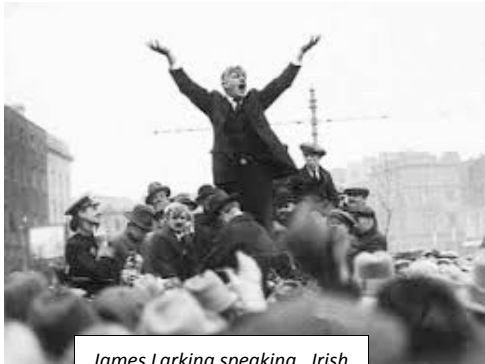


The 1913 Dublin Lockout



James Larkin speaking, Irish general strike, 1913

It is one hundred years since the Great Dublin Lockout of 1913. This was a seminal event in the development of the Irish trade union and labour movement. Between 1910 and 1913 the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union won significant victories for its rapidly expanding membership. Workers in the transport industry, in construction, in agriculture, on the Docks, and in areas such as cabinet making and sheet-metal working won increases in pay and improvements in their working conditions. In particular the wages of unskilled workers who had joined the ITGWU rose by between twenty and twenty five per cent in the first eight months of 1913. The most effective weapon that James Larkin, leader of the ITGWU, was able to employ was the sympathetic strike.

The employers of Dublin combined for the purpose of destroying the ITGWU. But under Larkin's leadership the workers stood firm and refused to be cowed. Today's trade union movement should look to the events of a century ago as an inspiration. Capitalists on a global scale are attempting to reverse all the

gains that organised workers have made over recent decades. Even the very right to be a member of a trade union is now under attack. Leaders of the labour and trade union movement should not be arbiters in the conflict between labour and capital. Less still should they become spokespersons for policies of austerity and cut-backs. The events of Dublin in 1913 demonstrate the importance of unity and solidarity in the face of the current employers' offensive.

The Strike and Lockout

On August 26th 1913, the first day of the Dublin Horse Show, workers on the Dublin trams were called out on strike by the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. The Dublin Employers' Federation retaliated by declaring a city-wide lockout involving more than four hundred employers, and demanded that each of their workers sign a document containing the words '*I agree to immediately resign my membership of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (if a member) and I further undertake that I will not join or in any way support this union*'.

Thousands of workers across Dublin chose to fight a lockout rather than sign this document. Their action was supported by the United Builders' Labourers' Union and by craft workers.

William Martin Murphy, a leading Irish capitalist who owned the *Irish Independent* newspaper and was also a director in many of the major

firms in Dublin, had founded the Dublin Employers' Federation. On August 15th sixty workers at Irish Independent papers were sacked for being members of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. The ITGWU then refused to handle any of Murphy's papers, either at the distributors or on transport. Two days later two hundred tramway workers were sacked by the Dublin United Tramways Company, another of Murphy's companies.

Following Murphy's lead, Jacob's, one of the city's largest employers, locked out three thousand employees, most of them young



women, at its biscuit factory, stating that the factory would not reopen until it had sufficient applications from workers who had pledged not to join the ITGWU.

Within a few weeks about 30,000 workers organised in thirty two unions had been locked out. The lockout lasted six months.

The Irish Transport and General Workers Union was founded in 1908 by James Larkin who had previously been an organiser with the National Union of Dock Labourers; by 1913 it had become the largest and most militant trade union in

Ireland. The average wage of an unskilled labourer in Dublin then was estimated to be around eighteen shillings a week, but many worked a seventy-hour week for fourteen shillings. Dublin in 1913 had one of the highest death rates of any city in Europe, greater than Calcutta. In 1913 there were 25,822 Dublin families, or a population of 87,305, living in tenements, four out of five with but a single room as accommodation.

Escalation

The Lockout was bitter and prolonged. Many workers and strike leaders were dragged before the courts. Some received prison sentences, among them James Larkin, James Connolly and leaders of the Irish Women Workers Union (IWWU) such as Rosie Hackett and Molly Doyle.



On Sunday August 31st the Dublin Metropolitan Police baton charged a crowd on O'Connell Street who had come to hear Larkin speak. Up to 500 people, including men, women and children, received hospital treatment in the city that day,

known since as Bloody Sunday. The previous evening ITGWU members John Byrne and Thomas Nolan were killed by police batons.

Police descended on working class areas smashing up homes and assaulting residents. A workers' defence force, composed of union members and known as the Irish Citizens' Army, was formed in response.



Irish Citizens' Army

One of the functions of this force was to prevent evictions of the families of strikers. As the Lockout escalated the problem of feeding huge numbers of hungry people became acute. Food ships were sent to Dublin by the British Trade Union and Cooperative movements.



But a scheme to bring the children of starving families to sympathetic homes in Britain was

thwarted by the action of Catholic priests at Dublin Port.

The annual conference of the British TUC in 1913 condemned the actions of the Dublin authorities and urged affiliated unions to support the struggle of the Dublin workers. Sympathetic strikes broke out in places such as Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham. Bill Haywood, leader of The American Industrial Workers of the World, addressed mass meetings in Dublin, as did Kier Hardie, leader of the Independent Labour Party.

Aftermath

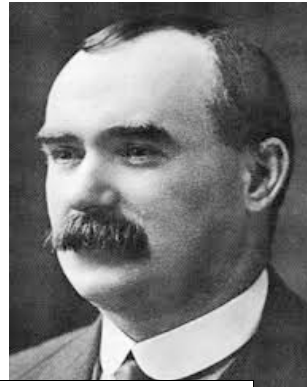
The lockout dragged on until the early months of 1914, with workers gradually drifting back. The ITGWU was on its knees but the union refused to surrender. The document demanding that workers boycott Larkin's union was allowed to lapse but many workers never again got employment in Dublin. However the employers failed in their stated attempt to destroy the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. The morale of the organised labour movement was not broken. Within five or six years there would be a number of widespread union actions, including a national general strike against conscription in 1918 and a series of labour uprisings in areas such as Limerick, Cork, Waterford and Belfast where workers organisations were in local control for periods of

time. Between 1917 and 1920 membership of the ITGWU soared from 5,000 to 120,000.

The 1913 strike and lockout were big factors in the growth of trade unions in Ireland, and the events raised the profile of the organised labour

strike action beyond Dublin. In particular sympathetic action by workers on the Irish railways failed to materialise.

James Larkin and James Connolly went on speaking tours in Britain where they raised



James Larkin & James Connolly – union leaders of their caliber are needed today

movement in the general political context of the time.

When the Irish Trades Union Congress was founded in 1894 it had around seventeen and a half thousand members, representing around ten per cent of the workforce, the main stronghold being in the industrial area of Belfast. In 1920 twenty five per cent of the workforce was unionised.

Division

The majority of unionised workers at the time belonged to craft unions, and the more conservative union leaders opposed the affiliation of the ITGWU to the Irish Trade Union Congress. Apart from a few instances of workers taking individual action in a number of workplaces union leaders did not extend the

funds and tried to encourage solidarity

action from British trade unionists. Everywhere they went they got huge support. Larkin himself addressed a number of trade union conferences in what became known as his 'fiery cross' campaign. Following pressure from the rank and file a special meeting of the British TUC was held to organise sympathetic union action in Britain. But the leadership defeated a resolution calling for a blockade of Dublin.

Conclusion

Towards the end of 1914 Jim Larkin went on a speaking tour of the United States hoping to raise funds for the union. While there he

became involved in the trade union and socialist movement and spent three years in Sing Sing as a political prisoner. The Irish Labour Party, founded in 1912, did not play any political role in the lockout, nor did it mobilise support around the country.

Perhaps one of the foremost lessons of the 1913 lockout is the very significant role of leadership in the organised labour movement. Leaders like James Larkin were able to inspire the members of their unions, to mobilise them, to articulate their needs and to win victories. Unlike the Irish trade union bureaucracies of today, the leaders in 1913 made immense personal sacrifices in their endeavours to achieve gains for their members. Throughout the devastating cut backs of recent years trade union and Labour leaders in Ireland have largely abandoned their members and continue to seek an accommodation with Government policies. They would do well to study the lessons of the Great Dublin Lockout of 1913.

Finbar Geaney
member, Dublin Council of Trade Unions