THE PERIOD from 1917 to 1919 was a time of world revolutionary turmoil and stirring working class struggles never since repeated. The traumatic effect of the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 and the disturbed aftermath of the First World War transformed Europe into a boiling cauldron of political and industrial unrest. In 1919, a wave of revolt and protest swept across the continent bringing a soviet in Munich, an insurrection in Berlin, a commune in Budapest, a general strike in Vienna, risings in Vratsa and Plovdiv, the occupations of factories by Turin workers, the struggles for a forty-hour week in Glasgow and Belfast and big strikes in Liverpool, Southampton, Tyneside and London.

Ireland experienced some of the tremors of this upheaval. A combination of external and internal influences found expression in working class activity in different parts of the country. In Limerick, many workers, led by the officers and executive committee of the United Limerick Trades and Labour Council, had grown in political and nationalistic consciousness. This development had been sharpened by a number of events, notably, the effects of the 1913 Dublin Lockout, the influence of the writings of James Connolly and the participation of the Citizen Army in the 1916 Rising. James Larkin, speaking at the 1914 annual conference of the Irish Trade Union Congress, in thanking those who had helped the locked out Dublin workers, made a special reference to the Limerick Pork Butchers who had 'sent more every week in proportion to their strength than any other union.'

This new awareness found an outlet in the appearance on October 20th 1917 of Limerick's first working class paper, The Bottom Dog. This weekly publication was written and circulated by some of the leaders of the Trades Council and continued for 48 editions to November 1st 1918. Labour Day was celebrated by Limerick workers for the first time on May 1st 1918, when over 10,000 workers marched through the streets. A press report described the event: "It was a striking display of the strength and solidarity of organised labour in the city, and the appeal of the Trades and Labour Council to celebrate the day was most successful.'

The demonstration ended with speeches from three platforms at the Market's Field, where in mass meeting assembled, extend fraternal greetings to the workers of all countries, paying particular tribute to our Russian comrades who have waged such a magnificent struggle for their social and political emancipation." Thus it can be seen from the language used in the text of the resolution that the Russian Revolution had repercussions in Limerick and the expression of solidarity by the city's workers shows the extent of their developing class consciousness. (3)

During this period, the Irish Transport and General Workers Union campaigned, vigourously to organise general workers into its young Limerick branch. But other forces were also at work. The rise of Sinn Fein to political power brought an increase in political awakening into working class consciousness. In the years 1917 and 1918, two papers published in the city, The Factionist and The Soldier Hunter, fanned the new nationalistic fervour. So and socialism struggled to assert themselves and these forces were soon to merge in a general strike of the city's workers, in April 1919, that became widely known as the Limerick Soviet.

The first moves that led to the strike began on January 21st, 1919, when a member of Sinn Fein and an Irish Volunteer, Robert J. (Bobby) Byrne, was sentenced to twelve month's imprisonment with hard labour after a revolver and ammunition had been found at his house. Byrne had been brach president of the Post Office Clerk's Association until he was dismissed from his job for his political activities. He had also been a delegate to the Trades Council. In prison Byrne led his republican colleagues in a campaign of disobedience to secure political status and better treatment. This campaign culminated in a riot at the prison. Police reinforcements were sent for and the prisoners were beaten and ill-treated. On February 14th, following a meeting of the Trades Council, a resolution was passed, and late distributed throughout the city in leaflet form, protesting against the treatment being meted out to the prisoners.

This protest was ignored and the prisoners went on hunger strike to try to secure their objective. After three weeks, Byrne was in a weak condition and was removed to the hospital at the Limerick Union. He was placed in a general ward under a heavy armed guard. Plans were made for his rescue by the Volunteer leadership and, at 3 p.m. on Sunday, April 6th, the attempt was made. An attack was made on the ward and, in the ensuing melee, Byrne was shot through the chest and died at 8.30 p.m. the same evening. One of the policemen guarding Byrne was killed, another was seriously wounded and others received injuries.

The death of the policeman was not an isolated incident but part of a general strategy of guerilla harassment and attacks on the British military forces and the police. The British administration in the country was in the process of breaking down before the rising tide of Irish nationalism. In March 1919, a month before the Limerick strike, in a report marked URGENT and stamped SECRET, the Inspector General of Royal Irish Constabulary informed the Chief Secretary's Office for
Ireland that "In the prevailing discontent with the existing form of Government, should the extremists decide to take independent action, they could rely to a considerable on the co-operation of Labour organisation, and that they would certainly find a large number of fanatical Irish Volunteers through the country, ready to do their bidding. Ireland is unquestionably in a highly inflammable condition and in my opinion at no time was there more urgent necessity for the presence of an overpowering military force." (4)

It was against this highly charged background that the funeral of Robert Byrne took place. The funeral itself was a tense and crowded occasion with an estimated 15,000 people, including the Mayor and Corporation and Sinn Fein sympathisers from Limerick and the surrounding counties, coming together for the event. The British military authorities became alarmed that a further outbreak of trouble was imminent. Troops and armoured cars lined the route of the funeral procession and two planes hovered over the city.

On April 9th, three days after Byrne's death, the British military authorities took a further step to deal with the explosive situation: the city of Limerick was proclaimed a special military area under the Defence of the Realm Act, with the terms of the proclamation to take effect from Tuesday, April 15th. From that date, special permits would have to be used by all people entering the city. Those who needed permits had to present also be forced to undergo the same military and police scrutiny.

Strong resentment spurred by the active nationalist forces, manifested itself among the workers against these restrictions. A special meeting of the Trades Council was called for on April 13th and was attended by representatives of thirty-five trade unions. The decision of the meeting was that the workers should not be forced to work under the conditions of the proclamation. A general strike of all the city's workers was declared and the Limerick Soviet was under way.

A strike committee was elected to control the city and a subcommittee were appointed to take charge of propaganda, finance, food and vigilance. The strike was called at 11.30 p.m. on Sunday, April 13th and, with the help of a sympathetic printing works in Cornmarket Row, which worked night and day during the strike, within two hours the city was covered with the following proclamation:

Limerick United Trades and Labour Council Proclamation. The workers of Limerick assembled in Council, hereby declare cessation of all work from 5 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 began and an estimated 15,000 workers obeyed the call. Through a unique coincidence, journalists from all over the world were then in Limerick to report on the proposed transatlantic flight by Major Wood, who had planned to land in the city for re-fuelling. Consequently, within twenty four hours, the striking Limerick workers had captured headlines in newspapers throughout the world. For the duration of the strike, these journalists gave their readers a blow by blow account of the operation of the soviet.

Four depots were established to supply food at fixed prices and the work of collecting and distributing the food was carried out by four City Councillors. Certain shops were allowed to open and labour was provided for

THE LIMERICK GENERAL STRIKE COMMITTEE, 1919

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Four depots were established to supply food at fixed prices and the work of collecting and distributing the food was carried out by four City Councillors. Certain shops were allowed to open and labour was provided for
bakeries, gas and electricity works and other essential industries. Only vehicles displaying the notice, “Working under authority of the Strike Committee”, were allowed to travel on the streets. Approval was given to some firms to save perishable goods and to transport such goods as coal, butter and flour from the docks and the railway stations. Any company not carrying out instructions or engaging in profiteering or the unequal distribution of food was immediately closed down. James Casey, a printer, one of the strike leaders and treasurer of the Trades Council, has written:

Whilst the Trades Council and Strike Committee controlled all activities inside Limerick City, during the General Strike, the Irish Republican Army was busy with the preparations of martial law. The beleaguered people were systematically collected from surrounding towns and villages. After nightfall, relays of boats with muffled oars were successfully used to run the food and other supplies through the blockade and to maintain communication with the citizens. Numerous stratagems were employed to elude the military cordons, and funeral hearses from the Union Hospital and other districts outside the city did not always have a corpse in the coffin. (5)

Public houses were kept closed for the duration of the strike. A special civilian police force was set up to ensure, with the help of groups of picketing workers, that the authorised shops opened and closed at the appointed times. Queues were also controlled and traffic regulated. Every effort was made to prevent inconvenience, and equality of classes was the guiding principle of the strike committee. James Casey has recorded: “It was, 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.”

The strike committee published a people’s news sheet, The Worker’s Bulletin, which carried a day-to-day account of the progress of the strike. A separate report of the daily activities was also prepared for the benefit of the Irish and foreign journalists. The military authorities hit back with their own propaganda, issued through their Press Censor’s Office. In typewritten notices pasted up in the streets, the military claimed: “If owing to the wanton action of ill-disposed persons, the inhabitants suffer through lack of the necessities of life, the Government are in no way responsible and cannot do anything to ameliorate the consequences of such wanton action.” (6)

To this the strike committee replied and its statement ends on a defiant and optimistic note: “Should any suffering or inconvenience by occasioned, we rely on the men and women of Limerick, inspired as they are by old and forefathers did before us in the glorious cause in which we are in no way responsible and cannot do anything to ameliorate the consequences of such wanton action.” (6)

On the same day the Irish Times stated: “Associated to some degree with labour is the irresponsible element among Sinn Fein which, of course, regards the situation as a challenge to British law.” (9)

The local committee meanwhile is carrying out its functions with a thoroughness and appreciation that have not hitherto been associated with provincial disputes. Shrewd judges detect in this complete organisation the guiding hand of Sinn Fein and, though there is no open alliance, there is certainly a tacit agreement between the political and industrial parties here. Defiance of British law affords them a common platform. Labour, however, takes care to keep itself aloof from politics lest it should offend its friends in Great Britain, whose support is adequately appreciated in the present struggle. One sees very few emblems of Sinn Fein here nowadays and, except the daubing of the Treaty Stone in republican colours, there is no glari-
At the annual conference of the Gaelic Athletic Association held in Dublin, on April 20th, a resolution was adopted making a grant of £100 for the Limerick strike fund. A collection of £35.15s. was also taken up for the same fund. The Irish Times carried a report on the opposition of British trade unions to the strike. (19) On the following day, the same paper stated: (20) "Mr. J.H. Thomas, M.P., in a circular to all branches of the railwaymen's union in Ireland...advises the members of the union not to take any official part in the movement without the authority of the executive committee. In accordance with the instruction given, a copy of Mr. Thomas's letter has been sent to the branch of the Union at Limerick and to all branches connected with the railwaymen throughout Ireland". The paper also reported the local reaction to this statement and to a similar one from Mr. Stockman, on behalf of the executive of the British T.U.C. and British Labour Party. (21)

At the end of the first week, the strike committee had not received the anticipated amount of outside financial support. The committee, faced with dwindling food supplies and a serious shortage of money, attempted to head off a crisis by deciding to design and print its own money. Thousands of pounds, in denominations of £100, £50 and £1 notes, were issued. Commenting on this decision, an Irish Times reporter wrote:

"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". (22) An editorial writer in the same edition stated: "We are spectators today at a very bold and candid experiment in Irish syndicalism. We think that the experiment will fail...The country will note...the works of friends whom the Limerick Soviet has made in England. The great organisation of Labour remains silent and aloof.Only the extreme socialists, a small and discredited body, take it to their bosom. It has earned the injurious praise of the British Socialist Party and of the Independent Labour Party". (23)

The "injurious praise" of the Independent Labour Party was also given in the same issue of the Irish Times, in an account of that party's annual conference:

"Councillor Crawford, Edinburgh, said that they ought to do something to encourage the "Limerick Soviet" which had got over its financial difficulties by the issue of a paper currency of its own. He would like to see the working classes in this country do the same. In spite of what Mr MacDonald has said, the 'Limerick Soviet' was the first working class Soviet established in these islands. Although it was not possible to move a resolution, their sympathies were with their Irish friends." (24)

On Tuesday, April 22nd, the London Times devoted its third leader to the strike and concluded: "It is the outcome of the efforts of the Transport Union to paralyse the national life of Ireland, but in reality there is no country where the doctrines of Syndicalism are less likely to obtain a firm hold. The chief sufferers will be the strikers themselves." (25)

A number of ruses were carried out by the strike committee in attempts to confuse and harass the military. One such scheme involved the organisation of a bogus railwaymen's union in Ireland...advises the members of the union not to take any official part in the movement without the authority of the executive committee. In accordance with the instruction given, a copy of Mr. Thomas's letter has been sent to the branch of the Union at Limerick and to all branches connected with the railwaymen throughout Ireland". The paper also reported the local reaction to this statement and to a similar one from Mr. Stockman, on behalf of the executive of the British T.U.C. and British Labour Party. (21)

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Worker's Bulletin Issued

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while giving intense relief to the citizens generally, had
gone for nothing. They were basing their hopes upon a
futility of pursuing such a course and wisely decided to
of them are glad to get back to work, but others regard
the conference, and it was as a result of this document
Rev. Dr. Hallinan, Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick,
discussed the situation at length. Subsequently, his
and the Mayor called upon Brigadier-General Griffin and
committee issued its final proclamation outlining the
terms of the decision and ending on a hopeful if un-
realistic note: "We...

"Various Labour leaders were converging upon
Limerick yesterday, and it is understood that a decision
will be reached today on the question of a general strike
throughout Ireland. The prevalent opinion in Ireland
appears to be any call of the kind will not meet with a
widespread response." (27) The Irish Times reached a
similar conclusion. "The Executive of the T.U.C.
evidently is disappointed with the result of its appeal to
the workers throughout Ireland...the strike cannot be
universal because the sturdy and highly organised Labour
of North-East Ulster will have nothing to say to it." The
Labour Party had earlier decided to give practical sup-
port to the striking workers. But on April 23rd., the Irish
Times correspondent in Limerick stated: "The failure of
the national executive of the Labour Party to fulfil their
engagement to meet here today is regarded as an indica-
tion that all is not well in Labour circles. Their action,
taken in conjunction with the action of the British Labour
leaders, forces one to the conclusion that the end of the
strike cannot be far off." (28)

On Thursday, April 24th., following discussions with the
Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick, Dr. Hallinan, and the
Mayor of Limerick, Alphonsus O'Mara, the workers' solidarity began to crumble. The strike committee, under
strong pressure, shifted ground. After a long meeting,
John Cronin addressed a big meeting outside the
Mechanics' Institute, the headquarters of the strike com-
mittee in Lower Glentworth Street, and announced the
termination of the strike. He said: "We...could resume work without military permits to do so, and
those who could not to continue "in their refusal to accept
this sign of subjection and slavery". (29) And the strike
committee issued its final proclamation outlining the
terms of the decision and ending on a hopeful if un-
realistic note: "We...
call upon our fellow-countrymen and lovers of freedom all over the world to provide the
necessary funds to enable us to continue this struggle
against military tyranny." The Irish Times reported:
'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. In the afternoon, the 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 their
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.

When the decision was conveyed to the men this evening,
they received it in silence, and the subsequent speeches
of their leaders did not put them in better heart." (30)

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 Irish
views, 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 im-
mediate end of the strike; and that the readiness
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 con-
tinuance of the strike." (31)

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 at-
titude of the Roman Catholic clergy in supporting the
strike 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 discounted
extreme measures and the Executive knowing that the
people would be guided by their clergy, wisely
abandoned their plans." (32)

This statement was further reinforced by the sermon
given by Rev. W. Dwayne, Administrator of St. Michael's
Church, when speaking at the 12 o'clock Mass, on Sunday,
April 27, when he said: "What he wished to state was that
neither his Lordship nor the clergy were consulted before
the strike was declared, and were teetotally opposed to
The proclamation calling off the strike. (33)

Another body which was also opposed to the continuance of the strike was the Chamber of Commerce. It complained after the end of the dispute: "Had the workers consulted with the Chamber before declaring a general strike, joint action could have been taken which might have been effective and saved the city from the disastrous strike which lasted twelve days. The directors of this Chamber feel it their duty to enter an emphatic protest against the arbitrary actions of the workers in calling a general strike without giving due notice to the employers. If the positions had been reversed and the employers without notice closed down their premises, the workmen would have bitterly resented the action." The Chamber estimated that the employers had lost about £250,000 in turnover during the period of the strike and that the workers had lost £45,000 in wages. (34)

A week after the total resumption of work, the military authorities withdrew the proclamation of the city. The Sinn Fein policy of helping to keep the strike going as long as possible as a tactic to harass the military was emphasised in the nationalist paper New Ireland: "The chief value of the strike in Limerick lies in the effect it will have in putting the energetic nationalists on their mettle." (35)

A Limerick republican broadsheet The Republic was bitterly critical of the members of the strike committee who had "bowed the knee in shameful submission to the Army of Occupation". The people had been let down by the "nincompoops who call themselves the 'Leaders of Labour' in Limerick", and the calling off of the strike "came as a death blow to the hopes of thousands" (36) who were waiting outside the Mechanics' Institute.

The dissension between the Limerick Trades Council and the Irish T.U.C. did not end with the calling off of the proclamation. Echoes of the resentment broke out at the annual conference of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union congress, held at Drogheda in August 1919, during the debate on the carefully-edited report of the executive on the Limerick strike. A delegate, Michael O'Donnell of the Irish Clerical Workers' Union and a member of the Limerick strike committee, criticised the executive because of its delay in going to the strike area which "allowed certain undercurrents to get to work to sap and undermine the movement in Limerick". A Cork delegate named O'Duffy made a claim when he said that the strike was ended as "a result of subterranean influences". Tom Johnson, replying to the debate at the conference, explained the attitude of the executive. "Their proposal 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 of the people of Limerick, if they agreed to the Executive's proposal! The local strike committee had rejected this proposal on the grounds that it was impractical, and because of the clergy's opposition to the plan". (37)

The report as a whole was then submitted to the conference and adopted, with only one vote, that of the silent and unknown King's County (now Offaly) Trade Council delegate, Smyth, being cast against it.

**SOURCES**

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7. Ibid., p. 46.
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12. Limerick Chronicle, report.
15. Ibid.
16. The Worker's Bulletin, issued by the Strike Committee, 18 April 1919.
17. Irish Times, 21 April 1919.
18. Ibid.
20. Irish Times, 23 April 1919.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. The Times, 22nd April 1919.
27. Irish Times, 22 April 1919.
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29. Limerick Chronicle, report.
32. Irish Times, 26 April 1919.
33. Limerick Chronicle report.
34. Ibid.
35. New Ireland, 3rd May 1919.