

STUDY SECTION

MARX, ENGELS AND THE FENIANS

In September 1867 two leaders of the revolutionary Irish Fenian movement were rescued from a prison van in Manchester. A policeman died in the course of the rescue. Five Irishmen were later charged with murder in connection with this incident, and despite the lack of direct evidence against them, three of them were hanged on 23rd November.

The trial and executions provoked mass protests in Ireland and Britain, in which all the best elements of the labour movement participated. At their trial, the Irish revolutionaries were defended by Ernest Jones, the veteran Chartist leader.

Marx and Engels take action

One of the escaped prisoners is said to have been harboured for a time by Engels' wife, an Irishwoman who herself had Fenian connections. The executions threw the Engels household in Manchester into mourning. Engels wrote to Marx about the courage of the Fenians during their last hours and described how one of them, when asked by a bishop to recant, replied that "he had nothing to repent of and were he at liberty he would do the same again."



Frederick
Engels

Down in London, Marx threw himself into organising protests through the International Working Men's Association (the 'First International'). On his initiative its General Council arranged a public debate on the Irish question on 19th November 1867. The meeting expressed its solidarity with the Irish national liberation movement and criticised British reformist trade union leaders who denied the right of the Irish nationalists to adopt revolutionary methods in their struggle.

One speaker said: "The English working men who blame the Fenians commit more than a fault, for the cause of both peoples is the same; they have the same enemy to defeat — the territorial aristocracy and the capitalists."

The British communist Ralph Fox writing in 1931, summed up the importance of that meeting: "Undoubtedly, the English delegates to the Council in these debates saved the honour of the English working class, thanks to Marx's guidance."

Marx, Engels and Fenian tactics

During the next few years Marx continued to do everything he could to promote solidarity, in Britain and internationally, with the Irish national liberation movement, taking this as a line of demarcation between genuine and sham labour movements, a touchstone for assessing what elements of the labour movement were genuinely free from colonialist chauvinism.

This does not mean that Marx had no reservations about Fenian tactics. On November 28th 1867, for instance, Marx wrote to Engels declaring that he must "behave diplomatically" with respect to Fenianism. Engels replied: "As regards the Fenians you are quite right. The leaders of this sect are mostly asses and partly exploiters and we cannot in any way make ourselves responsible for the stupidities which occur in every conspiracy."

On 13th December 1867 a group of Fenians tried to blow a hole in the wall of Clerkenwell Prison to free some other leaders who were held there. The attempt failed but caused several deaths and injured 120 local people. Marx wrote to Engels the following day: "The last exploit of the Fenians in Clerkenwell was a very stupid thing. The London masses, who have shown great sympathy for Ireland, will be made wild by it and driven into the arms of the government party." In his reply Engels called those responsible for the bombing "fanatics", "asses" and "cannibals".

It would, however, be misleading to quote these remarks out of context. Marx and Engels in their confidential correspondence were in the habit of using very strong language about anyone with whom they had disagreements, as anyone acquainted with that correspondence will know. Suffice it to say that with such comparatively mild terms as "asses", "cannibals", etc., they are letting the Fenian leaders off rather lightly. Many a nineteenth century revolutionary is given a much more thorough lambasting in their correspondence.

The important point, however, is that these were private criticisms that were not published until nearly fifty years later, long after Marx and Engels were both dead. Nothing of the kind was ever uttered publicly by them at the time.

Years later (26th June 1882) Engels wrote to a German socialist about the recent assassination by Fenians of two senior British civil servants in Dublin. He complained that the Fenians were increasingly

adopting what he called "Bakuninism". Lessons for today

This was an anarchist tendency associated with the Russian Bakunin, who advocated "propaganda by deeds" and against whom Marx and Engels waged a fierce struggle in revolutionary circles.

Who were the Fenians?

It is clear from all this that Marx and Engels were themselves exasperated by the mistaken tactics sometimes adopted by the radical petty-bourgeois leaders of the Irish nationalist movement. However, their reservations on this score they kept strictly to themselves. The fact that these reservations of theirs later came to light only underlines all the more emphatically how deliberate their decision was not to be drawn into polemics over these tactics.

Marx assessed Fenianism as being "characterised by a socialistic tendency (in a negative sense, directed against the appropriation of the soil) and by being a lower orders movement." It had originated among Irish groups in America. "But in Ireland the movement took root (and is still really rooted) only in the mass of the people, the lower orders. That is what characterises it."

For Marx and Engels, then, the crucial point about Fenianism — what 'characterised' it — was not the fact that petty-bourgeois policies and tactics dominated among its leadership, but that it was a "lower orders movement" in struggle against British colonial domination. They realised that to conduct polemics with leading elements of that movement over questions of tactics, no matter how mistaken they might feel those tactics to be, would carry with it the danger of being swept along into the position of being 'left' appendages of the anti-Irish chorus.

Marx and Engels accordingly never throughout their campaigning on the Irish issue, made a single statement in condemnation of the Fenian tactics. British colonialism was to be kept firmly in their sights as the sole target of their campaigning on the Irish question. They realised that condemnation of the Fenian tactics would undermine their efforts to strengthen the solidarity of the international working class with the Irish national liberation struggle. To ensure that such solidarity was built on a genuine anti-colonialist and anti-chauvinist basis, their campaign had to be single-minded and clear-cut.

Does the correspondence and other statements of Marx and Engels on the Fenians provide us with answers to questions on the attitude that Marxists should take towards the Irish national liberation struggle today? Yes and no. It does not provide us with easy answers in the sense that we can fish out a quotation, take it out of its context and exclaim: "Yippee! It's in Marx!" It is true that the fundamental contradiction — that between British colonialism and the Irish people — remains unresolved. But apart from this, there are as many dissimilarities as similarities between the situation that faced Marx and Engels and the situation that faces us. Even where close historical analogies do present themselves, nothing Marx or Engels ever said can relieve us of the responsibility of thinking things out ourselves strictly in accordance with conditions today.

What one can learn, however, from the statements of Marx and Engels, is their method of approaching the question of national liberation from a proletarian standpoint that always took the unity of the English and Irish working class, and beyond that the unity of working and oppressed people of all lands, as the guide to what policies and tactics to adopt.

They realised that such calls for unity would be a complete sham and totally ineffective if they were not linked to the most resolute opposition to British colonialist chauvinism. Accordingly, though the national liberation struggle — then as now — often led to non-proletarian tactics 'hitting the headlines', Marx and Engels never allowed this to lure them into adopting what might be seen as a 'superior attitude' towards an oppressed people in struggle. They were careful never to give anyone grounds for harbouring any suspicion, no matter how unfounded, that they were to any degree infected by colonialist chauvinism towards an oppressed nation, least of all towards a nation oppressed by the country in which they were active as revolutionaries.