

Labour lives no. 5

Seán Murray

Seán Murray (1898-1961), republican and communist, was born on 15 June 1898 to Patrick Murray, a farmer at Laney, Cushendall, Co. Antrim, and his wife Mary Ann (née Gore); the last of their four children, after Mary Ann, Kate and Margaret. Christened 'John' in St Mary's Catholic Church, Cushendall, he would be known beyond the glens as Seán. Murray was educated locally at Glenaar national school. He left aged eleven to work on the family farm, but later attended evening school and studied Irish history. He attributed his initial interest in socialism to reading James Connolly.



Murray joined Sinn Féin in 1917 and the IRA in April 1919, was interned in 1920, and a delegate to the IRA convention in Dublin in March 1922, where he met Peadar O'Donnell, who would become his closest friend and confidante. He first associated with communism when working in Glasgow in 1922. Moving to London in 1924, he became secretary of the London branch of Jim Larkin's Irish Worker League. In 1925 he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), and was employed by the All-Russian Co-operative Society Ltd (ARCOS) and Russian Oil Products. In December 1927 Murray arrived in Moscow to attend the International Lenin School, where he took the pseudonym 'James Black'. Assessed by his tutors as 'very capable, very active', and commended for 'independence of thought', and 'a good grasp of Marxist-Leninist methods', he was admitted to the Soviet communist party on 20 February 1928.

In September 1929 the Comintern sent Tom Bell to Ireland to build a new party. Murray returned to Dublin in July 1930. Bell fell out of favour and was replaced in September with a secretariat comprising Murray, young Jim Larkin, and Bill Denn. Murray gradually emerged as de facto leader of the Revolutionary Workers' Groups, formed in November 1930. The Groups made significant advances in 1932: membership rose to a peak of 340, and the print-run of the weekly *Workers' Voice* reached 3,000 copies. Murray also worked to promote workers' education and theoretical publications.

Always a Moscow loyalist, Murray endorsed the Comintern's substitution of 'class against class' for anti-imperialist politics in Ireland during the 'third period'. However, he remained a Connollyite at heart, and following the start of the 'economic war', he pleaded in Moscow for a return to anti-imperialism. The Comintern approved, with certain provisos. With the foundation of the second Communist Party of Ireland (CPI) in 1933, Murray became general secretary, and his pamphlet, *The Irish Case for Communism*, was adopted as the basis of its manifesto. The manifesto envisaged the fight for communism growing out of the national struggle. Hopes were raised briefly by the ill-fated Republican Congress in 1934.

An intense anti-communist climate prevailed from 1933 to 1935. In Dublin's municipal elections in June 1933, Murray received seventy-five votes. In October he was served with an exclusion order from Northern Ireland. In 1934 he visited Moscow and the United States, where he lectured widely under the auspices of the Communist Party, collecting funds to keep the CPI afloat. Murray was again in Moscow in 1935 for the 7th world congress of the Comintern, and welcomed the popular front

policy. He applied the line most notably on Spain as editor of the *Worker* in 1936 and with O'Donnell and Bill Gannon was the organiser of Irish enlistment in the International Brigades. He and Bill's sister, Margaret, were later married in Dublin. By 1938 interest in Spain was abating, the CPI muster had fallen to around 100, and Moscow was calling in the CPGB for rescue work. Describing the party's state as 'catastrophic', the British scapegoated Murray's leadership.

The Anglo-Irish treaty of April 1938, which repatriated the 'treaty ports', delivered another blow to Murray. Whereas he claimed the treaty entailed a pro-British foreign policy, the Comintern reckoned it would ensure Irish neutrality in the event of an Anglo-German invasion of Russia. A CPGB report in March 1939 commended Murray's 'unquestioned devotion', but added that he had shown no ability. Murray was dropped from the Comintern's payroll, on which he had held the nominal post of Irish correspondent of the New York *Sunday Worker*, and ceased to be a full-time party worker. Though much used as a street speaker, he was not acknowledged in a history of party newspapers in the CPI's *Workers' Weekly* in 1940, or in the *Weekly's* announcement in March 1941 that Tommy Watters had become party general secretary.

Following the Nazi invasion of Russia, the CPI was dissolved in Éire and pursued a vigorous pro-war policy in Northern Ireland. Now in favour with Stormont, the Communist Party, Northern Ireland (CPNI), as it eventually came to be called, got Murray's exclusion order lifted on 8 October 1941 with the aid of Independent Labour MP Jack Beattie. Murray moved to Belfast to work as a labourer, and later in Harland and Wolff. Though editor of the CPNI's *Unity*, he was not well regarded by the leadership. Some wrote him off as 'deadwood' or frowned on his republicanism, or his drinking habits. Conversely, others deplored the neglect of his talents. During the war the Murrays lived with Michael McInerney and his family at 260 Limestone Road. Afterwards they obtained a house at 32 Lincoln Avenue, which was to be his final address. On his father's death in the 1950s, Murray rented out the farm, keeping the farmhouse for his own occasional use.

A purge of the ailing CPNI in 1946 facilitated Murray's political recovery. In 1950 he was appointed CPNI national organiser, and slowly he led the party towards cross-border unity and anti-partitionism. His last significant contribution was to draft the programme 'The Irish way to socialism' in 1958. A revised version was adopted by the CPNI in 1962 as *Ireland's Path to Socialism*.

Murray took ill in March 1961, and died in the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast on 25 May. He was survived by Margaret. They had no children.

Emmet O'Connor

Bibliography

Murray's private papers are in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. For other sources see Stephen Bowler, 'Seán Murray, 1898-1961, and the pursuit of Stalinism in one country', *Saothar* 18 (1999), pp.41-53. No bibliography exists of Murray's extensive writing for newspapers and journals. His published pamphlets were:

1. *The Irish Case for Communism* (Dublin, 1933)
2. *Ireland's Fight for Freedom and the Irish in the USA* (Workers' Library, New York, 1934)
3. *The Irish Revolt: 1916 and After* (Dublin, 1936)