**James Connolly’s Legacy in America**

**and Why It Matters Today**

Remarks by Joe Jamison

**INTRODUCTION**

The general theme of this panel is “**Labor and Imperialism**.”

My co-panelist has discussed ***Irish*** labor and imperialism. Today, I want to discuss***American labor*** and ***American***imperialism.

I try to give a bird’s eye view of US trade union history in the 20th century. That’s a lot of ground to cover.

I’ll try not to overuse the word “imperialism.” What I mean by it is the classic Marxist definition, the monopoly stage of capitalism and all that goes with it: the export of capital, dominance of finance capital, wars for re-division, parasitism and decay of the system, and the rest. It's the definition, I think, that has stood the test of time.

**Obviously Ireland and America occupy two very different places in world political economy**. So, the relation of “labor and imperialism” has to be placed differently.

In the case of Ireland, imperialism, **external corporate and government power if you will,** curtails the freedom of the whole nation.

In the case of the USA -- in our day the arch-imperialist country -- imperialism not only curtails **the freedom of the countries it dominates.** Inside the US, it **curtails the freedom of social forces** whose interests are objectively opposed to empire.

**My talk is mostly about the early Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).** For 20th century America, the CIO in 1935-47 was **no less important than** the abolitionist movement had been in the 19th century, and the national independence movement had been in the 18th century.

*1. I talk about what the CIO’s radical trade unionism* ***was****, and* ***how*** *and* ***why*** *it was crushed.*

*2.  Then I talk about* ***the consequences of its destruction*** *in the years that followed, up until the present, and*

*3.****Finally, why it matters.*** *As we in the US trade union movement think about the crisis of our movement, we need to reexamine the kind of left-wing trade unionism represented by the CIO and a bit earlier, by the IWW and Connolly*

***Since this year, 2013, is the anniversary of so many events in classical republican and socialist republican history, let me mention the Connolly connection.***

***The CIO, which I will talk about today, is one of Connolly’s long-term legacies in America.***

This is the second time I have talked about **US** **industrial unionism --** what is called **general unionism** in this part of the world **--** in front of an Irish audience.

Three years ago, RTE ran a contest called **“Ireland’s Greatest”….** In preparation for my Joe Duffy interview on the streets of the Lower East Side, New York, I reviewed the studies of Connolly’s US years 1902-1910. I noticed there has been very little focus ***on the US consequences of Connolly’s work.***

I make the case that, with other leaders of the Left in the US working class movement (Eugene Debs, Big Bill Haywood, Joe Hill, Mother Jones) Connolly deserves to share the credit for the CIO, not to mention founding the socialist republican current in Irish-American politics.

I put the details of this argument in notes I worked up for the Joe Duffy interview a few years ago. They’re on that desk and you can look at them later, if you like.

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**ONE**

**Let me begin.**

**CHART: US Trade Union Density, 1930-2012**

The main back ground to all of this is this dreadful chart. Union density is the percentage of the workforce that is organized into unions. Note the slope of the line.

US workers are not abandoning their unions. Polls show that unions ***could quickly triple in size*** if workers were free to join. The cause is, **first, the ferocity of employer’s attacks on new organizing that prevents growth.** This has been gathering speed for decades and it will take time to defeat it. The second cause **is the inadequate trade union response to the attacks. That is also to blame.**

***My overarching theme*** *is this: the history of American labor since the late 19th century has been the struggle between a class collaborationist/pro-imperialist tendency and a class struggle/anti-imperialist tendency.*

*When the former was unchallenged, organized labor declined.*

*When it was challenged by a strong class-struggle movement, unions grew and prospered. There has been a seesaw movement.*

A.   1886-1905 Gompers, AFL, craft union, class collaborationist approach gains dominance

***B.   1905-1920  Gompers approach is challenged by a labor-left in the SP and the IWW (including Connolly) and Bill Foster.***

C. 1920-1935 Gompers’ successor, William Green, and other class collaborationists are in the ascendancy after the repression of WWI and the 1920 Red Scare.

***D. 1935-1949   The Left-Center challenge of the CIO***

E. 1949—to Present   Left-Center is destroyed and Left influence greatly diminished by the Cold War and McCarthyism.

From 1890 to 1935, the right-wing, class collaborationist tendency was characterized by a reluctance to strike, by an opposition to organizing industrial workers, by the toleration of segregated unions, and by support of American imperialism abroad including the Spanish-American War and WWI.

By contrast, the left-wing tendency among other things believed in organizing industrial workers, engaging in militant strikes, opposing racial segregation, and opposing WWI and supporting the Russian Revolution -- just the opposite of the AFL leadership.

When the class-collaborationist tendency was dominant, American unions have suffered declining density and worsening conditions.

When the class-conflict tendency has challenged the labor aristocracy and corporate power, unions have grown and prospered.

To be sure, it is ***not only*** the politics, and strategy, and ideology of the union movement that determines union growth and union density.

There are also such factors as

* How strong the employer resistance to unionization is,
* The supply and demand for labor (recessions, depressions, and booms),
* Mass moods, movement morale, and quality of trade union leadership.
* The political winds may be favorable or unfavorable.
* There are even imponderable historical factors, for example, over most of the 20th century, the existence of an alternative social system that both frightened and restrained Big Business.

**But having the *correct politics, strategy and structure is a necessary condition* -- if not the sufficient condition -- for union growth.**

We in the US union movement are in big trouble. There is a now a basic debate about fundamental direction. Our present direction is obviously not working.

I argue we must turn to the historical moment when we did get things right, namely, the early, radical CIO.

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***TWO***

***What was the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) of 1935-47?***

**Born in 1935, the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations)** was the **single greatest achievement of US democracy** in the 20th century. Its only possible rival for that title is the Black Civil rights movement.

The CIO’s creation had been the painstaking labor of generations of the best militants of the US working class movement including Connolly and his contemporaries and co-workers.

**The birth of the CIO was like a river dam overflowing and bursting.** The CIOgrew explosively, in 1935, 1936, and 1937 after decades of defeat, repression, lost strikes, by the betrayal, corruption, and laziness of the AFL craft union leaders. The CIO, essentially a Left-Center coalition, organized six million workers into industrial unions, more than doubling the size of US union movement and overshadowing the conservative craft unions of the AFL

**By the way, the “left wing” of the CIO was not just the Communists**

The early CIO was a Left-Center coalition.

Anti-Communism was the ideology used to attack the CIO after WW2, but **that does not mean** the CP was utterly dominant.

Only 16 of the 36 unions in the CIO were Left-led

“Left-led” does not necessarily mean Communist-led. The Communists were the largest single force, the best organized, and most cohesive and enjoyed therefore wide influence.

But the CP was a minority in the leadership and a small minority in the membership.

Only 11 unions were expelled from the CIO in 1949-50.

**Social democrats and other centrists** led many sections of the CIO. Its supreme founder, John L Lewis of the Mineworkers, **was an AFL conservative** most of his career, until he shifted to the political center in 1935.

The next CIO top leader, Phil Murray of the Steelworkers was a kind of a **Catholic Social Democrat.** Some CIO unions were led by **militants of no political party**. In the upper Midwest, (Minnesota and Wisconsin) sections of the industrial union upsurge were **led by Trotskyists**

**What did the CIO stand for?**

The essential ideas of the CIO were

* Industrial unions, not craft unions (what’s wrong with craft unions? Craft unions split the workers between a minority elite and all the rest. Plus, in an age of giant corporations, they are too small to fight the employer)
* Organize the unorganized
* Left-center unity inside the movement
* Build the political independence of the labor movement
* Equality for Black, immigrant and unskilled and women workers
* Fresh, militant tactics including illegal ones, such as the sit down strike
* Challenge the anti-worker, pro-imperialist aspects of US foreign policy; win the war, 1941-45; after 1945, continue the New Deal policy of Big Three unity (US, UK, USSR)

**What did the CIO achieve?**

The CIO was responsible for **all that was best in the New Deal**, one of the few periods of genuine social reform in the country, from which we still benefit.

Examples:

* The Social Security system,
* Unemployment insurance,
* Massive public works programs building, roads, schools and hospitals,
* An expansion of the state sector (TVA),
* Legalization of industrial unions,
* Certain civil rights advances,
* Massive aid to family farmers,
* Laws setting maximum hours and minimum wage rates,
* Financial regulation of Wall Street,
* Taxation of corporate profits,
* Programs building affordable housing,
* Even “the Good Neighbor Policy,” so called, a less aggressive US policy toward Latin America

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**THREE**

**Biding its time until after 1945, the US establishment, newly strengthened, split and crushed the early CIO**

The battle was so dramatic because the two antagonists had only recently appeared on the historical scene, each with new strength, though not in equal measure.

When it arose in 1935, the CIO was overdue by decades. By 1945, with its numbers augmented by wartime industrial growth, CIO had some six million members.

Similarly, the USA, although a major and growing power since the end of the 19th century, was ***suddenly the supreme world power.***

By 1945, the US power position in the world was radically altered.   WW2 strengthened the US military industrial complex, and gave it unprecedented, enormous power.

Other belligerent countries were

1. Weakened, like Britain.
2. Or exhausted and humiliated, like France.
3. Or reduced to rubble, like Germany, Italy, Japan, most of Eastern Europe and the European part of the USSR.

**Only the US** had been strengthened and emboldened by the war.

**Just how strong was the US?**

In 1945, **50 percent of world production** took place in the US, which had only about 7 percent of world population.

In 1932, the worst year of the Great Depression US unemployment was **at least 30 percent.** **In 1944 unemployment was below zero**, if you can imagine such a thing.

The US had a monopoly on atomic weapons till 1949.

To create the new world order, US corporate elites needed stable large markets and it needed political stabilization at home and abroad.

US rulers feared the Left in Western Europe, the socialist camp, revolutionary movements in the colonial world, and the Left at home.

It feared the CIO. In 1946, after the WW2 no-strike pledge, big CIO strikes occurred in most basic industries. 20 percent wage increases were not uncommon.

The early CIO resisted both the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan.

To organize a lasting, stable **Pax Americana** to replace the **Pax Britannica,** US corporate power could not tolerate a big, powerful internal opponent, the radical trade unionism of the CIO, with 6 million members in basic industry and an influence on millions more.

Beginning in 1947, US ruling circles, led by the Truman White House, crushed the Left within the CIO. **The motive was imperialist** as well as domestic. And Truman and McCarthy, backed by Big Business, were strong enough to get away with it. In no other developed capitalist country was the Left completely ousted from the leadership of a significant labor federation.

**The Pax Americana** was rapidly formed with new, global and regional institutions. Its political symbol was the new UN organization headquartered in New York

**Economically**  
The US dollar displaced the British pound as the world reserve currency. New institutions were created at Bretton Woods: IMF, World Bank. The US was bursting with production, but it had few Western European markets. The Marshall Plan was proposed.

1. To solve the US balance of payments problem
2. To help European industry get back on its feet (so it could buy US goods),
3. To help the discredited political Right in Western Europe regain its lost positions, and
4. To weaken the Left,

With many strings attached, the Marshall Plan doled out billions of aid dollars to European governments. The US encouraged the formation of what would in time become the EU. In 1951 it pushed the idea of the European Coal and Steel community, whose goal was to reconcile France to the rearmament of West Germany.

**Militarily**  
Occupied Japan, it occupied and began to rearm West   
Germany. It dropped “de-Nazification.” NATO in 1948. Other regional pacts CENTO, SEATO, ANZUS.

**The crushing of the US Left, including the CIO Left, was done by fear and repression.** The Cold War attacks produced a social-democratic, class collaborationist CIO led by Walter Reuther of the Autoworkers one that big capital could live with — labor peace, long contracts, no strikes over grievances, productivity bargaining, weakened shop steward system, no independent politics, etc.

The postwar era became the Cold War externally and McCarthyism, internally.

To reverse the New Deal policies, both foreign and domestic, the Truman Administration decided to create a Red Scare of unprecedented scale, far bigger than the one after WW1

1. March 1947 Truman demanded loyalty oaths from federal employees
2. March 1947 Truman Doctrine. Intervention in the Greek Civil war, marked the beginning of the Cold War containment policy
3. June 1947 Taft Hartley Act became law. It crippled union organizing and began to split the Center and Right from the Left in the CIO….
4. HUAC hounded thousands of leftists, liberals, and above all, left-wing union leaders.

**A word about the Taft-Hartley Act, which was the legal dagger in the heart of the radical CIO:**

* The Taft Hartley Act severely curbed the union use of the strike weapon. It prohibited jurisdictional strikes, wildcat strikes, solidarity or political strikes, secondary boycotts, secondary and mass picketing, closed shops, and monetary donations by unions to federal political campaigns.
* It required union officers to sign non-Communist affidavits with the government.
* States were allowed to pass so called right-to-work laws that outlawed closed union shops. Half the states still have these laws.
* It added a list of prohibited actions, or so called “unfair labor practices,” on the part of unions to the National Labor Relations Act, which had previously only prohibited unfair labor practices committed by *employers.*
* The White House could obtain legal strikebreaking injunctions if an impending or current strike imperiled the national health or safety, a test that has been interpreted broadly by the courts

The anti-Communist affidavit worked this way. It was not just a matter of an individual deciding in private to obey or to defy an unjust law*. A union could not participate in normal National Labor Relations Board proceedings unless the union leaders complied. If they didn’t comply, the union could not organize new workers, negotiate contracts or engage in any normal union activity. So the union as a whole was damaged.*

Most Communist union leaders refused to comply and took the consequences. So did their unions. Left unions shrank and were raided by CIO and AFL unions with right-wing leaderships. Some left leaders signed the affidavit but didn’t change party affiliations. If they were exposed and convicted of perjury, they faced jail time.

Some prominent non-Communist leaders, such a John L Lewis refused to sign. **But the repression worked**. It split the CIO Left from the rest of the CIO, the conciliatory part. After little more than a year about 80,000 union officers including leaders of 89 of the 102 AFL unions and 30 of 41 CIO unions, signed.

The non-signing unions were expelled from the CIO in 1949-50. They continued to be raided.

Much of the Taft Hartley Act is still in force. However, the non-Communist affidavit provision was declared unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court in 1965, too late to do any good for any of its victims.

**What was McCarthyism?**

The attack was not only legal. It was ideological. McCarthyism was the most extreme example of repression in an advanced capitalist country **short of fascism.** It wasn’t fascism, but it had many of the characteristics of fascism

* Anticommunism was its main ideology
* Total mobilization of the government, the employers, media, Catholic Church, courts, schools, Hollywood, veterans groups, youth groups
* It had a mass base. Approval of McCarthy was high through 1954

Did people here see **The Front** the Woody Allen movie? It could give the impression McCarthyism was primarily a purge of Hollywood, or a blacklist of cultural figures or academics.

Not so. It was mainly a purge of the left wing from the CIO. In the CIO, a labor center of about 6 million, 80,000 functionaries had to take loyalty oaths. Blacklists, witch-hunts, union CIO expulsions in 1949-50, and union raiding, which led to forced union mergers.

The benefits to the US ruling class were immediate. By kicking out the Left, the CIO **mutated** from a Left-Center coalition to a Right-Center coalition.

Thus, **the radical CIO,** greatest achievement of US democracy in the 20th century was crushed.

By 1949, the **purged CIO** was born**.** The purged CIO supported US foreign policy eagerly -- Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan, NATO. It did not support the Henry Wallace presidential campaign of 1948. Wallace, who had been FDR’s vice president in 1940-44, wanted to continue New Deal policies.

In a few years, in 1955, the purged CIO was yoked together with an unreformed AFL to become **the AFL-CIO.**

**Forty years of stagnation ensued, from 1955 to 1995**. The stagnation began when the Left was ousted from the movement.

**What did we lose?**

Progressive politics in the US suffered on all major issues: social and economic justice, anti-racism, other equality struggles, antiwar, social welfare provision.

We are still paying the price for this defeat.

This perspective about the CIO explains some peculiarities of 20th century US history.

What didn't happen -- that could have happened?

For example, I was asked: Why the left-wing political parties, which existed in Connolly’s time at the beginning of the 20th century, did not lead to the establishment of a mass American labor-based political party, whereas the counterparts of such parties in Britain and various other countries did?

Answer: The forces that would have naturally in due course worked to build a mass people’s party led by labor were, by degrees, removed from the scene, in 1947-60, the McCarthy era. They actually ***did try,***as late as 1948, with the Progressive Party of Henry Wallace, whose Progressive Party sought to continue the basic FDR New Deal policies

There were other consequences of the CIO Left’s defeat, for American capitalism and imperialism. To name a few:

1.   **The South was not organized.** **Operation Dixie** was the name of the post-[World War II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II) campaign by the [CIO](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congress_of_Industrial_Organizations) to [unionize](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trade_union) industry in the [Southern United States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_United_States), particularly the [textile](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Textile) industry. The campaign ran from 1946 to 1953 in 12 Southern states and was undertaken in order to consolidate gains made by the trade union movement in the [Northern United States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_United_States) during the war and block the status of the South as a non-union, low-wage haven to which businesses could relocate. Why did it fail? The Left, which had the energy and politics to carry it out, had been driven out.

2. **Bellicose US foreign policy centered on counterrevolution got a free hand.** The extreme difficulty of mobilizing a mass anti-war movement while **the top trade union top leadership was part of “the war party.”** War after war: Korean War, Vietnam war, in the 1980s Reagan’s wars in Central America, first Gulf War, Afghan war, Iraq war; US waging nine wars right now

3. **No extension of New Deal social safety net,** instead attacks on it. Shrinkage after 1980 Reagan and again after 1991(downfall of socialist Europe), and after 2008 economic crisis. Now accelerating attacks and shrinkage

4. **Immense sums spent on war preparations,** which could have been used for useful social purposes if the basic political balance in the country were different**.**

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**FOUR**

**Why Does All This CIO History Matter in the US Today?**

The general focus of this panel is “Labor and Imperialism.”

**So the question of questions remains:** If the early CIO era was such an obvious success, why the resistance to the kind of trade unionism that gave us such victories in the 1930s and 1940s?

The top union leadership today is not composed of un-intelligent people, far from it.

**Rather, the cause is political and ideological: the cause is the opportunism embedded in top leadership world outlook.**

**A word about opportunism.** It is truly astonishing how infrequently this concept is discussed. It ought not to be a mere term of abuse. In working class politics, opportunism is a policy of conciliation between the working class and capital.

Opportunism represents an unnecessary retreat under the pressure of one’s class opponent. It can be more or less conscious. The fundamental ***idea*** of opportunism is an alliance or a drawing together between capital and its opposite, the working class.

The US trade union predicament requires an analysis that our current leaders are not ideologically equipped to carry out. They cannot up with the cure because they don't recognize they have the disease.

Since 1947 and the great CIO purges, **social reformism,** social democracy if you like -- first the **rightmost,** intensely anti-Communist kind, and then, since 1995, the **centrist** kind -- has been the dominant ideology in the US trade union leadership.

Social reformism cannot reverse our decline Social reformism almost always tails behind the “liberal” wing of capital. That is why the relationship with the Democratic Party continues.

Therefore, though our decline continues, our union revitalization debate in America goes on with little progress and no conclusions and no outcome.

**Conclusion 1)**

**If the long sweep of US labor history demonstrates anything, it is this conclusion: imperialism is the mortal enemy of democratic advance.**

***This requires emphasis.*** *It is a contested view, even today. It was not always clear to contemporary observers. In the 1950s and 60s conservative union leaders openly believed otherwise. Craft-union conservatives such as George Meany -- believed they had a deal -- steady gains in US workers’ wages and benefits in return for trade union support of US foreign and military policy.*

But as soon as it could, US imperialism took back its concessions made in 1935-47. It is still taking them back.

**Conclusion 2)**

**The crushing of the radical CIO by repression and fear was motivated by foreign policy concerns, by the ambitions of US imperialism, as well as by domestic factors.** The strengthened US establishment was unwilling to put up with domestic militancy. But it also could not tolerate strong internal opposition to its reorganizing of the post-war world. The creation of the Pax Americana was an equal, if not greater priority.

**Conclusion 3)**

**Was the crushing of the radical CIO inevitable? It can be debated. I see plenty of contingency in this history.** The timing of the birth of the CIO was long delayed, compared to other countries. Britain’s "new unionism” arose in the 1890s. In Ireland, "Larkinism" emerged in 1900-1910.

The CIO’s unlucky fate was to come along precisely at the historical moment when the US Big Business was being vastly strengthened **by unique, never-to-be-repeated, unforeseeable events, namely the military outcome of WW 2.** In 1945, the US emerged in a monopoly position not unlike that of Britain in the mid 19th century.

**Conclusion # 4**

**Where, then, is our salvation to come from?**

No union movement controls *all* the factors that determine its success or failure. Or union density. ***But it controls some.***

The radical CIO -- and the Connolly and IWW legacy before it -- matters because US unions can save themselves only by returning to the CIO’s core principles, which more or less consistently challenged opportunism.

***Back to the CIO!*** would be a good slogan in my country.

Only then can we change the slope of this line.

Thank you.

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