

The Belfast police mutiny of 1907 - John Gray



A history of the mutiny of 70% of the Belfast police force during a dockers' strike which brought together Catholic and Protestant workers in struggle.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This article is just an extract from a longer work on the 1907 Dock Strike in Belfast. This unearthing of the Labour history of Northern Ireland is not a purely academic exercise. History, or rather mythologies of history, remain a potent force in Irish politics, and yet the real traditions, the real record of class struggle particularly in the North has been ignored or conveniently buried by bourgeois historians. In published works the 1907 Dock Strike, the first attempt by the unskilled industrial workers of Ireland to organise and fight, rates a few paragraphs, the police mutiny a few sentences. No published work covers the 1919 General Strike, and the unemployment riots of 1934 again rate no more than a few paragraphs.

There is in fact an almost total lack of published work on any aspect of Ulster's modern history. This owes something to the priorities of historians at Queen's University Belfast, who live in an atmosphere something akin to that at the British Embassy in Uruguay, and when they do concern themselves with Irish history they rarely advance beyond the tasteful days of Grattan's Parliament. Southern historians have equally neglected Northern history, imbued with middle class nationalist outlook, they have no interest in the labour movement, perhaps consequently view Northern Ireland as an incomprehensible problem, and anyway find rich pickings detailing the activities of "national" leaders and movements.

The troubles of the past three years have led to a spate of new works purporting to put the Northern problem in its historical context. Given the dearth of accurate material provided by academic historians, given that the authors of this new spate of largely journalistic works have failed to do any basic research themselves, it is little wonder that they have adopted the view that the problems of the North are to be viewed as community or sectarian conflict pure and simple. Thus Andrew Boyd writes in the introduction to "Holy War In Belfast", a work rushed out to take advantage of the riot market, "the long-standing hostility between the two communities has erupted, generation after generation, in violent sectarian riots on the streets of Belfast". He goes on to claim, "Holy War in Belfast probes to the roots and origins of these riots and traces the first outbreaks back to the 1830's". The book is certainly the first

that even bothered to cull government reports and describe the actual riots. There is however no attempt to explain why Belfast's record for religious tolerance in the early 19th century deteriorated into sectarian rioting in the mid-nineteenth century. Consequently for Andrew Boyd and other historians like him history is made by individual bigots who just happened to turn up on the stage of history at a particular moment, and riots are caused by the Joe Bloggs of this world who just happen to turn up drunk with a stone in hand on a particular day. The whole social background to the events is ignored, the terrific pressures on the impoverished agrarian refugees who flocked into Belfast, a new industrial slum, are ignored, the connection between community conflict and class conflict is ignored.

At a more crass level we descend to Patrick Riddell, columnist in the "Sunday News", and author of "Fire Over Ulster". If nothing else, his book accurately reflects the kind of ill-informed prejudice which constitutes "knowledge of history" by many Ulster people. Here the tale of community conflict goes further than the mere recital of events looked at through blinkers, the whole situation is viewed in almost racial terms. Northern Protestants and Southern Catholics are both capable of being brutal, but some are more brutal than others. Thus "the Ulstermen defended their state fiercely but they have never in something like 200 years, perhaps not since the 17th century, shown such ferocity as the Southern Irish displayed when they fought their appalling civil war. Ulstermen will strike back but they are rarely cruel and they have to be seriously provoked before they strike back at all" (p.34), and "The Protestant Ulstermen had not descended to such depths of behaviour, such extremes of savagery, as to blow their opponents to pieces with landmines or throw them alive into furnaces". This was apparently an ethnic trait of the Southern Catholics.

It is true that there are a few Northern historians who have tried to deal accurately with modern history. A.T.Q. Stewart is one of these, his book "The Ulster Crisis" deals factually with Ulster's resistance to Home Rule, and in particular with the organisation of that resistance. No one can reasonably deny that in 1912 the vast majority of Protestant workers supported the UVF. But a book of this kind does not raise the question why they did so, it does not pretend to cover the experience of the Protestant industrial proletariat in the decade before, it leaves the Patrick Riddells of this world to fill in their own racial explanation, and then on that basis to glory in the resistance.

When we look at the 1907 Dock Strike and the police mutiny of the same year, this simple myth begins to evaporate. We find unskilled workers, mainly Protestant, fighting the employers, many their future leaders in the UVF, we find policemen, many Protestant, mutinying, we find the Independent Orangemen mustering hundreds of Protestant workers under a platform asking Protestants as Irishmen to play their part in the development of Ireland as a nation. To say this is not to deny the existence of community conflict in the North, those who do so bury their heads in sand, it is to say this, community conflict is an expression of acute pressures on the working-class and cannot conveniently be isolated from the question of class conflict, often indeed community conflict has been used as a deliberate safety valve to prevent class conflict. Time and time again the labour movement has almost succeeded in bringing class war to the fore in Belfast. This was true in 1907. It is only when they fail that disillusioned workers seeking other outlets for their despair fall easy prey to the slogans of sectarian war.

It is then a vital task for Northern socialists to learn for themselves the real history of the working-class in modern Ireland, and to broadcast to the masses their true heritage. This work is necessary for those committed to one or other section of the labour movement. The very fact that today the Labour movement in the North is going through its darkest period is witness enough to the fact that mistakes have been made in the past and there are important lessons to be learnt from those mistakes.

Prior to 1907 the Trade Union movement in Ireland was conservative and reformist, and was dominated by skilled workers. Unskilled workers were hardly organised at all, and yet in the two large cities, Belfast and Dublin, were worse off than in large British cities and equally numerous. Larkin arrived in Belfast in February 1907, it was his first visit to Ireland, and he came as National Organiser for the National Union of Dock Labourers. So successful was his message of militant solidarity between unskilled workers in the fight for better conditions that by April 1907 he had recruited approximately 3,000 men to the NUDL. At the end of that month, the Belfast Steamship Company, linked to one of the large cross-channel railway companies locked NUDL members out. They were determined to crush the union while they still had time. Small employers were willing to concede terms to the dockers, it was the large cross-channel companies, linked to the Shipping Federation, which were determined to win. The Shipping Federation was an international blackleg organisation. The blacklegs who came to Belfast had smashed a strike in Hamburg a month earlier. When the Belfast strike was over they were to travel to Antwerp to smash another strike.

When these big guns, led by Gallagher, Managing Director of Gallaghers tobacco factory and Chairman of the B.S.Co., determined to fight, the smaller companies and the City authorities fell into line. In May the striking dockers drove the blacklegs from the quays. Police and military guards were introduced. The dockers could no longer stop the blacklegs working, but Larkin replied by calling the carters out on sympathy strike. The ships could unload at the quays but blackleg carters had to run the gauntlet of angry workers on every street. Carting soon ceased.

The authorities were extremely hesitant in the face of what for them was a rapidly deteriorating situation. They had used force before in sectarian confrontations, but in this case they were threatened by a purely labour dispute, most of the strikers were Orangemen, they had the active support of many Catholic workers, the ship-yard workers, and they were led by a Catholic. Blackleg carters were being attacked in places as far apart as Divis Street, Sandy Row and the Ravenhill Road, indeed on the Ravenhill Road the police had to baton charge rioters.

By July 12 at least 5,000 workers in the City were affected by strikes. At the Independent Orange Order demonstration a collection was held for the strikers and in the following week strike meetings were held in Sandy Row, Ballymacarrett, on the Falls, on the Shankill and in York Street. In the face of this united stand by the unskilled workers of Belfast the authorities were first unwilling to act, and then, when they did prepare to act, found that their instrument of oppression, the Royal Irish Constabulary, would not act for them.

The fateful decision that finally precipitated mutiny was taken on July 18. Members of the RIC were ordered to escort traction engines through the city. The traction engines, equipped with makeshift armour had been shipped to Belfast a week earlier specifically to break the strike.

The police were already overworked without any further extension of their duties. The "Northern Whig" for July 11 reported "the strain on the police is daily increasing and yesterday between 50 and 60 members of the force from Henry Street barracks alone were on duty from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m." As early as June 29 an irate correspondent had described just what sort of work this was "the spectacle to which we were treated yesterday of a waggon-load of goods going to the quay under the protection of a score of constables is a singular one indeed, of course on that basis it would require half the entire strength of the RIC to protect the traffic to and from Belfast harbour and the Railway termini".

The authorities were over complacent putting this kind of strain on a force which had its own grievances. In recent years there had been two commissions of enquiry into the conditions of

the constabulary, but in the words of the “Constabulary Gazette”, one made “paltry recommendations that have never been put into effect, the other, confined to Belfast, has been kept by the state as a secret document”. Policemen’s pay in Belfast varied from £78 to £62 16s p.a. That is roughly 30s a week down to 24s, a wage marginally higher than that of the best-off dockers and carters. But policemen were expected to live in respectable areas of the city, they had to pay their own tram fares on the way to duty (this affected very seriously suburban constables drafted into the city daily to deal with the strike disturbances). The police were supposed to get 1s extra if they were on continuous duty for more than 8 hours, but complained that they were continually being taken off duty after 7½ hours to avoid payment. It was against this background that a “More Pay” movement had been flourishing in the ranks of Belfast police for some time.

The strike leaders made several references to the conditions under which the police were working. As early as July 7 a visiting speaker from Birmingham, Mr. Jones, commented at a Belfast Socialist Society meeting on the Custom House Steps “the police themselves had been badly overworked from 6 in the morning till 11 and 12 at night and he saw no reason why they should not bind themselves into a Trade Union”. On July 17 Larkin said “the police were working 18 hours a day without any extra pay, and they would go on strike too – only they dared not”.

Indeed the police would not have heeded the strike leaders if it had not been for the all-embracing nature of the strike movement itself. They dared to do what Larkin said they would not, because the more they escorted blacklegs, the more they were jeered by Catholic and Protestant workers alike. When a local police force cannot live peacefully in the midst of any section of the community then indeed its loyalty is threatened.

All forms of agitation in police ranks were of course illegal. This had one fortunate consequence. The rebel policemen used the columns of the “Irish News” to put forward their plans and views, thus leaving a unique record of their activity.

First let us take their attitude to the strikers. Their letters show quite clearly how they had been enormously affected by the strike movement. How they had in some cases unconsciously adopted a revolutionary position on the role of the police in Ireland. “Willing to Strike”, undoubtedly one of the leaders of the “More Pay” movement, perhaps a group, wrote on July 10 referring to the “screeches of the capitalist newspapers in Belfast for the past few days over what they term the gross neglect of duty by the police force of this city in not attacking and batoning the unfortunate strikers who are merely looking for justice from their employers” “the strikers are as ourselves, trying to better their conditions, and if we work together we will wring from the government what I trust the strikers will soon wring from the capitalists – more pay”. “Willing to Strike” wrote again on July 16, in sarcastic vein, “of course we should slaughter all before us to settle this strike for the capitalists, who hate us as much as their unfortunate workmen. When they failed to turn the strike into a sectarian business they thought it would be a good idea if they got the police and the ‘strikers’ into conflict”.

A further letter from “Willing to Strike” appeared on July 22. It told how the RIC officers were doing “all in their power to humiliate the Belfast police in the eyes of the public by turning them into ‘blacklegs’ - to please their friends the capitalists. They tried to make us accept tea from these companies, and put us under an obligation to these ‘English sweaters’, but we indignantly refused to sell our independence”. In an editorial published on the same day the “Irish News” gave extracts from other letters it had received, one included this pathetic passage “it is shameful to see a uniformed peace officer sitting under the funnel of a ‘Puffing Billy’ or taking the other side of the car to the driver and getting hooted and jeered at

through the streets. Walking after the prohibited waggons is bad enough, and sometimes one has to run a little”.

Some policemen, aware of the unhappy nature of their role on the streets of Belfast, went on to analyse the role of the RIC in Ireland as a whole. The “Irish News” editorial on the 22nd included the following extract from a letter: “. . . we have never shirked any task imposed on us, no matter how odious it might have been; yet we do not get a living wage. We have made evictions possible from Donegal to Cork. We have left nothing undone that was demanded or expected of us. We regret our past misdeeds”. “Slave”, writing on the same date, said, “The RIC were not established and armed to police Ireland but to soldier it. They were established as a garrison to enable those arbitrary rulers and landlords to impoverish, enslave, and wring rack-rents from the poor unfortunate people of this country – our fathers and grandfathers. These tyrants and landlords were the indirect employers and masters of the police. These masters have nearly all fled, owing to recent land legislation, and the few who remain have no interest in the country; they are merely waiting for their bonus.”

“Willing to Strike” explained in an eloquent statement on passive resistance on July 16, how policemen should act if ordered against the strikers. “Do our duty in a passive manner; do nothing we can avoid. We may be ordered to charge a crowd of ‘strikers’ by our officers, but they cannot make us strike them! We can refuse to identify rioters, for there is no one so blind as he who will not see. In a thousand ways we can turn the law into a farce. This is our only remedy now.”

The use of the police force to escort motor-waggons from July 19 sparked off the mutiny. On that day Constable William Barrett was ordered by District Inspector Keaveney to share the cab of a wagon with a blackleg. Barrett refused. Keaveney appealed to Head Constable Waters who ordered Barrett to do as he was told. Barrett again refused and was suspended. At the later disciplinary proceedings Keaveney explained whose instructions he was following. “Mr. Kemp (the employer) told me that Mr. Morrell (the Acting Commissioner of Police) promised him that a detective would sit with the driver of this motor” (“IN”, August 2).

Barrett, dispensing with the legal niceties of the dispute, explained in a letter to the “Irish News” published on August 8, after his dismissal from the force, “The precipitating cause of the police strike and the subsequent trouble leading to the importation of 6,000 soldiers into Belfast was due to the unwarranted conduct of the Acting Commissioner (Morrell) in having entered into an alliance with the railway companies and masters in order to defeat the carters and dockers in securing the rights they are fighting for”.

Even the “Constabulary Gazette” supported Barrett’s stand, this time on purely legal grounds, they commented: “In the first place if a policeman was necessary he should have been a uniformed man: and in the second place there is, we are informed, an order with which the officers ought to be familiar, to the effect that members of the RIC are directed not to sit with an obnoxious person when on protection duty, but rather to drive on a vehicle behind them”.

Barrett’s suspension was merely the final straw, three days earlier on July 16, “Willing to Strike” had indicated that trouble was brewing: “In a short time a circular will be sent to each of your barracks giving you instructions how to act. In the meantime keep cool; don’t get into unnecessary conflict with the workmen; subscribe as much as you can for their support – and say nothing. Your officers will be against you in this movement and will look for victims.”

The circular was published in the “Irish News” on July 22. The body of it ran as follows: “Comrades – having regard to the letters which have recently appeared in the public press and the feeling of indignation which we are all aware prevails in our midst, the hardships and injustice which are lately becoming unbearable, the despotic rule which prevents us from ventilating this injustice, we cannot refrain any longer from making our views public.”

The circular then referred to “the exorbitant cost of living and the excessive difficult duty which we have to perform”, and went on to say that the time was now ripe for “a petition setting forth our views on this matter” this to be submitted to the government for due consideration.

The circular was moderate in tone – “we have been told lately to strike, but such is not intended if it may be avoided by granting us the justice which we deem necessary”. Its concluding paragraph ran “now comrades you are not required to do anything underhand or injurious to your position. The press is always willing to assist you. All that is required is justice and no body of men have remained so long waiting patiently for this as the police have”.

The circular gave detailed organisational arrangements for a delegate meeting to be held at Musgrave Street Police Station, at 7 p.m. on Wednesday July 24. “On receipt of this circular you will please hold a general meeting at each station. An intelligent man will be appointed to represent the party, who will enquire carefully into the views of the men, and note same for the information of the general meeting. This man should be appointed by his comrades, he will sign first, the remainder of the party to sign after. Then the list of names should be taken possession of by the selected man.” The representatives were to bring “their list of names, also a summary of views”.

The resolutions to be proposed at the meeting were:-

1. A rise of pay of 1s per man.
2. That our pension on leaving be calculated as three-quarters of pay.
3. To appoint a solicitor to draw up a petition in legal form, and submit same to His Majesty’s Government.
4. To apply to the Inspector-General by wire for his permission to submit same.
5. General.

The day before the meeting, Tuesday, July 23, the authorities acted. Acting Commissioner Morrell issued a circular headed “More Pay Movement” (“IN”, July 25) – “With reference to the circular which has been sent to the several barracks in the City this morning asking the men to hold a general meeting, I have directed that you remind the men that no such meeting can be held without the direction of the Inspector-General – By Order.”

On the morning of the meeting “Willing to Strike” replied in the “Irish News”. He reported that the dissident circular “has been seized in a number of stations by those in charge on its arrival and submitted to the Commissioner” and went on: “Comrades, hold your meeting in Musgrave Street Barracks, as suggested, and if not permitted to hold it there, march in a body to Queen’s Square and hold it there”.

That night between 200 and 300 men defied the official ban and went to the meeting held in the reading room at Musgrave Street Barracks. An “Irish News” reporter attended the meeting and gave a full account of the proceedings (“IN”, July 25). The room was crammed to the doors, but before proceedings could begin a Head-Constable appeared and said that the meeting was banned. The men shouted, “We will hold the meeting”. Barrett said, “Let all the men who are with us stand here” pointing to a corner – several men moved to the corner to the accompaniment of deafening cheers. Then from the stairs came a shout of “Attention!” The men stood to attention and the Head-Constable entered followed by Acting-Commissioner Morrell. Morrell asked angrily, “What is this men? What is this I hear?” There was no answer. Morrell ordered “All the men with three years’ service fall in outside.” There was no answer. He then asked a constable, “What service have you?” “Seven years”, came the reply. Morrell then ordered, “All men of 20 years’ service come forward.” Shouts came from the assembled men, “Not one man of ye go forward,” “Not one of ye don’t.” Morrell

proceeded to walk round the room threatening individual men. Barrett then spoke up, "Let no man, let no man tell his service to anyone. We are here to hold a meeting. Why should we be prevented from holding a meeting? It is as much our right as any other men in this City. Don't allow yourselves to be bullied. If we can't hold a meeting here we can hold it outside. But in any case you must stand together. Stand together comrades and all will be well." Morrell advanced towards Barrett and ordered, "Constable, leave this room." Barrett replied, "No, I will not, I am acting perfectly properly in warning these men against interference. I will not." Morrell and District Inspector Clayton rushed forward to arrest Barrett, they seized him by the collar, the constable next to Barrett punched Morrell and he went down on the floor. Morrell then punched Constable McGrath and declared him suspended. McGrath replied, "I don't care about you or your service. I can make as good a living anywhere else." Then pandemonium broke out. Barrett pleaded for quiet and asked permission to reason with the men. He was again ordered out of the room. Barrett then ordered the men to fall in two deep and march to St. Mary's Hall, "Come on, I will show you a place where we can hold our meeting."

The men ran cheering down the stairs and lined up two deep in the yard. Just as the gate was being opened Morrell shouted, "I appeal to you, for God's sake don't go any further with this thing. Don't go outside that gate into the street. Don't make a disgrace of the policemen of Belfast – I am going into my office. Appoint five men amongst you and I will let them confer with me there. I give you ten minutes to consider this." The men agreed to this, met Morrell and made arrangements to see him again three days later on Saturday evening. Morrell issued a statement on Friday, July 26, admitting that he had agreed to see the men. "I have agreed to hear the views of the five men selected on Wednesday last tomorrow evening at my office and no more men are to attend unless I send for them" ("IN", July 29).

The "Irish News" account of the Wednesday night meeting created a sensation. The Tory Press dismissed it as Nationalist rumour-mongering. The "Northern Whig" for example, describing the incident in which Morrell was knocked down, said: "All that happened was that his foot was trodden on." Barrett, defying police regulations, wrote to the "Irish News" on July 27, under his own name, confirming the "Irish News" account and the "Constabulary Gazette" described the scene accurately "when physical force was resorted to resistance followed. County Inspector Morrell was knocked down and both he and Mr. Clayton were driven from the room; tables and forms were overturned and the police cheered defiance to all authority."

Tom Sloan, Independent MP for South Belfast and prominent in the Independent Orange Order raised the matter at Westminster on Thursday, July 25, the day after the meeting. The authorities did not yet consider the situation serious. Augustus Birrell, Secretary for Ireland replied "there is some dissatisfaction on the question of pay, but full consideration will be given to any legitimate complaints".

The serious nature of the police unrest became clear on Saturday, July 30. Morrell had asked to see five men, but by mid-afternoon many groups of policemen could be seen making their way to Musgrave Street Barracks. They had to push their way through a dense cheering throng of strikers for it was clear to the strikers that something was afoot. That morning it had been announced that Barrett was suspended for writing to the press, and that any gathering at Musgrave Street was banned.

Despite this more than 500 and perhaps as many as 800 policemen arrived to pack the courtyard at the barracks. Barrett marshalled the men into ranks six deep. They represented a broad cross section of rank and file policemen in Belfast. A Unionist Councillor, Frank C. Johnston told the "Telegraph" (Monday, July 29) that the gathering was not "of a party (i.e.

sectarian) nature at all, as he saw at the meeting members of the force representing the different religious denominations". Although mainly the younger members of the force, there were men there with 10 or more years' service.

Shortly after 4 p.m. Morrell and Clayton arrived to try and get control of the situation. Morrell read a statement suggesting that the men should hand in their names and forward a request for a meeting to the Inspector General. At this stage he was loudly jeered and the officers departed in some haste.

Barrett then spoke, he announced his suspension that morning, but he clearly feared that the situation was getting out of hand. He told the men "all I just ask you to do is this – let each and every one return to his barracks. Do your duty loyally and faithfully until this evening week, and then we will hold a meeting". Many of the men there were dissatisfied with this proposal and there were cries of "Too long" and "We'll give them one hour to reinstate you". Barrett replied, "No, we will give them eight days to consider the matter and give us a definite answer."

He told them that their petition had been forwarded to the Commissioner and that in due course it would go before the Inspector General, a Westminster MP (probably Sloan) had been given a copy. The petition contained the demands which had been circulated several days earlier, it did however contain this last paragraph: "The urgent character of the demands now made by the men necessitates their being urgently attended to, and, acting on our instructions, we have to press strongly, and with the greatest possible respect, for a definite assurance within a week that our case will be favourably dealt with forthwith."

When this was read out the police broke into deafening cheers, the strikers outside burst through the doors and joined the policemen. Barrett spoke again, he welcomed the strikers saying "it has been alleged that the authorities can put 10,000 men in our place, but there are 100,000 loyal union men in the City who will support us". He then announced that the next police meeting would be held on the Custom House Steps, and read out telegrams of support; that done he asked the crowds to disperse.

The crowd however was far too roused to simply go away. Barrett was chaired by constables and strikers and carried to the Custom House Steps. Total indecision ensued. There were calls to demonstrate outside the Commissioner's house, to wreck the barracks, to go to the docks. Barrett persuaded them to avoid violence, and they returned to the barracks. From there they went out by the gate into Townhall Street and to the City Commissioner's office in Chichester Street. The five district delegates elected on the Wednesday night, including Barrett went in accompanied by a Unionist Councillor, F. C. Johnston, JP. The delegation were informed that Assistant Inspector-General Gamble was to arrive from Dublin at 6 p.m. and would discuss any grievances. At 6 p.m. the crowd reassembled within the barracks. However, it was not until 8 p.m. that Barrett reappeared with the result of the talks with Gamble. He told the meeting, "I am suspended. He has refused to reinstate me." Once again Barrett asked everyone to disperse. Again both civilians and police suggested that they rush the Commissioner's office.

At this point the strike leaders appeared for the first time. The men who had demanded action were prepared to stop and listen to the leaders of the dockers, the carters and other strikers. The speakers included John Murphy, Secretary of the Trades Council, Alex Boyd, leader of the Municipal Employees, one of the strike leaders, and also prominent in the Independent Orange Order, and also James Sexton, General Secretary of the National Union of Dock Labourers. Despite their oratory the strike leaders from outside proved less militant, less critical in their assessment of the position of the rebellious policemen than the policemen themselves. Alex Boyd told them "he hoped that Colonel Sir Neville Chamberlain (the

Inspector-General) in whom he had every confidence would investigate the matter to the bottom". When the heat had gone out of the situation, with much talk of this kind, the strike leaders suggested that civilians should leave, and soon after the policemen began to disperse.

By failing to take any immediate action the policemen had already sealed their fate. They had timed their action to take advantage of the existing situation in Belfast, and their sole strength lay in forcing concessions while the authorities were powerless. Instead they attempted to go through legal channels in a situation in which they had no legal rights at all. As a result they had given the authorities eight days' grace.

The Tory Press were quite aware of the position by Monday. The "Newsletter", which had dismissed the whole affair as Nationalist rumour, now said, "When we say that these men numbered more than 500, that they met in defiance of orders, and that they or some of them hooted their officers it will be seen that the situation is serious enough and calls for prompt and decisive action on the part of the government."

The authorities were already moving into action. The Assistant Inspector-General arrived on the evening of Saturday, July 27. He held talks with County Inspector Morrell for most of Sunday. Meanwhile officers, head-constables, and sergeants from all stations met under District Inspectors Kelly, Gelston and Clayton. Stern tactics for dealing with the mutiny were decided upon. Assistance was called for from Dublin, the decision to send in troops, which must have had the support of Augustus Birrell, Secretary for Ireland, was made, six new magistrates were sworn in. There was disagreement, however. District Inspector Kelly of the West division resigned from the force rather than accept a transfer.

The first troops, 500 men of the first battalion of Cameron Highlanders and 700 men of the Berkshire Regiment, arrived in the City on Tuesday July 30.

These signs of impending doom had their effect on the policemen. "Willing to Strike", writing on Wednesday, July 31, said "Comrades, the demon of division is amongst you. 'Divide and Conquer' is the latest move." Moderates were proposing to go back to square one and submit a new petition to the Inspector-General. Although caught between the authorities intent on repression, and the moderates hoping to salvage something, the "More Pay" movement was still active. On Wednesday, July 31, they send round a circular aimed at the higher ranks who were at that moment preparing to crush them. It was addressed "To the head-constables and sergeants of the RIC desirous of joining in and assisting the movement for increased pay and pensions". Replies to the following questions were "respectfully requested":-

1. Are you in agreement with action of the men carrying on the 'More Pay' movement?
2. Do the demands made on behalf of the force meet with your approval?
3. Are you prepared to strike and agitate and co-operate with the men if and when required in order to force the concessions claimed?
4. In view of the fact that the County and District Inspectors and other high placed police authorities are strongly opposed to the 'More Pay' movement and in as much as the government have been misled in the past by the representations of these officials as to the pressing character of our grievances and the crying injustice of our case, the men are of the opinion that all our future representations and communications should be direct to the responsible minister of the crown. For this purpose we require to know, are you prepared, notwithstanding disciplinary regulations to the contrary, to support the decision come to, to hold direct communication with authorities other than the police authorities?"

Unfortunately, by the following day, Thursday, August 1, it was clear that "other authorities" were just as unsympathetic as the police authorities. The Under-Secretary for Ireland gave the reply to the petition handed in by the men the Saturday before. His statement included the

following: "It is impossible for the government to entertain a petition presented under such conditions of disorder and insubordination, and of which the concluding paragraph is of a threatening nature." Before any representations were heard there would have to be a "complete re-establishment of discipline". The petition was "a serious discredit to all the constables concerned". Constable William Barrett was dismissed and six other constables were suspended.

The next day, Friday, August 2, the day before the next planned meeting of dissident policemen, further blows fell. 200 policemen, most of whom had been involved in the trouble were told to prepare for immediate transfer to distant and scattered country areas. On Saturday morning the "Newsletter" reported that their replacements were already billeted in Lisburn and "the married and senior constables of Antrim, Down and Louth have been communicated with and ordered to hold themselves in readiness to take duty in Belfast when required." The same morning the "Irish News" reported that most of the men at Mountpottinger, Springfield Road and Musgrave Street Barracks were to be moved that morning.

The price of militancy was now clear. Barrett's most enthusiastic supporters were being got out of the city before they could cause any more trouble. Any tempted to join in the Saturday demonstration knew what lay in store for them.

The only encouragement for the police in Belfast came from RIC men in other parts of Ireland. At Athenry on August 1, 70 men met, and again the following night despite the opposition of the local DI. They passed three resolutions.

1. They objected to being made herds of.
2. They would stand by any strikers who were victimised.
3. They would support a strike.

Support also came from Tipperary and Nenagh. Cork, however, was more typical. On Tuesday, July 30, the men agreed to apply to the Inspector-General for permission to hold a meeting. On Friday, however, they were refused permission and instead of taking any action decided to wait and see what would happen in Belfast.

Belfast was packed with troops on Saturday, August 3. The English "Daily News" described the scene: "The great industrial centre, crowded with 6,000 soldiers represented an armed camp. It is impossible to imagine a dockers' strike at Liverpool or Hull producing such a tremendous marshalling of military forces." The "Constabulary Gazette" voiced the fears that day "the military have been pouring into the city, and it is no exaggeration to say that in all sections of the population there is a reign of terror" and "if the police and the military are set in active opposition the result will be hell".

A huge crowd gathered, on the Saturday afternoon at the Custom House Steps, and at 4 p.m. Barrett appeared to speak. He told the crowd that "No military can make men work who are dissatisfied with their conditions. Down with blacklegs and cheap labour say I whether in civilian or constabulary life. All men are entitled to a living wage. Complaints are made that we demand redress of our grievances at the wrong time. I quite agree that we ought to have struck out for more pay at the time of the Boer War when there was no military force available in this country". Barrett had perhaps by now realised his tactical error in not pressing home the advantages held by the policemen. He went on to describe the police as "victims of a degrading system engineered by the successive governments in the interests of the landlord reactionaries against the masses of the people by the manufacture of crime". He considered that much of the work of the ordinary policemen involved detaining people for offences which only landlords would consider to be crimes, he believed that the RIC was

vastly overloaded with District and County Inspectors and in order to justify their existence these men aided and abetted this “manufacture of crime”.

After the meeting Barrett was chaired by the demonstrators and a crowd of between 3,000 and 5,000 followed him as they toured the barracks of West Belfast. The procession went via the Donegall Road, Upper Library Street and Townsend Street, and then along the Falls to the Springfield Road returning by the Grosvenor Road.

For all the noise and clamour the march did not achieve its objectives, the mutiny itself had been utterly crushed. Many of Barrett’s supporters had left on trains from Great Victoria Street that morning, the others dared not appear. For the first time there were signs that sectarian politicians, in particular Nationalists, were more interested in the police mutiny than the labour leaders. The “Newsletter” reported that there was “a large Nationalist element in the crowd”. The “Telegraph” headed its report “NATIONALIST DEMONSTRATION – Ignored by the Constabulary”. Many of the marchers had shouted “Home Rule for Ireland” and there had been signs of tension when the march neared the Shankill.

Nationalists were, of course, interested in the police mutiny, far more interested than they were in the labour struggle. The police mutiny and the introduction of British troops raised for them the purely national question of British force in Ireland. The Dungannon Club, later to merge with Sinn Fein, led by Bulmer Hobson, later a bitter opponent of the Labour movement in the South issued a characteristic statement which included “for too long Irishmen have done the dirty work of their British masters for pay, but some of us are finding out that it pays better to be true to Ireland than to sell Ireland. The RIC are finding out at last that they are the sons of Ireland before they are the servants of the English government, and that if they strike it won’t be the heads of their brother Irishmen they’ll hit.”

The Labour leaders were far less anxious to talk about the police mutiny than the Nationalists. It raised difficult questions for them. When policemen in the South and West supported the Belfast mutineers, did that mean that Belfast strikers and mutineers were expected to throw in their lot with the Southern peasantry? If strikers either fought the military or supported mutineers were they not in fact threatening the whole fabric of British Rule in Ireland? No Labour leader had the courage to spell that message out. They still held to the belief that the strike movement was a strictly economic and non-political affair. But the strike had grown so large that it could no longer remain non-political. The police had mutinied because of the pressures put on them by the strike. When Labour leaders had nothing to say about the mutiny and let it die a quick death, their supporters were simply confused, and what was worst of all, stood by as 6,000 troops came into the City, little realising that once the soldiers had dealt with the police, they would deal with the strikers. Four days after Barrett’s final forlorn meeting on August 3, 1,000 troops were out protecting blackleg carters.

Some Labour leaders did not merely stand by while the mutineers were crushed, they believed that if the strikers showed their loyalty to the government during the mutiny, they might even gain by it. Mr. Appelton, a British TUC delegate, attempted to settle the carters’ dispute during the police mutiny because “there was a very serious danger of a conflict between the police and the military. I felt that it would be of the greatest use to remove one of the elements of danger if possible before Saturday (July 27) because then certain steps were to be taken in connection with the dismissal of some of the police”. Note that Appelton considered the striking carters as “an element of danger” which indeed they were if you were more concerned with the continuing stability of British rule in Ireland.

The episode of the police mutiny illustrates well the main failing of the labour movement in the North, often against all the odds the workers of Belfast have reached the brink of success,

but the greater their success the more political questions about the whole nature of society in Ireland and its control are raised. When the labour movement flinches from those questions and claims to be non-political, or turns to British Parliamentary Democracy in its hour of crisis then it is defeated and often smashed. In 1907 they had to work with the police to succeed, they dared not do it and failed.

There is then perhaps a final comment. Events such as these occurred in a decade typified as that when all Ulster Protestants, rich and poor, exploiter and exploited stood shoulder to shoulder against an equally united Catholic population. For those who have perpetuated the myths of Ulster's history "Willing to Strike's" words fit well. "There is no one so blind as he who will not see."

JOHN GRAY

Transcribed by Niall who says I left it 'as written', so there might be a few minor grammar/punctuation mistakes as on the original ('Augustus Birrell' should be 'Augustine Birrell', wagon is spelt 'waggon'...)

Taken from www.wsm.i.e.