



The Story of the Limerick Soviet

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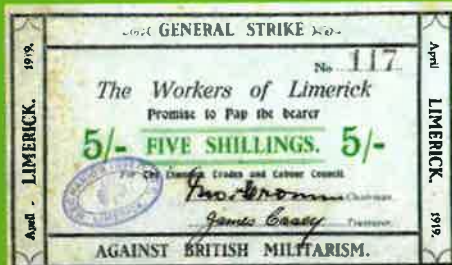
The 1919 General Strike against British Militarism

D.R. O'Connor Lysaght

**Celebrating
Limerick Soviet 100
1919 - 2019**

Sixth Edition

(With foreword by Pat O'Connor and the programme
of events commemorating the Limerick Soviet in 2019)



2019
CENTENARY FESTIVAL
LIMERICK.
SOVIET

PROGRAMME

April

05 LAUNCH OF 'THE BOTTOM DOG' NEWSPAPER
(Limerick Council of Trade Unions)
MECHANIC'S INSTITUTE, Harrington St.
6:00 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome

06 TRADE UNION PARADE
(Limerick Council of Trade Unions)
MECHANIC'S INSTITUTE, Harrington St.
1:30 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome

**PODCAST LAUNCH
'BOTTOM DOG - THE STORY OF
THE LIMERICK SOVIET 1919'**
(Clair Freckville, members of Limerick Soviet
Committee Committee & Socialist Party)
Weekly episodes with interviews & dramatizations.
In all podcast apps and at www.limericksoviet.ie
AVAILABLE FREE

07 WREATH LAYING AT ROBERT
BYRNE'S GRAVE + TALK AFTER
(Robert Byrne, Chairman of Sinn Féin)
MOUNT SAINT LAWRENCE CEMETERY
2:00 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome

09 SHOWING OF LIMERICK SOVIET
DOCUMENTARY
(Limerick Council of Trade Unions)
BILLY HALL, 48 O'Connell St
7:30 PM
TICKETS: 4.5,-
available at www.limericksoviet.ie

10 TALKS ON THE LIMERICK SOVIET
BY LIAM CANNILL
(Limerick Council of Trade Unions)
2:30 PM
SOUTH COAST HOTEL
private event for Secondary School teachers
7:30 PM
LIMERICK CITY LIBRARY, The Grange, Michael St.
FREE EVENT all welcome

11 BOOK LAUNCH LIMERICK SOVIET
1919: THE REVOLT OF THE
BOTTOM DOG
Book by Dominic Haugh. Launched by
Rebh Coppinger - Socialist Party
MECHANIC'S INSTITUTE, Harrington St.
7:00 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome
NORMA MANLY GIG
COMMERCIAL BAR, Catherine St.
9:30 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome

LEAGUE SPECIAL MEETINGS OF LEUO MEMBERS
in discussion a number of thanks to all those who supported the Limerick Council
of Trade Unions

LEAGUE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF SIFTU DISTRICT COUNCILS
Private event for members of SIFTU District Councils

LEAGUE LEAD OF IRISH LABOUR HISTORY SOCIETY
Private event for ILHS members. Held by Limerick with special
talk in the Limerick Soviet.

13 DISPLAY OF LIMERICK
SOVIET EXHIBITION
(Limerick Council of Trade Unions)
MECHANIC'S INSTITUTE, Harrington St.
10:00 AM - 12:00 NOON
FREE EVENT all welcome

April

**PUBLIC TALK BY LIAM CANNILL
ON THE LIMERICK SOVIET**
(Irish Labour History Society)
FORSYTH HALL, Beaufort Rd.
4:30 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome

**LIVE STORYTELLING EVENT:
WORKERS OF LIMERICK**
(Limerick Soviet)
NARRATIVE: 4.58 O'Connell St
7:00 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome

14 BUS TOUR OF THE SITES OF
THE LIMERICK SOVIET WITH
LIAM CANNILL & MIKE McRAMARA
(Limerick Council of Trade Unions)
MECHANIC'S INSTITUTE, Harrington St.
12:30 PM
TICKETED EVENT: 4.5,-
see website for details

**SONGS OF PROTEST BY BRENDAN
GUERIN + OPEN MIC**
COMMERCIAL BAR, Catherine St.
4:00 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome

15 LABORATORY OF COMMON
INTEREST / DISCUSSIONS,
WORKSHOPS, ART-MAKING AND MORE /
(Free "Space Limerick")
FAB LAB, Railroad St.
open events DAILY 10:00 AM - 4:00 PM
check @ Facebook Space Limerick on Facebook
for more information

16 'BREAD NOT PROFITS' OPENING OF
PLAY BY MIKE FINN
OLD CEMENT FACTORIES, Catherine St.
DAILY 7:30 PM
TICKETED EVENT: 6.00,- / 4.50,-
see website for details
tickets at: www.limericksoviet.ie

17 A HISTORY OF PROTEST &
STRUGGLE IN LIMERICK
TALK AND POSTER EXHIBITION:
(with former socialist Mayor Joe Harrington &
Mary O'Donnell member of Limerick Soviet
Committee Committee)
FAB LAB, Railroad St.
6:30 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome

18 FEDERAL NASH GIG
COMMERCIAL BAR, Catherine St.
8:00 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome

19 'A POLITICAL HISTORY OF
OUR BODIES' SHORT PLAY BY
MOYROSS WOMEN'S GROUP
+ 'HISTORY OF WOMEN AND REVOLUTION
IN IRELAND' PRESENTATION
FAB LAB, Railroad St.
4:30 PM
check @ Facebook Space Limerick on Facebook
for more information

April

20 LIMERICK SOVIET MUSIC NIGHT
COMMERCIAL BAR, Catherine St.
9:00 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome

23 FILM SCREENING + DISCUSSION
WITH THE DIRECTORS:
'EAT YOUR CHILDREN'
short film about racism in Ireland!
9:00 PM FAB LAB, Railroad St.
FREE EVENT all welcome

24 'FEMINIST ECONOMICS' LEAD BY
DR. CONOR MCCABE
on request at: Fab Lab,
Railroad St.
10:00 AM - 4:00 PM
FREE EVENT limited spaces
book at: www.limericksoviet.ie

27 PANEL DEBATE:
THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION
CHAIRD BY VINCENT BROWNE
(Limerick Soviet, Communist Socialist Committee)
FAB LAB, Railroad St.
7:30 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome

LIVE MUSIC NIGHT
COMMERCIAL BAR, Catherine St.
10:00 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome

28 UNVEILING OF LIMERICK
WORKERS MEMORIAL PLAQUE
(Limerick Council of Trade Unions)
MECHANIC'S INSTITUTE, Harrington St.
2:00 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome

**RE-AIRING OF RTE 'DOC ON ONE'
ON LIMERICK SOVIET + Q&A
WITH KEVIN O'CONNOR**
(Limerick Soviet Communist Socialist Committee)
MECHANIC'S INSTITUTE, Harrington St.
2:30 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome

**'LET US RISE' LAUNCH OF
ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY,
WRITINGS AND DRAWINGS
INSPIRED BY THE LIMERICK SOVIET**
(Limerick Writers Centre)
MECHANIC'S INSTITUTE, Harrington St.
4:00 PM
FREE EVENT all welcome

28TH / 6 PM COMMERCIAL BAR, Catherine St.

FESTIVAL AFTERPARTY

Learning from the Limerick Soviet.

An event worth commemorating.

A foreword by Pat O'Connor

[The late Pat O'Connor wrote this foreword for the previous edition - the 5th].

The first few decades of the 20th century marked an intense period of working class and socialist struggle. At a time when the aristocracy and barons of industry called on the masses they employed to spill their blood in the pursuit of ruling class interest in the battle fields of Europe, the working class developed a new sense of confidence. This was represented in the emergence of a strong Trade Union Movement. In the aftermath of the Great War, uprisings occurred in Germany, Hungary, Austria and Italy. Of course the Russian revolution of 1917 set an example that the workers of Britain and Ireland followed in their struggle for the forty hour week.

It was against this background that the events that became known as the Limerick Soviet began. What emerges from this struggle is the linkage between the social economic and national struggles. In 1919, despite Britain's protestations that it was the main defender of 'small

nations', it occupied all of Ireland with an iron fist. In a secret document issued by the Royal Irish Constabulary in March 1919 Ireland was described as being ...'unquestionably in a highly inflammable condition ... at no time was there more urgent necessity for the presence of an overpowering military force'. This declaration, which was not for public consumption, clearly outlines the role of Britain, an occupying force, in its relationship with the Irish populace. No surprise then that young Bobby Byrne was arrested in January for his Republican activities. Bobby, as well as being a member of the Irish Volunteers, was a leading figure in the Post Office Workers' Union. His subsequent hunger strike and attempted rescue, which led to his death in a cross fire at the City Home hospital, opened up a series of events that could have changed the course of Irish history.

The declaration of a state of emergency by the British Government caused the trade unions and Republican activists to unite in a situation of Dual Power. The Limerick Council of Trade Unions co-ordinated all of the activities that would normally be carried out by capitalist

commerce. They made their own bread, printed their own money and policed their own communities to such an extent that there was a marked decrease in petty crime and no incidents of looting were reported. The Strike Committee also issued its own publication and the Workers' Bulletin of April 18th. 1919 reported 'tis true that the British soldiers have been asked in the past to do the dirty work of their capitalist bosses; men who enlisted 'to fight for small nationalities' have been forced to dragoon their fellow workers, of course in the interests of freedom moryah...". This passage captures the twinning of the National and Social struggle, underpinning the imperialist and anti-working class nature of the British occupation. This is in the same genre of Connolly's ideas when he declared that 'only the Irish working class remain as the incorruptible inheritors of the fight for freedom in Ireland'. (1910).

The Limerick Soviet in its two-week epic struggle was a microcosm of how the Irish struggle for freedom could succeed, whereby, as Connolly prophesied, working people could be the only class to deliver it. However, then as now the leadership and support required was not

forthcoming. The Limerick General Strike of 1919 came to an end because the Labour leadership vacillated in its support. The Catholic Church, through its Bishop Dr. Hallinan, used the Labour Executive's suggestion that the city be evacuated (a conscious excuse to avoid a general strike) as a signal to unite with the Mayor in calling for an end to the Strike. In addition, the Railwaymen's Union's refusal to back the Strike sounded a further death knell! Of course, the Chamber of Commerce also lent its comments as the Strike petered out adding the perennial chant that strikes always cause hardship!

The memory of the Limerick Soviet and its historic lessons were ignored in the early decades after 1919. In April 1940 there was a wreath laying ceremony attended by Bobby Byrnes' IRA comrades which was addressed by the then Mayor Dan Bourke. In the seventies Jim Kemmy and Rayner Lysaght wrote extensively on the period albeit from differing positions. This present publication is the 5th edition of Mr Lysaght's, *The Story of the Limerick Soviet*. In 1990, former RTE Industrial Relations Correspondent, Liam Cahill launched his definitive *Forgotten Revolution*,

the only hardback publication on the Soviet. Myles Breen's play, *A Flame in Spring*, ran for several days at the Belltable Theatre. In the Ark Tavern at Corbally, a play was staged giving a perspective on the event from the funeral of an RIC man killed in the City Home shootout.

There is now a rich tapestry of documents and technology on this historic fortnight in Limerick's history. The 80th and 90th anniversaries were marked by the Limerick Soviet Commemorative Committee. In 1999, in Joe Harrington's mayoralty, the 80th anniversary saw the unveiling of a plaque at Thomond Bridge. John Gilligan as Mayor in 2009 declared open the Robert Byrne Memorial Park on Clancy Strand.

Mike McNamara, President of the Limerick Council of Trade Unions, has assembled a treasure of memorabilia from the period which can be viewed in the Mechanics Institute in Hartstonge Street in Limerick. He was also instrumental along with the Commemoration Committee in organising the newly instituted annual commemoration to the grave, which had been identified and cleaned, of Robert Byrne in Mount Saint Lawrence. Sinn Féin Councillor,

Shane Ó'Ceallaigh, delivered the 2014 oration. In May 2014, the Limerick Council of Trade Unions organised a Bus Tour under the guidance of Pat Condon and Mike McNamara of the scenes of Bobby Byrnes arrest, imprisonment and death, with Mike Finn's dramatic inputs.

The story of the Limerick Soviet is now well re-established as the major event it really was in Limerick and Irish labour history. Rayner Lysaght has played a significant part in popularising and explaining the Limerick Soviet and in this fifth edition of his *The Story of the Limerick Soviet* he continues to do this important work.



The late Pat O'Connor

**THE STORY OF
THE LIMERICK SOVIET**

The 1919 General Strike against British Militarism

BY

D.R. O'CONNOR LYSAGHT

6th Edition

Published on the Centenary of the Limerick Soviet - 2019.

Preface

The Nature of the Irish National Struggle

One of the more disagreeable features of the struggle between Irish historical "traditionalists" and "revisionists" is not their clashes but their de-facto readiness to agree on major issues without investigation. The traditionalists do have the excuse that they drafted the line on these issues in the first place, the revisionists pretend that they question everything.

One such matter of implicit agreement is the socio-political nature of the revolutionary struggle after 1916. The traditionalists are happy with the historic perspective of a 'pure' nationalist political-military campaign with no social or economic aspects. The revisionists are happy to go along with this. The first school fears lest too careful research provides ammunition to shake the status quo. Its opponents, or, at least, too many of them, want to change the status quo only in the political sense and are happy to accept their opponents' terms of reference as producing the ammunition they need in their task of defaming the national

struggle for its alleged lack of social content.

In this matter, both sides are wrong. The atmosphere in Nationalist Ireland between 1916 and 1923, and in Unionist Ireland to 1920, differed from the periods before and afterwards more than they differed from each other. Partly because of organisational and political weaknesses in the revolutionary camp itself; this potential was either strangled at birth or just neutralized by its enemies. It had been there, however, and it had enough reality to be part of the overall picture of the years of the national struggle.

For example, this was the period when Ireland led Britain and, indeed, the world outside Russia, on women's political rights. This cannot be separated from the rise of Sinn Féin. The only two women running in Ireland in the general election of 1918 were candidates of that party. Had its electoral triumph been much less than it was, it is likely that Constance Markievicz would not been these islands first woman MP and that she would not have been the world's second woman government minister. Later, with the limited independence given by the Treaty women under

thirty got the vote on equal terms with men six years before their sisters elsewhere on these islands.

Such advances were paralleled by the fact that clerical influence was unusually low. At the time of the 1917 Sinn Féin unity convention a Catholic priest objected that he was not seated by right of his cloth alone, as he was at similar Home Rule assemblies. Though the Dail cabinet came down at last against democratic, rather than clerical control of education, it did so after a struggle that would not be seen again for more than seventy years. It is not really surprising then, that the majority of the Catholic bishops remained hostile to the first Dails and their Republic even after the leaders of the Home Rule party had accepted the fact that events had overtaken their programme.

Finally, there was the fact of internationalism. Republican propagandists translated nationalist works of other lands. Until 1920 the Irish Theatre struggled to bring to Dublin the best of foreign drama. None of this meant that Sinn Féin headed a socialist movement. It did mean that it headed a revolutionary democratic mass movement. Such bodies have to face the fact at last

that bourgeois society cannot support too much democracy and that they must either advance further than the leaders of that society would like in the direction of Socialism or accept that their programmes be diluted.

The potential approached Socialism in the theories of some of the Republic's leading supporters. Richard Mulcahy has testified that at that time the major social influence upon the revolutionaries was George Russell's *National Being* with its perspective of co-operative socialism achieved through the self-interest of the petty bourgeoisie. This vision was embraced then by W.B. Yeats in his article 'If I were Four and Twenty' published in Russell's *Irish Statesman* in August 1919. This journal challenged the anti-Bolshevik propaganda of the rest of the capitalist media. What stopped this developing into socialism was the absence in the revolutionary movement of any organised mass working class socialist presence. James Connolly had led the Citizen Army in the Rising. His Comrade-in-arms, Markievicz was token Labour as well as token woman Minister in the Dail Cabinet, but she lacked Connolly's union base. The surviving

leadership of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union knew that its Acting-General Secretary's intervention in the rebellion had cost his life, the union headquarters, Liberty Hall and, for a while, the freedom of the union President. While using Connolly's name to win recruits, it took its line, along with other unions, from their movement's surviving ideologist, Thomas Johnson. While Labour had to be sympathetic to Irish national aspirations and the struggle to achieve them, it was to keep them at arm's length, and mobilise only against specific anti-democratic actions on the part of the British occupier. An attempt by Connolly's friend, William O'Brien, to maintain a Labour presence within the broad revolutionary front that would become a single Sinn Féin party without that presence was undermined by the opposition of his labour allies.

They were not altogether to blame. The organisation of their movement united, as a single entity, the industrial and political movements so as to make Labour politics simply a function of the Irish Trade Union Congress. The independent Socialist Party of Ireland remained little more than an infrequently productive

publishing house. This constituted an empirical form of syndicalism: the idea that one big union was all that was needed to emancipate the working class. It had been expected to aid recruitment on a clear class basis. In reality, it made political division a major hazard to the unions as well as the party that they constituted, and made unity a premium to be achieved, if necessary through a strategy based on the lowest common denominator. In a land where workers were divided politically, like everyone else, between Unionists, Constitutional Nationalists and Republicans, this meant a necessary fudge on the national question.

Until 1920, this seemed to work. Membership of the I.T.U.C.'s affiliates, trades unions and trades councils, rose from 130,000 at the end of 1916 to 320,000 in August 1920. The bastion of syndicalism, the I.T.G.W.U., made up the largest part of this, growing from 5,000 to 120,000 in the same period. This growth did not quite parallel that of the reviving Republican movement after 1916. What became the new Sinn Féin expanded steadily although 1917, as did the Volunteers. Both appealed beyond the working class to

tenant farmers and small businessmen who made up the broad social front termed unscientifically "the men of no property". Labour advanced more slowly until the October revolution in Russia showed it what workers could do and inspired the Irish along with others.

The national struggle could still affect Irish Labour positively as was shown the following April. The British government move to conscript Ireland was met by petitions, pulpit denunciations and by the constitutional nationalist MPs taking the Sinn Féin line of abstention from Westminster. Labour organized the first political general strike in these islands: the first successful political general strike in western Europe. Admittedly with aid from the Irish Volunteers in some non-unionised areas, the stoppage was nearly 100 per cent successful outside the Unionist north, and it might have been successful there, had the Belfast Trades Council been able to protect a previous anti-conscription meeting against loyalist interference. As a result, 1918 saw Labour and the I.T.G.W.U. breakthrough in areas where they had been unknown.

If the 1918 general strike had shown the possibilities for Labour in

advancing the national struggle, the end of the year gave it a warning against being too detached from it. Self-determination was bound to become the central feature of the December general election campaign in Ireland. Labour found too late that it had allowed Sinn Féin to identify the cause with its strategy of principled abstention from Westminster. Labour could either oppose Sinn Féin, with the almost certain prospect of losing, or it could run in tandem with it, alienate many constitutional nationalist workers and accept the hegemony of the projected Dail Eireann over a trade union congress that saw itself as the prospective, syndicalist "parliament" of Labour? Except in four Unionist constituencies in Belfast, the Labour candidates withdrew. Yet, as the anti-conscription strike had shown, and as was borne out by Volunteers and other Sinn Féin supporters joining local general strikes for better conditions, the Irish working class linked nationalism and syndicalism 'in its revolutionary consciousness' as Leon Trotsky had put it. It was inevitable that this combination would be expressed more than would be welcome to the Labour or Republican leaderships.

The Anglo-Irish War, Irish Labour and Limerick

On 21st January 1919, Dail Eireann held its opening session and the Irish Volunteers drew their first mortal blood since 1916 at Soloheadbeg, Co. Tipperary. These facts have set the seal for subsequent historians of the first months of the year.

Yet such an emphasis is the product of subsequent events rather than of judgment of contemporary news. The first Dail session and Soloheadbeg were, in their time, isolated incidents in a period that was more notable for industrial unrest. In early November 1918, Walter Carpenter led members of his International Tailors, Machinists and Pressers Union to take over premises in Dublin's North Lotts as a co-operative clothing works, taking the title 'Soviet.' The great Belfast engineering strike began days after the Dail convened and Soloheadbeg was fought and, before the end of the month, Peadar O'Donnell was leading the Soviet occupation of Monaghan Asylum. These were just the immediate outstanding stoppages.

That such facts have been downgraded has a material justification. The existence of the Dail

provided a long-term institutional focus for the national struggle that the social ones could not match, either in the ITGWU or in the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress. The continuing refusal of these bodies to seek to seize from the Dail the consistent lead in the Anglo-Irish War enabled the latter to dominate what Labour had allowed to become the initial struggle against British imperialism. In this position, it won many from the economic struggle as the national struggle that it led had superseded the economic issues in intensity by 1920. On the other hand, the Labour leadership's justification for their inaction – The need to maintain a single trade union movement and Labour Party would betray itself in the end when James Larkin split both.

Although the Irish Labour leadership did not try to take the lead in the independence struggle, it did act, on several occasions, to advance it by means - the strike weapon - that it alone could command. On four occasions from April 1919 to December 1920, the strike was used to assert democratic rights against Ireland's imperial occupiers. (Another general strike, the Mayday holiday, was an international initiative). Three

of these were called because of spontaneous rank and file action rather than the inspiration of Labour's National Executive. The remaining one occurred as the result of rank and file demand. Two of them (as well as the Mayday holiday) strengthened rather than weakened Irish Labour as a whole. Industrial struggles, the proportion of organized Irish workers on strike in 1919 (70,800 out of 229,786) was lower than that of organised workers in industrialised Britain (2,901,000 out of 7,926,000); the difference was more than filled by the political strike figures, which created, in turn, an industrial atmosphere in which economic strikes were less necessary. The two exceptions failed, ultimately, due to specific problems. The Motor Permits Strike of the winter of 1919-20 was handicapped by inter-union squabbling. The Munitions of War Strike of 1920 came at a time when the Labour leadership's lack of perspective on the national question left it unable to oppose the Black and Tans; significantly, this political strike was the last effective one in the Anglo-Irish War.

The remaining example of rank and file working class action to oppose imperialism is the subject of this

pamphlet. Like the other two examples of such initiatives, it was handicapped by Labour's National leadership. Yet, partly because of its regional character, this handicap did not have as debilitating an effect on the general Labour struggles of the time as it was to have in the context of the Motor Permits and Munitions of War strikes.

The Limerick General Strike of April 1919 was, in its way, a classic example of the dialectical synthesis - the mutual interaction - of the Labour movement's methods of struggle with the cause of Irish self-determination. It was not accidental that it should be a spontaneous initiative of the workers of Limerick. The city was known both for its recent nationalist acts and for its workers' syndicalism.

As long ago as 1899, Limerick had elected a local Labour Party, under the Republican, John Daly, to a majority on its corporation, though disillusion with what had become another constitutional nationalist front had contributed to the achievement being eclipsed by the notorious anti-Jewish boycott of 1904. In 1916, Limerick's Bishop Edward O'Dwyer had been, greatly to everyone's surprise, the member of

the Catholic hierarchy who had condemned the British executions of the Easter Rising leaders. In January 1918, its Mayor, Stephen Quin, had accepted a British Knighthood causing him to be replaced within a month by a Sinn Féin mayor, Alphonsus O'Mara of the bacon-curing firm, Donnelly's. O'Mara was re-elected the next year. This was at a time when the municipal councils of Ireland were still those elected in the years up to 1915 and were dominated by councillors who had been supporters in one way or another of constitutional nationalism. Then at the general election of December 1918, Michael Collivet was returned unopposed for Sinn Féin.

This nationalism had to affect the city's United Trades and Labour Council. At the same time that body was affected by the working-class's other contemporary revolutionary current: syndicalism. This had been slow to appear. Unlike other major Irish cities, Limerick got no I.T.G.W.U. branch until July 1917. Even then, half the trade council's affiliated membership was in non-syndicalist British based unions. Yet Syndicalist militancy affected all. The council chairman, Sean Cronin of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters

had been very critical of the influence of the 'Dublin Socialists' in his movement. By April 1918, he was hailing the general strike as evidence that his class 'really ruled Ireland'.

This had a narrower side. In November 1918, the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress amended its constitution to allow for some form of political intervention on its side by individuals outside the unions. The Trades Council of Limerick, along with those of Cork and Waterford, led the opposition to this breach of syndicalist principle.

This militancy was increased by the fact that the expansion of the I.T.G.W.U. caused a clash between the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland and the 600 employees at its plant at Lansdowne. The workers in all the concerns managed by the Cleeve family combine that ran the Condensed Milk Company sent delegates in April 1919 to form a Munster Council of Action which threatened strike action for better conditions in the Condensed Milk Company's factories. The Company retaliated with a policy of 'divide and rule'. First of all, it awarded a 48-hour week at a wage of 11/4d per hour (45/- per week) to its 600 workers at Lansdowne (where it had its

headquarters). At the same time, it sacked the factory's I.T.G.W.U. shop steward.

While this proceeded, events were occurring which led to the clash which would show how the traditions of nationalism and syndicalism affected the Limerick United Trades Union and Labour Council's response to a concrete instance of military repression.

The Limerick Soviet Begins

On Sunday, 6th April 1919, the Co. Limerick Volunteers went into action. Their mission was to rescue one of their number, Robert J. (Bertie) Byrne.

Byrne was a prominent trade unionist, a member of the trades council, who had lost his job as a telegraph operator for his part in organising his colleagues in his union and (officially) for attending John Daly's funeral without leave. On 21st January 1919, he was victimized further, this time for his Republican views. A British Army court martial found him guilty of possessing a pistol. On 1st. February 35 unions affiliated to the Limerick United Trades and Labour Council passed a motion of protest against the

treatment of the political prisoners and the inactivity of the visiting justices and of the medical officer. The motion called on the local deputies and councillors to ensure the prisoners political status.

None of this had any result. On 3rd February, Byrne was sentenced to 12 months imprisonment with hard labour. As the senior officer of the Volunteers imprisoned there he began a campaign for political status.



Robert (Bobby) Byrne

At last, the prisoners wrecked their cells and destroyed the fittings. In retaliation, the warders beat them, removed their boots and clothing and handcuffed their leaders day and night, on a bread and water diet, in solitary confinement. The prisoners went on hunger strike. Byrne's condition became such that, on 12th March, he was transferred, under

police guard, to Limerick Workhouse Hospital (now St. Camillus).

It was here, at 6 pm., on 6th April, that his volunteer comrades tried to rescue him. They failed. A constable was shot dead, a second was wounded mortally, and Byrne himself was taken away by the rescue party, but he had been injured fatally in the struggle. His dead body was found and carried to Limerick Cathedral to lie in state there. The Limerick Board of Guardians paid tribute to him as having been "a self-effacing patriot".

The government of the United Kingdom could not accept such a statement without acting against it. Limerick city was proclaimed a "special military area" under the control of the British Army. At Byrne's funeral, the route of the procession was lined by British troops with fixed bayonets; the procession itself was passed by parading armoured cars while military aeroplanes flew overhead. Two of Byrne's cousins were arrested and charged with murdering the constables, but the military controllers of the area doubted their ability to prove the case and both were released subsequently. Republicanism had to be suppressed,

somehow, in a city that was, in many ways, the most rebellious in Ireland.

So, on Friday 11th April, a large area in and around the Borough of Limerick was declared to be under martial law as from the following Tuesday. The area proclaimed included all the city, save the part of it north of the River Shannon, with the townlands of Killalee, Monamuck, Park and Spittleland and those parts of the townlands of Reboge (Rhebogue) and Singland that lay to the west of the railway line from Limerick to Ennis. The Shannon was the north-western boundary of the military area because the British Army was short of manpower. The bulk of its strength was composed of conscripts who were unlikely to accept a longer draft to keep order in Ireland. To avoid what would have been a ragged cordon there the command opted for two sentry posts at the Shannon bridges.

The Workhouse Hospital where the shooting had occurred was outside the boundary, as were several factories including the condensed milk factory. Anyone who wished to enter this area could do so only if they carried permits, bearing their photographs and signatures, that were issued by the British military on

the recommendation of the Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C.). No exception was to be made for workers commuting to and from jobs that were often outside the proclaimed area. This fact was to be declared by Sean Cronin, the Chairman of the United Trades and Labour Council, to be the decisive cause for the events that were about to begin.

On Saturday 12th April, the workers in the Condensed Milk Company's Lansdowne Factory, most of whom would be affected by the permit order, struck work in protest against it. This initiative has been credited to Sinn Féin members amongst the workers (Cahill, 1991) and alternatively, to Connolly's comrade, the administrator of future workplace seizures, Sean Dowling, I.T.G.W.U. organiser for the area (C. Desmond Greaves, 1982). Both accounts may be right; political strikes were in the air after the Russian revolution. What is certain is that neither the national leadership of Sinn Féin nor that of the I.T.G.W.U. (or, indeed, the Labour Party and T.U.C.) played any role in inspiring it. The union leaders were unenthusiastic about political strikes. Sinn Féin was unenthusiastic about any strike.

It was the unions that represented most of the Lansdowne workers- the I.T.G.W.U. and the Irish Clerical & Allied Workers Union - that were most vehement the next day, when the United Trades & Labour Council held a special meeting on the issue at the Mechanics Institute. After an argument that lasted over two sessions (some feared a possible food shortage would result from the decision), it was resolved at 11.30 p.m. to call a General Strike for the city as from 5 a.m., Monday 14th. of April, until the ending of martial law.

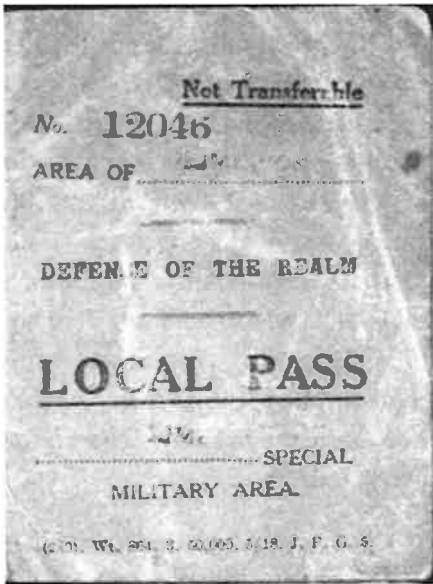
At a mass meeting to proclaim this decision, Cronin threatened, also, to call out the railwaymen. He stated that only the 48 hours they needed to get permission from their Executive in London prevented him from doing so immediately. In fact, they had given notice to their Executive in London that they would strike from Wednesday 16th April, if it gave permission.

The United Trades & Labour Council transformed itself into the Strike Committee; Cronin, as its Chairman, remained at its head in its new form. Immediately, it took over a printing press in Cornmarket Row, prepared placards explaining the strike, and had them posted all over Limerick.

This was the first of many publications during the next fortnight: permits, proclamations, food price lists and a Strike Bulletin. Besides the propaganda, the Committee detailed skeleton staffs to maintain gas, electricity and water supplies.

The Strike is Organised

The strike had an immediate success.



Despite the suddenness of the decision, it was executed by 15,000 organised workers. On Monday the 14th all that was operating were the public utilities under their skeleton staffs some carriers with permits from the Strike Committee to carry journalists to interview it, the banks,

the hotels, all government business (including the inquest on Robert Byrne), the Post Office (albeit for the sale of stamps only), and the railways (though the engineers struck work the next day). These last would become a major issue for the stoppage.

The next day, the Unionist *Irish Times* described the strike as a 'Soviet', though the American journalist, Ruth Russell, describes Cronin himself having admitted proudly to the name. Certainly, nobody challenged it at the time.

But what did this mean? Quite simply, the Trades Council/Strike Committee had local sovereignty over Limerick during the Soviet's fortnight. The City Council was irrelevant and the local bourgeoisie accepted it. The petty bourgeoisie, the small shop keepers, participated in the strike readily enough. The Committee's Chairman, Cronin, was careful not to develop his aims beyond the immediate struggle to remove the Military Permit Order.

As in the strike against conscription the cause was an ideal/right (in this case people's and especially worker's freedom of movement) over and above the national issue. Further, the

military alienated the larger capitalists. General Christopher J Griffin, the British Officer in command of the area, vetoed Messrs Cleeve's offer that it take, hold and distribute permits on behalf of its workers. On the 14th the whole Limerick Chamber of Commerce sent to Andrew Bonar Law (the British Unionist leader and acting Prime Minister), to Viscount French, the Lord Lieutenant and to Griffin, a statement condemning the permit system. Sinn Fein had to back the strike and Mayor O'Mara refused to leave the proclaimed area for his home, preferring to stay in a hotel through the stoppage.

Naturally, and in view of the apparent class collaboration; the Unionist press regarded the Soviet as no more than a front for Sinn Féin. The point is that the authority exercised during the two weeks of the Limerick Soviet was not that of the bourgeois city council, such as Sinn Féin had always placed at the centre of its strategies, but that of the local trades council, a working-class body. Of course, the I.T.G.W.U. had connections with Sinn Féin, and the union was one of the prime movers in the strike, nonetheless, full subservience to Sinn Féin would have

meant continuing work. The Limerick Soviet remained a working class strategy; executed by a conscious, if undeveloped, labour movement. Sinn Féin, conceived from the start as a capitalist body, could not have directed it.

The one member of the Strike Committee not of the working class was the farmer, Michael Brennan, Commandant of the East Clare Brigade of the Irish Volunteers. He was co-opted so that the Soviet could have not only its own pickets but a body of armed men in reserve. That this was only a contingency is shown by the fact that Brennan was the choice. There was too much rivalry between the Limerick brigades for them to allow any nominee from one of them to be their sole representative; rather than have one from each, the outsider, Brennan was appointed.

The Committee had soon to escalate the struggle. The threatened food shortage began to appear on the first day. Accordingly, the Committee ordered the rationing of hotel meals. In the evening, it granted permits (to be enforced by picket) for shops to sell bread, milk and potatoes from 2 to 5 p.m., as from the next day, and

for the bakeries to maintain production.

On 15th April, it allowed the butchers and on Wednesday 16th April, the coal merchants to open similarly. The immediate results made it clear that more organisation was needed: fearing shortages, the customers at the open shops staged buying sprees. By the end of April 15th, the shops selling potatoes in the poorer parts of Limerick had to close down. After their experience the next day, the six largest coal merchants refused to re-open for the rest of the fortnight of the Soviet, though the Strike Committee commandeered some of their coal.

To avoid a food shortage, the Strike Committee established a subordinate body of four city councillors with control over the local volunteers to organise the supply of food to Limerick. It opened a food depot on the north bank of the River Shannon to take supplies (mainly of milk, potatoes and butter) from the farmers of Co. Clare, whose supply organisation was run by Fr. William Kennedy of Newmarket-on-Fergus.

By the end of the first week the sub-committee was promised food from elsewhere in Ireland and from trade

unions in Britain. At night, boats with muffled oars, and by day, hearses from the Workhouse Hospital that were empty of any corpse brought the supplies into the city. A ship that had arrived in the port was given a permit that it might be unloaded of its cargo of 7,000 tons of grain. In Limerick city itself the sub-committee operated four distribution depots from which it was fixing the retail prices for its sales. It even organised the supply of hay for cart horses. Profiteers were closed down immediately. Eventually, the sub-committee had to set up its own sub-committee to deal with the different aspects of its task.

Other sub-committees under directors were established to supervise the pickets and propaganda. The first body dealt with the pickets that executed police duties in the area; these included enforcing the hours of trading, the regulation of queues and the holding of permits. It enforced a ban on cars and hackney cabs that appeared on the streets without permits and without displaying the notice 'Working under Authority of the Strike Committee'.

The story is told of an officer of the United States Army who arrived in

Limerick on his way to visit relatives living near, but outside, the city. After receiving his permit, he expressed his bewilderment at "who rules in these parts. One has to get a Military Permit to get in and be brought before the Soviet to get a permit to leave".

On the more normal duties of police work, in which they supplanted the R.I.C., the pickets sub-committee's success can be measured by the fact that there was no looting and, consequently, no cases brought before Petty Sessions. Indeed, as Thomas Farren of the Dublin Trades Council and the Labour Party National Executive was to remark at the Drogheda Congress of the Irish Labour Party & Trade Union Congress in August 1919, there was not a single arrest made during the entire strike. At the end of the first week, this sub-committee, too seems to have split in two: one for permits and one for transport.

The Propaganda sub-committee was responsible for the Strike Committee's publications, most notably, its daily Worker's Bulletin. This maintained publication throughout the period of the stoppage, although, until Thursday 17th April, three out of the four local

(bourgeois) newspapers appeared, licensed by the Strike Committee.

Another sub-committee was soon established. On 18th April, Cronin announced a fund to supply the Soviet with money as it was to need cash both for purchases from outside and to keep its circulation inside its area. A sub-committee was established to plan this fund. It was composed of competent accountants and employees in the finance departments of Limerick firms.



The carpenter, John Cronin, described by an American journalist as "The father of the baby Soviet"

The Strike gained international publicity due to one coincidental fact. Preparations were being made for a transatlantic air race, and one of the

competitors therein, Major Wood, was planning to refuel at the neighbouring Bawnmore field. Accordingly, many reporters were in the city including representatives of the Chicago Tribune, the Paris Matin, and the Associated Press of America, an agency serving 750 papers. All these reporters came under the authority of the Strike Committee. Of course, as good newspapermen, they reported the fact.

Major Wood himself feared lest his plans be jeopardised by the Soviet's control of Bawnmore's supplies. Through the ex-Lord Mayor of Limerick, Sir Stephen Quin, he asked the Committee's permission to use the landing field. This permission was granted on the understanding that he openly acknowledge it. In practice, he did not have to carry out his part of the bargain. On his way from England in his plane, he crashed in the Irish Sea.

Two Powers

By Good Friday 18th April, Dual Power (the division of Government authority) in Limerick had developed to its fullest. On the one hand there was the British state. It had brought in an extra 100 police at the time of the inquest on Robert Byrne. It had

considerable military forces including an armoured car on Sarsfield Bridge and a tank (nicknamed "Scotch and Soda"). It had the routes into the proclaimed area barred with barbed wire. At the same time, it was careful not to show any reluctance in granting the few permits that were demanded.

Against the colonial power was the full force of organised labour in Limerick, albeit with the backing of Sinn Féin. Only the largest coal merchants (with the protection of the R.I.C.) had opposed the Strike Committee and this was less out of principle than out of self-interest.

All the other sections of the community accepted the Committee's rules. The public houses were closed (and stayed so throughout the fortnight of the stoppage, thus contributing, no doubt, to the lack of crime). On the other hand, by Good Friday, the picture house was permitted to open, with its profits going to the strike fund. Bruff Quarter Sessions had to be adjourned because Limerick solicitors and court officials refused to attend. Limerick pig-buyers had absented themselves from the fairs of Nenagh and Athlone. The farmers of the neighbourhood were accepting

that, due to the closure of the Lansdowne creamery and condensed milk factory, the price of their milk had fallen to 1/-per gallon and that the Soviet was enforcing its retail at 4d per quart. According to Cronin, the British Army was affected: a Scots regiment had to be sent home hastily when it was found that its soldiers were allowing workers to pass in and out of the city without demanding their permits.

Already there had been one trial of strength between the two powers. On the 17th April, Griffin offered the terms that he had refused Messrs Cleeve to the Limerick Chamber of Commerce for its affiliated and shopkeepers in respect of customers. The Chamber (which included Francis Cleeve of the said firm) referred the terms to the Strike Committee. Griffin appealed to the citizens of Limerick as a whole, blaming "certain irresponsible individuals" for forcing him to impose the permit system on the people. The Strike Committee replied that it had no wish to take the step it had taken, but that the military authorities had given it no alternative; to prevent others suffering the permit system at a later date, it had no option but to move. Its statement was backed

independently by a number of the city clergy, headed by the Bishop, Dr Denis Hallinan, who denounced the permits order as "unwarrantable" and inconsiderate and also attacked the military's handling of Robert Byrne's funeral.

On Easter Sunday, 20th April, they maintained their position, congratulating the citizens of Limerick on their exemplary discipline. That evening Lord Mayor O'Mara organised a public meeting which passed unanimously motions demanding the ending of martial law and the surrender of all foodstuffs to the Strike Committee.

Matters could not remain thus. Either the strikers or the British had to win (any compromise would be, in practice, merely a form of victory for one of the two sides) or the whole struggle would be enveloped in an escalation that might bring Irish Labour to seek state power.

The most definite move in the last possible direction would have to be taken by the railwaymen. These had given massive support to the strike. They were refusing to handle freight for Limerick except where it was permitted by the Strike Committee itself or where it was under military

guard. It was expected that they would expend this action into a full-scale railway strike. Cronin had expected this when the strike was called, On Good Friday he expressed his hopes once again.

Meanwhile, the Strike Committee's delegates were reporting to it favourable replies to the call to spread the strike. What held them back was the inaction of the National Executive of the Irish Labour and Trade Union Congress. Partly because of its unwieldy nature, (the members were drawn from all parts of the country, its current President, Thomas Cassidy, being based in Derry nor was there any provision for a standing committee within it), partly because of the strike's ending of telecommunications with Limerick, the Executive was unable to discuss the strike immediately.

On Wednesday 16th April, its Dublin members agreed informally to send the Party & Congress Treasurer (and ideologist), Thomas Johnson, to Limerick. What was more, after two of the strikers had brought a report of the situation in the city, they summoned a meeting of the full Executive for the next day.

This meeting declared that the strike concerned the workers basic right of travel and it appealed to all workers and people of the world to support it. But it did not make any recommendations or call for broadening the strike, preferring to wait until the bulk of its membership could go to Limerick. This was the beginning of Easter weekend, the next day was Good Friday and on Easter Monday, both Cassidy and the influential Drapers Assistants Association leader, Michael O'Lehane, had meetings of their own unions.

So the Executive decided to remain inactive until Tuesday the 22nd. However, Saturday's *Voice of Labour* included a stop-press report of the Soviet with an exhortation to workers elsewhere to "be ready" to strike in sympathy. Meanwhile, tendencies were developing to weaken the stoppage.

Workers militancy increases.

On the 19th, (against the Mayor's opposition), the Resident Magistrates appealed to Griffin to extend the boundaries of the proclaimed area. On Wednesday 23rd April, the Chamber of Commerce discussed seriously whether its members

should organise scabs, as they were beginning to be hurt by the money shortage. They decided against it for the time being.

On Easter Monday the 21st, a major blow was delivered in London. H.R. Stockman, speaking on behalf of the British T.U.C. and, in particular, of those trade unions whose members were involved in the struggle, declared it to be political and instructed the said unions accordingly to refuse strike pay to those of their members that were involved.

This move was denounced the next day by Sean Cronin. He insisted that the dispute was entirely a labour question rather than that it was an elementary right to strike for democratic freedoms. At a higher political level, support from Britain was offered by the tiny British Socialist Party (later the nucleus of the Communist Party of Great Britain) and by the Independent Labour Party. Stockman himself offered subsequently to discuss the matter with the Irish Labour Party. However, his statement was supported particularly by the Executive of the National Union of Railwaymen which ordered its Irish members to avoid action unless it directed it. This was not necessarily a

course of action that was acceptable to the said members, as was shown later by its delegates at the Drogheda Congress of the Irish Labour Party and T.U.C. It did place further, isolated, onus on that body's Executive.

While the Strike Committee was attacked by local bourgeoisie and British trade union bureaucrats, it had headaches also from its rank and file. Their militancy increased steadily. Saturday, 19th April, saw an incident when a sentry had to disperse a crowd of boys.

On the following Monday, there was a more serious affair. A hurling match was held at Caherdavin, on the north bank of the Shannon, outside the area proclaimed. Many used the opportunity to "trail their coats". On returning to the city that evening, some 300 individuals refused to show their permits (or denied possession of such) at Sarsfield Bridge checkpoint. The sentries there were reinforced swiftly by 50 constables and the tank and armoured car. With remarkable discipline, the protesters paraded in a circle, stopping at the checkpoint only for each to deny possession of a permit. Later some crossed the river by boat. The majority, including Thomas Johnson,

organised a midnight concert, dance and supper at St. Munchin's Temperance Hall in nearby Thomondgate. The women stayed the night at supporters' houses, while the men slept in the Hall or in the open.

The next day, the protesters boarded a train for Limerick at Longpavement station on the Ennis line and avoided a military cordon at the city terminus by getting out at the opposite side of the platform to where the troops were waiting. The garrison was reinforced to prevent a repetition of this incident. On the 23rd shots were fired by troops at the Munster Fair Green when people avoided showing permits, but no one was hit. On the same day too, the army used their guns against a more definite, if alleged, attempted blockade breaker, but did not kill or wound him.

Another headache for the Strike Committee was the shortage of money. This was reduced by gifts supplied by outside trades councils and trade unions: the I.T.G.W.U. made up for an initial failure to send strike pay by giving £1,000 to the strike fund - not a large sum considering its claim to have 3,500 members in the city. Gifts were sent

by various sympathisers, including the G.A.A. and the Bishop, the Sinn Féiner, Dr. Michael Fogarty and the clergy of the Killaloe diocese. Nonetheless, these could help out only to limited extent. The Labour Party and T.U.C. National Executive estimated, later, that £7,000 to £8,000 per week was needed to maintain the Soviet. Only £1,500 had arrived when it ended after a fortnight.

The Finance Sub-Committee worked with Johnson to prepare designs for special bank notes to be issued on the credit of Limerick and its Strike Committee. Such notes to the total value of thousands of pounds were produced in sizes of £1, £5 and 10/-. According to John McCann, (1946) 'This money was accepted by numbers of shopkeepers upon the promise of redemption by the Trades Council. Ultimately, these notes were redeemed leaving a surplus from a fund that had been subscribed to by sympathisers in all parts of Ireland' However, other sources suggest that the strike ended before they could be put into general use. Meanwhile, the stoppage continued to gain support amongst the workers. On the 23rd, the clerks at the Union workhouse joined it.

Union Bureaucrats Move

On Easter Sunday, the 20th, two more members of the Labour Party National Executive had arrived in Limerick. That night, at the meeting called by Mayor O'Mara, Cronin offered, on behalf of the Strike Committee, to hand power to them. If he felt inadequate, part of the reason was that he knew what had to be done to win the strike and believed that the National Executive members would be able and willing to expand the struggle. He had already talked of calling out the railwaymen; now he declared that the National Executive would make Limerick the headquarters of Ireland's national and social revolution.

The other members of the National Executive arrived in Limerick over the two days, Tuesday and Wednesday, 22nd and 23rd April. On the latter date, they talked with the Strike Committee far into the evening. Cronin's hopes were dashed. The delegation stated that it had no power to call a national General Strike without the authority of a special conference of the Party and Congress. In any case, such a strike could only be for a few days as, in Thomas Farren's words, 'under the

existing state of affairs they were not prepared for the revolution'.

What the delegation proposed, instead, was at once limited and totally utopian. Johnson is reported as describing it at Drogheda thus... 'that the men and women of Limerick, who, they believed, were resolved and determined to sacrifice much for the cause they were fighting, should evacuate their city and leave it as an empty shell in the hands of the military. They had made arrangements for housing and feeding the people of Limerick if they agreed to the Executives proposition. Many of the men in Limerick with whom they consulted were in favour of that proposition. The Executive then placed it before the local committee and having argued in favour of it, left the matter in the committee's hands. They decided against it. That was the last word. The Executive did not go to Limerick to take out of the hands of the Limerick Strike Committee the conduct of their own strike'.

What this meant was quite simple. The Executive was prepared to go to any lengths to avoid confrontation with the occupying forces lest it alienate unorganised workers whose recruitment was considered

indispensable before Labour could take state power. Although Limerick was far from the size it is now, it was still Ireland's fifth largest city. For the Labour Party to organise its evacuation would have been an intolerable burden on it. At the same time, it would not have deterred the British Army, whose role in Limerick would have become more boring, but certainly simpler.

The only conceivable result of the proposal would have been to ruin Labour as quickly as the national General Strike it feared to call, without embarrassing British imperialism in the least. The limitations of the politics of pure protest have seldom been more evident. Quite correctly, the Strike Committee rejected this proposal.

Politically, if not elsewhere, nature abhors a vacuum. The left had failed to use its opportunities. Now the time was ripe for the strikers' bourgeois allies to change sides. The evacuation scheme itself had been inspired by a suggestion from Richard Mulcahy, Chief of Staff of the Volunteers, that the city's women and children be evacuated. Now his local supporters took the initiative. The day after the Executive had met the Strike Committee, the Mayor and

the Bishop of Limerick visited General Griffin.

What happened at this meeting is unknown. Subsequent events point to them having obtained what might have been considered a compromise: the Soviet should end and, if for a week after that, there was not trouble in the proclaimed area, he would withdraw the Military Permit Order.

Faced with this offer, backed as it was by the leaders of bourgeois Limerick, spiritual and temporal, deserted by the National Executive of its organisation, politically, and by now, save for Johnson, personally, the Strike Committee began to retreat.

Defeat

On the same day as the Mayor and the Bishop met the General, it declared that strike notices were withdrawn for those working within the boundary of the proclaimed area. For the others, the strike would continue. Indeed, Johnson was cheered at a meeting outside the Mechanic's Institute when he promised a special conference to discuss the strike. The next day, he called for more financial aid.

However, and especially in Thomondgate where the workers commuted to their jobs in the proclaimed area, there was considerable bitterness and copies of the proclamation limiting the strike were torn down. Many talked of a "Second Soviet", threatening to refuse permits. At Sarsfield Bridge on Saturday, 26th April, demonstrators stopped permit holders from crossing until they were themselves dispersed by the constabulary. As yet, only half the strikers had returned to work. The bacon-curing factories remained closed though this was due in a pig shortage rather than permits; they were in the proclaimed area. More significantly, the Condensed Milk Company's factory stay closed.

Hallinan and O'Mara increased their demands for the total ending of the strike. On the Sunday, in the pulpit of St. Michael's, Fr William Dwan, denounced the strike as having been called without consulting the Bishop and clergy. Even without this, the Strike Committee could not resist the pressure. The Bishop and the Mayor had at least some scheme of action (or rather, inaction) the Committee had none. On the same day as Dwan's attack, it declared the

Limerick General Strike to be at an end.

The next day, save for mills and the bacon factories, the city was back to normal. Seven days later the proclamation was withdrawn and permits to enter the area covered by them were declared unnecessary as from midnight, Sunday-Monday, 4th - 5th May. On the 10th of the same month, the Chamber of Commerce found the voice that popular feeling had forced it to suppress. It denounced the Strike Committee for not consulting it and for not giving adequate notice to the city's employers as a whole. It hinted that, had it been asked, it could have worked with the Trades Council to take (unspecified) joint action such as would have prevented the "disastrous strike". It remarked that if it had acted to lock out its members' employees without consultation, the Trades Council would have "bitterly resented it". Separately, it estimated the strike as having caused losses of £42,000 in wages, and £250,000 in turnover.

The Limerick Soviet's defeat, for such was what it was in the long run, was caused immediately by the Strike Committee's acceptance of bourgeois

leadership. However, this was itself caused by the refusal of the National Executive of the Labour Party and T.U.C. to embark on a struggle that might have caused major problems, but which could have led to the Worker's Republic.

In his speech to the Party's Drogheda Congress, Johnson was to justify this position. 'There were times when local people must take on themselves the responsibility of doing things and taking the consequences, and this, he asserted, was one of them. But when that action had been taken there must be due consideration given to any suggestion of an enormous extension of the action. They could never win a strike by downing tools against the British Army. But there was always the possibility in Ireland that aggressive action on this side might prompt aggressive action on the other side of the Channel. It was for them as an Executive to decide whether this was the moment to act in Ireland, whether there was a probability of a response in England and Scotland, and their knowledge of England and Scotland did not lead them to think that any big action in Ireland would have brought a responsive movement in those countries.

'A General Strike could have been legitimately called in Ireland on 12 occasions within the last two years. But it was not a question of justification; it was a question of strategy. Were they to take the enemy's time or were they to take their own? They knew if the railwaymen came out the soldiers would have taken on the railways the next-day. They knew if the soldiers were put on the railways, the railways would have been blown up. They knew that would have meant armed revolt. Did they as trade unionists suggest that it was for their Executive to say such action shall be taken at a particular time, knowing, assured as they were, that it would have resulted in armed revolt in Ireland? He believed that it was quite possible that it would be by the action of the Labour Movement in Ireland that insurrection would someday be developed. There might be occasion to decide on a down tools policy which would have the effect of calling out the armed forces of the Crown. But Limerick was not the occasion'.

Johnson's assumptions were shared by the vast majority of delegates present. Only D.H. O'Donnell of the Irish Clerical and Allied Worker'

Union criticised the strategy that had been followed. Two notable past and future critics of the party's line, RT. Daly, former Secretary of the National Executive, and the tailors' leader, Walter Carpenter, (later to be a founder member of the Communist Party of Ireland) hastened to declare their support for what had been done. Sean Dowling, Limerick's I.T.G.W.U. organiser, offered to second a vote of confidence in the National Executive. Cronin was not present: doubtless his old suspicions of 'Dublin Socialists' had been revived by his soviet experience and he could see no point in debating them.

Yet, with the benefit of hindsight, the assumptions that guided the leaders' strategy can be seen to be incorrect. They imply that the Limerick Soviet was a protest, and, more importantly, only to be kept as a protest. The time for more serious action was not yet (as Carpenter remarked). But when was it to be?

Johnson, the man who talked of the labour movement finding its own time was the man whose strategy had kept it from finding its own time. Now he was concurring in the I.T.G.W.U.'s obstruction of the Irish Citizen Army without which, as a bare minimum, no time would ever be

found that would be truly favourable to Irish labour. Nor had Johnson any understanding of the political handicap that the single organisation of the Irish Labour Party and T.U.C. had on the development of working-class politics. Because of the dead weight represented by the politics of thousands of raw untrained recruits who had entered the movement on an industrial basis there was a standing excuse for the movement's leadership to avoid any radical political initiative.

One man who tried to deal with this problem in the form it had taken at Limerick was MJ O'Lehane of the Irish Drapers Assistants Association. He put a motion calling for a Special Conference to give the Executive power to call and veto strikes (including general strikes), to control propaganda and to pay strikers and lock-out victims from a special levy.

Despite opposition, mainly from craft unionists and the railway unions, this motion was carried and forgotten. O'Lehane himself died early in 1920. In any case, simply giving such power to the National Executive on its present basis was not the answer to Labour's organisational problems. When the grassroots demand was strong enough, (as with

the national General Strike on behalf of the hunger-strikers the following year), the Executive would take such powers without apology. Its debility lay in the fact that it was elected by the delegates of a politically undifferentiated working-class organisation to lead initiatives that required a politically tested revolutionary party.

So, it gave support to Johnson and his colleagues in a material situation that would develop to prove them catastrophically wrong. Soon would come Tan War, Civil War, national partition and the weakening of the working class, both nationally and internationally. Even in the short run, Johnson's prophecy of the dreadful results of a national political railway strike was to be disproved by the events of the following year, when Irish railwaymen were to strike work on the munitions issue in a context far less to their advantage. Neither the Irish Labour Party nor the trade union movement - before or after its break with the former - nor indeed the Irish Communist parties have ever come to terms with this political failure.

As for Limerick itself; the after effects of the strike do not give support to the idea that the national question

got in the way of the social question. Admittedly, there was some superficial evidence of this. Following immediately on the end of the strike, Limerick had to be allowed exemption from the Irish National 'holiday' (in effect a general strike) in celebration of May Day 1919 (The only time this day has been celebrated thus in Irish history until present times). The city's workforce accepted that Limerick needed to get its economy back in order as soon as possible.

Nor did Limerick see within it such occupations of workplaces by the employees as occurred in Cork, Waterford and in various towns in Munster and elsewhere during the succeeding four years. Its Trades and Labour Council called for the ending of the Munitions Strike in 1920 before the struggle was finally ended nationally. It is also true that, when at last the Labour Party and Trade Union Congress did decide to fight a general election for the third Dail in June 1922, the Limerick United

Trades and Labour Council did not run a candidate, showing itself to be, in this matter, in line with the consistent Republicans who opposed the Articles of Agreement.

Yet this evidence is more than negated by other facts. Certainly, the Limerick workers were by no means backward in the industrial struggles during the remaining period of the War of Independence and Civil War. Its Trade Council's defeatist moves came only a week before the rest of the country, after a six and a half month fight in which the city had suffered more than any comparable one in the country. Even more significant than the tactical withdrawal of the Limerick workers from the May Day holiday was the fact that, when the Condensed Milk Company's Lansdowne employees resumed work, their shop steward continued amongst them without trouble, his dismissal forgotten by the company.

That the factory was not occupied in May 1922, like the other plants of the Condensed Milk Company was due to the fact that its workers had been on strike for a month before the issue of the dismissal notices that provoked the occupations and that Limerick was garrisoned by the new National (Saorstat) Army which protected the company's property more determinedly than did the Anti-Treaty Forces, elsewhere. The city had an organised unemployment

movement and an organised tenants' movement, the latter of which organised the occupation of houses in Garryowen in 1922. The next year, too, a strike of printers resulted in Limerick in the strikers running their own *Limerick Herald*.

That the Trades Council did not contest the 1922 general election seems to be due as much to its continuing anti-parliamentary syndicalism (and the stimulus to this by the spontaneous social struggles of the time) as to any Anti-Treatyite influence. In 1923, when the workers' class struggles as well as the national struggle were being defeated, the council ran candidates for the twenty-six county Dail.

Even though Limerick city and county were not soon again to play the pre-eminent role played by the city in April 1919, this was only because they were surpassed, particularly, in the sphere of class struggle by counties Cork and Tipperary, who were also republican hotbeds. Limerick does not need to apologise for its Soviet. It was the leadership of the working-class movement that betrayed it (albeit buttressed by the contemporary form of party organisation). This ensured that the Limerick Soviet would not have the

place in Irish history that its opposite number in Petrograd had in Russian history. Limerick's fusion of syndicalism and nationalism came to embarrass trade unionists and nationalists alike.

Save for a couple of isolated ceremonies the city's Soviet was buried from memory more completely than the workplace occupations of the period.

Between 1920 and the fiftieth anniversary in 1969 only one chapter in each of two books, (Seán McCann's *War by the Irish* and the symposium,

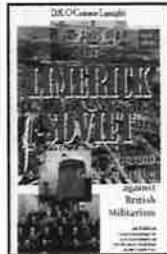
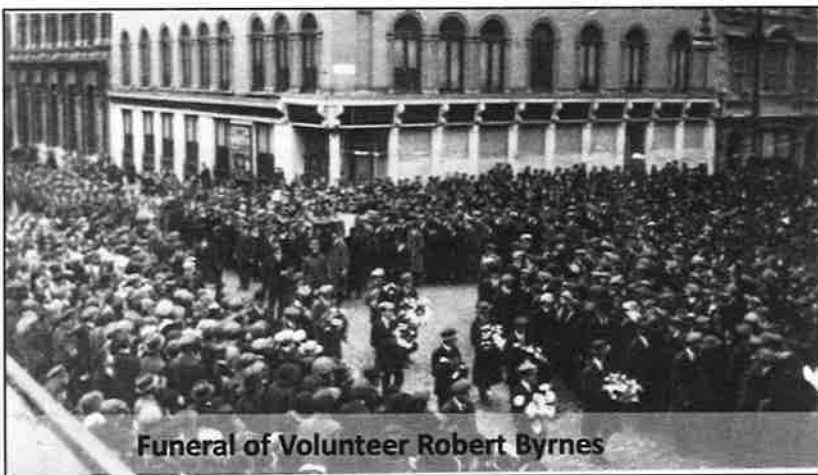
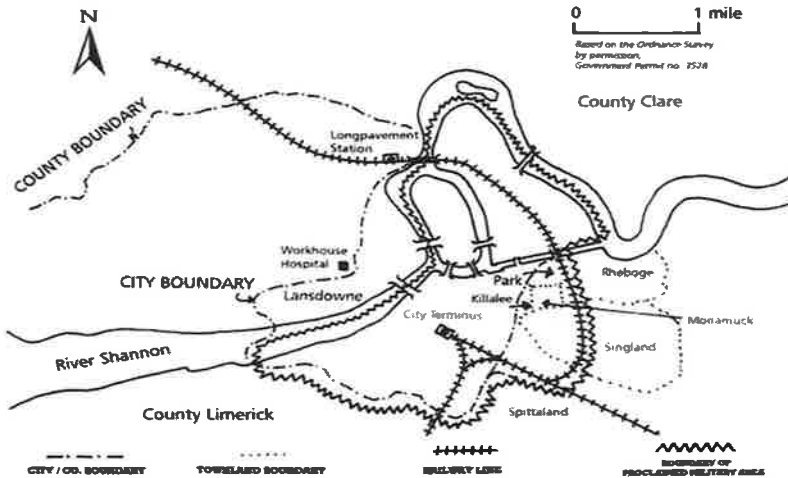
Limerick's Fighting Story), gave it any sort of detailed treatment – and the second edition of the latter cut out the chapter all together but restored to the third edition, published only in the last decade.

Since 1969, matters have been different. As outlined elsewhere in this edition the Limerick Soviet anniversaries have increasingly become occasions for celebration in the city. That is only just; for two short weeks, Limerick had shown Ireland the vision of the Workers' Republic.



Limerick United Trades and Labour Council 1919

LIMERICK CITY AND THE MILITARY AREA April - May 1919



The covers of the first five editions of this pamphlet by D.R. O'Connor Lysaght

POSTSCRIPT TO THE CENTENNIAL EDITION.

A century after the Limerick Soviet, it is still possible to meet people who have never heard of it. They will know about such relatively small contemporary anti-imperialist acts, as the Soloheadbeg ambush and the Knocklong rescue, that involved less than a dozen.

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, there is the fact that, as shown in this pamphlet, the leadership of the Labour movement downplayed the event which came too close to exposing the bankruptcy of their strategy in the troubles after 1916. Secondly, there is a similar and even more potent fear among the movement's capitalist enemies. C. Desmond Greaves maintained that his life of Liam Mellows was rather less acclaimed than his life of Connolly because, unlike the other, it was about nationalism rather than socialism. In fact, the bourgeoisie can live very comfortably with past nationalist upsurges, particularly ones that gave them state power. What bugged that class about Greaves' study of Mellows was that it showed that there could be a connection between the nationalist struggle and that of the workers,

though Greaves was unable to explain it. To reveal this connection could expose the bourgeois imperialist hegemony over Ireland to co-ordinated attack on two fronts, rather than separate and often half-hearted ones.

The Limerick Soviet was the high point of the process in which Ireland's national struggle merged with the class militancy of the working people. There were other working class-based interventions during the subsequent year, including a general strike in April 1920, but these were initiated reluctantly by the Labour leadership at the demand of its rank and file and would be ended by it as soon as seemed practical.

As has been noted in the main text, once bourgeois democracy had established itself, the general response to the fact of the Limerick soviet was to ignore it. There were occasional mentions in left wing publications of the workplace occupations at Knocklong and Arigna, but none of the working people of an whole city taking civic power. Only after fifty years, when the late Jim Kemmy and the present writer with vital support from Pat O'Connor and the Limerick Young Socialists (later Socialist

Democracy) began to rediscover it that the event came to the fore.

Even so, in mainstream (bourgeois) history, its significance tends to be presented as to diminish it, to present it as a minor event, rather than as the biggest act of Irish resistance in 1919. That history writing is indeed class biased, was shown when a distinguished Professor visited the Irish Labour History Society and urged its members to limit their studies to the history of 'work' and ignore living conditions and, above all, class struggle. Only today, 5 January 2019, the *Irish Times* published an article on this year's centenaries ignoring Limerick's contribution completely.

The Soviet's dismissal within the Labour Movement is less straightforward. In the otherwise excellent DVD, *The Limerick Soviet*, two prominent local trade unionists gave their views on the failure of Labour's national leadership to extend the struggle. The late Frank Prendergast said that there was not time to call a special conference of the movement to agree to a general strike. Mike McNamara said that the Labour leaders feared to alienate the trade unionists of industrial Belfast. The first statement is simply inaccurate; the

movement had no problem calling a conference at short notice to organize a national general strike against partition. Mike McNamara may have isolated one aspect of the leader's refusal to act, but it was not the overall excuse given by them. Insisting that the timing was wrong for spreading the struggle, subsequent history shows that they did not believe that the timing would ever be right. They were as committed as Sinn Fein to limiting their national intervention to eventual participation in the capitalist democratic parliament, Dail Eireann.

So, once revealed, the impetus to commemorate the Limerick Soviet has come from the working people of that city. Over the years since 1969, there have been many moves to bring to public attention both the strike and Robert Byrne, whose death was its catalyst. The centenary of the event enables it to be publicized on a broader scale than ever before. In 2016, the people of Ireland took control of the Rising celebrations from the hands of the Government and its friends. For the Limerick event the working people do not have to take control. They have that control already. It is just a matter of using and expanding it.

TUESDAY, APRIL 22, 1919

IRISH TO ISSUE MONEY.

Limerick Notes to be Secured in Part by Food Supplies.

LIMERICK, April 21. (Associated Press.)—The general strike here, incident to the proclamation of Limerick as a military area, assumed a new phase today when the Finance Commission of the Limerick Trades and Labor Council announced that it was preparing to issue its own money in the form of 1-shilling and 10-shilling notes, which would be used in the purchase of food for the 14,000 strikers.

The money is called "Strike Treasury notes," and is secured by the stock of food which it is proposed to purchase with the financial gifts reaching Limerick from other parts of Ireland and by the "integrity of the workers of Limerick."

The announcement of the new financial scheme was made by Tom Johnson, Treasurer of the Irish Labor Congress, who announced also that the Food Commission of the Labor Council had arranged for supplies for the city. This food will be assembled in the warehouses in Limerick and sold to merchants, who will distribute it under the direction of the labor council at fixed prices which do not permit of profiteering.

The notes are printed in different colors to show their denominations. Those of 10 shillings are inscribed as follows:

General strike against British militarism April, 1919. The Limerick Trades and Labor Council promise to pay bearer ten shillings.

LIMERICK TRADES AND LABOR COUNCIL.

Chairman
Treasurer.

The total amount of the issue has not yet been determined, but the printing presses are already at work.

The military forces were especially watchful during the night and it is said that reinforcements have arrived.

Strikers Barred for Lack of Passes.

LONDON, April 21.—Five hundred strikers at Limerick, who attempted to re-enter the town this evening after attending a hurling match in the suburbs, were stopped by troops because they did not have military passes, says the Limerick correspondent of The Daily Mail.

The men did not need passes in leaving the town, but under the regulations nobody may re-enter without them, and as the men refused to apply for passes, they were not allowed to cross the bridge over which they sought to return to Limerick.

2014 Bus Tour to the scenes of Bobby Byrnes arrest, imprisonment and death.



—THE—
Workers' Bulletin.



No. 17.

April 8th, 1919.

One Penny.

THE NEW ERA.

DISGUISE it as they may, the Capitalistic Press must admit the fact that the new era is upon them. The old order—the order of repression, starvation and force—is on the brink of the precipice, and no power on earth can prevent it toppling over. For centuries that bad old order has been held up to us as the key-stone of civilisation; we have been admonished not to kill the goose that lay the golden egg, not to resist the law or kill initiative. To-day we are warned that the interests of Capital and Labour are bound up, one with the other, and that we cannot destroy one without destroying the other. To the unthinking these meaningless phrases may be convincing but if we have learaed anything we must have learned by now that the present system—no matter what name we call it by—is a system of greed and oppression, the destruction of the masses, and the setting up of the classes on a pedestal. Capital is not capitalism—hand, machinery, buildings, food-stuffs—these are capital and must not be destroyed. What the workers want is to release these things that constitute capital and real wealth from the clutches of the base profiteers and financial gamblers who exploit them for their own agrandisement to the detriment of humanity as a whole, and put them at the disposal of the nation to enrich the whole people and enable the humblest to live the life that God ordained every one of His creatures should live. To end the present system of monopoly, therefore, and replace it by a system of national ownership and democratic control, is not only essential in the highest interests of the working classes, but is inevitable if the real property of the nation is to be saved from deterioration consequent on misuse.

Speeding up, greater production, better facilities for the investment of capital under the present system of control, means for the capitalist enhanced profits, for the workers less employment and more hunger. Every machine that saves labour should be introduced, and every appliance that lessens toil enhances labour-power and makes for better results, should be employed in industry. But the advantages that science and human ingenuity places at the disposal of industry should be utilised in the interests of the community—that is, in the interest of the operatives, and not as a get-rich quick devise for the privileged few. Some weeks ago we saw on the quays of Limerick a new appliance for the discharge of coal from the coal-boat. But from enquiries made on the spot we learned that the effect of this time-saving machinery will be that very many quay-workers will henceforth be unemployed, and that as a consequence the spectre of hunger will haunt the fire-side of their wives and

The Story of the Limerick Soviet by D.R. O'Connor Lysaght

For info on this publication Tel: Joe Harrington at 00 353 (0) 87 285 3570 or write to Mary O'Donnell, 30 East Singland Road, Garryowen, Limerick.



In 1999, in Joe Harrington's mayoralty, the 70th anniversary was commemorated on a plaque on Thomond Bridge.



Mike Finn reads the Soviet's Proclamation during a commemoration event



In 2009 Mayor John Gilligan declared open the Robert Byrne Memorial Park on Clancy Strand.



Sean Dowling,
Limerick I.T.G.W.U.
organiser



British Troops outside King John's castle during Limerick Soviet



Limerick Soviet

"For never but by workers' hands will workers' wrongs be righted"

James Connolly

The Pat O'Connor Memorial Banner

"Limerick Soviet anniversaries have increasingly become occasions for celebration in the city. That is only just. For two short weeks, Limerick had shown Ireland the vision of the Workers' Republic".

D.R. O'Connor Lysaght