



James Connolly's Years in America, 1902-1910

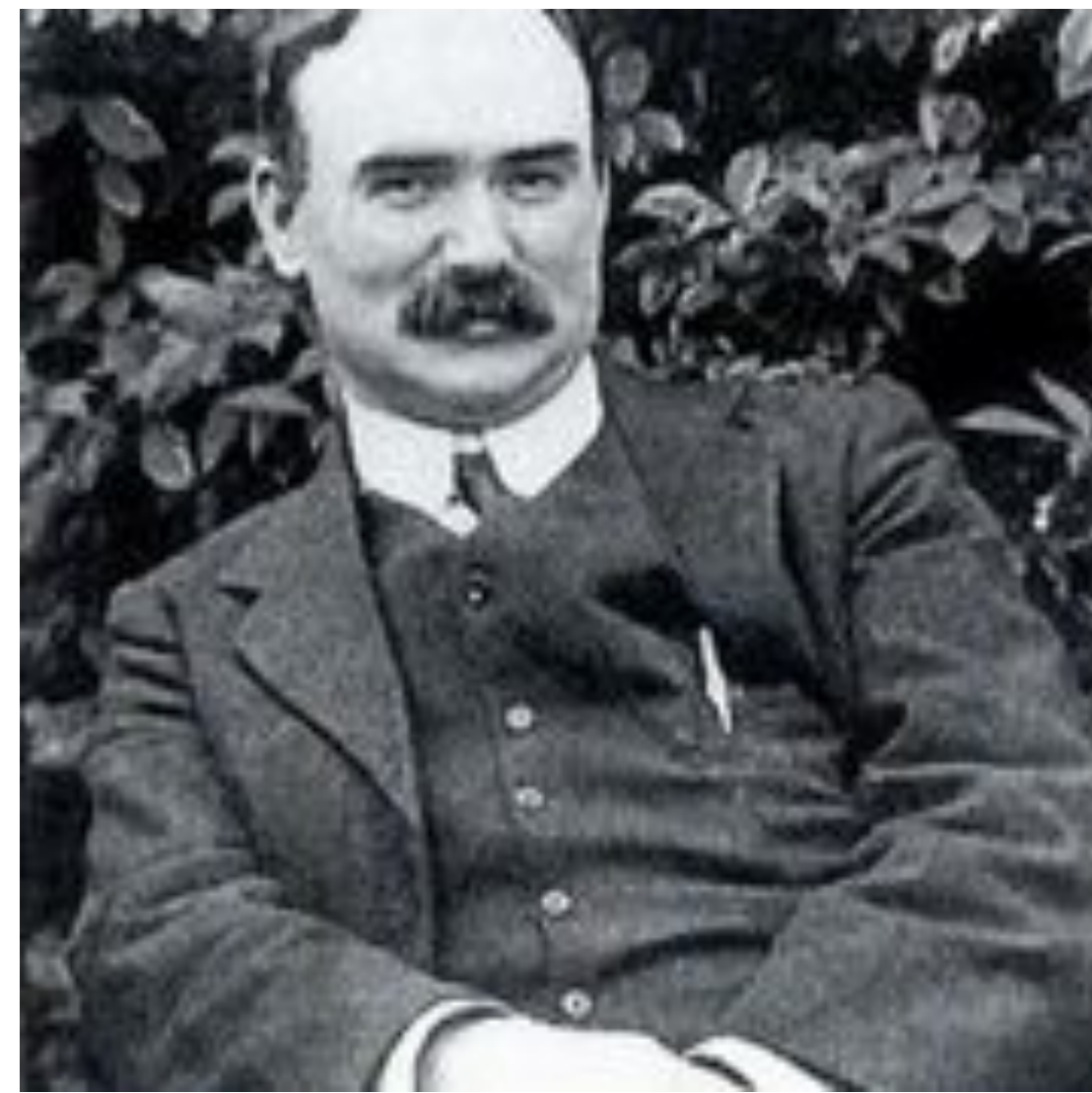
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Introduction

James Connolly, born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1868, was an Irish socialist who would go on to be a leading member of the 1916 Easter Rebellion in Ireland. From an early age he became involved in the socialist movement through groups such as the Scottish Socialist Federation and the Independent Labor Party. A self-educated man well read in the socialist and political literature of his day, Connolly eventually made his way back to Ireland, forming his own socialist group, the Irish Socialist Republican Party.



Connolly in America and the Socialist Labor Party



Attracted to the work of American socialists, particularly that of Daniel De Leon, he travelled to America for the first time in 1902, at the behest of De Leon's Socialist Labor Party for a speaking tour.

Upon return to Ireland, however, the clash of personalities and ensuing fallout that would come to define much of Connolly's career resulted in his ejection from his own party. Rejected by his comrades and excluded from any position of consequence within the socialist movement in Ireland, which had stagnated anyway, Connolly determined to move to America, with its more active socialist and labor movements, while bringing his family over later.

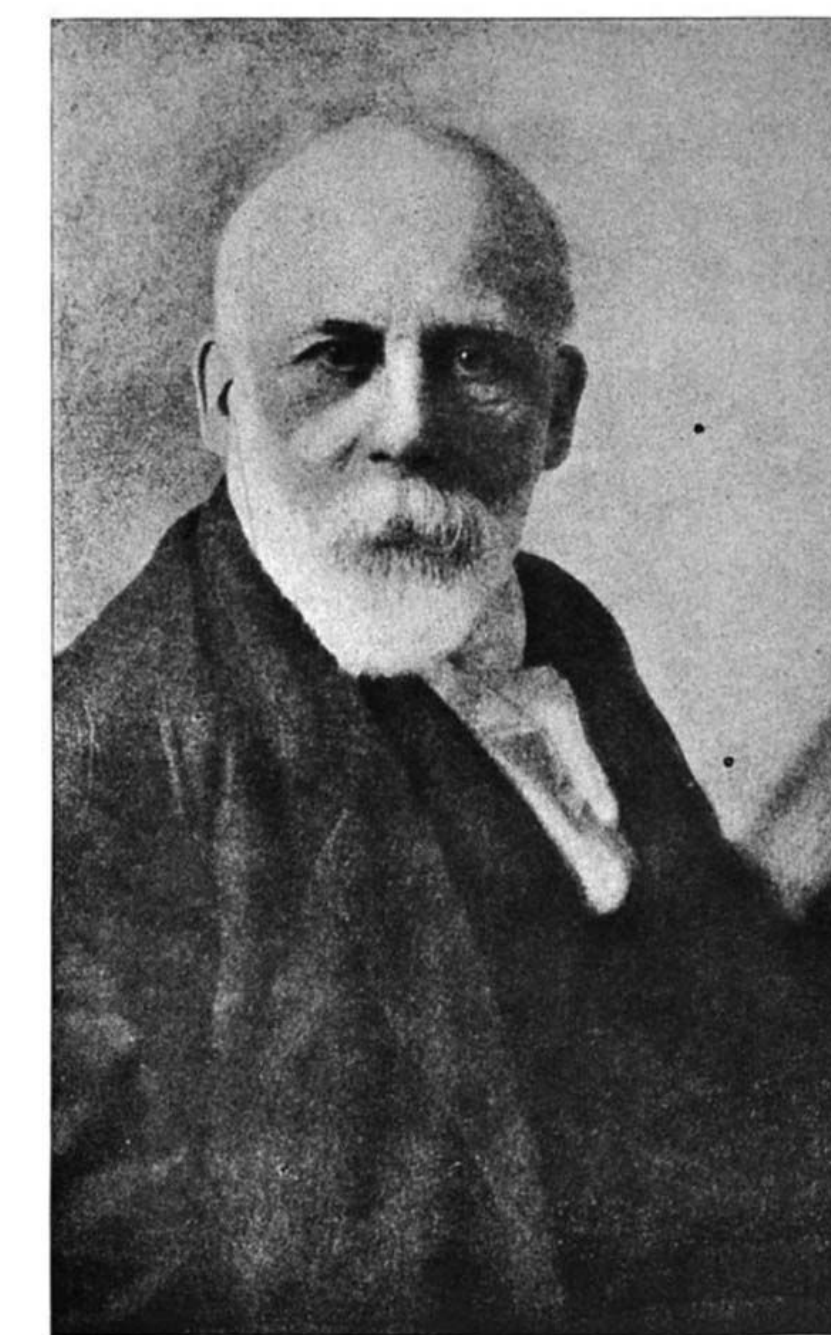


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Daniel De Leon and the SLP

His welcome was much cooler in 1903, however, with Connolly denied employment in the SLP and struggling to find work to support himself. His letters and papers from this period alternate between admiration and hatred for De Leon, whose political ideology he initially admired. They agreed on a number of key stances and issues while differing on others, but the toxic mix of De Leon's dogmatism and intolerance, clashing with Connolly's stubbornness and similar need to be in control came to dominate their relationship. These clashes with De Leon, however, forced him to refine his own socialist ideology, as he moved from member of the SLP, to involvement with the IWW, and later the Socialist Party of America as well.



DANIEL DE LEON (far right)
Leader of Socialist Labor Party - Workers' International Industrial Union



Connolly felt strongly that socialism should be accessible and understandable for the people it was trying to reach, as evidenced by work such as his popular book *Socialism Made Easy*. Connolly often worked to organize recent immigrants, especially but not limited to, the Irish. He also made an effort to work already established labor and socialist organizations to bring them into the SLP and IWW.

Connolly saw factionalism within the movement as harmful to achieving the goals of socialism. His grassroots work reveals a true dedication to the needs of the worker and his belief in the importance of uniting the movement, however, he deviated from this when it came to working and cooperating with fellow leadership. In order to reach the Italian Socialist Federation and try to bring it and other race federations into the fold of the SLP, Connolly went so far as to teach himself Italian. Unfortunately, it was his work with the ISF, and the question of the role of so called "race" federation's inclusion within the SLP and IWW, which De Leon objected to, that became an unexpected point of contention that led to Connolly's exit from the SLP.

The Industrial Workers of the World



Formed in 1905, the IWW was a radical labor organization that emphasized using industrial unionism to form one big union, under which all workers would be organized, controlling the means of production. Connolly was attracted to the IWW's focus on industrial unionism and with the IWW, he worked, giving speeches, writing, and organizing unions, alongside other notables of the socialist movement, including figures such as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, his neighbor in NYC and fellow socialist speaker and activist.



Regrettably, it was not so much ideology but rather a personality clash and factional politics that caused the final rupture of relations between Connolly, De Leon and the SLP. As a result of his conflict with De Leon and subsequent resignation from the SLP in 1908, Connolly became even more involved with the IWW, where he wrote a regular column, "Notes from New York," in the *Industrial Union Bulletin*, the official publication of the IWW.

In addition to the many articles he wrote for the *Industrial Union Bulletin* and the *Harp* during this period, Connolly also managed to pen the book *Labor in Irish History*, which retold Irish history, reinserting the voice of everyday working men and women into it's story.

The Role of Political Action and the IWW, Socialist Party of America

With the IWW Connolly also gained experience organizing workers, striking to achieve better wages, working hours, and conditions. During his time in America, he refined his organization and strike methods, which he would employ upon return to Ireland in 1910 through his work with the Irish Transport and General Workers Union and other labor organization efforts.



The National Executive of the Irish TUC and Labour Party, 1914

While the IWW was strongly against any political involvement, Connolly was not ready to give up on all political, ballot box action. Here was the attraction to the Socialist Party, with its broad, political platform and charismatic, if flawed, leader Eugene V. Debs. Connolly initially rejected the SP for its cooperation with the American Federation of Labor, which practiced "craft unionism," a form of labor organization that Connolly saw as detrimental to the socialist movement. During his later years in America, however, he came to value and support the role of the Socialist Party.



Conclusion

Connolly's years in America had a profound impact on his political and socialist ideology, providing him real world experience navigating leadership politics, and refining his grassroots labor organization and strike methods. He wrote and traveled extensively with the SLP, IWW, and SP, gaining valuable experience he would bring back to Ireland and employ for the causes of the Irish worker, and of Irish national independence.