

# The story of the Limerick soviet, 1919 - D.R. O'Connor Lysaght



The story of the Limerick soviet and general strike, April 1919 by D.R. O'Connor Lysaght, written in 1979.

## Introduction

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 judgement of contemporary news. The first Dail and Soloheadbeg were, in their time, isolated incidents in a period that was more notable for industrial unrest. The Belfast engineering strike began within days of those two nationalist events and, before the end of the month, Peadar O'Donnell was leading the Soviet occupation of Monaghan Asylum. These were just the outstanding stoppages.

That such events have been downgraded in favour of the then less frequent acts of the national struggle is not altogether mistaken, however. 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 IT&GWU or in the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress. The refusal of these bodies to seek to take the consistent lead of the War of Independence from the Dail enabled the latter to dominate what had to be 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 In this position, it won many from the economic struggle as the national struggle that it led had superseded the economic issues in intensity by 1920.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 leaders' justification for their inaction - the need to maintain trade union movement unity, which was then at one with Labour's political party in the Syndicalist manner - betrayed itself in the end with the Larkin split.

Although the Irish Labour leadership did not try to take the lead in the independence struggle, it did, on several specific aspects of it, intervene to advance it by means - the strike weapon - that it alone could command at this time. On five occasions between April 1918 and December 1920, the strike was used to assert democratic rights that were being endangered by the actions of Ireland's imperial occupiers. Three of these were called as the result of spontaneous rank and file action rather than of the initiative of Labour's National Executive. Each of the five, save the Motor Permits Strike of the winter of 1919-1920 and the final one - the Munitions of War Strike of 1920 - tended to strengthen rather than weaken the Labour movement as a whole. Of the exceptions, (both examples of spontaneous rather than centrally-planned initiatives), the first was marred by inter-union squabbling

and the other came at a time when the Labour leadership's lack of a perspective on the national question was utterly inadequate as an opposition to the Black and Tans.

The remaining example of rank and file working-class initiative 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 handi-cap 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 noted both for its recent nationalist acts, and for its workers' syndicalism.

As far as nationalism went, it had been, of course, Limerick's Bishop O'Dwyer who had, greatly to everyone's surprise, been the member of the Catholic hierarchy who had condemned the British executions of the Easter Rising leaders. In January 1918, its Mayor, Stephen Quinn, had accepted a British knighthood and had, accordingly, been 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 1914 and were dominated by councillors who had been supporters in one way or another of the Parliamentary party, or at least its strategy.

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, (i.e. the idea that one big union was all that was needed as a weapon to achieve socialism). In November 1918, the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress had 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, had led the opposition to this breach of syndicalist principle.

This current was reinforced by the recent growth of the IT&GWU in the city and its militancy was increased by the fact that this expansion had produced a clash between the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland and its 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 1/4d 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 IT&GWU 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.

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### 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. 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. On 21st January, he was victimised further, this time for his Republican views. A British Army court martial sentenced him to 12 months' imprisonment with hard labour for possession of a revolver and ammunition without authority. In Limerick jail, he was treated as an ordinary convict. As the Senior Officer of the Volunteers imprisoned there, he led them in an agitation to obtain political status. This was backed by the 35 unions affiliated to the Limerick United Trades and Labour Council. On 1st February, it 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 political status for the prisoners.

None of this had any result. The political prisoners' actual status came to be noted for its lack of the benefits enjoyed by ordinary prisoners. At last, they 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 own condition became such that, on 12th March, he was transferred, under police guard, to Limerick Workhouse Hospital (now St. Camillus's).

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. (In fact, both of them were released subsequently). Republic-anism had to be suppressed, somehow, in a city that was in so 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 that part of it north of the River Shannon, with the townlands of Killalee, Monamuck, Park and Spittleland and those parts of the town-lands of Rhebogue and Singland that lay to the west of the GS&WR line from Limerick to Ennis. The Workhouse Hospital where the shoot-ing had occurred was outside the boundary. 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 RIC. No exception was to be made for workers commuting to and from their 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.

It was the unions that represented most of these workers the - IT&GWU 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 pm to call a General Strike for the city as from 5 am, Monday 14th April, until the ending of martial law.

At a mass meeting to proclaim this decision, Cronin threatened, also, to call out the railwaymen stating 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 staff, 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 and the Post Office, albeit for the sale of stamps only), and the railways (though the engineers struck work the next day).

As yet, this triumph had support beyond its class nature. The petty bourgeoisie, the small shopkeepers, participated readily enough in the strike. Further, the military alienated the larger capitalists. General Griffin, the British Officer in command of the area, vetoed Messrs. Cleeves' 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 Féin backed the strike and Mayor O'Mara refused to leave the proclaimed area for his home, preferring to stay in an hotel through the stoppage.

Naturally, and in view of the apparent class collaboration, the Unionist press regarded the strike 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, however ineffective it would prove in the long run. The council's Chairman, Cronin, was careful not to develop his aims beyond the immediate struggle to remove the Military Permit Order. As previously, with the Irish national General Strike against conscription of April 1918, the cause was an ideal/right (in this case people's, and especially workers', freedom of movement) over and above the national issue. Of course, the IT&GWU 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 remains 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 Strike 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 pm, 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 6 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. Kennedy of Ennis. 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 of 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 RIC, 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 Workers' Bulletin. This maintained publication throughout the period of the stoppage, although, until Thursday 17th April, three out of the four local (bourgeois) newspapers appeared, licenced 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 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. As good newspapermen, they reported the fact.

Major Wood himself, feared lest his plans be jeopardised by the Soviet's control of Bawn-more's supplies. Through the ex-Lord Mayor of Limerick, Sir Stephen Quinn, 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, 13th April, Dual Power in Limerick had developed to its fullest. On the one hand, there was the British Army. 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 active backing of Sinn Féin. Only the largest coal merchants (with the protection of the RIC) 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 Strike 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 affiliates and shop-keepers in respect of customers. The Chamber (which included Francis Cleeve of the said firm) referred the terms to the Strike Committee. He 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 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 had refused 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 expand 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 Party 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, was 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, 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 appeal-ed to all workers and people of the world to support it. But it did not make any recommend-ations 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 Union leader, 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 along with an exhortation to workers elsewhere to 'be ready' to strike in sympathy. Meanwhile, tendencies were developing to weaken the strike.

#### Workers' Militancy Increases

On the 19th, the Resident Magistrates (against the Mayor's opposition) 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 scab, as they were beginning to be hurt by the money shortage. They decided against for the time being.

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

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 TUC. It did place further, isolated, onus on that body's Executive.

While the Strike Committee was attacked by local bourgeoisie and by British trade union bureaucrats, it had headaches, also, from its rank and file. Their militancy increased steadily. On Saturday, 19th April, there was an incident when a sentry had to disperse a crowd of boys. On the following Monday, there was a more serious affair. An Easter 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 check-point. 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 check-point only for each to deny possession of a permit. Later some crossed the river by boat. Some stayed the night with sympathisers in the surrounding Thomondgate area. The majority, who were joined by Thomas Johnson, organised a midnight concert, dance and supper at a nearby temperance hall, and slept there or camped out. The next day, they boarded a train for Limerick at Longpavement station 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. The next day 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 would 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 ITGWU 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 GAA and the Bishop and clergy of the Killaloe diocese. Nonetheless, these could help out only to a limited extent. The Labour Party and TUC 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, 'this money was accepted by numbers of shop-keepers 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'. Other sources, however, suggest that the strike ended before they could be put into general use.

Meanwhile, the strike continued to gain support amongst the workers. On the 23rd, the clerks at the Union workhouse joined it.

#### Union Bureaucrats Make Their Move

On Easter Sunday, the 20th, two more members of the Labour Party National Executive arrived in Limerick. That night at the meeting called by Lord 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 rail-waymen; 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 pre-pared for the revolution'.

What the delegation proposed, instead, was at once limited and totally utopian. Johnson described 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 Executive's 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 a confrontation with the occupying forces. 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 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 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 no 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 Mechanics' 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 to a pig shortage rather than to permits: they were in the proclaimed area. More significantly, the Condensed Milk Company's factory had to stay closed. Hallinan and O'Mara increased their demands for the total ending of the strike. On the Sunday, Father William Dwane, a priest who may not have signed the Bishop's circular letter, denounced the strike from the pulpit of St. Michael's, 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 Dwane'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 TUC to embark on a struggle that might have caused major problems, but which could have led to the Workers' 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 line 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 some day 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 DH O'Donnell of the Irish Clerical and Allied Workers' Union criticised the strategy that had been followed. Two notable past and future critics of the party's line, PT Daly, former Secretary of the National Executive, and Walter Carpenter of the International Tailoring Machinists and Pressers Union, (later to be a founder member of the Communist Party of Ireland) hastened to declare their support for what had been done. The militant ITGWU organiser in the Limerick area, Sean Dowling, offered to second a vote of confidence in the National Executive.

Yet, with the benefit of hindsight, the assumptions that guided this 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 who was concurring in the ITGWU'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 TUC 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'Lahane 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 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 do jobs that required a politically tested revolutionary party.

It thus 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 recently). 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 Dáil 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 6 1/2 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 shopsteward continued amongst them with-out 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

(Saorstát) 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' social struggles as well as the national struggle were being defeated, the council ran candidates for the twenty-six county Dail.

Above all, even though Limerick city and county was not soon again to play the pre-eminent role played by the city in April 1919, this was only because it was 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 St. Petersburg has had in the history of Russia. Even so, for two short weeks, the city had shown Ireland the vision of the Workers' Republic.

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The sources of this work are the contemporary newspapers, the William O'Brien papers in the National Library, the minutes of the 25th Annual Congress of the Irish Labour Party and TUC and John McCann's account in 'War by the Irish' (Kerryman).

This pamphlet is based on the text of a paper delivered by D.R. O'Connor Lysaght at a public meeting held in the Mechanics' Institute in Limerick on 27th September 1979.

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Further Reading;

If you wish to read more on the Limerick Soviet, here is suggested further reading:

Liam Cahill, *Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet 1919*, O'Brien Press, 1990