A column about the left

ANTI-FASCIST activists are picketing every meeting of Exeter City Council in protest at the council's decision to celebrate William of Orange's landing in Devon in 1688 on his way to London to become King.

The council, the activists say, is pandering to the Orange Order and to the National Front. Although some Labour representatives have voiced vocal opposition to any celebration of 1688, there has been a long debate in the columns of Exeter’s Press on the issue, focusing on what William of Orange’s landing meant for the Catholics of Ireland.

This is all very strange, but highly symptomatic of the deep change in the political climate over the past four decades. One of the early winners of this change was the anti-Whitlamites who part company with Marxism, certainly with any attempt to maintain a Marxist view of history.

The revolution of 1688 saw off James II’s attempt to restore Catholicism and absolute monarchy in Ireland. It was a victory for the Whigs whose leaders were convinced that the country had been divided by the previous 50 years — who rules, Parliament or the King? Therefore, Parliament ruled. James fled into exile, and Parnell and the Jacobites were defeated — the joint rule of Queen Mary, James’ Protestant daughter, and her husband, the Dutch prince William of Orange. James’ troops melted away, and even those 'Torries' who in principle supported him as the legitimate monarch found it very difficult to rally to his cause.

Apart from some bloodletting and the settling of old scores in Scotland, it was virtually a bloodless revolution in Britain. In Ireland it was a bloodless revolution in French mouths. For the absolute monarch Louis XIV, the bigoted Catholic ‘Sun King’, James had been building up an army in Ireland for years against Parliament. Ireland became the theatre of war between Parliament, whose chief general was William of Orange, and James’ Irish army, to which he added contingents of Louis’ French troops.

Catholic Ireland had, of course, much more to lose than Protestant England which was trying to subvert and overthrow Protestant Ireland, on the other hand, with the help of the French. The Falkirk Boys in what was then the Protestant city of Londonderry stopped the governor, Lundy, surrendering the city to James’ troops by closing the gate to the town, and the Donegal as Connacht Táin.

In the 17th century there was a succession of land confiscations as one faction or another was driven from power. The National Parliament in Dublin now continued the tradition by widespread confiscation or reclamation of Protestant land. But, in a series of famous battles and sieges, 'Aughin, Derry and the Boyne', and Limerick, Parliament defeated James' Irish army and his French allies. The last stand of James’ Irish army occurred in the besieged city of Limerick, under the leadership of Patrick Sarsfield, one of James’ generals.

Sarsfield surrendered on terms which included the right of the Irish soldiers to emigrate and enlist in the French Catholic army, which they did, and promises that Catholics could freely practice their religion. The National Parliament, for its part, put it, Sarsfield went off to fight and die in Louis' wars, ‘but ere he yielded the Saxon sword, he confirmed his Irishmen and our dearest Moore’. But they did, and with a vengeance. William of Orange, who by the standards of the time was far from being a bigot, was inclined to see the failure of James’ Irish army as a threat to the stability of the Protestant settlement.

New Protestant Parliament in Dublin had other ideas. They reversed the measures of James’ Catholic Parliament, and they brought in a series of savage oppressive measures against the Catholic majority, the 'Penal Laws', many of which bear a striking resemblance to the laws of apartheid. (The difference was that Catholics could convert; many of those with property did).

Protestants who disserted from the established Anglican Church were also discriminated against, though not so much. Until the last quarter of the 18th century, when the Penal Laws began to be relaxed, this system held the Catholics in Ireland, without the right to certain property, education, religion, or professions like the law. They bribed the exorcists to rob the sires’ — a Catholic could not take over his father’s property if he converted. "Their dogs were taught alike to run upon the scent of well or poor. The Catholics were 'forcible to read, forbid to plead, disarmed, disinfranchised imperit'."

As late as the 1840s, the Protestant Irish nationalist Thomas Davis could write these bitter lines and add: "What wonder if our step betrays the freedman dawn in Penal days". Catholic Ireland would find it difficult to be enthusiastic about Britain’s 'Glorious Revolution'.

Yet despite what followed in Ireland, and despite its obvious inbuilt class limitations as a revolution led by, and immediately and primarily, the emerging middle class. The English and Scottish landed political oligarchy, despite the fact that the common people of England and Scotland had immediately to begin a prolonged struggle with that oligarchy to establish their own rights — the 1688 revolution remains one of the turning points in human history. Essentially, it was only consolidated, and for years finished, the work of Cromwell’s revolution of the 1640s, when James' father Charles had lost his head. In its course or at a direct result of it it helped create the world in which we live today. Its effects were felt throughout the following century, in America, where those who won independence from Britain in the 1770s looked to it for inspiration, and in France, where opponents of absolutism looked to the ‘Glorious Revolution’ and the liberties it had secured in the way we look back on the Russian or the French revolution.

The other similar historical events, the English Commonwealth of the 1640s, the American and French revolutions and so on — which increased human liberty, took human kind forward, and helped create the present possibility of socialism, 1688 is ours. It belongs to the socialists and the consistent democrats everywhere, even in Ireland.

True, it took an unconsidered long time for the Catholic people of Ireland to experience its benefits. But it did bring benefits, directly and indirectly. That Irish Republicanism which took shape in the 1780s and ’90s under the influence of first the American and then the French Revolutions owed much to it — indirectly and directly, too, for the first Republicans were the Catholics identified with the ‘Glorious Revolution’. Today’s vigorous and stable Bourgeois Democracy in Ireland is of great benefit to Ireland’s workers: it has secured its most important gains. It is extraordinary, but, as I’ve already said, symptomatic. It is symptomatic of the state of historical materialism in our movement, and of the serious state of theoretical evolution: the political situation has become history as current politics extrapolated backwards. That should not be the approach of Marxists! Yet finding an aristocracy in the more inappropriate, because what happened in Ireland at the end of the 17th century was part of a European process.

On James’ side (and as his paymaster) was Louis XIV, who ended the previous toleration of Protestants in France in 1685 by revoking the Edict of Nantes. Louis’ line against the Protestants had much in common with Ireland’s Penal Laws — except that Louis’ special aim was to create a state-run army. The enforced mass ‘conversion’ of the sizeable French Protestant community, or to their exile (some of them to Ireland), under that community was aimed, wiped out. That does not excuse the oppression of the Irish Catholics; it should put it in its historical perspective.

In European terms William and Britain stood for relative tolerance, against the expansionary absolutism of the sultan ‘Sun King’, whose system oppressed the people of France for 100 years more.

As on most questions like this, James Connolly was far in advance of both the Irish Republican and the British Labour parties.

In the chapter on ‘The Jacobites and the Irish People’ in ‘Labour in Irish History’, confining himself severely within an Irish nationalist purview, Connolly makes out a mere self-serving adventurer and truly says that ‘neither army had the slightest claim to be considered as a patriot army combating for the freedom of the Irish race’. Then he printed the following denunciation of Sarsfield and his associates: "So far from the pacems of praise..." and the Jacobite army being justified, it is questionable whether a more enlightened or patriotic age than our own will condemn them as little better than traitors for their action in seducing the Irish people from their allegiance in the cause of their country's freedom to plunge them into a war on behalf of a foreign tyrant..." Connolly was surely thinking of the attempts by James to build up an Irish army for use against Parliament and the British people when he wrote in November 1913 his denunciation of Irish nationalist grudge-bearing, a plea for British air support for an Irish Irish Ireland: "We are told that the English people contributed their help to our enslavement. It is true. It is also true that the Irish people contributed soldiers to the emancipating movement of the English people. Slaves themselves, the English helped to enslave others; slaves themselves, the Irish helped to enslave others. There is no room for recrimination."

By P. Avakum