

**Speech by President Michael D. Higgins at Celebration of James Connolly and the Irish Citizen Army**

SIPTU Liberty Hall Theatre, Dublin, March 29, 2016

A Thánaiste,

A Ardmhéara,

A Dhaoine Uaisle,

A Cháirde Gael,

Ar an gcéad dul síos, is mian liom mo bhuíochas a chur in iúl do Chór Ard Scoil San Lughaidh as an ceol álainn sin.

I measc na ngrúpaí éagsúla a ghlac páirt san Éirí Amach, grúpa ar leith a bhí in Arm Cathartha na hÉireann de bharr a dtraidisiún chomhionannais - arm oibrithe a raibh na mbaill tiomanta, ní hamháin don neamhspleáchas náisiúnta, ach don athdháileadh maoinne ar bhealach cóir i measc muintir na hÉireann. Tá áthas orm go bhfuil an deis seo agam aitheantas poiblí a thabháirt don méid a rinne Arm Cathartha na hÉireann, agus a cheannaire James Connolly, le linn Éirí Amach na Cásca 1916 ar son saoirse na hÉireann.

Today we celebrate the distinctive contribution of the Irish Citizen Army, and its great leader, James Connolly, to the Easter Rising of 1916, and to Ireland's Freedom at large – by which James Connolly meant all of our freedoms. I am especially pleased that we are able to do so in this emblematic seat of the struggle for the rights of workers – Liberty Hall.

In 1951, Citizen Army member Rosie Hackett concluded the witness statement she gave to the Bureau of Military History with the following remark:

“Liberty Hall is the most important building that we have in the city. More things happened there, in connection with the Rising, than in any other place.”

It was indeed just outside these premises that, on Easter Monday 1916, the men and women of the Irish Citizen Army assembled to take part, along with members of the Irish Volunteers, in an armed rebellion against the British Empire. The importance of Liberty Hall as the headquarters of both the Irish Citizen Army and the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union reaches, however, far beyond the purely military. It is the emancipatory aspirations of the members of the Citizen Army, and the egalitarian dimension they injected into the events of 1916, that still appeal to us, call to us, one hundred years later.

The women and men of the Irish Citizen Army were committed to achieving much more than national independence: the Republic of which they dreamt – the Republic which is yet to be

realised – was one that would enable a more equal redistribution of the fruits of prosperity among all of its children.

The distinctiveness of the Irish Citizen Army lay not only in the ideals its members held, but also in the social circumstances from which many of them came. It was from the tenements and the ranks of the excluded that the Citizen Army drew much of its membership, and it was in the bitter experience of the working people of Dublin seeking to organise themselves, that their thinking and their actions were rooted.

Indeed we should never forget that the ICA sprang from an event which preceded the Rising by three years – the Great Lockout of 1913, and the resulting strike organised by the leader of the newly formed Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), Jim Larkin.

The opening decades of the 20th Century, that period during which the Rising would take place, was a time when one third of the population of Dublin inhabited tenement slums in the city centre. It was a time, too, when, in the absence of effective union organisation, more than a quarter of male workers were engaged in unskilled labour, being paid “slave wages”, and unable to access decent housing and food for themselves and their families.

The brutality of the Dublin employers' attempt, in the summer of 1913, at forcing workers into choosing between their job and the new union, “Larkin's union” as they called it, is what precipitated the formation of the Irish Citizen Army, which was initially set up as a workers' militia defending strikers against the attacks of the police and the strike-breakers.

The ethical appeal of egalitarianism, and an awareness of the destructive consequences of imperialism were not, however, confined to one class or the direct experience of poverty. Some radical people from more comfortable social backgrounds also joined the Citizen Army – some of them being engaged concurrently in the other progressive movements then under way, such as the movement for women's rights, socialism and cultural nationalism.

Although the Great Strike of 1913 was, in the short term, ultimately broken, this defeat did not succeed in its aim of crushing the workers' resolve to join a general union. Neither did it extinguish the flame of the struggle for social transformation.

The union movement endured as the living pulse at the heart of the transformative social vision heralded by James Connolly, who became the leader of the Irish Citizen Army in the autumn of 1914, after Jim Larkin's departure for America.

It was James Connolly who presided over the reorganisation of the Citizen Army, turning it from the loosely organised group equipped with sticks and bats it had been at its beginnings, into the armed, well-trained and highly motivated, though much smaller, force that would take part in the Rising of Easter 1916. As one Citizen Army member, Frank Robbins, recalled in his memoir, *Under the Starry Plough*, published in 1977:

“The hard core of the Irish Citizen Army who remained loyal to Connolly embraced the ideal of Irish independence as expressed in the very definite terms of the ‘Workers' Republic’.”

One of the most remarkable legacies of the Irish Citizen Army for us today is, I believe, the place it carved out for women, both among its ranks and in its vision for the Ireland of the future. It is well known that, during the Rising, Citizen Army officer Dr Kathleen Lynn was second in command at City Hall, while Constance Markievicz and Margaret Skinnider played an important combatant role at St. Stephen's Green.

More profoundly, not just James Connolly, but figures such as Francis Sheehy Skeffington, who was a member of the Citizen Army at its outset, saw women's emancipation as being essential to any genuine social progress. If I may quote the words of James Connolly, from *The Re-Conquest of Ireland* (1915):

“Of what use... can be the re-establishment of any form of Irish State if it does not embody the emancipation of womanhood. As we have shown, the whole spirit and practice of modern Ireland, as it expresses itself through its pastors and masters, bear socially and politically, hardly upon women...

... Down from the landlord to the tenant or peasant proprietor, from the monopolist to the small business man eager to be a monopolist, and from all above to all below, filtered the beliefs, customs, ideas establishing a slave morality which enforces the subjection of women as the standard morality of the country.

None so fitted to break the chains as they who wear them, none so well equipped to decide what is a fetter. In its march towards freedom, the working class of Ireland must cheer on the efforts of those women who, feeling on their souls and bodies the fetters of the ages, have arisen to strike them off...”

For Connolly, therefore, women were to play a crucial part in the upcoming armed action with those of the Volunteers who had rejected Redmond's call for enlistment in the British Army – a joint action to which Connolly agreed early in the New Year of 1916, after discussions with the Irish Republican Brotherhood. From then on, Liberty Hall operated at two levels, combining the preparations for an insurrection with the normal work of the Union.

It is no surprise then for us to note how centrally Liberty Hall features in so many of the accounts of the events of 1916.

As the headquarters of the ITGWU, the Hall had already, before 1916, become central to the collective life of Dublin's workers. A soup kitchen had been run there by Maud Gonne and Constance Markievicz during the Lockout. Every week, the Irish Workers' Orchestra, formed by Michael Mallin, gave a concert in the Hall, including one on the Sunday before the Rising.

A clothing co-operative had also been opened, with Delia Larkin, and then Helena Molony, who later fought with the Citizen Army in City Hall, as Secretary. This co-operative employed women who had lost their job as a result of the Lockout. It comprised a small workroom and a shop, run by Rosie Hackett, on the Eden Quay side of Liberty Hall. “One of the products of the Co-Op”, one member of the Citizen Army recalled with appreciation, “was a first class workers' shirt. It had a crest of the Red Hand on it and was selling for 2/6.”

“Rebel Papers”, as they were then known, were also sold in that shop. Some of those papers were printed in the adjacent machine room, where Connolly had installed a Double Crown Wharfedale printing press. After *The Irish Worker*, the paper founded by Larkin, was shut down by the British authorities for anti-war sedition, it was replaced from May 1915 onwards, by a new version of Connolly’s paper, *The Workers’ Republic*. When the last edition of *The Workers’ Republic* came out, on Saturday, 22nd April, 1916, its reduced length of 4 pages, instead of the customary 8, was the only clue that an exceptional event was imminent.

In the weeks leading up to the Rising, Liberty Hall bustled with activity, in a tensed atmosphere of regular police raids. Indeed British Intelligence were monitoring all that was happening there. For about six months before Easter 1916, Dr Kathleen Lynn provided first aid and medical classes in Liberty Hall.

“That,” Rosie Hackett recounted in her witness statement, “was part of the real preparations”, before going on to describe how, “from Holy Thursday, we were preparing the food. The scout boys went around collecting bread.”

Drilling and other military exercises regularly departed from Beresford Place, and Liberty Hall itself was turned into a workshop for making ammunition. As Frank Robbins recalled:

“A number of the unemployed members of the Irish Citizen Army were utilising their spare time making munitions. This group was augmented by a selected number of members who frequented Liberty Hall in the evenings and were free from other duties... The munitions being manufactured were grenades and bullets converted from ordinary shotgun ammunition. Bombs of all shapes and sizes were made from “baggin” cans, tin snuff boxes, tobacco tins and other such receptacles.”

Most importantly, it was also in Liberty Hall that the Proclamation of the Republic was printed. It is fitting indeed that those lines in the Proclamation that are most meaningful to us today – “The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens” – that those words, then, which convey the generous aspirations of the women and men of the Irish Citizen Army, should have materialised in Liberty Hall’s printing room.

All of us who live in an age of digital reproduction must appreciate what a herculean task the printing of the Proclamation was for the three men who carried out that work – Christopher Brady, Liam O’Brien and Michael Molloy. In their witness statements, they recalled how they were met at Liberty Hall on Easter Sunday morning by James Connolly and Tomás MacDonagh and given the task of printing a manuscript in a handwriting which Liam O’Brien identified as that of Patrick Pearse.

The three men showed not only dedication but considerable creative imagination in completing their task. The Proclamation had to be printed in two halves, and, according to Molloy, the Wharfedale was “so dilapidated that parts had to be propped up with bricks.” Then too, the shortage of type was so great that wrong fonts had to be used after being altered with sealing wax. The job was finished between 12 and 1 on Easter Monday morning, when 2,500 copies of the Proclamation were handed over to Helena Molony, who had been waiting on a couch in the co-op shop.

In the early hours of that morning, large bodies of Volunteers and Citizen Army began congregating outside Liberty Hall. Frank Robbins gave us a lively account of that seminal moment:

“That morning saw Liberty Hall and its surroundings once again the scene of great activity. Members of the Irish Citizen Army who had the previous night been given passes to go home were returning at an early hour. Senior officers and section mobilisers of the Irish Volunteers arrived early and the latter were leaving on their bicycles every couple of minutes...

Until, a couple of hours later:

“Bugler William Oman sounded the fall-in at about eleven forty-five am. There was a rush of feet from all directions throughout the Hall. That was a thrilling moment.”

Each group were marched by their officers from Liberty Hall to their positions across the city. The Irish Citizen Army battalions were led, to the General Post Office by James Connolly, to St. Stephen's Green by Michael Mallin, and to City Hall by Seán Connolly.

The rest is history, and this year of commemorations has given us the opportunity to recall and celebrate the idealism and heroism of it all.

It is important to note, today, in Liberty Hall, that the Irish Citizen Army did so much better in mobilising its troops than the Volunteers after Eoin MacNeill's countermanding order. Indeed it is doubtful if the Rising would have gone ahead without the Citizen Army's 250 combatants who made up an estimated third of the forces who mobilised in Dublin on Easter Monday.

Neither the tactical rapprochement between the Citizen Army and the Volunteers, nor the coming together of Pearse's and Connolly's language in the Proclamation, should, however, obscure the fundamental ideological difference that existed between the revolutionary vision of the members of the Irish Citizen Army and the economic and social conservatism of many within mainstream nationalism.

Thus, while the Proclamation declares “the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland”, the men and women who were “out” in 1916 had different understandings as to who exactly should own Ireland in the new Republic they were calling forth.

The ambition of those who formed or joined the Irish Citizen Army was not confined to replacing an alien landlord class with a native one, or replacing one form of conservative nationalism with another. Their objective was to transform thoroughly Ireland's social, economic and cultural, as well as political, hierarchies. Such radical ideas of participation and redistribution were, of course, staunchly opposed by many nationalists, as well as by Ireland's Catholic hierarchy and Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin.

James Connolly was acutely aware that there existed in Ireland, as there did in many other colonial settings, a class of native predators, a very wealthy class of industrialists and graziers, some of whom were nationalists, who wanted to preserve the economic and social status quo. A class who

would seek to adopt only a form of independence without workers' rights. In Connolly's view, these people, whose livelihoods depended on the perpetuation of inequalities, wanted nothing more than a transfer in their favour of the administration of Ireland.

James Connolly's strong anti-imperialist stance was also in direct conflict with the outlook of many members of the Irish Parliamentary Party, who would have been content to secure the advantages of a political autonomy for Ireland within the Empire. Connolly, on the contrary, was appalled at the slaughtering of the international proletariat on the Western Front and in the Middle East. In his estimation, a blow against Empire before the end of the War was necessary, so as to clear the ground for future socialist struggle.

Yet Connolly may have been overly optimistic, at least in the short term, in thinking that the Empire was "weakest at the point nearest its heart." On Wednesday, 26th April, 1916, the third day of the Rising, Liberty Hall was shelled by the gunship *The Helga*, and reduced to a ruin. This destruction of the headquarters of Irish trade-unionism, which, despite being left vacant during Easter Week, were chosen by the British military as the first building to be shelled, stands as a metaphor for the ruination of the hopes that had galvanised the combatants of the Citizen Army.

Notwithstanding the loss of life suffered by the Citizen Army during the Rising, the war years that ensued were defined by a "labour must wait" stance. Feminists, too, were told that they must wait, as the property-driven conservatism against which Connolly had warned grew into the dominant ideology of the new Irish State. Land and private property, a repressive religiosity and a narrow pursuit of respectability, affecting in particular women, became the defining social and cultural ideals of the newly independent Ireland, at the expense of any fundamental social transformation of an egalitarian kind.

The Republic for which the men and women of the Citizen Army hoped remains unfulfilled. But their hopes did not die. We are all here today. And those same aspirations for true equality, for real independence, can sustain us today in the task of rebuilding our society and our economy. *Tapáimis an deis seo na gealltanais a tháing chugainn ó mhná agus ó fhir Arm Cathartha na hÉireann, nár cuireadh i gcrích go fóill, a fhíorú le linn na comóraidh seo.*

[Let us seize the opportunity of these ongoing commemorations to rekindle the unfulfilled promises bequeathed to us across the century by the women and men of the Irish Citizen Army.]

Their vision of a people free from want, free from impoverishment and free from exploitation remains a wellspring of inspiration for us as we seek to respond to the situation of too many workers who, in Ireland today, earn a wage that guarantees neither a life free from poverty, nor access to decent housing, adequate childcare and health services.

*Mar fhocal scoir, is mian liom go ndéanaimis focail James Connolly a fhíorú, nuair a dúirt sé: "The real progress of a nation towards freedom must be measured by the progress of its most subject class."*

*Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.*

