

LIBERTY

SUPPLEMENT



The special anniversary edition of 'Liberty' produced last year, was not intended to be a comprehensive history of the Union. It was merely a collection of highlights from the rich tapestry of events and personalities that have contributed to the development of the country's largest union. However, we are now enlarging that collection with the publication of this supplement which may be inserted into 'Liberty 75'. For copies of 'Liberty 75', see the advertisement on the back page.

The Limerick Soviet

On Sunday April 6th, 1919, a small group of Irish Volunteers made a desperate bid to rescue one of their comrades, Robert J. (Bobby) Byrne from the Limerick Workhouse Hospital. Byrne — who had been Branch President of the Post Office Clerks' Association until his dismissal for his political activities — had been sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment with hard labour by a British Army court martial for possession of a revolver and ammunition without authority.

In Limerick jail, Byrne had led his Sinn Fein colleagues in a campaign of agitation to secure political status. The campaign was supported by the Limerick United Trades and Labour Council (to which Byrne has been a delegate). The Council passed a resolution on February 1st protesting against the authorities' treatment of the political prisoners and the inertia of the Visiting Justices and the Medical Officer.

Following a violent confrontation with the warders, the prisoners went on hunger strike. After three weeks, Byrne's condition became so weak that he was transferred on March 12th to the Limerick Workhouse Hospital where he was placed under a heavily armed guard.

The Volunteers' rescue attempt was a failure. Although Byrne was snatched by the rescue party, he was shot through the chest and died later in the evening. A constable was also shot dead and a second seriously wounded.

While Byrne's body was removed to Limerick Cathedral to lie in state, the Limerick Board of Guardians paid tribute to him as "a self-effacing patriot". The funeral was a tense affair with over 15,000 people — including the Mayor and Corporation of the city — in the procession. The route was lined by British troops with fixed bayonets and by armoured

cars while two military aircraft flew overhead.

On April 9th, the British military authorities proclaimed the city of Limerick a special military area under the Defence of the Realm Act to take effect as and from Tuesday, April 15th. The northern boundary of the martial law zone was the river Shannon — which meant that the large, predominantly working-class area of Thomondgate lay outside the proclaimed area. Since special permits issued by the British authorities were required to gain entry to the martial law zone, workers from Thomondgate would be subjected to military scrutiny on their way to and from work in the city. Similarly workers who lived within the zone would have to undergo the same experience as they travelled to and

from two of the city's largest factories — Cleeve's Condensed Milk Company and Walker's Distillery — which were located on the northern side of the Shannon.

On Saturday, April 12th, the workers in the Cleeve's factory — most of whom would be affected by the permit regulations — went on protest strike. Their unions — the ITGWU and the Irish Clerical and Allied Workers' Union — were particularly vocal at the specially convened meeting of the United Trades and Labour Council in the Mechanics' Institute on the following day.

After a lengthy meeting, the Council decided that no worker should be forced to work under those conditions and resolved to call a General Strike for the city from 5.00 a.m. on Monday, April 14th, until such time as the martial law proclamation was revoked.

At a public meeting to announce the decision, the Council's President,



The National Executive Council 1984-85: Back row (l-r): Jim Lotty, Larry Duggan, John Meehan, Joe Booth, Eamon O Griofa, John Gannon, Paudge Reddy, Tom Colgan, Tony Kenneally, Sean Roche. Front row (l-r): Martin Kennedy, Sen. Chris Kirwan, John Carroll, Edmund Browne, James O'Sullivan. Inset (l-r): Noirin Greene, John Hamilton, Paddy Teahan.

John Cronin also threatened to bring out the railway workers — adding that he would have done so immediately but for the fact that they needed 48 hours to secure the permission of their London-based Executive.

The Trades Council then transferred itself into the Strike Committee with Cronin as its Chairman. With assistance from a sympathetic printing works in Cornmarket Row, the city was posted with the following counter proclamation in the early hours of Monday morning:

LIMERICK UNITED TRADES AND LABOUR COUNCIL PROCLAMATION.

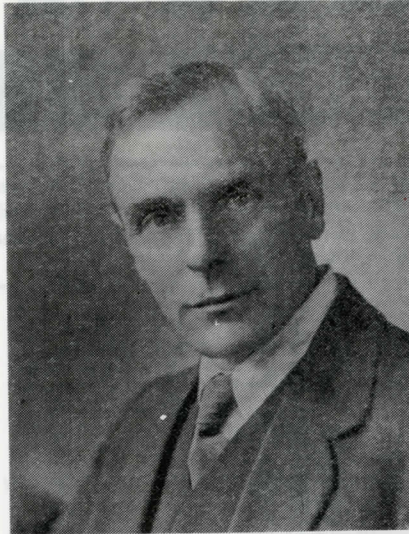
The workers of Limerick assembled in Council, hereby declare cessation of all work from 5.00 a.m. on Monday, April 14, 1919, as a protest against the decision of the British Government in compelling them to procure permits in order to earn their daily bread.

“By order of the Strike Committee, Mechanics’ Institute.

Any information to the above can be had from the Strike Committee.”

The strike call had an immediate impact as an estimated 15,000 workers responded. The only services operating on the Monday were public utilities staffed by skeleton crews, the banks, hotels, government offices, the Post Office (for the sale of stamps only) and the railways (whose engineers downed tools the following day).

The Strike Committee began to take steps to ensure that food shortages should be minimised and that any attempts at black-marketing should be prevented. Four food depots were established under a sub-committee to supply food at fixed prices. Selected shops were given permission to open for business and sanction was given for work to resume at certain bakeries, in the gas and electricity works and other designated essential industries. However any company which failed to comply with the committee’s instructions or which engaged in profiteering or any other unfair activities was immediately shut down.



Tom Johnson

The high degree of organisation required to sustain this operation was evident in Trades Council Treasurer, James Casey’s description in “Limerick’s Fighting Story”.

“Whilst the Trades Council and Strike Committee controlled all activities inside Limerick city, during the General Strike, the Irish Republican Army was busy without. Supplies of much needed food for the beleaguered population were systematically collected from neighbouring towns and villages. After nightfall, relays of boats with muffled oars were successfully used to run the food and supplies through the (British military) blockade and to maintain communication with the citizens.

Inside the city, a special citizen police force was established to control queues, regulate traffic and to ensure, along with groups of pickets, that authorised shops opened and closed at the appropriate times. “It was,” according to Casey, “generally admitted that the city was never guarded or policed so well previously. The people, for once, were doing their own work, and doing it properly. There was no looting and not a single case came up for hearing at the Petty Sessions.”

A special propaganda sub-committee published a newsheet, *The Daily Bulletin*, which carried regular reports on the progress of the strike. A separate report was also prepared for the many Irish and foreign journalists who were in the city at the time. By chance journalists from all over the world had come to Limerick to report on the attempt by Major Woods to cross the Atlantic by airplane. All these reporters including

representatives of the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Paris Matin*, and the Associated Press of America, an agency servicing 750 papers, came under the authority of the strike committee. So, within twenty four hours, the birth of the Limerick Soviet had captured headlines in newspapers throughout the world. The military authorities retaliated with their own propaganda, which was issued through the Press Censors Office.

Tom Johnson, representing the Irish TUC and Labour Party arrived in Limerick on Thursday, April 17th, stating that “he had authority for announcing that the full strength of the Labour movement in Ireland, backed by the general public, would be exerted on behalf of the men and women in Limerick”.

On the same day Brigadier-General Griffin, military Commandant in Limerick, met the Limerick Chamber of Commerce and gave them authority to issue permits to their workers to go to work. He also informed the Chamber that he was considering giving the employers further permission to send permits to their customers in the country. However, despite these concessions, the members of the Chamber of Commerce were far from happy with the strike. A special meeting of the Chamber on April 19th passed a resolution to bonar law demanding that martial law be lifted in Limerick.

Support for the strike came from the Gaelic Athletic Associations annual conference in Dublin which voted on April 20th to donate £100 to the strike fund. However, the following day, Monday, H. R. Stockman announced on behalf of the British TUC in London that since the strike was political, unions affiliated to the TUC should refuse to pay strike benefits to “their members taking part in the action”. Simultaneously, J. H. Thomas, the railwaymen’s leader, circularised his union’s Irish branches advising that union members should not take any official part in the movement without the authority of the executive committee. The TUC decision, in particular, was denounced by John Cronin who insisted that the dispute was entirely a labour question.

By the end of the first week, the strike committee had not received the expected amount of outside financial aid. The committee, confronted by diminishing food stocks and a critical

lack of cash, decided to print and circulate its own paper money. Large quantities of notes were issued in denominations of 10s, £5 and £1.

Not unexpectedly the decision caused a stir in the news media; the *Irish Times* correspondent on April 23rd commented: "The decision to issue 'Treasury Notes' to secure goods on credit is taken as a sign of growing financial weakness ... The impression therefore is gaining ground that the crisis has passed and that the close of the week will synchronise with the close of the strike."

Though disappointed with the response of the British-based unions' leadership, the Strike Committee continued to frustrate and harrass the military authorities. However, without concrete support from workers in other parts of the country, the future of the Soviet seemed limited.

Discussions with a delegation from the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress on April 22nd and 23rd confirmed the prognosis. The delegation informed the Strike Committee that it could not call a national General Strike without the authority of a special conference of the Party and Congress.

According to Thomas Johnson's reply to the debate on the Soviet at the subsequent ILPTUC annual conference in Drogheda, the Party and Congress Executive's proposal to the strike committee was "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 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".

On Thursday, April 24th, after discussion with the Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick, Dr. Hallinan, and the Mayor of Limerick, Alphonsus O'Hara, the strike committee announced a major new development — which signalled the end of the strike. After a lengthy committee meeting, John Cronin told a large meeting outside the Mechanic's Institute that all workers who could resume work without military permits should do so while those who could not, should continue "in their refusal to accept this sign of subjection and slavery".

The *Irish Times* took up the story as follows: "This decision was made at the close of an anxious day of conferences and conversations ... After an exchange of views with a delegation from the conference, the Most Rev. Dr. Hallinan, Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick, and the Mayor called upon Brigadier-General Griffin and discussed the situation at length.

Subsequently his Lordship and the Mayor sent a joint communication to the conference, and it was as a result

of this document that the decision was reached... This announcement while giving intense relief to the citizens generally, had been received with mixed feelings by the strikers. Many of them are glad to get back to work, but others regard the result as a defeat, and feel that their sacrifices have gone for nothing. They were basing their hopes upon a national strike and, even when it became evident that this would not take place, they expressed their determination to continue the struggle. Their leaders, however, saw the futility of pursuing such a course and wisely decided to get out of an awkward situation as gracefully as possible.

The abrupt end to the strike caused much discussion and controversy in Limerick. In an editorial headed, "The Strike — And After", the local paper, *The Munster News*, commented: "The struggle would have dragged on for some time longer had not his Lordship, Most Rev. Dr. Hallinan and the Mayor, as representing the spiritual and temporal interests of the citizens, sent a joint letter to the Trades Council on Thursday, requesting the immediate end of the strike; and that they ready compliance with that request was wise will be readily acknowledged by everyone who has at heart the interests of Limerick as a whole — interests that suffered severely during the continuance of the strike."

While the contents of the joint letter sent by the Bishop and the Mayor were not publicly disclosed, it is clear that the Bishop's intervention was the decisive factor in finishing the strike. A report in the *Irish Times* stated... "the opinion is undoubtedly entertained that the early attitude of the Roman Catholic clergy in supporting the strikers was not consistently pursued. It is thought that their views on the situation completely changed when they learned the drastic plans submitted by the Labour Executive to force the issue. They naturally dis-countenanced extreme measures and the Executive knowing that the people would be guided by their clergy, wisely abandoned their plans..."

However, though the strikers had to make the initial move by indicating their willingness to return to work, the original cause of the dispute — the military proclamation — was withdrawn within a week of the total resumption of work.



Members of the Limerick Pork Butchers' Society section of the ITGWU who received 50-year membership badges five years ago together with Alderman Tommy Allen, Mayor Limerick, Edmund Browne, National Group Secretary (now Vice President), Ned Browne, former Vice President, Paddy Kelly, former Secretary, Limerick Branch, Larry Duggan, President of the LPBS and Gerry McMahon, Branch Assistant, Limerick No. 3.

EARLY DAYS IN THE SOUTH-EAST

Although Waterford was formally represented at the meeting in the Trades Hall in Capel Street, Dublin, on December 28th, 1908, which decided to launch the ITGWU, the Branch was defunct by 1911. However, P.T.Daly arrived in the city in August of that year at the invitation of the local Trades Council and the Branch revived for a time.

However, the effective organisation of Waterford by the Union began in July 1917 — when Denis Houston re-established the Branch with the membership drawn from carters and corporation workers. Tom Dunne, a member of the Tailors' Society played a leading part in the early development of the Branch and by 1918 he was officially secretary of the Branch — which was principally composed of general labourers together with brewery, construction, creamery and gas workers. A second Branch based entirely on the local munitions factory was also in existence.

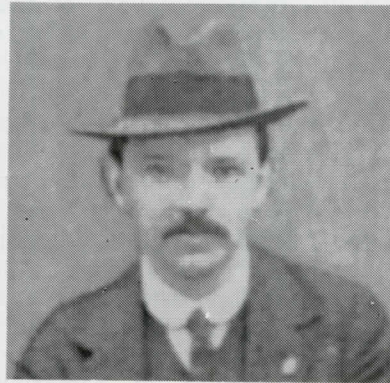
In May 1918, W.P.Coates, a native of Kinsale who had recently returned from London to avoid conscription, was appointed as organiser. Coates set about extending organisation into the country and within a few weeks established a new branch at Kilmacow, just across the Kilkenny border, with the aid of Michael Holden.

Meanwhile at the western end of Co. Waterford, the Dungarvan Branch, founded in February 1918, secured immediate wage bargaining successes in April as a result of the tenacity of L.A.Veale who became a full-time secretary. He began to develop recruitment eastwards as far as Portlaw.

Towards the end of May, Veale joined Coates in Kilmacthomas — midway between Dungarvan and Waterford City. Accompanied by pipe bands and suitably inscribed banners, the two men led a parade through the village which secured the recruitment of hundreds of general and farm labourers along with workers from the local creamery, flour mill and woollen mill.

WEXFORD

Credit for the establishment of the Irish Transport & General Workers' Union in Wexford rested initially with Michael McKeown, the Union's Belfast organiser. McKeown addressed a meeting in



P. T. Daly

the town on July 11th, 1911, after which the Branch was created. McKeown had attempted to organise Wexford twenty years earlier for the National Union of Dock Labourers. However, an attempt to recruit the workers at Pierce's Foundry resulted in the owner sacking all union members and replacing them with scab labour.

The management of Pierce's, confident that their employees would soon be forced to repudiate their Union membership, were surprised by the workers' determination to remain solid behind the ITGWU. They laid plans to reopen the foundry using non-union labour in October. With the stage set for a lengthy impasse — with neither side prepared to yield. Daly was the victim of a brutal assault by company sympathisers early in November. A motor manufacturer by the name of Belton together with the editor of the Wexford Record newspaper whose proprietor was closely connected with Pierce's, set upon Daly late at night — beating him unconscious with heavy clubs.

In spite of initial police reluctance to accept his statement, Daly pressed ahead with a prosecution when he had recovered. The eventual judgement against Belton for this brutal assault — a £1 fine — was in stark contrast to the lengthy jail terms being handed down to workers for minor infractions on picket duty.

At the end of January, P.T.Daly was arrested on a phoney charge of incitement to violence and was hurriedly removed to Waterford jail. James Connolly was sent down to Wexford

to replace Daly. Discovering that the employers would accept any union except the ITGWU, Connolly made the ingenious proposal that the foundry workers should establish a new organisation, the Foundry-worker's Union, which would then be affiliated to the ITGWU.

The employers agreed to this arrangement and so the Foundryworkers' Union was established with Richard Corish as its secretary. In June 1918, Pierce's agreed to recognise the ITGWU unconditionally. so the Foundryworker's merged with the Wexford Branch. Corish, who also held office as Lord Mayor of Wexford, was Chairman of the Wexford Branch until his death in 1945.

KILKENNY

The ITGWU first appeared in Kilkenny in August 1911 as a result of P.T.Daly's recruiting drive in the South-East at that time. However, that particular attempt at organisation was relatively short-lived. 1918 marks the Union's effective establishment in the county in April, workers in the starch factory in Graigenemanagh joined the Union. In June a new organiser for the Kilkenny/Tipperary area, Daniel Branniff, was appointed by Head Office.

In July, Acting General Secretary William O'Brien, accompanied by Waterford organiser, W.P.Coates, visited Kilkenny for talks with the 1,200 member Kilkenny Trade and Labour Union which agreed to merge with the ITGWU. The Bennetsbridge Branch of the Kilkenny Trade and Labour Union became an ITGWU Branch in the middle of the month. According to local tradition, Bennetsbridge is claimed to be the first ITGWU Branch in Co. Kilkenny. Although Graigenemanagh may dispute that claim, Bennetsbridge was certainly the first of the Kilkenny Labour Union branches to transfer to the ITGWU, under the guidance of Michael Kelly and James Lawlor. A Union Branch was also established in Castlecomer at this time.

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