

Review

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"No revolutionary movement is complete without its poetical expression. If such a movement has caught hold of the imagination of the masses, they will seek a vent in song for the aspirations, the fears and hopes, the loves and hatreds engendered by the struggle. Until the movement is marked by the joyous, defiant, singing of revolutionary songs, it lacks one of the most distinct marks of a popular revolutionary movement; it is a dogma of a few, and not the faith of the multitude".

-- James Connolly, 1907

In a very worthwhile initiative Helena Sheehan and Bread and Roses Productions have released a CD entitled "Songs of Irish Labour".¹ This is a recording of the living tradition of socialist songs in Ireland. It includes contemporary music celebrating the lives of figures from Ireland's labour movement -- such as Jim Larkin, Robert Tressell and Jim Connell.

The initiative has its roots in the very successful commemoration of Jim Connell which took place in Crossakiel, Co. Meath in April 1998. In 1889 Jim Connell wrote "The Red Flag", a song which became an international anthem for working class organisations the world over.

The chorus of "The Red Flag":

Then raise the scarlet standard high.
Within its shade we'll live and die,
Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer,
We'll keep the red flag flying here.

This is more the spirit of the Paris Commune than modern European Social Democracy, and it is no accident that as Tony Blair has "modernised" the Labour Party in the UK, he turned against the song, which was traditionally sung at the end of the party conference.

If that is the oldest song on the CD, then one of the more recent songs is also very stirring. This is "Ten young women and one young man" by Ewan MacColl. This song tells the story of eleven shopworkers who back in 1984 refused to serve South African goods in Dunnes Stores, a major grocery chain. At a time when the white apartheid regime was fighting tooth and nail for its existence, every act of solidarity with the anti-apartheid movement was vital. These young workers took their trade union resolution of solidarity very seriously and as the song explains:

Now Mary Manning of Kilmainham, a twenty one year old cashier,
Was put to the test the very next morning and she spoke up loud and clear.
"No I'm afraid I cannot serve you. That grapefruit's South African".
"Some of us here are opposed to apartheid".
Ten young women and one young man.

Well what a hell of a hullabaloo, the groans and threats and angry cries.
The management foaming at the mouth and the suits buzzing round like
blue-arsed flies.
"You'll sell that grapfruit or be suspended, we'll tolerate no union ban".
Little did they understand the will,
Of ten young women and one young man.

For months these workers stood on a picket line in defiance of management and in solidarity with their brothers and sisters in South Africa. Years later, with the defeat of apartheid, ANC members visiting Ireland made a particular effort to meet with the strikers and thank them for their stand. James Connolly's own work is available thanks to this CD. "A rebel song" was written in 1903 and has the powerful opening:

Come workers sing a rebel song
A song of love and hate

Of love unto the lowly
And hatred to the great.

"The watchword of Labour" was printed first in 1918 after Connolly's execution. It became the anthem of the Irish Labour Party and the trade union SIPTU, often played by the Union's own marching band.

But probably the most inspiring and musical song in the collection is about James Connolly rather than by him. It is Donagh MacDonagh's "Dublin City 1913". This is a song whose words rise to the treatment of Ireland's biggest ever confrontation between workers and employers, the Dublin Lockout of 1913.

From around 1909 to 1913 the Irish working class movement had been conducting a powerful drive to organise. At the forefront of the growth of Irish trade unions was the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU), a revolutionary organisation committed to solidarity and mass picketing. The ITGWU was consciously modelled on the IWW in the US, for whom James Connolly had been an organiser and it had the same "One Big Union" flags and symbols.

William Martin Murphy rallied the employers and drew a line in the sand. He locked out ITGWU members and for six months some 40,000 workers fought the employers and the British police.

The song is a great defence of the workers fight for basic rights and human dignity. It is also a tribute to the passion and commitment of James Larkin, the founder of the ITGWU, to the workers' cause. But the really throat catching moment in the song comes in the final four lines, when the music deepens and slows, altogether changing direction -- to remember with sober determination the execution of Connolly after the Easter Rising:

But last of all those seven leaders
I'll sing the praise of James Connolly
The voice of labour, the voice of justice
Who gave his life that men might be free.

So this CD is an initiative to be welcomed as providing a record of some great Irish labour songs. Unfortunately, however, it is necessary to make a criticism of the enterprise. The quality of the performances and production are generally weak. Whilst a certain flexibility is available for singers of these songs, there are limits to how far you can stray from the right pitch. This is not a CD that you would play for the pleasure of listening to the music. Moreover the accompaniment generally seems to lack depth and passion.

Furthermore, Connolly's words may be powerful, but the Scottish tunes to which he put them come across very dolefully, at least in this version.

Finally a political, rather than a technical, point. The politics of the producers of this CD are "old Labour". That is, Social Democratic, of the pre-Blair period, but not by any means revolutionary Marxist. The vice-President of SIPTU, Des Geraghty, sings one of the songs. Ruairi Quinn, the leader of the Irish Labour Party, is thanked in the credits. These are people who have long ago given up on the ideas of Connolly and Larkin. Rather, they are anxious to persuade workers to join in a "partnership" agreement with government and employers. This is despite the fact that since 1987 such agreements have seen a massive shift in wealth in Ireland. The share of GNP going to profits has risen by 10%, that to wages has fallen 10%.

Once, during a benefit for striking airport workers, in a packed room full of strikers and their families, one of the strikers was persuaded by his friends to stand up and sing a song. He began to sing "Dublin City" and the large room fell hushed.

In Dublin City in 1913
The boss was rich and the poor were slaves.
The women working and the children hungry.
Then on came Larkin like a mighty wave.

And as the song went on, you could sense the connection between those workers who made a stand with Larkin and Connolly and the current strike.

It was a feeling of pride to be part of the movement and in every way fulfilled James Connolly's view of the need for socialist songs in a real revolutionary movement.

Unfortunately the versions on this CD capture the spirit of the government office rather than of streets taken over by a risen people.

1 Editor's Note: "Songs of Irish Labour" may be ordered through the following Web site:
<http://www.dcu.ie/~comms/hsheehan/songs.htm>