



The one that got away Labour and the 1918 election

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As a rule, Irish history hasn't moved according to the parliamentary timetables beloved of political scientists, but December 1918 was different. Although it essentially registered political shifts that had taken place well outside the political arena, that election did represent a historical watershed. Long-standing loyalty to an old political party crumbled as popular support shifted behind the new force of Sinn Féin. The specific voice of the working class was conspicuous by its absence from the campaign, however, and ninety years on it is worth asking how and why.

In the preceding year or two Sinn Féin had developed a successful electoral strategy and won a couple of by-elections. They intended to win a wider victory in the general election, electing enough candidates to establish an independent Irish assembly, having refused to attend the Westminster parliament. Sinn Féin's programme was to win international recognition for an Irish republic, after which "the Irish people may by referendum freely choose their own form of Government".

The labour movement also had its eye on the election. Trade union membership had entered on a steep upward curve, and a one-day general strike in April had been a significant factor in the national campaign that prevented the British government introducing conscription in Ireland. The movement's self-confidence was evident that August in the decision of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (as it was called from then on) to take the practical steps necessary to field candidates.

The Congress executive issued its election manifesto in late September, stating a clear socialist aim:

To recover for the Nation complete possession of all the natural physical sources of wealth of this country.

To win for the workers of Ireland, collectively, the ownership and control of the whole produce of their labour.

To secure the democratic management and control of all industries and services by the whole body of workers...

It was no less clear on the central issue of the election, Irish independence. Labour believed that Ireland should have "the right to choose its own form of Government, to choose its own sovereignty, to determine its own destinies without limitations". If successful at the polls, "the members of the Irish Labour Party shall not attend the House of Commons", said the manifesto—but a get-out clause followed: "It is conceivable that altered circumstances and the interests of the workers and democracy may however warrant a change of policy which shall be determined by a special National Congress."

Initially and in some quarters, the radical overall tone of the manifesto overshadowed that clause. The republican newspaper *New Ireland* hailed "The decision of the Labour Party to abstain from Westminster". But *New Ireland* was sympathetic to the left, and *The Irishman*, speaking for the Arthur Griffith right wing of Sinn Féin, was not so charitable:

When we first read of the nomination of labour candidates we regretted that Irish labour—in its preponderating majority so nationally sound and strong—should have

chosen the approaching Election for its first appeal as a distinct party to the voters of the country. ...we could not help wishing that official labour had refrained from entering as a party... Sinn Fein regards abstention from Westminster as an essential principle of the Nationalist creed—a principle that is as immovable as truth and as eternal as God. In its manifesto the National Executive fails to recognise the vital character of this principle.

New Ireland was singing the same tune a week later.

If the question of abstention from Westminster was the problem, some of Labour's most prominent candidates went out of their way to state that they had no intention of going near the place. William O'Brien, Cathal O'Shannon and Thomas Farren were heckled at an election meeting in Dublin but, as *The Voice of Labour* pointed out, they "made it quite clear and definite that they stand for a free and democratic Republic... that they will not be satisfied with a lower status than sovereign nationhood; that they maintain the right of the Irish people to full, absolute and untrammelled self-determination... that if Congress should at any time reverse Labour's present policy of abstaining from Westminster they will immediately resign their seats".

Meanwhile Labour's election director Thomas Johnson wrote to *New Ireland* maintaining that, if anything, his party was more republican than Sinn Féin, who would be happy with any system of government for an independent Ireland:

It is well known that several of the most influential and active of the Sinn Fein leaders are avowed monarchists, and given the right to self-determination, would advocate for Ireland a monarchy. The Labour party on the other hand claim for Ireland the right to self-determination in the most absolute sense, and in addition declares for the abolition of all the political and social privileges on which monarchy and aristocracy is based. Where is the weakness?

As for Westminster, he claimed that Labour would only set foot there if the workers of Britain were at the point of overthrowing the system that oppressed them, and needed the votes of Irish workers to help.

Behind the scenes, contacts were taking place between Sinn Féin and Labour representatives. The upshot was that Sinn Féin was prepared to stand aside in a handful of constituencies in favour of Labour candidates publicly pledged never to attend the British parliament. This would mean Labour entering the electoral fray more with a whimper than a bang, but it could count on getting some candidates elected to the new rebel Dáil. On the other hand, what would northern unionist supporters of the labour movement make of an electoral pact with Sinn Féin? Added to that was pressure from trade unionists in the rest of the country for Labour to stand aside altogether: the pro-Sinn Féin tide was evident in Labour's own ranks too.

So when a special conference of the ILPTUC met on 1 November, it was on the horns of a dilemma. Johnson proposed, on behalf of the executive, that they withdraw from the election, leaving a straight fight over the issue of national independence. Irish workers, he said, "would willingly sacrifice for a brief period their aspirations towards political power, if thereby the fortunes of the nation can be enhanced". There was opposition to the proposal, including two of the declared candidates, O'Shannon and Farren, but it was approved by 96 votes to 23.

It is difficult to see the logic of the resolution in Johnson's terms. If Labour was all in favour of self-determination for the Irish people—indeed, less ambiguous about it than some Sinn Féiners, as he had pointed out—their presence in the election campaign would have boosted that cause rather than weakening it. Every vote cast for the Labour manifesto would have been a vote for national independence. Like his notion of Irish socialists making up a revolutionary majority in a hung British parliament (as if revolutions are shepherded into

voting lobbies by parliamentary whips) Johnson was hastily spinning a justification for a bad compromise.

One conference delegate, Thomas MacPartlin, provided a syndicalist justification: "It was far more effective for them to have the industrial workers organised to fight the Capitalist class, than to grip political power." But there is no contradiction between the two, and both are more effective when combined. There could have been an argument, in different circumstances, for building up other aspects of the movement than its electoral strength, but this was never Labour's position. Putting forward such a claim after candidates had been proposed is like the teenager who gets knocked back by a girl and then claims he never fancied her to begin with.

Could Labour have done a deal with Sinn Féin instead? Any candidates elected under such an arrangement would be few, but they would also be weak. They would only be returned with the grace and favour of Sinn Féin, much as 'Lib-Lab' MPs had sat in Westminster by agreement with the Liberal party. Their ability to speak and act independently of others would have been hampered from the start. Instead of holding positions won by the workers' own efforts, they would have represented a Labour tail to be wagged by the Sinn Féin dog. Openly lining up behind Sinn Féin would probably have split the movement in two, with northern unionist workers breaking away.

But whether Sinn Féin would have done a deal with Labour anyway is far from certain. While elements in Sinn Féin were open to a partnership, many were opposed to Labour standing at all, as *The Irishman's* editorial comments testify. The Irish Republican Brotherhood under Michael Collins were busily trying to get their own men selected as candidates, and were unhappy at the prospect of cuckoos in their nest. Collins's lieutenant Harry Boland was strictest of all in holding up hoops that any potential candidates would have to jump through.

In contrast, when it came to cutting a deal with the Home Rule party in Ulster, the principle of abstention was no longer essential, immovable or "as eternal as God". Sinn Féin agreed to stand aside in favour of candidates who were wholeheartedly committed to attending Westminster and to accepting a lot less than full sovereignty. For all the political differences between Home Rulers and Sinn Féiners, there was little between them on social issues. Plenty of senior Sinn Féin figures were far more alarmed at the socialism they heard from Labour than the compromising parliamentarianism that the Home Rule party still stood for.

The other option, of course, was for Labour to stick to its guns, to carry on with its election campaign regardless of who opposed them. This would have meant few victories, possibly none at all. Sinn Féin was clearly in the van of the fight for independence, and even those who could otherwise be depended on to back Labour would have voted Sinn Féin anyway. But Labour could well have taken a seat or two in Dublin. The city's St Patrick's constituency was so left-wing that, after Labour's withdrawal, Sinn Féin stood Connolly's comrade-in-arms, the self-proclaimed workers' republican Constance Markievicz. Just a single genuine workers' TD in the first Dáil could have had a real impact, and even an unsuccessful campaign could have won over more workers and helped build a base of support to work from.

A Labour campaign for national independence would have alienated unionist workers in the north—but perhaps not so much if it was run independently of Sinn Féin. Labour candidates ran in Belfast separately from the ILPTUC and, even though they supported Irish independence (albeit in a watered-down form), won over 20 per cent of the vote. The ILPTUC ended up with the worst of both worlds, coming across to unionist workers as too nationalist and to nationalist workers as not nationalist enough. Taking an unambiguous stand of its own for full independence in the election would have been more honest, and may have won it more respect.

The undemocratic British electoral system has to bear some of the blame here. The single-round first-past-the-post system inevitably squeezes out smaller parties, and makes it difficult to express preferences within a range of opinion. The pressure to step down and not split the vote is hard to bear. In the 1920 local elections, proportional representation allowed workers to vote Labour and transfer to Sinn Féin, and half of the ILPTUC's 650 candidates were elected. The following year's general election was another first-past-the-post affair, however, and Labour waited once again.

Labour's loss of nerve in 1918 has been portrayed as an original sin that still haunts the Labour Party's actions today. It was a chronic failure of political courage, and a bad direction to face when the winds of change were blowing through Irish politics. But that mistake is sometimes twisted into an excuse for coalitionism: because Labour marginalised itself then, it has inevitably stayed on the sidelines ever since, with no alternative but to hold up the skirts of Fine Gael (or more recently Fianna Fáil). Two wrongs don't make a right, however. A real party of labour would have the guts to break that mould rather than continually recast it. The mistakes of ninety years ago should serve us as a cautionary tale in the task of establishing an independent voice for the working class in politics – a task just as difficult today, but just as necessary.

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