James Connolly, one of Ireland’s national icons, spent considerable time abroad, particularly in the United States, where he witnessed the successes and failures of labor radicalism and unionization, and of working class conditions resulting from unregulated corporate expansion. Those experiences influenced his actions during the Dublin Lockout of 1913, which was part of a larger transatlantic effort to secure the rights of the working class in the years before World War I.

Despite major advances made by Irish labor activists in the 19th century, Connolly found that employers still held the advantage when he arrived in 1902. Over the next eight years, he was among an influential second generation of Irish American leaders in the United States who rallied immigrants from all over Europe to press for the dignity of labor. Turning homeward, he insisted that the fight for Irish nationalism was inseparable from the battle for the rights of all workers, in factories as well as on farms.

James Connolly’s conception of revolution was social as well as political:

“The Republic I would wish our fellow-countrymen to set before them as their ideal, should be of such a character that the mere mention of its name would at all times serve as a beacon-light to the oppressed of every land, at all times holding forth promise of freedom and plenteousness as the reward of their efforts on its behalf.”

American Labor Museum/Botto House National Landmark.
Ireland infused James Connolly’s life from the beginning. Born in 1868 to immigrants from County Monaghan, and raised in Edinburgh, he joined the British Army at 14 and was stationed in Ireland for seven years. There he met Lillie Reynolds, from Co. Wicklow, whom he married in 1890. He was a fiercely devoted family man, and Lillie always supported his work, moving their big family across the Atlantic Ocean in 1904, and finding creative ways to feed them when he had no income. They had seven children, Mona (who died from accidental burns on the eve of their departure for America), Nora, Aideen, Ina, Moira, Roderick and Fiona (born in Newark, New Jersey).

Connolly’s formal schooling ended at the age of ten; thereafter, he was self-taught, devouring the work of writers like Marx and Engels. He was drawn to socialism while living in Scotland and upon moving to Dublin in 1896, founded the Irish Socialist Republican Party, calling for “public ownership by the Irish people of the land and instruments of production, distribution and exchange.” As editor of the ISRP newspaper, The Workers’ Republic, and as a contributor to publications like The Shan Van Vocht, he supported universal suffrage, free education, a 48-hour work week and a minimum wage. The influence of John Mitchel and James Fintan Lalor emerged as early as 1897 when Connolly became active in Irish nationalism by protesting Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee. He also published the first edition of Erin’s Hope, which he revised in 1909 while in the United States.

James Connolly’s time in the United States was a constant tug-of-war between his revolutionary aspirations and his need for wages. Being a socialist party organizer did not pay well, if at all, and his publishing efforts—except for Socialism Made Easy, which sold 40,000 copies—were often self-financed. In Troy, New York, he collected insurance premiums until a walkout by the young women in its collar factories found him raising strike funds instead. Out of a job, he got work at the Singer Sewing Machine factory in Elizabeth, New Jersey, settling the family in nearby Newark. There he learned both German and Italian to encourage new immigrants. Moving to the Bronx, he became an organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World.

America taught Connolly the value of a labor movement that welcomed all workers, regardless of nationality or skill. But it also taught him a bitter lesson:

“...In America, the ambition of the toiler is to be a slave driver instead of a slave...this applies not only to the native-born American but to the Working Class of America as a whole, Irish as much as any other. The spirit of America is on them—the spirit of grab.”

New Castle Public Library; New Castle, Pa; Joseph McGarrity Collection, Digital Library@Villanova University

Joseph McGarrity Collection, Digital Library@Villanova University

After the Irish Vote
Socialists Predict Democratic Party Is Going to Perdition
Irish-Americans who are not satisfied with present conditions were urged to become socialists in a manifesto issued yesterday by the Irish Socialist Federation, headquarters No. 749 Third Avenue. The federation was organized at the time William D. Haywood first addressed the socialists here after his acquittal, one of the leading organizers being James Connolly, who took an active part in the spreading of socialist propaganda in Dublin three years ago.

The New York Tribune, July 19, 1908
James Connolly, who had come from Ireland as a representative of the socialist party of that country, was the guest of the evening, and was introduced to the audience by Mr. Levy. Mr. Connolly is a clear, interesting speaker, without the excessive ire of the socialist orator, and was able last night to tell in an instructive way of the conditions of the present time in the little country from which he came. He told of the troubles, hopes and aspirations of the people of Ireland almost overshadowing the social problem of America. The presence of the capitalist class in his country, the speaker said, was very evident, for the land was in their hands. Ireland and England, he said, had the same king, but the two peoples were not one, that they had different political traditions and economic conditions. Personally, he had no feeling of hostility against Englishmen as such, but he wished to live on friendly terms with them apart. The speaker quoted from the report of the government's statistician's figures showing the sufferings in Ireland caused by starvation, eviction and forced immigration. In discussing the social and political condition of the people, Mr. Connolly showed how his country would be benefited under the socialist plan.

James Connolly made three extensive speaking tours of the United States, stopping in big cities and small towns. Traveling by train (and sometimes stagecoach), he spoke to crowds in union halls and on street corners, often two and three times a day.

Connolly's first tour (September-December 1902) was sponsored by the American Socialist Labor Party. He advocated for the value of strikes and the importance of ethnic alliances among workers under the socialist umbrella. On his second tour (July-October 1908) Connolly trumpeted the newly formed Irish Socialist Federation and its newspaper, The Harp, of which he was the editor and chief writer. He also campaigned for Eugene Debs, the presidential candidate of the Socialist Party of America. Connolly was a national organizer for the Socialist Party of America on his third tour (May 1909-April 1910) at the steady salary of $3 a day, with a mission to soften prejudices against socialism among Irish Americans.

James Connolly championed the Industrial Workers of the World on speakers' platforms and on the docks of New York City. Nearly 8,000 people assembled on May Day 1908 in Union Square, just north of Greenwich Village, for an IWW rally. Connolly was among the scheduled speakers that day, captured in a rare photograph by George Bain. “You cannot speak here today,” he said to Russian anarchist Alexander Berkman, according to The New York Times. “You cannot speak here today,” he said to Russian anarchist Alexander Berkman, according to The New York Times (May 2, 1908), because the permit had been issued to the IWW only. When Berkman insisted on having his say, Connolly and his colleagues adjourned the rally.

Unemployment in the city had reached 200,000, that spring and tensions were rising, especially between socialists like the IWW leaders and the more radical anarchists. Coming just two months after a fatal anarchist bombing in the same square, 200 police officers were deployed for crowd control and rally goers sported red cards in their hatbands reading “First of May—Our Holiday. Keep yourself orderly; make no disturbance.”

The Irish Socialist Club was represented at the rally by a banner with the slogans ‘Fág a’Bealaċ’ (Clear the Way) and ‘Up Men and At Them!’
Working Conditions

As the twentieth century opened, many in the United States, particularly new immigrants, toiled in manufacturing, mining, and heavy industry. The whistle blew at dawn and again at dusk, usually six days a week. Long hours, low pay, lack of safety, and little job security were common and meant that the income earned by the labor of their children was critical to making ends meet in many working class homes.

Dangerous equipment, deafening noise, poisonous chemicals, and accidents were all too common. At the same time that James Connolly was trying to encourage unionization, the photographer Lewis Hine was documenting conditions for the National Child Labor Committee and New York State began to investigate factories after the Triangle Shirtwaist fire in 1911. All these efforts helped to reveal gross inequalities, pushing unions to strike and sparking reform movements.

FIRE IN FACTORY KILLS 148; GIRLS LEAP TO THEIR DEATH
Blazing Bodies Whirl to Street in Scores, Flames Pursue

Boston Daily Globe, March 26, 1911
A DECADE OF UPHEAVAL IN AMERICA

A decade of strikes in manufacturing and mineral industries across the United States culminated in the eruptions of 1912 and 1913. While big strikes in Lawrence, Mass., and Paterson, N.J. garnered headlines and prison sentences, as in Dublin and Belfast, most won limited concessions or were broken. From Ireland, James Connolly followed the efforts of his Industrial Workers of the World colleagues who were fighting for the rights of those toiling underground or in factories. American newspapers and politicians portrayed strikers and their leaders as dangerous radicals who were undermining the economy and encouraging lawlessness. The backlash by owners and police was merciless. Hunger was the greater opponent for those struggling to live on strike pay and charity. As Connolly wrote in *The Free Press* during the tin plate workers’ walkout in New Castle, Pa., a strike is always

“a battle of strength between a full purse and an empty stomach.”

A DECADE OF UPHEAVAL IN IRELAND

Ireland also experienced year after year of labor unrest, especially among dock workers in Belfast, Sligo and Dublin, culminating in 1913 when Dublin alone reeled from 30 strikes. The euphemism “Dear, Dirty Dublin” summed up decades of chronic unemployment, inadequate sanitation and aging housing stock that exposed a yawning gap between rich and poor. In August, tram workers walked off the job when asked to reject the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union. The subsequent widespread sympathy strike – a tactic also used in America by the Industrial Workers of the World – by as many as 25,000 workers, ground business to a halt in what is remembered as the Lockout.

Violence and riots erupted, and police attacked crowds gathered on “Bloody Sunday,” August 31. When James Larkin, secretary of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union was arrested, James Connolly took charge of the union, getting sent to prison himself where he went on a hunger strike.

Ultimately, neither side accomplished its goal. When workers returned to their jobs in January 1914, James Connolly called the Lockout a ‘drawn battle.’ But it was out of this conflict that the Irish Citizens’ Army was created. Connolly married its working class roots to radical nationalism after 1914, leading to a significant role in the Easter Rising of 1916.
Under the Auspices of the Irish Socialist Federation

A FAREWELL DINNER TO

James Connolly

National Organizer Socialist Party of Ireland, Editor The “Harp”

GOOD SPEAKERS

THURSDAY,

JULY 14th,

1910

7.30 P.M.

Come bring your friends. You will enjoy yourself.

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258 WEST 23RD STREET, NEAR 8TH AVE.

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Tickets may be secured from The Secretary, Connolly Dinner Committee, 745 Third Avenue, New York City.

DON’T MISS THIS OCCASION TO TELL CONNOLLY WHAT YOU THINK OF HIM.

Hear

The Irish-American Orator

JAS. CONNOLLY

(OF NEW YORK),

Editor of “THE HARP,” and Author of “Erin’s Hope,”

“The End and The Means,” “Nationality and Religion.”

Mr. Connolly was formerly editor of the “Workers’ Republic”

Dublin, and is now the editor of “The Harp”

A man of World-wide information and experience.

SUBJECTS:

- - In IRELAND.
- - In AMERICA.
- - and LABOUR.
- - and RELIGION.

Opinions of the Press:

“A splendid speaker... Well versed in the history and literature of his country, and in speaking directly from his own experience he is able to give both time, grace, and wisdom.” — Cavanagh’s Dublin, July.

“A man of pleasing personality. His manner is that of an orator, and his language that of a scholar.” — Boston Herald.


“A vivid, forceful, eloquent exposition of Socialism, and a well-defined theory of politics, that will

 Academy and public libraries will wish to add this volume to their shelves. He talked for nearly two hours last evening, the eminent Irish

Jas. Connolly of Dublin... As he walked up to the lectern, his delivery grew more animated until it

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James Connolly was shot by a firing squad on May 12, 1916 for his role in Ireland’s Easter Rising, tied to a chair because his wounds prevented him from standing. He was 47 years old and had, indeed, led a very full life dedicated to Ireland and to eliminating poverty and empowering wage earners everywhere. His role as one of the signatories of the Irish Proclamation, and as a founder of Ireland’s Labour Party, has tended to eclipse the memory of his work as an Irish agitator in the United States, as well as his exceptional abilities as a writer and intellectual. Two of his most famous books, Labour in Irish History (1914) and Labour, Nationality and Religion (1910) were written while he was in America.

Despite scant education and limited income, he was a voracious reader and was keenly attuned to the power of print. Strikingly ahead of his time as a thinker, he wrote about history from the viewpoint of the underclasses, and about the effects of global capitalism and exploitation in places like India. He denounced World War I with its employer-forced conscription of Irish workers, which he compared to the starvation tactics of the Lockout. A feminist, Connolly encouraged the ambitions of his own daughters and celebrated women’s influence. He was conversant with the literati of the Irish Revival, like W.B. Yeats and George Russell (Æ), but he was not afraid to point out that Ireland needed a viable future more than a gilded past. A pragmatic nationalist, socialism was fundamental to Connolly’s vision of an Irish republic.

James Connolly – champion of labor, republican, and philosopher – will forever be honored as one of Ireland’s foundational martyrs. While he always fought for Ireland, he did not always live there. His experience navigating life as an outsider, often poor and unemployed, in Scotland, England and, most particularly, in the United States, intensified his longing for Ireland even while it shaped his perspective on how best to serve her.

Could he have become such a dynamic thinker, or fought so hard for workers’ rights, or even battled in the Easter Rising, if he had not come of age in the epicenter of radical working class Scottish intellectualism? Or, without his years in America, stumping for the “One Big Union” of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), where his comrades were Germans, Jews and Italians, would he ever have envisioned an inclusive Irish republic? However these questions are answered, Connolly’s links to people and movements outside of Ireland celebrate the complex international web in which the seminal events of 1913 and 1916 in Ireland took place.

Reflecting on the great societal upheavals of 1903-1913, at a time when many of the battles he fought then are still being waged around the world, how would this James Connolly want us to remember him?

“Hasn’t it been a full life, Lillie, and isn’t this a good end?”

James Connolly, True Citizen of the World

Daphne Wolf

Connolly, in later years, remarked cynically that he had made two grave mistakes in his life, first in going to America, and second, in returning there from. But it was in that great Western Republic he really found himself and completed that spiritual development the high gods of destiny had decreed should leave an indelible mark upon the nation he loved so well – true citizen of the world he was through all his days.¹

James Connolly saw America in a way few poor immigrants could imagine. He traveled back and forth across the country three times, viewing it from train tracks and speaker’s platforms, and learning about it directly from the people who worked in its mines, mills and factories. He offered them an alternative to their misery, a world in which poor workers across the country – of many different racial and ethnic origins – would find it far better to stick together than to abandon each other to claw their individual way to the top. He asked laboring people to construct their own dignity, not by rising to the middle class alone, but by uniting all trades and skills under one umbrella. This was not a vision that was welcomed by mainstream trade unionists or the solid Irish American middle class then emerging.

One biographer assessed the affect of his time in the United States: “He had gone away from Ireland an Irishman; he was returning as a leader of...
men." Many experiences contributed to Connolly’s growth as a socialist and revolutionary from 1902-1910, but his membership in the IWW (also known as the Wobblies) was fundamental. He was dedicated to the IWW concept of industrial unionism, or a pan-worker labor movement. When James Larkin founded the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union in 1909, Connolly praised it because its principles so closely resembled those of the IWW. In addition, Connolly admired the IWW tactic of the sympathetic strike. Connolly learned a good deal about strike strategy while in the United States, where unions could be required by their contracts to give employers notice many months before they called a strike, and strikes often occurred during an industry’s slow season. Connolly observed in the International Socialist Review that United Mine workers’ contracts expired in early summer when there was little demand for coal, and those of the carpenters in New York City expired in early January, “when all work in their vicinity is suspended, owing to the rigors of the climate.” Connolly rejected these conventions to the employers, accusing the union leaders of collaborating with capitalism. He said strikes should be called without warning, at the busiest time of the year. Workers and employers had nothing in common, he proclaimed, and there was no reason for employees to cooperate with the bosses.

Although he was a member of the Socialist Labor Party of America (SLP) for many years, Connolly had some notorious conflicts with its autocratic leader, Daniel De Leon, but these confrontations helped to steer Connolly’s later actions and philosophy. The two clashed over many issues, their biggest difference of opinion centering on whether or not it was productive for workers to strike for higher wages. De Leon—a lawyer and lecturer at Columbia University who once called himself a Jesuit spy—argued that any increase in pay gained from a strike would be wiped out by an inevitable rise in the price of goods, but Connolly used Karl Marx’s writing to argue the opposite, that cost of living increases came first. Connolly, who also looked forward to the coming socialist revolution, knew far better than De Leon the practical value of a small rise in pay to a poor family. It cannot be overlooked that Connolly’s life in America was split between two jobs: he worked in the Singer Sewing Machine Co. in Elizabeth, N.J., where he worked as a lathe operator, and Connolly later confessed that he and his socialist foreman had “booned” the capitalist into the belief that he was an expert mechanic. Con- nolly never subscribed to the common immigrant fantasy of getting rich quickly, nor did he approve of those who jettisoned their community ties for individual gain. His concern for his own family’s welfare was always connected to that of every other poor family who struggled to survive. Again and again he puzzled over the American devotion to individualism. He described “the American national disease” as “swelled pride” and attacked American chauvinism, lamenting that a nation “so young, so new, so uniformed,” should display such “an abnormal degree of satisfaction with itself.”

In order to get work he had to jockey for position like any other immigrant, and play the job seeker’s game. Connolly lied to an insurance firm in Troy, saying he was a member of the Socialist Labor Party of America (SLP). He also organized trolley workers spontaneously walked off the job in Yonkers, N.Y. in 1907, and Connolly offered them to get the unionized electricians and engineers in the powerhouse to walk out with them too. The workers refused, Connolly said, and they “took a firm grip on their union cards and scabbed on the men on strike.” But in Dublin, six years later, Larkin made that same tactic work. The power of the sympathetic strike to cripple an industry put fear in the hearts of employers during the 1913 Lockout. Connolly learned a good deal about strike strategy while in the United States, where unions could be required by their contracts to give employers notice many months before they called a strike, and strikes often occurred during an industry’s slow season. Connolly observed in the International Socialist Review that United Mine workers’ contracts expired in early summer when there was little demand for coal, and those of the carpenters in New York City expired in early January, “when all work in their vicinity is suspended, owing to the rigors of the climate.” Connolly rejected these conco-
movement a primary focus of his work, learning Italian and German in order to reach them. He identified more closely with the recently arrived workers from Southern Europe who filled the factories and coal mines than with the earlier immigrants, like so many Irish who had already moved up to jobs in industrial management, politics and the civil service.

In 1906, Connolly defended two Italian socialists arrested by the Newark police for carrying a red flag in a parade. In his protest to the police commissioners he revealed a familiarity with the precepts of the U.S. Constitution, and displayed his inherent moxie:

> “...indeed free exercise of the right of political discussion is inconceivable without the right to proclaim your political faith by such peaceful means of agitation... or are we to be told that it is the color of the flag that makes the difference in free America. That words which are legal and law abiding on blue, white, purple, green or orange flags become treasonable if displayed on flags whose color is red.”

Encouraged by his experience with the Italian workers, Connolly founded the Irish Socialist Federation (ISF) in 1907 to educate Irish workers in America about socialism and encourage them to cooperate with the workers of all other races, colors and nationalities in the emancipation of labor.” He began a newspaper called The Harp for the ISF in 1908, published in New York until 1910 and for a short while in Dublin; much of his best writing was published there. Both efforts helped ease Connolly’s relationship with the newly formed Irish Socialist Party in Ireland.

However, it was an uphill battle for the ISF in the United States. Despite the fact that starvation wages still affected Irish American households, the new organization faced hostile crowds in many neighborhoods, where ISF members carried a speakers’ platform made with detachable iron legs that could be used as weapons in an emergency. Connolly blamed Irish American politicians, along with a cohort of Irish nationalists they supported, for this antipathy towards socialism:

> “Theand the United Irish League will send another deputation to America to collect donations on the strength of this great fight for Ireland. And all the Irish American politicians who expect to run for office that year will crowd upon the U.I.L. platform to wave the green flag and fool the Irish. Not the least of the sorrows of Erin is the fact that the miseries of her people are the stepping stones on which shameless politicians climb to pelf and power.”

Connolly did not find streets of gold in America. He found breadlines, and starving children, and police smashing the heads of the unemployed. Yet, unlike most immigrants, Connolly was not marginalized by his own poverty. As a prominent hawk for socialism in the United States, he enjoyed mobility, notoriety and access to the premiere radical minds of his time. He traveled widely, published books and a newspaper, and jousted with politicians and policemen, all the while keeping up a vigorous and often prickly correspondence with his socialist comrades across the sea. It was in the United States, where he faced both trade union sectionalism and unregulated corporate greed, that his radical ideas on working class unity were hammered into sharp focus. Those American experiences returned to Ireland with him, molded his participation in the 1913 Dublin Lockout and the 1916 Easter Rising, and created his fierce Irish nationalism with the conviction that Ireland must create a society that revered justice over profits. © 2013

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