

How Black Sees Green and Red

By Claude McKay

LAST summer I went to a big Sinn Fein demonstration in Trafalgar Square. The place was densely packed, the huge crowd spreading out into the Strand and up to the steps of the National Gallery. I was there selling the Workers' Dreadnought, Sylvia Pankhurst's pamphlet, Rebel Ireland, and Herman Gorter's Ireland: The Achilles Heel of England; I sold out completely. All Ireland was there. As I passed round eagerly in friendly rivalry with other sellers of my group, I remarked aged men and women in frayed, old fashioned clothes, middle aged couples, young stalwarts, beautiful girls and little children, all wearing the shamrock or some green symbol. I also wore a green necktie and was greeted from different quarters as "Black Murphy" or "Black Irish." With both hands and my bag full of literature I had to find time and a way for hearty handshakes and brief chats with Sinn Fein Communists and regular Sinn Feiners. I caught glimpses also of proud representatives of the Sinn Fein bourgeoisie. For that day at least I was filled with the spirit of Irish nationalism—although I am black!

Members of the bourgeoisie among the Sinn Feiners, like Constance Markievicz and Erskine Childers, always stress the fact that Ireland is the only "white" nation left under the yoke of foreign imperialism. There are other nations in bondage, but they are not of the breed; they are colored, some are even Negro. It is comforting to think that bourgeois nationalists and patriots of whatever race or nation are all alike in outlook. They chafe under the foreign bit because it prevents them from using to the full their native talent for exploiting their own people. However, a black worker may be sensitive to every injustice felt by a white person. And I, for one, cannot but feel a certain sympathy with these Irish rebels of the bourgeoisie.

But it is with the proletarian revolutionists of the world that my whole spirit revolts. It matters not that I am pitied, even by my white fellow-workers who are conscious of the fact that besides being an economic slave as they, I am what they are not—a social leper, of a race outcast from an outcast class. Theirs is a class, which though circumscribed in its sphere, yet has a freedom of movement—a right to satisfy the simple cravings of the body—which is denied to me. Yet I see no other way of upward struggle for colored peoples, but the way of the working-class movement, ugly and harsh though some of its phases may be. None can be uglier and harsher than the routine existence of the average modern worker. The yearning of the American Negro especially, can only find expression and realization in the class struggle. Therein lies his hope. For the Negro is in a peculiar position in America. In spite of a professional here and a business man there, the maintenance of an all-white supremacy in the industrial and social life, as well as the governing bodies of the nation, places the entire Negro race alongside the lowest section of the white working class. They are struggling for identical things. They fight along different lines simply because they are not as class-conscious and intelligent as the ruling classes they are fighting. Both need to be awakened. When a Negro is proscribed on account of his color, when the lynching fever seizes the South and begins to break out even in the North, the black race feels and thinks as a unit. But it has no sense of its unity as a class—or as a part, rather, of the American working-class, and so it is powerless. The Negro must acquire class-consciousness. And the white workers must accept him and work with him, whether they object to his color and morals or not. For his presence is to them a menacing reality.

American Negroes hold some sort of a grudge against the Irish. They have asserted that Irishmen have been their bitterest enemies, that the social and economic boycott against Negroes was begun by the Irish in the North during the Civil War and has, in the main, been fostered by them

ever since. The Irish groups in America are, indeed, like the Anglo-Saxons, quite lacking in all the qualities that make living among the Latins tolerable for one of a conspicuously alien race. However I react more to the emotions of the Irish than to those of any other whites; they are so passionately primitive in their loves and hates. They are quite free of the disease which is known in bourgeois phraseology as Anglo-Saxon hypocrisy. I suffer with the Irish. I think I understand the Irish. My belonging to a subject race entitles me to some understanding of them. And then I was born and reared a peasant; the peasant's passion for the soil possesses me, and it is one of the strongest passions in the Irish revolution.

The English, naturally, do not understand the Irish, and the English will not understand unless they are forced to. Their imperialists will use the military in Ireland to shoot, destroy and loot. Their bourgeoisie will religiously try to make this harmonize with British morality. And their revolutionists—I would almost say that the English revolutionists, anarchists, socialists and communists, understand Ireland less than any other political group. It appears that they would like to link up the Irish national revolution to the English class struggle with the general headquarters in England. And as Sinn Fein does not give lip-service to communism, the English revolutionists are apparently satisfied in thinking that their sympathy lies with the Irish workers, but that they must back the red flag against the green.

And the Irish workers hate the English. It may not sound nice in the ears of an "infantile left" communist to hear that the workers of one country hate the workers of another. It isn't beautiful propaganda. Nevertheless, such a hatred does exist. In the past the Irish revolutionists always regarded the Royal Irish Constabulary as their greatest enemy. Until quite recently its members were recruited chiefly from the Irish workers themselves; but the soldiers of the Irish Republican Army shot down these uniformed men like dogs, and when at last thousands of them deserted to Sinn Fein, either from fear of their fighting countrymen, or by their finer instinct asserting itself, they were received as comrades—hid, fed, clothed and provided with jobs. I saw one of the official Sinn Fein bulletins which called upon the population to give succor to the deserting policemen. They were enemies only while they wore the uniform and carried out the orders of Dublin Castle. Now they are friends, and the British have turned to England and Scotland for recruits. And so all the hatred of the Irish workers is turned against the English. They think, as do all subject peoples with foreign soldiers and their officers lording it over them, that even the exploited English proletariat are their oppressors.

And it is true at least that the English organized workers merrily ship munitions and men across the channel for the shooting of their Irish brothers. Last Spring, following on a little propaganda and agitation, some London railmen refused to haul munitions that were going to Ireland. They had acted on the orders of Cramp, the strong man of their union. But the railroad directors made threats and appealed to Lloyd George, who grew truculent. J. H. Thomas, the secretary of the Railwaymen's union, intervened and the order was gracefully rescinded. As usual, Thomas found the way out that was satisfactory to the moral conscience of the nation. It was not so much the hauling of munitions, he said, but the making of them that was wrong. The railroad workers should not be asked to shoulder the greatest burden of the workers' fight merely because they hold the key to the situation!

It is not the English alone, but also the anglicized Irish who persist in mis-understanding Ireland. Liberals and reactionary socialists vie with each other in quoting Bernard Shaw's famous "Ireland has a Grievance." Shaw was nice enough to let me visit him during my stay in London. He talked lovingly and eloquently of the beauty of medieval cathedrals. I was charmed with his clear, fine language, and his genial manner. Between remarking that Hyndman was typical of the popular idea of God, and asking me why I did not go in for pugilism instead of poetry—the only light thought that he indulged in—he told of a cultured Chinaman who came all the way from China to pay homage to him as the patriarch of English letters. And just imagine what the Chinaman wanted to talk about? Ireland! It was amusingly puzzling to Shaw! Yet it was easy for me to understand why a Chinaman whose country had been exploited, whose culture had been belittled and degraded by aggressive imperial nations, should want to speak to a representative Irishman about Ireland.

Whilst the eyes of the subject peoples of the world are fixed on Ireland, and Sinn Fein stands in embattled defiance against the government of the British Empire; whilst England proclaims martial law in Ireland, letting her Black and Tans run wild through the country, and Irish men and women are giving their lives daily for the idea of freedom, Bernard Shaw dismisses the revolutionary phenomenon as a "grievance." Yet the Irish revolutionists love Shaw. An Irish rebel will say that Shaw is a British socialist who does not understand Ireland. But like Wilde he is an individual Irishman who has conquered England with his plays. There the fierce Irish pride asserts itself. Shaw belongs to Ireland.

I marvel that Shaw's attitude towards his native land should be similar to that of any English bourgeois reformist, but I suppose that anyone who has no faith, no real vision of International Communism, will agree with him. To the internationalist, it seems evident that the dissolution of the British Empire and the ushering in of an era of proletarian states, will give England her proper proportional place in the political affairs of the world.

The greatest tradition of England's glory flourishes, however, in quite unexpected places. Some English communists play with the idea of England becoming the center of International Communism just as she is the center of International Capitalism. I read recently an article by a prominent English communist on city soviets. It contained a glowing picture of the great slums transformed into beautiful dwellings and splendid suburbs. When one talks to a Welsh revolutionist, a Scotch communist, or an Irish rebel, one hears the yearning hunger of the people for the land in his voice. One sees it in his eyes. When one listens to an earnest Welsh miner, one gets the impression that he is sometimes seized with a desire to destroy the mine in which his life is buried. The English proletariat strikes one as being more matter-of-fact. He likes his factories and cities of convenient makeshifts. And when he talks of controlling and operating the works for the workers, there burns no poetry in his eyes, no passion in his voice. English landlordism and capitalism have effectively and efficiently killed the natural hunger of the proletariat for the land. In England the land issue is raised only by the liberal-radicals, and finds no response in the heart of the proletariat. That is a further reason why England cannot understand the Irish revolution. For my part I love to think of communism liberating millions of city folk to go back to the land.

The English will not let go of Ireland. The militarists are

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hoping that the Irish people, persecuted beyond endurance, will rise protesting and demonstrating in a helpless and defenceless mass. Then they can be shot down as were the natives of Arimitsar in India. But against a big background of experience the generals of the Irish Army are cautious. The population is kept under strict discipline. The systematic destruction of native industries by the English army of occupation forces them to adopt some communist measures for self-preservation. They are imbibing the atmosphere and learning the art of revolution. I heard from an Irish communist in London that some Indian students had been in Dublin to study that art where it is in practical operation. It is impossible not to feel that the Irish revolution—nationalistic though it is—is an entering wedge directed straight to the heart of British capitalism.