
THE LIMERICK SOVIET - APRIL 1919: THE
TRIUMPH OF THE LIMERICK TRADES COUNCIL (1810)

AN OVERVIEW BY FRANK PRENDERGAST

MAY DAY 2013

The deposit of records in the Mechanics Institute, Limerick, is a rich testimony to the antiquity of the various trades who have met here over the last two centuries - bakers, carpenters, coopers, masons, plasterers, painters, and plumbers etc, to protect and better their working conditions.

Over that long two hundred years, the Limerick Council of Trade Unions, founded in 1810, has made a worthwhile contribution to the city's public life and development.

In cities and towns all over the world, craftsmen and artisans have flourished from time immemorial. Originally, their professional needs were met by the formation of Guilds following the collapse of the Roman Empire. Those Guilds were amongst the most politically powerful in their areas and the most formidable influence of commerce and trade in their communities.

John Jebb in his "Guilds of Dublin" however describes how the bonds of interest began to weaken between merchants and craftsmen in the second half of the eighteenth century, because they had degenerated into political clubs. The reason for the decline was twofold:

- 1) The neglect by the merchants of the furtherance and preservation of their particular trades and crafts and
- 2) The admission of people to membership who had no training or qualifications and who only sought membership as a stepping stone to the civic franchise; the right to vote in those days was confined to the Freeman of a Borough, membership of a craft Guild being one requirement for admission as a Freeman onto the Civic Roll.

With the break up of the Guilds, the corresponding attempts by the tradesmen to seek improvements in their wages and conditions were fiercely resisted by the merchants. Flushed by the advances of the Industrial Revolution the employers became arrogant; in October 1757 they resolved "to prosecute to the ultimate vigours of the law, all journeymen of the barber-surgeons trade who shall for the future enter into any such trade or combinations".

Andrew Boyd in his "The Rise of the Irish Trade Unions, (1729 - 1970), reminds us that "on the 3rd of January 1770 two weavers were whipped through the streets of Dublin from Newgate Prison to College Green. The whipping was done by the public hangman and overseen by the High Sherriff of Dublin to see that the punishment was fully carried out".

Thirty years later, the notorious Anti-Combine Laws (1779 - 1824) were introduced into the British House of Commons by William Wilberforce, the emancipator of the British Empire's black slaves, but who saw no incongruity, apparently, in his introducing laws for what was nothing less than the subjugation of the workers in Britain and Ireland as white slaves.

On April 25th 1816, Archibald Buchanan, a cotton mills manager in Scotland with 875 employees, told the British Parliamentary Select Committee who were investigating the employment of children in the factories of the United Kingdom, that he had six year old children working twelve hours a day in his employment. Lord Londonderry of the magnificent Powerscourt Estate in County Wicklow, speaking to the same Commission on behalf of the mine owners of Scotland and Wales, defended the practice of sending children of six years of age

down the mines "because it was necessary to develop the stoops on their backs for the types of work they had to do".

Child labour was also common in Limerick industries and factories during the 19th century. In her essay on this topic in the Limerick Civic Trust Publication "Made in Limerick", Angela South recalls how "more than twenty apprentice girls of Mr Kinnear's factory in Clare Street were sentenced to one week's imprisonment for neglect of duty". John Reddan, a carpenter and Secretary of this Mechanics' Institute, described in a letter to the *Limerick Leader* in 1950 how in 1807 his maternal great grandfather John Higgins, and James Comerford were arrested in Higgins' house by the authorities for transacting business for the Carpenters' Guild which had been established in 1710. When tried, the punishment meted out to them was, "all their books and monies confiscated; six months in gaol; a £10 fine and their word never to be taken in Court". James Comerford was my maternal grandmother's (Mary Comerford) great, great grandfather. John Higgins' great, great, great, great grandson is Joe Reddan of the Planning Department of Limerick City Council, whose family is still actively involved in Limerick business and cultural life.

In the century after the formation of the Trades Council in 1810, some of the major industrial disputes in Limerick were those of the Bakers' Guild in their unsuccessful campaign to abolish night work, which was referred to by Karl Marx in "Das Kapital"; the Carpenters' Guild in their successful campaign for an increase from thirty shillings to thirty two shillings per week and a 3pm finish on Saturday instead of 6pm, and that of the Pork Butchers' Society in 1890 for the restoration of the allowance of a penny per pig killed. The Shaw Company alone

exported 4,000 tons of ham annually (c.f. the Mattersons File on the press reports of the strike, courtesy of Ms Peggy Carey, formerly of Mattersons).

In 1895 the Trades Council became involved in a dispute between the Christian Brothers and the Bishop, Dr Edward Thomas O'Dwyer. He was a noted authority in the field of education and a man of very strong will. He was furious with the Order's Superior General, Brother R.A. Maxwell, a lawyer, who had by-passed him in his decision to set up an industrial school at Glin, County Limerick.

In reprisal, the Bishop ordered the stoppages of the weekly collections in factories and offices which the Brothers had organised for feeding and clothing the boys in their schools since their arrival here in 1816.

The Trades Council, all of them past pupils of the CBS, doubtless, stepped in and took over the collections in defiance of the Bishop. The dispute was settled eventually when the local Brother Superior offered an apology to him. The Trades Council's standing was greatly enhanced.

Their next venture into public affairs four years later was an even more resounding success. The Local Government Reform (Ireland) Act of 1898 extended the vote to ordinary people for the first time ever. The next local elections were held the following year - 1899. Each trade of the Trades Council put forward two candidates and their campaign was mounted from the Mechanics' Institute which was then at Number 9 Bank Place, the corner of Bank Place and Rutland Street. Bank Place had a special resonance for the trade unions. It was from there that all the big parades and political meetings of the century in which they had participated with their banners, began. They succeeded in winning twenty four of the forty seats on Limerick's first Labour Corporation.

Twenty years later they became involved in politics again in what was the outstanding event in their entire distinguished and honourable history when they established the Limerick Soviet in April 1919. The events began with the dismissal of Robert (Bobby) Byrne, by the Post Office Authorities in Limerick in January, 1919 for attending the funeral of Limerick Volunteer, John Daly. As adjutant of the Second Brigade of the IRA in Limerick, he was a delegate of the Post Office Workers Union to the Council of Trade Unions. He was arrested on the 13th January, 1919 and sentenced to a year in prison for the possession of a revolver and ammunition. He organised a campaign of disobedience there in support of his claim for political status for himself and those under his command. He went on hunger strike and was moved to the City Home, now St. Camillus Hospital, where his condition was described as being very weak. On Sunday the 6th April, 1919, IRA volunteers attempted to rescue him but he was fatally wounded in the ensuing gun battle and died later that day in John Ryan's cottage in Meelick. Constable Martin O'Brien from Caherconlish of the RIC who were guarding Byrne was also fatally wounded in the affray. Ten thousand people attended Robert Byrnes' funeral in St. John's Cathedral the following Wednesday: these included his celebrated cousin Alfie Byrne, M.P. and T.D., and five times Lord Mayor of Dublin.

In a panic response the British Authorities proclaimed Martial Law under the Defence of the Realm Act. This meant that city workers had to apply for a permit to go to work, notably the women and girls of Thomondgate who worked in Cleeves' Condensed Milk Company of Ireland at Lansdowne. The workers there voted to go on strike the following Monday 14th April. The RIC blamed Sinn Féin for the strike. Batty Stack, who worked in Cleeves, was a member of the IRA

Squad who tried to rescue Bobby Byrnes. The Trades Council met the following Sunday – Palm Sunday - and declared a general strike throughout the city in protest at the declaration of Martial Law. It was a unanimous decision by the thirty five affiliated unions. Within two hours the city's walls were covered by the strike notice.

Led by the “three C's”, John Cronin Chairman, a carpenter; James Casey, Secretary, a printer; and James Carr, Treasurer, an engineering worker, the Strike Committee elected sub-committees to deal with propaganda, finance, food and vigilance. What turned the strike into a major political embarrassment for the British Government, who saw it as a threat to security, was the fortuitous presence in Limerick of an international Press Corps of journalists, photographers and twenty newsreel photographers. They had come here to record an attempt by Major J.G.P. Wood of the Royal Flying Corps, to fly the Atlantic Westward; the flight was to start from the 70 acre airfield at Bawnmore, an ideal place as its name indicates.

The *London Daily Mail* had offered a prize of £10,000 and the *State Express Gazette Company*, another 2,000 guineas, for a successful crossing. As it happened, the flight never took place, because Major Wood had to ditch his plane, ‘The Shamrock’, off the coast of Anglesea on his way to Limerick.

The host of journalists from all over the world was trapped in Limerick by the strike which was now being called the “Limerick Soviet” a term then fashionable throughout Europe after the Russian Revolution in 1917. Liam Cahill, the author and former RTE Brussels correspondent, recounts the details of the

strike in his classic work "Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet 1919, a Threat to British Power in Ireland".

The Strike Propaganda Committee held a press briefing each evening for the journalists who now gave the Soviet their undivided attention. This was generally sympathetic to the strikers. Among their numbers was a large American Delegation, one of whom, Mr. Morris of the Associated Press of America, had his reports syndicated to 750 U.S. newspapers. They would file their copy through the U.S. cable station at Valentia Island, thereby avoiding the British Censor.

When an English news agency claimed that the cables "were being scrutinised by the Strike Committee and that any journalist who told the truth was a marked man", this was refuted immediately in a letter to the Limerick Postmaster by the special correspondents of the *Daily News*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Chronicle*, *Manchester Guardian* and *Daily Mail*.

The Strike Committee was highly efficient, and for two weeks the people of Limerick, under the Direction of the Trades Council, ran the city's affairs. It was the first such phenomenon in these islands.

They organised food and fuel supplies. They issued their own currency and published their own newspaper. They attracted world-wide publicity.

But despite their efficiency and the undoubted overwhelming support of the citizens, the strike ended after ten days. This was due to the divisions between the Trades Council and the Irish Trade Union Congress who stated that their constitution did not allow them to call a National Strike. The Trades Council also

knew from their meetings in Dublin that they could not rely on Sinn Fein, the IRA or the Dáil for support.

The Head Office of the National Union of Railwaymen, in London, whose support was crucial, opposed the strike and it was believed that the Unionist Workers in Northern Ireland would do likewise. The appeal by the Mayor, Alphonsus M. O'Mara and the Catholic Bishop of Limerick, Dr Hallinan to the Trades Council to call off the strike, also had its effect.

On 24 April, a Strike Committee Proclamation called for a full resumption of work, so ending what was the high point in the over 200 year history of the Limerick Trades and Labour Council, all started by the shooting of Robert Byrne. The *Irish Times* editorial of 23rd April 1919 described it as, "a very bold and candid experiment in Irish syndicalism". Ninety four years after the Limerick Soviet, whether socialist or nationalist in its inspiration, the Limerick Trades Council can look back with legitimate pride on an unrivalled heritage of service to the City of Limerick and its people.

GURA FADA BÚAN IAD!

FRANK PRENDERGAST

PRESIDENT, LIMERICK TRADES COUNCIL 1973-74

MAYOR OF LIMERICK 1977 -8; 1984- 5.