a policy of Irish unity by consent, an important advance to which the CA felt it had contributed significantly. Nineteen eighty one was also the year of the hunger strikes, the CA organised lobbies of parliament and wrote to MPs.

In 1984 the CA conference *'The Irish Question and World Peace'*; highlighting Ireland as an issue for the British peace movement. Through the pages of the Irish Democrat the CA highlighted issues such as strip searching, nuclear pollution in the Irish Sea, the problem of anti-Irish racism and the strategic position of the six counties in Britain's Cold War games.

The 1985 the Anglo-Irish Agreement was a move by the two government to break the political deadlock while isolating republicans and nationalists. The *Irish Democrat* described the agreement was "the most squalid and contemptible piece of hypocrisy since Lloyd George swindled Michael Collins".

In 1989 the CA published a pamphlet *How to Go* and, an important contribution at the time of the 'Time To Go' initiative which had succeeded in gaining considerable broad-based support. In the same year a briefing paper on the PTA was published and the CA organised a conference, 'Scenarios for Peace'.

The road to peace: 1990's

The early part of the 1990s witnessed a vigorous period of campaigning by the Association. In 1990 the Association published a briefing paper, *Revisionism in Irish Historical Writings*, and a pamphlet, *Justice Denied*, on miscarriages of justice.

The CA also organised a conference on Irish unity sponsored by NALGO and RMT, the first time national unions had sponsored a conference on Ireland. Collaboration with the Action Group for Irish Youth and the Construction Safety Campaign resulted in a major photographic exhibition focussing on workers in the building industry. This was followed in 1991 by

a pamphlet, *Slaughter on Britain's Building Sites* published by the Association. Guests at that year's Mountjoy Martyr's Commemoration event organised by the CA included Billy Power and Hugh Callaghan of the Birmingham Six

Also in 1991 the CA initiated the Trade Union network on Ireland, which brought together many trade unionists from throughout Britain to look at ways of building support for Irish unity within the trade union movement.

Like many left-leaning organisation, the years of the mid 1990s proved to be difficult times. During these years the Association lost its main bookshop, due to a decision by Camden council to sell the premises. although a scaled-down version was to emerge in what had been the CA's offices on Grays Inn Road. The Association was also unable to continue employing an organiser.

However, the steadfastness of CA stalwarts, young and old, was to prove invaluable. Buoyed by the Irish Peace Initiative launched by Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams and the SDLP leader John Hume the Association resumed its publications programme, commencing with *Orangeism: myth or reality* in 1997 and *The Road to National Democracy: the story of the Irish Peace Process* in 1998. The Irish Democrat also underwent a professional redesign and was successfully relaunched in April 1997.

The Association's reinvigorated campaigning initiatives, along with the political opportunities and challenges brought about by the Good Friday Agreement, have already gone a long way to breathing new life into the organisation, enabling it to continue the politically important task of campaigning in Britain for Irish unity and independence.

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Last updated by David Granville on 2001-10-01 14:53:51
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