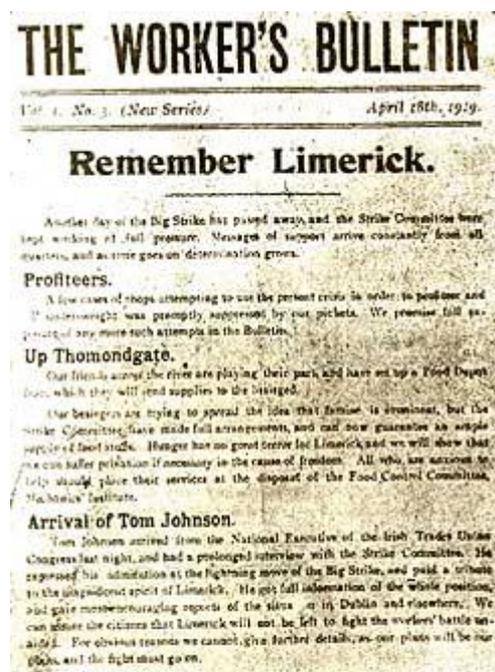


When the red flag flew over Munster



Workers Solidarity Movement's account of the wave of soviets in the province of Munster.

Irish Workers taking over their jobs, flying the Red Flag and declaring for socialism? It never happened here. That's what the establishment historians want you to think, that is why they have written whole episodes of our history out of the schoolbooks. In reality thousands of workers were involved in just such action at the beginning of the 1920's.

In the time from the Easter rising to the War of Independence the unions began to recover from the defeat of the 1913 lockout. Membership rose from 120,000 to 319,000, which was half of all wage earners. The ITGWU grew from 5,000 to 120,000.

The Russian revolution inspired workers in the years before its defeat at the hands of the new ruling class. In 1917 10,000 marched in Dublin and the Irish Citizen Army stated with great foresight that the lesson of Russia was that the state must be smashed and industrial control by workers established
Limerick

In 1918 the Anti-conscription strike was won and the following year 40,000 Belfast engineering workers came out for a 44-hour week. That year also saw the Limerick Soviet. In response to the British army declaring martial law and denying travel permits to workers who lived outside the city the United Trades and Labour Council organised a general strike and seized control of the city. The trades council took over printing presses to explain their case, regulated food prices to stop profiteering, issued their own money and provided staff for essential services. Nothing moved without a permit from the council. This lasted for 14 days.

That winter also saw a national strike by lorry drivers against having to get permits from the British army. It was won with massive support from all over the country. All this set the scene for what would become known as the Munster Soviets.

The Cleeve family owned mills, bakeries, agriculture machinery works, the Limerick Chronicle and 14 creameries throughout Munster. Their 3,000 employees had no union and earned one of the lowest wages in Ireland, 85p a week. The Cleeve family were millionaires. In 1919 the workers joined the ITGWU and its affiliated clerical union. They set up a Council of Action and prepared to strike for higher wages.

Cleeves were clever to split the union by offering different rises to each job. However, even when Knocklong creamery were left out on their own they still succeeded in winning a wage of £1.95-£2.10 after a campaign of spilling scab milk into ditches.

The following year the local union secretary, Sean O'Dwyer, who was a creamery worker, drew up plans to bring the company to its knees by occupying the creamery and its 12 subsidiary depots. Before taking over, the workers at the local co-op creamery were visited and they agreed not to take the milk of Cleeves' usual suppliers. This meant the farmers could be made an offer they couldn't refuse: to send their milk to the Soviet creamery or throw it away.

On the second Saturday of May the strike began. The next morning the strikers took over. The Red Flag was hoisted and the company's nameplate removed. In its place was put a sign Knocklong Soviet Creamery and above this We make butter not profits. All the depots were occupied as well. The much hated manager, Riordan, was ordered out and a new manager elected from the ranks of the union members.

97% of the usual milk went to the creamery. Two tons of butter were made each day, and all the orders filled, including those of Belfast. The workers were making a better job of running things and the bosses broke down. They contacted the Soviet Creamery where the workers gave them a list of demands including more pay, less hours, more holidays, the permanent sacking of Riordan and no victimisation. After just 11 hours Cleeves conceded these terms. On being given back the creamery their first act was to paint out the Soviet sign. . . with green paint!

This victory led other Cleeves staff to occupy and they too won demands in Clonmel, Carrick-on-Suir and Limerick. The least successful fight was in Tipperary where the women occupiers found it impossible to get supplies or markets. But even there they got half the wage rise they were looking for.

A wave of occupations, mainly in Munster, then occurred. The Co Wexford Farmers Association warned of Red Flag Terrorist Agitators. Over 400 landlords were dispossessed by agricultural labourers until the IRA came to the aid of the gentry by having the republican land courts order an end to illegal seizures.

Indeed this was not an isolated incident. The IRA was used to smash a farm strike in Bulgaden and to evict a Soviet occupation from the mills at Quarterstown. Countess Markievicz warned of the imminence of social revolution. Her friends in the Dáil decided All this is a grave menace to the Republic. The mind of the people is being diverted from the struggle for freedom by a class war. Seemingly the republican idea of freedom did not include freedom from the exploitation of the boss.

Io 1921 and 1922 similar Soviet occupations occurred at mills and creameries in at least 15 other locations, at Cork Harbour, North Cork railways, the quarry and the fishing boats at Castleconnell, a coach builders in Tipperary as well as the local gas works, a clothing factory

in Dublin's Rathmines, sawmills in Killarney and Ballinacourtie, the Drogheda Iron Foundry, Waterford Gas, mines at Arigna and Ballingarry. Undoubtedly there were others.

Most were successful as methods of getting the bosses to pay wage claims but they were more than just disputes about pay. They reflected both the growing confidence of newly unionised workers and a political idealism that looked to an Ireland free not only of the British army but also free of native bosses. They called their occupations Soviets because they were impressed by the example of the Russian workers who had established their own councils, called Soviets, to run that country.

It could have led to great social change but instead it petered out. When the Irish Women Workers Union (now a section of the FWUI) called on the union leaders to extend the occupations not one of them paid any heed. Where they were not opposed they certainly were not supportive. Like today's full-time officials they preferred to operate through the proper channels rather than challenge the bosses' authority.

The missing factor was a revolutionary anarchist organisation that could have built links between the different groups of workers who were in struggle, put forward the ideas of anarchism and developed a strategy for linking the anti-imperialist and class struggles to bring about a truly free Ireland run by the working class through their own democratic councils.

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