

Rebellion, Resistance and the Irish Working Class

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Working Class:
The Case of the 'Limerick Soviet'

By

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

When exploring twentieth century Irish history one frequently encounters accounts of such nationally significant events as the Easter Rising of 1916, the War of Independence or the Irish Civil War. Also common are biographies of important political figures such as Eamon De Valera, Eoin McNeill and James Connolly. Similarly, when researching historical events which occurred in Limerick city, a frequently cited topic is the signing of the Treaty. There are, of course, exceptions to this pattern. These would include, recent works such as Matthew Potter's *First Citizens of the Treaty: The Treaty and Mayoralty of Limerick 1197-2007* and *The Government and the People of Limerick: The History of Limerick Corporation City Council 1197-2006*. Potter's work offers a unique insight into the structure and personality of such institutions as the Limerick City Council. However, in contrast to this many accounts of early twentieth century Limerick focus on the general history of the city and county, both their own intrinsic significance and for the role they played in national politics. A common theme that connects both national and local histories in Ireland is the tendency to present Ireland as an isolated country, a country whose only real connection with Europe consisted of a long and bitter relationship with Britain. Perhaps this is a trend which will soon change. The extent of Ireland's importance and involvement in European affairs is a subject which is only now beginning to receive the attention it deserves. Jerome Aan de Wiel's *The Irish Factor 1899-1919: Ireland's Strategic and Diplomatic Importance for Foreign Powers* is one such work, a study which explores Ireland's relationship with Europe. The Limerick strike is a similar event, an event which has the potential to shed light on the connections between Ireland and Europe in a more comprehensive way than has been the case previous to this.

The particular focus of this volume is the Limerick strike of 1919 and the strike committee who created a soviet in order to organise and control this strike. Until recently this event was not considered worthy of any significant primary research in its own right. In fact it was James Casey who wrote one of the earliest accounts of the Limerick strike. His essay appeared as a chapter entitled 'A Limerick Challenge to British Tyranny' in *Limerick's Fighting Story*. Casey was on the strike committee of the Limerick Soviet. Liam Cahill, a journalist and political correspondent for

RTE, wrote the only, as yet, published book on the Limerick Soviet, a work entitled *Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet 1919, A threat to British Power In Ireland*. D.R. O'Connor Lysaght also produced a pamphlet entitled *The Story of the Limerick Soviet* a pamphlet produced to commemorate the events of the Limerick strike and the actions of the various members of the Limerick Soviet. All of these accounts, with the exception of James Casey's, are relatively recent albeit none of them have been undertaken by academics up to this point.

The Limerick Soviet has not been widely written about. Most of the authors who have published works on this event have a long historical association with such institutions as the trade union movement, the Labour Party and the Socialist Party of Ireland (S.P.I.) Liam Cahill's *Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet 1919, A Threat to British Power in Ireland* focuses on the Limerick Soviet and weaves its significance within the context of local, national and international history. The main focus of Cahill's work, however is the link between the Limerick Soviet and the trade union organisations. Cahill has a personal background in trade union organisation and served as an official of the Federated Workers' Union of Ireland and several other union organisations. The British empire's reaction to events in Limerick is dealt with in terms of the role of the British military under General Griffin and the actions of MacPherson, the then Lord Lieutenant. However, Cahill does not examine the extent to which the British government investigated possible links between the Limerick Soviet and the Bolsheviks in Russia. Although the Limerick Soviet was never definitively linked to the Bolsheviks, confidential monthly reports from the Inspector General to the Under Secretary highlighted the extent to which these links at this stage were investigated. The threat of Bolshevism was taken very seriously at this juncture in Irish history. The role of the Labour party, the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.) and trade union organisations are also explored in Cahill's research.

Remember Limerick 1919 by Michael O'Connell is a pamphlet which argued that between the years of 1907 to 1919, Ireland was a country in a serious state of rebellion, one where national independence and socialist revolution were a genuine threat. It also argues that Ireland was not isolated from socialist movements during this period. Ultimately, the pamphlet argues that class war and not nationalist struggle, was the dominant factor for Ireland at this time and that the Limerick Soviet is proof of this. However, the thrust of O'Connell's arguments seem to suggest that the Limerick Soviet could have spread the strike nationwide if the leader of the Soviet, John Cronin, had the authority to do this. Also, the conclusion of this pamphlet serves to confirm that O'Connell places

too much emphasis on the strike as a genuine attempt to introduce wide scale Socialist rule in Ireland. Cahill concedes that the Limerick strike could not be called a soviet and was at heart a protest on humanitarian grounds. James Kemmy, socialist politician and twice-elected mayor of Limerick city, also contributed to the small body of work that exists in relation to the Limerick Soviet.¹ In one particular article in *Saothar, Journal of the Irish Labour History Society*, Kemmy pointed out that due to the atmosphere of revolt which existed in Europe at this time, as relating to both the First World War and the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917, there was a surge of working class activity and the emergence of a more radical political and Nationalist consciousness.

D.R. O'Connor Lysaght's *The Story of the Limerick Soviet* highlights the role of the Labour Party and the S.P.I. during the events of the Limerick strike. Lysaght points out that while the Labour Party appeared to be growing in strength from 1916 onwards, it did not have the leadership required to expand the Limerick strike into a more comprehensive socialist revolutionary movement. Lysaght also points out that the Limerick Soviet was instigated by a working class inspired strike which centred on a labour issue – not on national politics. The Labour Party's National Executive ultimately managed the Limerick strike. However, the Executive did not actively encourage either the continuance or the spread of the strike. In the final analysis, the Limerick strike proved a political failure for both the Labour Party and the Socialist Party of Ireland. Neither party had the strength nor the determination to harness the power of the situation in Limerick and use it to create a socialist revolution.

The Limerick strike was an anomaly. It did not fit with the style of Nationalism that was occurring in Ireland at this juncture. It was not motivated by politics or fuelled by a desire for national independence. The Limerick strike presents an example of the connections between Ireland and Europe. It indicates that Ireland was not isolated from more widespread European events or trends. The soviet-styled strikes which occurred across Munster in the early part of the twentieth century reveal that Ireland had many of the same social problems and economic difficulties as the rest of Europe. The First World War was key in the development of working class consciousness and was a factor in creating similar conditions for the working class in a number of European countries. There is undoubtedly such a gap in research for events such as the Limerick strike. Such gaps could be filled by recognising and

¹ James Kemmy, 'The Limerick Soviet' in *Saothar 2: Journal of the Irish Labour History Society* (1975-6).

acknowledging the importance of organisations such as the Limerick Soviet and how their emergence is indicative of a much closer relationship between Ireland and Europe than previously considered.

In order to explain the Limerick strike a general overview of national events from the Easter Rising of 1916 onwards is provided. This overview outlines the aims of political parties such as the Labour Party and the S.P.I. By exploring these parties' aims it is possible to identify the influence which they had on workers in Limerick. By exploring the S.P.I. and the Labour Party influences on the workers of Limerick, one realises that while the Limerick workers were ideologically motivated by radical rhetoric and perceived support for various political groups in Europe at heart, such as the Bolsheviks in Russia the strike in Limerick city was not, politically motivated. The relationship between the strike in Limerick city and revolution abroad was essentially an ideological one. As James Connolly played a major part in the development of both parties his influence is briefly dealt with here. As this strike occurred in Limerick city, the city itself is also examined, in particular its affiliation to both the Labour Party and Sinn Féin. Also, the emergence of trade union organisations is explored as they experienced a huge surge in membership from 1917 onwards. During the strike, reports were continuously sent in to the Inspector General. These reports monitored both events and the strikes protagonists in order to determine whether Bolshevism was a genuine threat in Ireland at this time. Analysis of these reports contributes to better understanding of the Limerick Soviet as seen from the British government's point of view. The events which led to the death of two Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C.) officers is also examined as part of this research since it was this event which led to the decision to make parts of Limerick city special military areas. The attitudes of the citizens of Limerick city at the time was coloured by the particularly negative public image that the R.I.C. held. This issue, along with a range of ongoing and interrelated social issues in Limerick are explored in this research in order to explain the motivations for the formation of a soviet in Limerick city.

The actual events of the strike are dealt with in chapter two of this volume. The workers involved and the committee which directed them are identified. The link between the workers of Limerick and their involvement with Bolshevism is also analysed as are the methods by which these workers demonstrated their discontent. The key officials involved in bringing the strike to an end are identified and their agendas discussed. The popular support enjoyed by the Limerick Soviet amongst the city's working class is discussed, as are the actions of the Labour Party

and their representative Tom Johnson. The Limerick Soviet's significance in relation to Irish and European affairs is also explored.

In the months following the Limerick strike, the direction of the Labour Party is examined as part of the research process. This is necessary since the Limerick strike was not a politically inspired event albeit that it may have been heavily influenced by political parties such as the Labour party. Also, the approach to the Limerick strike on the part of the Labour Party is analysed and their political strategy for this action explained. This research examines the reasoning behind the Limerick strike in addition to the influence which the dire social conditions in Limerick city and their influence on the workers. Other soviets which emerged in Munster around this time are examined with reference to the effectiveness of the soviet system of striking. The social and political problems which existed in those areas of Munster where other soviets were set up are also analysed.

The fourth chapter of the volume examines the influence of the S.P.I. and the Labour Party on the workers of Limerick. The influence of these parties probably exposed a certain proportion of the working class to Bolshevism and revolution abroad. Such ideas and rhetoric probably encouraged the workers to strike and may have also influenced their attitudes to Bolshevism. Generally revolutionary events in Russia, Germany and Scotland are also outlined as part of this analysis. Events in these countries contributed to identifying the motivations of the Limerick workers and highlighted commonalities between international events and the Limerick strike. Such similarities strengthen the argument that the Limerick strike was an event which fit into the European trends of this era.

CHAPTER ONE

IRELAND 1916-1919

The period between 1916 and 1919 marked a radical turning point in Ireland's political landscape. Sinn Féin was the main political party in Ireland at this time. Led by Eamon de Valera and including influential members such as Arthur Griffith, Sinn Féin's primary agenda was self-determination for Ireland. The Easter Rising of 1916 was the defining event as associated with Sinn Féin and their project for Irish separation. The executions of those involved in the Easter Rising by the British government created a belief that these men were martyrs. Support for Sinn Féin dramatically increased. This newly acquired support for Sinn Féin marked the beginning of the end for the Irish Parliamentary Party headed by John Redmond, a party whose policy had been one of co-operation with the British government. On the 3rd of May, 1916, in speaking of events relating to the Easter Rising, Redmond expressed the unpopular view that the insurrection had been dealt with firmly by the British government and that it was the duty of the British government to do so. Redmond also heaped praise upon the then Chief Secretary Augustine Birrell who had resigned his position after the Easter Rising, stating, with Redmond that Birrell had done much good for Ireland particularly in the field of education.¹ Sinn Féin now began to win by-elections throughout the country against Irish Parliamentary Party members, victories which demonstrated that the Irish electorate were no longer satisfied with the Irish Parliamentary Party's agenda and their party's spirit of co-operation with the British government. By refusing to take their seats at Westminster, Sinn Féin were clearly outlining their objectives and distancing themselves from the Irish Parliamentary Party at the same time. In the Irish general election of 1918 Sinn Féin won by a clear margin, in campaigns aided by the support of the Labour Party who did not put forward rival candidates for election. One of the reasons that the Labour Party did not stand for election was to ensure that Sinn Féin's

¹ Arthur Mitchell and Pádraig Ó Snodaigh (ed.), *Irish Political Documents 1916-1949* (Dublin, 1985), p. 22.

message of self-determination was clearly communicated to the Irish public and became part of the political fabric.

The Labour movement was a steadily growing force in Ireland at this time. An example of the Labour movement's influence can be seen in the success of the general strike called on the 23rd of April, 1918 a strike which was called by the Labour movement to protest against the British government's move towards the introduction of conscription in Ireland. This was the first successful general strike anywhere in Western Europe to protest against greater participation in World War One² and was indicative of Labour's growing power in Ireland. Following the Easter Rising of 1916 both the S.P.I. and the leadership of the Irish Labour movement appeared very strongly in favour of revolutionary movements such as the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The S.P.I., in particular, was verbally quite supportive of the Bolsheviks. In February 1918, thousands of people assembled at Dublin's Mansion House to witness the S.P.I.'s response to the Bolshevik revolution. An address from the S.P.I. entitled the '*Address of the Socialist Party of Ireland to the People's Government of Republican Russia*' clearly demonstrated the Socialist Party's support for events in Russia. The address stated that:

Ireland welcomes your revolution, Ireland proclaims you Saviour of the Working Class. Ireland has faith in you, Ireland has faith in the revolutionary proletarian democracy, Ireland has faith in the Red International of the Socialist Republic.³

At this point, several members of the S.P.I. were members and leaders of trade unions and some would go on to lead the Irish Labour movement. Both organisations seemed at this time to be fully supportive of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. By supporting this type of revolutionary movement abroad, both organisations were creating the impression that they would also support revolutionary movements within Ireland. This message may have influenced the actions of the workers in Limerick and given them the confidence needed to form a soviet. The particular importance of such public verbal support for the Russian Revolution from the S.P.I. was that it was through these types of events that workers learned of the actions of the working classes in Europe. At the same time, they also absorbed the fact that this type of action was supported by the

² D.R. O'Connor Lysaght, *The Story of the Limerick Soviet: A General Strike against British Militarism* (Limerick, 2003), pp 3-4.

³ Tom Crean, 'From Petrograd to Bruree' in D. Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Revolution: Ireland 1917-1923*, (Dublin, 1990), p. 146.

S.P.I. It is not illogical to assume that events such as these created a positive image of revolution and of the strikes abroad. Therefore, the workers in Limerick who formed a soviet may have been trying to capitalise on this popular method of demonstration and, in the process could be confident that the S.P.I. would support them, just as they had the Russian revolution. Both the S.P.I. and the Labour Party created an ideological connection between the workers of Ireland and a large number of workers across Europe.

From 1916 onwards, trade union membership drastically increased in Ireland. The Irish Transport and General Workers Union (I.T.G.W.U.) had 5,000 members in 1916 and that increased to 100,000 by 1919. One possible reason for this increase can be linked to the fact that after the Easter Rising of 1916 many influential political leaders were removed from the public arena. This left a power vacuum and an opportunity for the trade unions to generate increased support. Linked to this was an opportunity for the Labour movement to enhance its political power.⁴ Also, trade union membership increased due to the effects of the First World War on the Irish economy. Linked to the increase in trade union membership was an attendant increase in the number of worker's strikes, a development which was partly due to rising inflation.⁵ Labour strikes were considered by many to be a part of Sinn Féin's agenda for a reinvigorated Irish Nationalism. The Labour movement's main concern at this time could be classed as purely economic in nature. Symbols such as the red flag and other revolutionary rhetoric may be viewed as merely a method to attract support and appear more reactionary than they were in reality.⁶

The presence of Labour in Limerick city was quite strong in the years following the Easter rising. The *Bottom Dog*, one of the first labour newspapers in Ireland, originated in Limerick city, for example. Socialist party leader James Connolly was a big influence on the development of the discourse that permeated this newspaper. The letterhead of the newspaper read 'We must look at life in all its aspects from the point of view of the 'Bottom Dog'-the oppressed- be it nation, class or sex'.⁷ Connolly believed that the Irish working class were the cornerstone of Irish society and that they were the most ambitious of all that Ireland be a free nation. He also stated that "The cause of Labour is the cause of

⁴ Liam Cahill, *Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet 1919 A Threat to British Power in Ireland* (Dublin, 1990), p. 16.

⁵ Tom Crean, 'From Petrograd to Bruree' in D. Fitzpatrick (ed.) *Revolution: Ireland 1917-1923*, (Dublin, 1990), p. 147.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 150.

⁷ The *Bottom Dog*, 1st December 1917.

Ireland, the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour. They cannot be dissevered.”⁸ James Connolly had organised the Socialist Republican Party and, later again, its official publication the *Worker's Republic*, in 1889.⁹ Connolly was steadfastly set against capitalistic imperialism. His vision for Ireland was one which hinged on social justice and involved a nation which was entirely separate from the British Empire. Connolly was aware of nationalistic rhetoric and strongly influenced by it but he also sought to coalesce the aims of both socialists and nationalists. He stated that:

The struggle for Irish freedom has two aspects; it is national and it is social. The national ideal can never be realised until Ireland stands forth before the world as a nation, free and independent. It is social and economic because no matter what the form of government may be, as long as one class owns as private property the land and instruments of labour from which mankind derive their substance, that class will always have it in their power to plunder and enslave the remainder of their fellow creatures.¹⁰

According to Connolly, the Irish question was economic at its core. It was his belief that political action was the most effective method for resolving Ireland's problems and he took such a strong position on this that he gave his life for this ideal in the final analysis. He joined the other insurrectionists in the Easter Rising of 1916 and was subsequently captured and executed. However, by involving himself and his socialist movement in nationalistic politics, Connolly ran the risk that his movement would be overpowered and under-represented by the more popular and powerful nationalist forces. The fact that the Labour movement did not stand against Sinn Féin in the general election of 1918 can perhaps be viewed as evidence of this fear on his part. It was also the case that when Labour went on strike at this juncture, their protests met with fairly widespread support from both the public and the press. This was largely due to the fact that these Labour strikes were viewed as complementary to the Sinn Féin agenda of self-determination; also, they were mainly striking against British companies.

Limerick city at this time was also responding to the changes in national politics, particularly the huge rise in Sinn Féin support the steady

⁸ John Boyle, *The Irish Labour Movement in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington D.C., 1988), p. 194.

⁹ Dorothy Macardle, 'James Connolly and Patrick Pearse' in C.C.O'Brien (ed.), *The Shaping of Modern Ireland* (London, 1970), p. 189.

¹⁰ F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine* (London, 1973), p. 274.

growth of the Labour movement, and trade unionism. In 1916, the Mayor of Limerick, Stephen Byrne Quin was a self-declared home-ruler in addition to being quite pro-Unionist. Quin was re-elected in 1917, albeit that, nationally, the support for Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party was on the wane. In January 1918 Alphonsus O' Mara was elected Mayor of Limerick,¹¹ a development which signalled a change of political direction. O'Mara refused to take the Oath of Allegiance and quickly made known his opinions on the Irish Convention.¹² The number of Sinn Féin supporters and Volunteers in Limerick increased rapidly in Limerick city during 1917 and the I.T.G.W.U. came to Limerick to organise unskilled workers in that same year. The I.T.G.W.U. advocated the use of the strike as a political weapon. By 1918 Limerick had high numbers of both militant nationalists and militant Labour supporters.¹³

In 1919 Limerick city was, like many parts of Europe, suffering from the effects of war. High levels of poverty existed in the city. The demand for livestock during the First World War meant that farmers and livestock dealers had the opportunity to become quite wealthy. However, Limerick city was not in a position to benefit from the First World War, due to the fact that the city's primary industries were not linked to the needs of military contracts. There were no munitions or engineering works in the city. The fact that it cost more to ship products from the West coast than it did from the East also meant that Limerick did not receive many contracts from the British Government as compared with other Irish cities.¹⁴ This factor when taken in tandem with many other hardships, contributed to the rising levels of poverty and discontent in Limerick city. Housing conditions in Limerick city at this time was also quite poor. *The Bottom Dog* reported on the 10 November 1917 that there were '1,669 houses unfit for human habitation in the city; 692 owing to dilapidated condition and 977 owing to want of ordinary sanitary accommodation. According to the same Authority '681 should be closed up absolutely.'¹⁵ (Original italics). By April 1919, Limerick city was experiencing severe economic difficulties which many blamed on the war. The housing conditions also contributed to discontent amongst the city's inhabitants, many of whom

¹¹ Matthew Potter, *First Citizens of the Treaty. The Treaty and Mayoralty of Limerick 1197-2007* (Limerick, 2007), pp 89-90.

¹² Matthew Potter, *The Government and the People of Limerick. The History of Limerick Corporation/ City Council 1197-2006* (Limerick, 2006), p. 370.

¹³ Ibid, p. 371.

¹⁴ Liam Cahill, *Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet 1919 A Threat to British Power in Ireland* (Dublin, 1990), p. 34.

¹⁵ *The Bottom Dog*, 10th November 1917.

were factory workers. These same workers were beginning to utilise the strike weapon to communicate their demands for shorter working weeks and higher wages in an effort to survive the tougher economic climate. These were just some of the underlying factors which likely influenced the Limerick strike of April 1919.

On the ninth of April 1919, under the Defence of the Realm Act (D.O.R.A.), various districts of Limerick city were declared special military areas by the British government – i.e. that they were under the direct control of the British army. Brigadier General C.J. Griffin was the general appointed to oversee this entire operation. The reason that Limerick city was declared a special military area was due to the death of two Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C.) officers on the 6 April. Also, the British government was concerned at the growing atmosphere of revolution and discontent amongst the workers. In a report from the Chief Secretary's office to the Inspector General for the month of March, the growing levels of discontent were described in the following terms: 'I have to report that during the month of March the condition of Ireland was very unsatisfactory owing to the continued prevalence of political unrest which is widespread and shows no sign of abatement'. This same report concluded with a general summary of the condition of Ireland as a whole: 'Ireland is unquestionably in a highly flammable condition and, in my opinion, at no time was there more urgent necessity for the presence of an overwhelming military force'.¹⁶ The monthly reports sent from the Chief Secretary to the Inspector General at this juncture also reveal the British government's interest in monitoring the levels of support for Bolshevism in Ireland. Organisations such as the I.T.G.W.U., organisations to which most Irish workers were affiliated, were being closely monitored. In the Inspector General's monthly report to the Under Secretary for June 1919, it was noted that:

Except in Ulster where it is unpopular, the bulk of the workers belong to the Irish Transport and General Workers Union which through its official organ "THE VOICE OF LABOUR" displays hostility towards the farming class and is raising the cry of "The land for the people." So far the members of this Union in provincial districts have not shown inclination to Bolshevism save that two small meetings were held at Cork and Limerick to support the "Hands off Russia" policy.¹⁷

Other similar reports such as the monthly report for May 1919 reinforce how closely the British government was monitoring the situation in

¹⁶ Inspector-General's Confidential Report for the month of March 1919.

¹⁷ Inspector-General's Confidential Report for the month of July 1919.

Ireland, including any possible increase in support for Bolshevism. The report stated that:

The influence of the Sinn Fein organisation has in no way abated during the month. Feeling is distinctly anti-British and hostile towards the police. There is nothing to show a marked tendency towards Bolshevism, but the fact that red flags were carried in a few processions on Labour Day demonstrations would indicate a slight tendency in that respect.¹⁸

The decision to declare parts of Limerick city special military areas in April 1919 was “officially” a consequence of the deaths of two R.I.C. officers. It was also due to the fact that the inhabitants of Limerick city, the workers in particular, were in a very agitated state. Perhaps the confrontation between members of the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.) and the R.I.C. in the Limerick workhouse was a signal to the British government of how volatile the situation in Limerick could become if it was not monitored on a regular basis or kept under control.

The shootings which triggered the formation of the special military areas and the subsequent strike occurred on the sixth of April, 1919. The *Irish Independent* covered the story of the death of Robert Byrne and the two R.I.C. officers reporting that there had been a shooting sensation in Limerick.¹⁹ Byrne was an I.R.A. member who was also a trade union activist. He had previously been arrested and sentenced to twelve months in prison for possession of a revolver and ammunition. During his sentence Byrne went on hunger strike to gain support for his position as a political prisoner. In a letter to his mother written on the eighteenth of January, 1919, Byrne assured her of his well-being as follows: ‘I am fit and well and really there is no occasion to bother about me at all. Try and put me out of your mind and just treat my absence as if I were away for a few days’.²⁰ These words were written in January, 1919. By April of the same year Byrne’s health had deteriorated considerably and he was transferred from Limerick prison to the Limerick workhouse hospital in a weak and emaciated condition. It was in the Limerick workhouse on the sixth of April, and whilst under police supervision, that some of his fellow I.R.A. members attempted to rescue Byrne. During the escape attempt Byrne was fatally shot. One RIC officer, a Constable O’Brien, was also shot during this same incident and died almost immediately. Another man named

¹⁸ County Inspector’s monthly report for May 1919.

¹⁹ The *Irish Independent*, 17 April 1919.

²⁰ Letter from Robert Byrne to his mother written 18.1.1919 from Limerick prison. Limerick City Museum Ref. No. 199001671.

Constable Spillane would later die from spinal injuries caused by a gunshot wound.²¹

Robert Byrne's funeral was held on the ninth of April in Limerick city where thousands of Volunteer members were in attendance. It is no coincidence that Limerick city was declared a military area on the same day as this enormous and emotional funeral. The colonial authorities instigated these "new" military areas out of a combination of fear – i.e. the shootings of the R.I.C. men - and the possibility that the workers of Limerick would retaliate for Byrne's death. On the 11 April 1919, the *Limerick Leader* reported that Limerick was now a military area as defined by proclamation. The direct consequence of the special military areas was that permits were needed for citizens to access certain parts of the city. This same newspaper article also detailed the method by which one could receive a permit. The permits were required by anybody travelling about the military areas and perimetres covered by the districts on the south bank of the river Shannon and those districts west of the railway line. As many workers needed to cross into different districts in order to get to work, permits were issued to them by the military. A letter of identification was required from the R.I.C. to apply for such a permit and only once it was established that the worker was loyal to the government were they granted a permit.²²

In order to leave or come into the military area it is necessary to obtain a permit from the competent authority in which the applicant resides, and anyone who commits a breach of the Proclamation is liable to be tried under the Defence of the Realm Act and removed from the district if necessary. A photograph is necessary for the purposes of obtaining a permit. The proclamation sets out no special hours up to which people may be about and mentions no more restrictions on the hours of business. The proclamation posted on Wednesday evening prohibits the holding, without permission of 'all meetings and assemblies for any purpose whatsoever'.²³

One of the immediate consequences of this new permit system was that both the R.I.C. and the military had access to enhanced and more-detailed information concerning all permit-carrying workers. This meant that any workers who were known to the police or were suspected of I.R.A.

²¹ Richard Abbott, *Police Casualties in Ireland 1919-1922* (Dublin, 2000), pp 35-36.

²² Liam Cahill, *Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet 1919 A Threat to British Power in Ireland* (Dublin, 1990), pp.61-62.

²³ The *Limerick Leader*, 11th April 1919.

membership were likely to be denied permits and would (likely) lose their jobs.

The relationship between the R.I.C. and the people of Limerick was also a focal point for tension at this time, just as it was in most other parts of Ireland. The R.I.C. seemed to have been particularly deeply mistrusted by the people of Limerick. During the trial, which investigated the circumstances of Robert Byrne's death, the *Irish Independent* quoted a representative for the Byrne family in the following terms:

he spoke appreciatively, on behalf of the late Mr. Byrnes relatives, of the conduct of the military-officers and men- in their difficult position, in all their dealings with the deceased man. On the other hand, he contended that the police had lost their heads over the matter, and that they had acted in a very regrettable way²⁴

An example of the negative press that the R.I.C. were receiving at this time, particularly as relating to Byrne's death is evident in the local Limerick newspaper *The Limerick Echo*. The newspaper reported that on the seventh of April 1919, the R.I.C. drew batons and charged at a crowd which had assembled outside the William Street barracks. One of the people injured in the ensuing melee was a British soldier.²⁵ At a time when the R.I.C. was unpopular with the Irish public anyway, many people viewed this permit system as the "final straw". It boosted the police force's power immeasurably and it made the lives of many Limerick city inhabitants intolerable.

Both the poor economic conditions in Limerick city and the often-strained relations between the public and the R.I.C. were unrelated aspects of a more-general sense of discontent. However, the death of Robert Byrne brought both aspects of this public discontent together and provided a focus for the public's outrage. Many viewed the R.I.C. as responsible for Byrne's death and the declining economic conditions probably contributed to the feeling that the British government was not providing enough material aid to the city. Both strands of opinion reinforced the notion that Ireland was ruled by an unfeeling tyrant and while they cannot be said to have provided a direct catalyst for the strike that ensued, these factors certainly reinforced the workers' determination to revolt against the military presence in Limerick city. Interestingly, the relationship between the British army and the people of Limerick was much more positive than that with the R.I.C. *The Workers' Bulletin* highlights the sense that the

²⁴ *The Irish Independent*, 17th April 1919.

²⁵ *The Limerick Echo*, 8th April 1919.

army (known as ‘Tommy’) had more in common with the people of Limerick than did the police force: ‘We learn with the greatest feelings of joy that our fellow Trade Unionists in khaki are refusing to do the dirty work, which is only fit for such invertebrates as the R.I.C.’ The same article states:

Tommy is not our real enemy, and we wish him to understand he is merely the tool of his Imperialistic Capitalistic Government. At the same time we don’t like to see him being used as a body guard to the Royal Irish Cowards, but we know, that given a chance, Tommy will make short work of guarding the murderers of their own people.²⁶

During the strike, one British Army Major was court-martialled for refusing to perform the duties he claimed were the responsibility of the R.I.C.²⁷ *The Workers’ Bulletin* highlighted the fact that many of the working class in Limerick city could empathise with their fellow working-class soldiers at this juncture. The perceived commonality between the British soldiers in Limerick and the strikers is evidence of the transcendence of nationality in this dispute. Both the majority of soldiers and the striking workers belonged to the working-class, and this was seen by the workers as a unifying factor.

From 1916 onwards, the political climate in Ireland was steadily becoming more aggressive and more assertive in tone. As political parties including Sinn Féin and the Labour movement became more organised, so too did their supporters. The Labour Party and the S.P.I. still publicly endorsed the rhetoric of previous leaders such as James Connolly while at the same time moving away from their policies and this reality meant that the workers in Limerick often remained unaware of the departure between the public image of these parties and their new political goals. Limerick city at this time can be viewed as a microcosm of national events. Changes in the political direction of the city’s mayoralty indicated that the city was becoming more supportive of Sinn Féin. However, Limerick also retained a very strong affiliation with Labour, a link which was strengthened by the arrival of the I.T.G.W.U. in 1917. The decision to make parts of Limerick city a special military zone also reflected on the national situation more generally. The British government was aware of a growing militancy throughout Ireland and military control of certain areas was deemed necessary to maintain their rule. As a city, Limerick also encapsulated the

²⁶ *The Workers’ Bulletin*, 21st April 1919.

²⁷ Liam Cahill, *Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet 1919 A Threat to British Power in Ireland* (Dublin, 1990), p. 94.

then economic performance of Ireland as a whole. Pitiably housing conditions and widespread levels of poverty were symptomatic of the general condition of the country. The careful monitoring of suspicious or Bolshevik-type activities by the British government also highlights the fear that Ireland's working classes could become militant. Each of these factors played important roles as catalysts for the strike that took place in Limerick city on the fourteenth of April 1919.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STRIKE

On the fourteenth of April, 1919, the workers of Limerick city called a general strike. The strike lasted until the twenty-eighth of April and during those two weeks, an estimated 14,000 workers downed tools. The immediate causes of the strike were the death of I.R.A. member Robert Byrne and the decision of the British military to declare parts of Limerick city an area under special military control. The strike was controlled by a strike committee which became known as a soviet. Perhaps, this is partly due to the strong control the strike committee had on various aspects of Limerick city. For the duration of the strike the city council's authority was overruled and the local middle classes recognised this reality.¹ The strike committee regulated the price of produce and the supply of food into the city. It also ensured the prevention of crime during the course of the strike and printed currency in order to finance it. It is generally acknowledged that the strike committee effectively and successfully governed the city. On the first of May 1918, a year prior to the strike, Labour Day was celebrated in Limerick city. On this day the workers of Limerick displayed a growing consciousness of the power inherent in their class position. By acknowledging the Bolshevik success in Russia and referring to the Bolsheviks as 'Comrades' in their demonstration at the Market's Field, the Limerick workers echoed the speeches made by the S.P.I. in February 1918. This is an indication of the influence that both the S.P.I. and the Labour Party had on the Limerick workers. By creating a positive image of events in Europe these political parties provided the workers with ideological inspiration and ensured that they felt themselves members of an international community:

That we the workers of Limerick and district, in mass meeting assembled,
extend fraternal greetings to the workers of all countries, paying particular

¹ D.R. O'Connor Lysaght, *The Story of the Limerick Soviet: A General Strike against British Militarism* (Limerick, 2003), p. 11.

tribute to our Russian comrades who have waged such magnificent struggle for their social and political emancipation².

That the workers of Limerick referred to the Bolsheviks indicates the effect, albeit limited, that the Bolshevik revolution had an on the consciousness of certain segments within Irish society. The allusions to the struggles for social equality and political emancipation were especially apt when considered in conjunction with the Irish situation at this time. In 1919, Ireland was still a colony within the British Empire. However, Ireland was also a county fighting a War of Independence against the colonial regime, a war which was to last until 1921. In 1919, the desire for independence from the British Empire was very strong. Therefore, many discontented members of Irish society may have viewed the success of the Bolsheviks against the previously-invincible Russian empire as proof that no empire was unbreakable if the people oppressed within it desired independence. The workers' speeches of this era and their allusions to their Russian working-class counterparts do not indicate that the Limerick workers were politically motivated by the Russian Revolution. They looked to the Bolshevik Revolution as an example of working-class consciousness rather than one that advocated an outright revolution

The strike began on Monday morning the fourteenth of April; Limerick city had been a special military area since the ninth of April. The main members of the strike committee were John Cronin, James Casey and James Carr with Cronin functioning as chairman. Cronin was a carpenter by trade and subsequent to the Limerick strike he went on to become a city councillor and a Poor Law Guardian. Indeed, upon his retirement, he was presented with a special award by the workers of Limerick at an event where the workers publicly acknowledged his role in their struggle during the course of the strike. The address from the Limerick workers on the occasion of his retirement referred to Cronin's invaluable work for the duration of the Limerick strike:

we desire to record in tangible form our appreciation of your very valuable services to the Trades Union management of the city and in particular your actions as Chairman of the Committee during Easter 1919 in the memorable strikes for Freedom to Work³

² Liam Cahill, *Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet 1919 A Threat to British Power in Ireland* (Dublin, 1990), p. 7.

³ Illuminated Address presented to John Cronin on his retirement. Limerick City Museum Ref. No. 1979.0020.

During the strike, John Cronin held the position of president of Limerick United Trades and Labour Council (L.U.T.L.C.). James Carr was the third officer of the strike committee while James Casey was treasurer. Casey later became the Mayor of Limerick city in 1921. He was a lifelong member of the Labour party and also wrote a memoir of the strike entitled 'Limerick Challenge to British Tyranny' an account which was published in *Limerick's Fighting Story: From 1916 to the truce with Britain*.⁴ The strike committee formed by these men also included various sub-committees which were charged with organising publicity, finance, food and vigilance. Interestingly, one of the reasons that the strike committee was referred to as a soviet was due to the highly- efficient manner in which it controlled every aspect of the strike. The control which the committee wielded over the people of Limerick city and the large support which it enjoyed is clear from the fact that such a small group of people ensured the maintenance of law and order during this two-week period and effectively governed the city of Limerick. The fact that the strike committee encountered no resistance from the people of Limerick is testament to the support and co-operation that they received from the public. The *Irish Independent*, a newspaper which was not noted for its sympathy towards the strikers, conceded that 'The first petty Sessions Court since the strike began was held yesterday, when not a single case arising out of the stoppage of work was listed'.⁵ Newspapers such as the *Limerick Leader* were obliged to print a heading on their publications during the strike, which stated 'Published, by Permission of the Limerick Strike Committee'.⁶ (sic). Hours of businesses, rates and prices of produce were controlled by the strike committee. One problem with the supply of food related to the production of bread. As the strike committee would only allow people to buy bread directly from the bakeries, the bakeries (in turn) needed adequate supplies of flour and coal so as to continue functioning. Support for the strikers came from County Clare where farmers supplied foodstuffs such as flour, milk and butter. These supplies were deposited to food depots set up by the Limerick strike committee just outside the military area.⁷ The strike committee also posted pickets so as to patrol the streets of Limerick and ensure that businesses kept to the agreed opening hours and regulated the price of their merchandise.

⁴ James Casey, 'A Limerick Challenge to British Tyranny' in Col. J.M. MacCarthy (ed.), *Limerick's Fighting Story: From 1916 to the Truce with Britain* (Tralee, 1949), pp 185-193.

⁵ *The Irish Independent*, 23 April 1919.

⁶ *The Limerick Leader*, 14th April 1919.

⁷ *The Irish Independent*, 17th April 1919.

Shopkeepers were also required to ration food supplies. According to James Carr, a member of the strike committee, 'Equality of sacrifice was for all classes'.⁸ The propaganda committee also posted notices throughout the city to keep people informed of the necessary prices and regulations.⁹

Initially, members of the clergy supported the strike. This included a Fr. Kennedy from Newmarket-on-Fergus who helped with the supply of food from County Clare to the food depots. The Catholic Bishop of Limerick Dr. Denis Hallinan issued a statement during the strike through the medium of his clergy, a statement which the *Irish Independent* reported as declaring: 'the proclamations of the city, under existing circumstances, unwarrantable, and condemning the display of military force'.¹⁰ However, by the time the strike had concluded the attitude of clergy also appeared to have seen significant change. For example, Rev. W. Dwane issued a statement on the events of the strike in Limerick at twelve o'clock mass on the twenty-seventh of April. That statement was referred to in articles published in both the *Limerick Leader* and the *Limerick Echo*. Rev. W. Dwane stated that:

in view of certain statements in the press he felt called upon to refer to the strike which had taken place in Limerick. What he wished to state was that neither his Lordship nor the clergy were consulted before the strike was declared and they were tee totally opposed to its continuance . . . His sympathies were always with the working classes. He was a great believer in the difficulty of the labourer and any help he could give in raising the dignity of labour would be rendered by him on all occasions. But he hoped that the honest working men of Limerick would in future duly consider any action they were about to take, and be guided only by leaders upon whom they could rely and in whom they could have full confidence. He was very glad that the strike had ended.¹¹

This statement contradicts both the statement printed by the *Irish Independent* on the 17 April and the article printed by *The Voice of Labour* on the 26 April. *The Voice of Labour*, in an article entitled 'All Power To The Limerick Soviet' stated that, 'The Soviet is in being. It obtained the adhesion of the Mayor and the support of the Bishop and clergy'.¹² *The*

⁸ James Casey, 'A Limerick Challenge to British Tyranny' in Col. J.M. MacCarthy (ed.), *Limerick's Fighting Story: From 1916 to the Truce with Britain* (Tralee, 1949), p. 45.

⁹ Liam Cahill, *Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet 1919 A Threat to British Power in Ireland* (Dublin, 1990), pp. 72-73.

¹⁰ *The Irish Independent*, 17th April 1919, *The Limerick Echo*, 29th April 1919.

¹¹ *The Limerick Leader*, 28th April 1919.

¹² *The Voice of Labour*, 26th April 1919.

Story of the Limerick Soviet by D.R. O'Connor Lysaght has also considered the Bishop of Limerick's statements in relation to both the permit system and the treatment of Robert Byrne. The Bishop declared the permit system 'unwarrantable' and also took issue with the manner in which Robert Byrne's funeral was carried out by the military.¹³ The support which the Bishop and his clergy had originally expressed for the Limerick Strike was decisively withdrawn by the time the strike had come to an end.

On Saturday 19 April - given the fact that the strike was lasting longer than expected - a meeting of Limerick magistrates was called to discuss the military restrictions. The city magistrates proposed that the perimeters of the special military area be expanded to include all of the areas where the workers lived. Such a move would have limited the number of permits which workers required to get to their factories for work. General Griffin was present at this meeting and offered a concession to the workers. Rather than the police being in charge of supplying permits he offered that the employers could oversee this operation. This concession was appealing as the strike was lasting much longer than anybody had originally anticipated. *The Nationalist* reported on the 19 April that if the concessions were accepted then the strike would be closer to a resolution. Its article stated: 'if this occurs then the end of the strike is at hand, as it was owing to the boundary limits that the strike was launched last Monday so suddenly and unexpectedly.'¹⁴ Resident Magistrate P.J. Kelly was present at this meeting. In a letter to the Under Secretary written on the 21 April 1919, Kelly informed him that 'The majority of magistrates with the mayor expressed themselves very strongly and pointedly showing that they are not at all in sympathy with the efforts of the authorities taken to maintain order'. The letter concluded with Kelly highlighting the relationship between the mayor, the magistrates and the R.I.C of Limerick city. Alluding to the controversial events which occurred in the Limerick Workhouse at the time of Byrnes' death, Kelly conveyed the opinion of the magistrates and the mayor when he wrote that 'I'm sorry to say some conveyed that they thought it was the police who committed an outrage on that occasion'.¹⁵

At the time of the strike, the Mayor of Limerick was Alphonsus O'Mara. O'Mara was known to be a Sinn Féin supporter - albeit that - as

¹³ D.R. O'Connor Lysaght, *The Story of the Limerick Soviet-A General Strike against British Militarism* (Limerick, 2003), p. 15.

¹⁴ *The Nationalist*, 19th April 1919.

¹⁵ CSORP/1919/10390 National Archives (Letter to the Under Secretary from P. J. Kelly Resident Magistrate).

O'Connor Lysaght has pointed out - the Limerick strike was not politically-inspired, given that both Sinn Féin and the Labour Party were generally not supportive of strikes.¹⁶ Sinn Féin, in particular, was then a capitalist movement in terms of its ideology. It is evident that the main impetus for this strike came from the workers themselves. The strike committee had authority over the entirety of Limerick city, a reality which rendered the city council powerless. The city's middle-class also appear to have accepted the strike committee and their methods. This fact was one of the main reasons why the strike committee became known as a soviet in the first place. Unsurprisingly, given the overwhelming support which the strike received across all social classes, the city mayor felt compelled to lend his support to the strike. On the 14 April, the British Unionist leader Andrew Bonar Law, the Lord Lieutenant Viscount French and General Griffin - (the latter was responsible for all military operations in Limerick city) - received statements from the Limerick Chamber of Commerce which clearly outlined their opposition to the permit system.¹⁷ On the 19 April the mayor hosted a large public meeting in which a resolution was passed in protest at the special military area which had been set up.

Fr. O'Connor, the parish priest of St. Mary's also added his voice to the protest saying that the cordon around the military area should be lifted since it was preventing the workers getting to their jobs.¹⁸

At a meeting called on the 20 April, Easter Sunday, John Cronin, leader of the strike committee, offered to hand over control of the strike committee to members of the Labour Party National Executive. He did this because the National Executive seemed supportive of the Limerick strike. On the 19 April, in a statement printed in the *Irish Independent*, the National Executive highlighted their opposition to the military permits and the infringement on workers' rights that had occurred due to the imposition of the special military area in Limerick. The statement continued:

In view of this wanton attack on trade unionists, the National Executive appeals to the unbiased opinion of the workers and peoples of all countries as to on whose shoulders lies responsibility for the probably grave

¹⁶ D.R. O'Connor Lysaght, *The Story of the Limerick Soviet-A General Strike against British Militarism* (Limerick, 2003), p. 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 11.

¹⁸ Liam Cahill, *Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet 1919 A Threat to British Power in Ireland* (Dublin, 1990), p.100.