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The Re-Conquest of Ireland

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The movement in favour of the direct employment of labour by the County Councils, established under the Local Government Act, has scarcely attracted as much public attention as it deserves. Our national press is, as a rule, so much wrapped up in the work of recording the gyrations of its political chiefs, and so little capable of realising the importance of any movement outside of, and uninfluenced by, the ordinary currents of political activity, that they can spare no space to chronicle the progress of a movement which, if consistently followed up, will do more to place the destinies of the people in their own hands than has been effected by all the political movements of the century.

It appears that throughout the South of Ireland the labourers are at present vigorously agitating against the system of letting out public works to private contractors, and in favour of the direct employment of all labour by the County Councils. This proposal, which virtually means that the labourers have emancipated their minds from the social superstition that a private, profit-hunting capitalist can do work better for the community than the community itself can perform it through its elected and responsible officials, has been already adopted by some of the County Councils, and is being discussed by others. The labourer thus finding in his hand one weapon of his emancipation – the ballot box – has already shown himself prepared to use it with an amount of political discernment not a little disconcerting to the men who fondly imagined that the parrot cry of Home Rule would still have its old effect in weaning the minds of the workers from any movement for the bettering of their position as a class. And this, be it noted, is only a beginning.

As the movement progresses, as the labourer sees that the vote which has placed him in the position of being able to elect his representative on the local governing bodies, may also, if properly used, enable him to transfer himself from the employment of an irresponsible master to the servant of a public board, of which he himself is one of the masters, he cannot fail to observe that the arguments and fallacious reasonings with which each step in that direction is met by the propertied class, are exactly the same in every respect as those with which the demands of his nation for political justice have always been met by the enemies of national freedom. He will observe that the nationalist propertied class hurl against the labourer the same epithets, and allege the same incapacity for administration, as they have had hurled at themselves when putting forward their demand for legislative independence; he will also observe that the propertied Unionist will line up, solid as a rock, along with the propertied Nationalist in defence of their joint interest in the subjection of labour; and finally he will discover that in this apparently insignificant movement for direct employment of labour there lies a path to freedom not only for his class, but for his nation.

The subjection of Ireland which is represented to-day as a mere political question is instead an economic, a social question. It is only political that it may be economic. In other words, the political machinery is only held by a dominant nation in order that the social powers may be held by a dominant class. The conquest of Ireland is founded upon the dispossession of her people from all right to the soil, and from all right to life except upon terms dictated



by the possessing class, in field, farms, or workshop owned and possessed by that class. That is to say, that the subjection of Ireland, like all other such subjection, is based upon the economic dependence of the oppressed upon the oppressor. The army, navy, and police are but the instruments with which this class enforces its domination, and the political subjection of Ireland to England means nothing more than that the possessing class were astute enough to place the control of those instruments of domination beyond the reach of the Irish people. On the same line of reasoning it will be seen that the cry for a 'Union of Classes' is in reality an insidious move on the part of our Irish master class to have the powers of government transferred from the hands of the English capitalist government into the hands of an Irish capitalist government, and to pave the way for this change by inducing the Irish worker to abandon all hopes of bettering his own position, and to assume such an attitude of meek resignation to his lot as a wage-slave as might convince the English government that he would make no revolutionary use of his political power, but would leave things much as they are. The bitterness of the opposition to the new labour movement is the outcome of the chagrin felt at the failure of this plot to delude the Irish worker in the interest of his Irish master. Instinctively the labourer feels that every move which lessens his economic subjection to a master raises him a step nearer to the heights of freedom; he gradually recognises that in exact proportion as the workers take the control of the work of the country from the hands of private individuals and vest it in the charge of public bodies representing the Irish people, in the same proportion does Ireland strike from off her limbs the shackles of slavery. By a steady pursuit of this policy the subjection of Ireland can be, in great part, reversed. The Socialist Republican Party has, ever since its formation, based its hopes upon the successful issue of this policy, and can not but be delighted that the line of action it had sketched out as the most immediately practical – sketched out after deep study of the social and political conditions of this country – is now being taken up by the labourers of Ireland.

The fact that most of the men now pursuing this policy would repudiate all connection with Socialism is the greater proof of the insight, alike into human nature and political developments, possessed by the band of pioneers who formulated this programme of action, knowing the self-interest of the workers would force such action on, apart from all theorisings, or knowledge of its greater possibilities.

People who talk of difficulties in the way of Socialism do not, as a rule, realise the nature of the Socialist plan of campaign. The workers are a subject class, but the workers are in the majority; therefore the workers may, by voting together, oust from every public board the majority of their masters, and replace them by a majority of class-conscious workers – workers conscious of the fact that the workers are a subject class, and determined to destroy such class subjection – and this majority of class-conscious workers can vote to take every industry from the hands of the master class and vest it in the hands of associations of workers, serving under the public bodies. Being in a majority the workers are irresistible – when enlightened.

In the course of this socialization of society, this gradual re-conquest of Ireland, the public boards in question will eventually find their paths crossed by the capitalist Imperial government; then Labour, from a dominant local, will rise to the position of a dominant national party, and the fight for complete independence will be taken up by the working class already in possession of the internal government of the country, with all the prestige arising from that fact, and with all the leverage arising from the circumstance that whatever action they may take will have been forced on by a desire to protect the interests of the majority – the workers. Such a crisis, and it is unavoidable if this line of action is consistently followed up, would bring the question of what is called national independence home to the fireside of every worker as a fight for the security of their daily bread, and under such conditions the war for freedom will not fail for lack of an army of adherents.

Therefore every worker who studies the social and political conditions of the day must see that the Irish



Socialist Republican policy, already so justified by the unconscious adoption here pointed out, is the only policy which blends in one irresistible force the interests of Ireland a Nation and the interests of the working class.