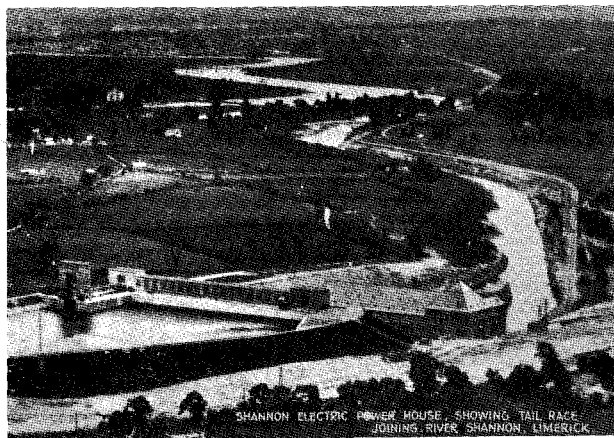


THE SHANNON SCHEME STRIKE

by Michael McCarthy



The Ardnacrusha Powerhouse and the Tail Race.

In 1925 the townland of Ballykeelaun, in south-east Clare and about three miles from Limerick city, took on the appearance of an Irish Klondyke. From every corner of their country men converged on the little village of Ardnacrusha in the hope of securing one of the 3,000 jobs on the Shannon Scheme. What was once a quiet farming area with a leisurely agricultural pace became overnight a giant building site blazed and torn by explosives and heavy machinery. The people of the village, with its few shops and three pubs, found themselves swamped by thousands of navvies who were "housed" in nearby huts, stables, hen-houses and barns.

The Shannon Electricity Bill became law in June 1925. On August 13 the contract between the Free State Government and the German company of Siemens Schuckert was signed. The contract was to cost £5.2 million and was to be completed within three-and-a-half years. (1). Within days of the contract being signed engineers had arrived from Germany and begun work. (2). Sites were pegged out and routes prepared for the 76 locomotives, 62 miles of railway track, hundreds of trucks, cranes, stone crushers, diggers and other heavy machinery soon to be imported from Hamburg.

One rather curious early achievement of the Germans was to transpose the name Ardnacrusha from what it now known as Parteen to the power station site. Parteen, in fact, was further down the road where the Protestant Church is situated. (3). Seemingly, the Germans had difficulty in establishing which townland was where so they called their construction site Ardnacrusha. There are strains of Macbeth and Birnham Wood about it all.

At the Longpavement, just outside the city, the Germans were to establish their railhead from which they ran their network of lines. On Thursday September 10 work was to have started on the building of a line from Longpavement to Ardnacrusha. Labourers on the job were to be paid 8d for a 54-hour week. (4) The district rate for labourers in Limerick and Clare was 1/1 for a 50-

hour week. Labourers who had been taken on by Siemens to convert the Strand Barracks into a storage depot were being paid 1/- for a 50-hour week. The city rate was 1/3 per hour for a 47-hour week. Besides, skilled trades on the Siemens' job were being offered less than the district rate. (5)

On the first morning of the Longpavement job a group of ex-servicemen of the national army approached the labourers there and urged them to stop work until the recognised rate was paid. The men agreed to do so. The Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, which represented many of the labourers, immediately issued a statement saying that work should continue but that talks on conditions and wages should take place without delay. (6) This advice was ignored by the men. The Transport Union then approached Siemens but, since the contractors would not meet its demands, formal instructions were given by the union for the work to cease. (7).

The stage was now set for what was to be a long, hard, bitter struggle. Organised labour was facing one of its greatest challenges since the foundation of the state, and viewed it as such. (8) There were four things in dispute:-

- (1) the wages of unskilled labour outside the city;
- (2) the wages of skilled labour outside the city;
- (3) the wages of unskilled labour in the city, and
- (4) the hours of the working week in and outside the city.

(9)

One of the most immediate effects of the dispute was to split the ranks of the ex-servicemen's association. On Sunday September 13, 600 former members of the national army held a meeting in the Transport Union hall at 91, O'Connell Street, Limerick. The meeting decided to form a new association because men were dissatisfied with the way the old association of ex-servicemen was handling their affairs. It also decided to affiliate the new organisation to the Transport Union in order to achieve greater clout in industrial action. The meeting was conducted by ex-Brigadier Tim Murphy. (10) There is the probability too, of course, that the association was splitting along Free State versus Republican lines, as the strains of the Civil War were hardly out of earshot. At a further meeting on the following Friday John Mulqueen was elected secretary of the new body, which had adopted the title of ex-National Army Officers and Men's Section, Irish Transport and General Workers Union. (11)

The old association, led by ex-Captain T. Casey, protested strongly and publicly in the local newspapers. It objected, firstly, against the formation of the new organisation and, secondly, against the affiliation of the ex-servicemen to the Transport Union. (12) Casey maintained that his group represented 90% of ex-servicemen in the city and area. (13) However, it was Mulqueen who made most of the running in the early days of the dispute with letters to the press protesting against the Government and low wages (14) and calling on the 800 ex-servicemen in the city not to apply for the job.

On September 25 an advertisement appeared in the national press for 3,000 unskilled workers for construction work on the Shannon river area in counties Limerick and Clare. Wages were set at 32/- a week for a 50-hour week, with free lodgings. The advertisement also stated that canteens were to be established and run by Irish contractors, where cooked food and other necessities could be bought for cost price. Applications were requested to fill in the printed form and address it to "The Shannon Scheme, Dublin". Interestingly enough, Siemens' headquarters in Dublin were at 43 Upper O'Connell Street, at one time the offices of the National Land League, the body of which had broken landlordism in Ireland.

There was an immediate outcry against the wages and conditions as advertised in the press. The ITGWU, the Irish Women's Workers' Union and the ex-servicemen's association affiliated to the Transport Union were unanimous in their condemnation. (16) The *Manchester Guardian* commented:

Such a wage is no doubt being paid and received contentedly enough on hole-in-the-corner jobs in many Irish counties, but the Shannon Scheme contractors must have been particularly sanguine if they really hoped that such a wage would be accepted from them when a great national scheme has to be put through under the auspices of the Government and when workers have to be collected from a distance. Labour naturally demands that the Government should compel the contractors to act the part of the model employer.

Dr. Thomas McLoughlin, Siemens' representative in Ireland, entered the controversy on September 28. He claimed that the rate being offered compared favourably with the going rates for agricultural labourers, and it was these, not city labourers, who should be used as the proper basis for comparison. The average agricultural wage at the time was 25/- for a 57-60-hour week. (17)

The *Voice of Labour* was quick to reply that it was unfair to compare the Shannon Scheme labourer to the farm labourer who often received some extra benefits in kind over and above the 32/- a week. However, it blamed Patrick McGilligan, the Minister for Industry and Commerce, for the whole situation and for signing the contract without the advice of the trade union movement. "It was signed as if the working class had no rights, no authority, no recognised status in the State. The Minister had acted in the spirit of an age before the repeal of the Anti-Combination Acts in 1824". (18)

On September 30 Joseph McGrath, the former Minister for Industry and Commerce, was appointed as Director of Labour for Siemens Schuckert. (19) His appointment angered and dismayed the unions. McGrath had been an organiser with Larkin's union, the Workers Union of Ireland, in Dublin, and later had been head of the Irish Secret Service. When Minister for Industry and Commerce he had first presented the Shannon Scheme report to the Dail. At the time of his appointment as Director of Labour for Siemens he had been out of work and in financial difficulties, having resigned from the Dail some months previously.

McGrath lost no time in getting into his new job. On the very same day as his appointment he opened negotiations with the Transport Union. No agreement was reached. (20) McGrath, however, was determined to finish the dispute one way or another. On October 1 he approached Casey's branch of the ex-servicemen's association, which was unaffiliated to the Transport Union, with an offer of 50/- a week and unbroken time. (21) There was considerable surprise and anger in the city when 45 of these men accepted the offer, and began work on Friday October 2 at the Strand Barracks, the docks and the Longpavement. (22) Pickets were immediately placed on

these jobs and on the Siemens' office at O'Connell Street, Limerick. (23)

The collective anger of the strikers boiled over on Friday night. Six labourers who had been working at the Strand Barracks went to the Transport Union office in O'Connell Street to explain their position. They were fortunate to escape with their lives. (24) At the Strand Barracks itself a group of the ITGWU affiliated ex-servicemen attacked the unaffiliated strike breakers. Gardaí were called and after a few charges the strikers dispersed. (25) German workers were also the targets of strikers' violence and these attacks were condemned from various pulpits throughout the city. (26)

By Saturday morning the strike had begun to spread. The Limerick Trades' Council issued a recommendation to carpenters and joiners in the Strand Barracks not to work with unskilled labour. (27) Members of the dockers' section of the Transport Union objected to German mechanics unloading material from ships guarded by the military with fixed bayonets. (28) A meeting of dockers was arranged for Sunday night, and even at this stage it was evident that the dockers would come out in support of their striking fellow workers. Their support was considered vital for the effectiveness of the strike.

On Sunday October 4 came the first test of public opinion in the city. Thousands of people turned out for a mass meeting which was held at the O'Connell monument at 3 p.m. Tom Irwin of the Labour Party Executive, William O'Brien, General Secretary ITGWU, T. Kennedy, Vice-President ITGWU, and J. Cronin, President of Limerick Trades' Council, addressed the gathering and called for solidarity in resisting this attack on the living standards of workers. Cronin, however, counselled against violence, "A man who strikes another in the fight is no friend of the labour movement. Violence will not be tolerated". (29)

The advice of the Trades' Council President was quickly forgotten. On the following day the dockers, who had decided to strike, assaulted the German mechanics who were unloading the Norddeucher Lloyd steamer, *Arabia*, which had arrived in port with 1,675 tonnes of material. (30) Guards on duty at the docks also came under attack. Strikers, armed with clubs and rubber pipes filled with lead, again set upon a few Germans in the city. (31)

On Monday there was a replacement of the picket at the Strand Barracks which had been removed following the fracas on Friday night. A new development was the placing of pickets on various premises in the city which had been supplying materials to the German contractors. In spite of the pickets, Casey and approximately 120 of his men turned up for work, but the skilled workers accepted the call of the Trades' Council and stayed at home. (32)

Hopes were raised briefly on Tuesday October 6 when the Government met representatives of Siemens in an attempt to find a way out of the deadlock. Nothing came of the meeting. (33) On the same day the National Executive of the Labour Party issued a statement denouncing the pay offer as being unmistakably "an unchristian wage" and calling upon "all workers whether organised or at present unorganised, to decline to allow themselves to be made instruments of this attack on the working class and to refuse to accept work at those wages". (34) It was hardly this call of the Labour Party but more likely the violence of the dockers which influenced Casey and his men but, at any rate, they stopped work on Tuesday evening pending a settlement of the dispute. (35) There was, however, no settlement in view and very little room for manoeuvre.

McLoughlin, as spokesman for Siemens, conducted his own public relations campaign, announcing that he had more applications for unskilled labouring jobs than he could handle and that men were being taken on at the rate of 40 a day. (36) His colleague, McGrath, announced that

the ships might be unloaded elsewhere, perhaps in Foynes. (37) Dockers in Foynes immediately held a meeting and indignantly rejected any suggestion blacklegging and informed the Director of Labour that no boats for Siemens would be unloaded at Foynes. (38)

The following weekend saw the setting up of a strike committee in the city, composed of representatives of the National Executive of the Labour Party, Limerick Trades' Council and the ITGWU. The committee announced that it was ready to negotiate if the contractors were prepared to do so. (39) John Hickey was elected secretary of the committee and its headquarters were at the ITGWU office, 91, O'Connell Street. (40)



Patrick McGilligan and Dr. Thomas McLoughlin on a visit to the site.

Another mass meeting was held at the O'Connell monument on Sunday October 11. Three bands led the thousands who marched in support of the strikers. (41) Again the leaders of the Irish TUC and the Labour Party Executive were present and called for continued support in "the biggest fight ever to face the labour movement in Ireland". (42) One of the most interesting speeches of the day was made by Tom Irwin, secretary of the Operative Plasterers' Society and a member of the Labour's National Executive. Referring to the German mechanics who were unloading the Arabia as scabs, he said that he had contacted the German trade unions and would have news for the mechanics shortly. (43) Within the week the *Voice of Labour* published a statement issued by the German Constructional Workers' Union, Hamburg, blacking the Limerick job and calling on all German workers on the Shannon Scheme to make common cause with their comrades on strike. "Are you not ashamed to impose a sweated wage? Few rural districts in Germany would pay 66.5 pfennig for a 48-hour week. You will have to face the consequences in Germany when you come home!" This appeal to the German workers to support their striking Irish fellow workers was not successful. Given the language barriers, the geographical difficulties, and the nature of the contract, it could hardly have been otherwise.

The following few days brought no new developments in the month-old dispute. Reports grew more pessimistic, as hopes for a speedy solution faded. The Limerick Leader described the prevailing mood: "Impatience, bordering on disgust, seems to be the pervading feeling in Limerick in regard to the prolonged deadlock in connection with the Shannon Scheme". (44) There were various calls for public bodies, such as the Limerick Corporation or the Limerick Conciliation Board, to intervene. A statement was made by the ex-servicemen unaffiliated to Transport Union accused the ITGWU of dragging its feet in the whole affair and called on the general public to form an arbitration committee to bring about a permanent settlement. It was pointed out that men from all parts of Ireland were still being taken on as labourers and were working for 32/- a week. The ex-servicemen also

stated that they were called off the site even though they were being paid 50/- a week. The statement recalled the old Limerick prophecy: "The stranger will flourish, the native will perish". (45) The fact that the unaffiliated ex-servicemen were not receiving strike pay made them more anxious than most to return to work.

By the end of the week the Limerick Corporation had yielded to the public demand for action. It was announced that the Mayor, Paul O'Brien, and two other officials of the Corporation would form a committee to intervene in the dispute. Ironically enough, at the same time, the Corporation also announced that it was no longer going to supply water to the German ships. (46) News of the Corporation's committee was well received in the city. Even Casey's unaffiliated ex-servicemen, who were champing at the bit to return to work, said that they would defer their decision to return pending the Mayor's peace efforts. (47) But hopes of a settlement vanished when, because of the vested interests of some of the Corporation members, the Mayor's committee never really got off the ground.

Another arbitrator had begun to actively interest himself in the dispute. Fr. J. Cleary C.S.S.R., spiritual director of the Redemptorist Holy Family Confraternity, (48) had already been in touch with the various parties in the dispute and was hopeful that a conference might be held in the near future. (49)

These moves gave rise to fresh prospects for an end to the dispute. But by the weekend these hopes had been shattered. First of all, coal workers refused to deliver coal to Siemens. (50) Then, on October 18 the Minister for Finance, Kevin O'Higgins, stated in Dungarvan that a secret society was fomenting trouble in the Shannon Scheme. He said that the organisation's aim was "to combat certain anti-British trade tendencies" which he claimed were showing themselves in the Free State. He alleged that an ex-army officer was the ringleader of this group, and warned those occupying pivotal positions in labour bodies or in organised associations of ex-servicemen, British or Irish, to watch out for agents of secret organisations. O'Higgins stated that the wage difficulty at the Shannon Scheme was directly due to a conspiracy by this secret society. (51)

Needless to say, the Minister's Dungarvan speech did not help to soften the strikers' attitude towards the Government or Siemens. The final blow to the remaining slender hopes of a settlement was a letter from Siemens to Fr. Cleary C.S.S.R. The contractors stated:

We do not understand what right the representatives of Limerick city labour have to refuse to accept rates in Limerick city which they admit to be fair rates on the alleged grounds that other rates, which do not concern them, and which are higher than those rural workers receive, are too low. In the circumstances outlined, the firm does not see that any useful purpose would be served entering into negotiations with a negotiating committee which represents Limerick city workers with whom, as far as the firm is aware, there are no points at issue. It is regretted therefore that the firm cannot meet in Conference with the negotiating committee. (52)

The letter spelt out the worst fears of the strikers but caused little surprise in the city. (53)

McGilligan, the Minister for Industry and Commerce, who had Ministerial responsibility for the Shannon Scheme, was in the United States all this time. He had gone there to examine the control and structure of the country's electricity industry. His Department, however, had remained remarkably silent on the dispute, even though it had come under severe criticism from several quarters for having advised the contractors to set the

weekly rate for labourers at 32/-. On October 20 the Department wrote to the National Executive of the Labour Party alleging that there had been an irregularity and that no formal complaint of a breach of the Fair Wages Clause had been lodged with the Department. The letter also pointed out that

there would appear to be evidence that your Executive is endeavouring to establish some new principle to be applied as a test to the wages paid under a Government contract other than that hitherto followed, the general standard of wages ordinarily paid by good employers in the district where the work is carried out. (54)

Two days later on October 22 a meeting took place between Government representatives and officials of the National Executive of the Labour Party. The Government repeated its complaint of the irregular procedure and professed ignorance of any matter in dispute other than the weekly rate of 32/- which, it claimed, compared favourably with the wages of farm labourers, road workers and similar workers needed for the job. The Government admitted giving information on wages to the contractors, and therefore accepted responsibility for the wage; consequently it was prepared to enter into discussion as to whether or not it was a fair wage. The Government objected, however, to discussing the matter with the negotiating committee in Limerick where it thought the atmosphere would not be helpful. (55)

The Labour representatives proposed that negotiations on rates and conditions for unskilled labour and other questions not purely local be conducted nationally with the National Executive and that negotiations for skilled workers in any particular locality be conducted with the local representatives of the unions concerned, or their headquarters, or with a local negotiating committee. (56)

The Government voiced no objection to the proposal of the National Executive and said that it would submit the proposal to the contractors. On October 26 the National Executive of Labour approved the action taken by its representatives during their meeting with Government. (57)

On the following day, October 27, Siemens effectively torpedoed the proposal of the National Executive by stating that which the firm had no objection to discussing with the Transport Union at any time matters which affected its members, but it reserved to itself the right to discuss with other Unions or Associations, for example, Associations of National ex-servicemen, etc., who may be prepared to offer their labour". (58) On the same day the unaffiliated ex-servicemen returned to work. (59)

On October 28 the National Executive requested a further meeting with the Government and suggested that the contractors be represented. The Department replied that, since the Ministers responsible were out of the country, no useful purpose could be served by further meetings. (60) Labour had no option but to suspend negotiations until McGilligan returned from the States. (61)

A noteworthy feature of the dispute at this stage was the manner in which the campaign was conducted by both parties. McLoughlin, Siemens' representative, had his almost daily report in the national press of "steady progress being made" in spite of delays, and of new men being taken on. Labour conducted its own campaign, mainly through the *Voice of Labour*. Under the headline "No Moleskin Joes", a correspondent from Ardnacrusha wrote that not one among the 150 navvies there could claim the slightest resemblance to one. "They are the usual material of which scabs are made - down-and-outs, and jailbirds who never worked." (62)

The newspaper also carried the words of the song, 'Thirty-two Bob!', which was doing the rounds of the pubs of Limerick and Ardnacrusha at the time:

Thirty-two bob! Thirty-two bob!
Come and we'll give you a beautiful job!
Come and enjoy some light recreation
Down on the Shannon electrification!
Sit down at once and send in your name,
And start in at playing an elegant game;
All you've to do is spend a few hours
Admiring the sun as it shines through the showers,
While you're up to your waist in mud and in stink,
Wielding a shovel or staking quick lime,
Shoving a barrow or lifting a load,
Digging a channel or making a road.
We don't want to strain you,
And so we won't detain you
For more than a mere fifty hours on the job,
And for that we'll pay you thirty-two bob!
Even that's not the might of our generous care,
We've taken great pains to ensure your share
Of good things to eat -
A whole half-pound of meat
And some scones at mid-day
And morning and night bread and jam with your tea:
For this we will charge you no more than twelve bob.
Sure everything's cheap on this wonderful job!
If you want any supper all you've to do
Is ask for it nicely and pay for it too.
After that you can roll yourself up in a cot,
In a nice wooden cabin set up on the spot.
You won't have to worry about paying rent,
For a rig and a stretch we won't charge you a cent.
Now isn't that a really beautiful job?
And don't forget a whole thirty-two bob!
Why don't you jump at the chance of your life?
Did I hear you say something about having a wife
And kiddies at home who will want to be fed?
What's wrong with you is, you've got a swelled head,
You shouldn't have children, your wife should be dead.
Didn't you know that the new Irish nation
Is only to last for one generation?
How dare you be married when your rate for the job
Is thirty-two bob! Thirty-two bob! (63)

On November 3 the Dail resumed, and the Government's policy was vehemently attacked by Deputy Thomas Johnson, leader of the Labour Party. He moved a motion that all steps should be taken to ensure that the men be paid a living wage before any more work was carried out on the Shannon Scheme. He argued that the wage was a sweated wage and that it did not allow for increases in the cost of living. He asked if the Government intended to build a new Ireland on unmarried men? The Government rejected the allegations of Congo conditions and coolie labour and claimed that wages and conditions compared favourably with those of similar labourers. The Labour motion was defeated. (64)

The Government's claim that it could not intervene and that the project would not be viable if the wages were raised was strongly supported by farmers who feared that higher wages would unsettle their own workers. (65)

The defeat of the Labour Party motion in the Dail was a crucial blow for Irish labour in general, coming, as it did, only four years after the foundation of the state. And, as the debate was in progress in Leinster House, work was progressing on the site at Ardnacrusha, albeit slowly. It soon became clear that the Government was not going to intervene. Labour therefore had to do something drastic, if the striking workers were to succeed.

Rumours had begun to circulate in Limerick of a general strike threat. (66) Then, on November 9, the National Executive of the Labour Party summoned a special meeting of unions and the Limerick Trades' Council for November 16 in Dublin to discuss the deadlock. The special conference declared a rigorous boycott of the Shannon Scheme and called on all workers to treat the

site as unclean and untouchable. Delegates blacklisted the men working there and appealed for financial aid for the strikers. Another important decision taken was the calling of a special meeting of the Trade Union Congress for Monday November 30. (67)

Patrick McGilligan had just arrived from America and replied immediately to the union's boycott threat.

The National Executive seems to have discovered in the proposal to provide work for some thousands of labourers on the Shannon Scheme, at better wages than they earn today, a veiled attack on the wage standard. That no standard can be durable except the standard of what the employment can afford they must surely have learned that this discovery of an entirely fictitious "attack" does more credit to their morbid suspicion than to their common sense or to their regard for the present or future interests not only of the nation but of the whole community of workers. Let the National Executive stand out of the way of those who desire to see the country develop according to the reason of its real resources and who are prepared to work hard to secure that object. (68)

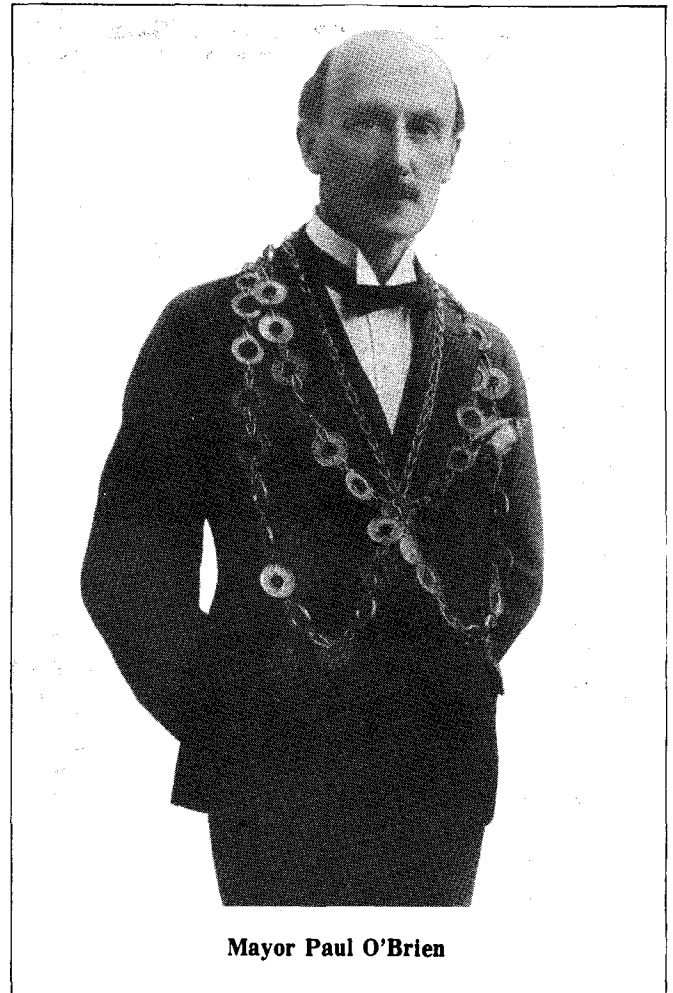
As if the Minsister's out-of-hand dismissal of the union's action was not bad enough for the morale of the strikers, the week of November 15 saw them taking another body blow. Members of the ex-servicemen's association affiliated to the I.T.G.W.U., led by ex-Brigadier Tim Murphy, decided to return to work, in spite of their union's official position. (69) The dockers also met but decided to continue with the strike. However, it was reported that many of them were in favour of returning to work. (70) Michael McCarthy, the local Transport Union organiser, immediately announced that, despite the apparent change in the attitude of some of the workers, there was no change in the union's policy. The position had altered slowly but significantly, however, and it was reported in the Dail that over 600 men were then working on the Shannon Scheme. (71)

Sunday October 22 brought another rally at the O'Connell monument in the city. Five thousand people attended to hear Thomas Johnson, Labour leader, and other Dail deputies address them. (72) Cork also had a mass meeting in support of the strikers, and there were reports too of rallies in other parts of the country. (73) Transport Union branches throughout the country, from Waterford to Sligo to Dublin, now began to contribute regularly to the Limerick strike committee fund. (74)

On Monday November 30, 130 delegates from the Free State and Northern Ireland attended a special meeting of the Trade Union Congress in the Mansion House, Dublin, which was heralded as the most important special conference since 1918. The meeting endorsed the boycott of the Shannon Scheme, and called on the Government and contractors to reconsider and negotiate. Delegates condemned the 32/- wage and resolved to protect the trade union rights which were threatened by the dispute. (75) The decision of Congress to boycott the scheme could have affected 250,000 workers in the country but, in the event, was never implemented.

The Senate debate took the same bitter turn as the Dail debate. Seamus O'Farrell, moving the motion on behalf of Labour, urged the Government to recognise "the right of workers to rates of wages at least sufficient to provide them and their families with the indispensable necessities of civilised life". (76) He stated that Labour was in favour of the Shannon Scheme but that the conditions pertaining and the wages offered gave him no option. He added: "Instead of creating a Gaelic Ireland these conditions will create an Irish China". (77)

The Earl of Mayo painted a picture of "navvies frying their beef-steaks on a shovel" (78) and could not see the



Mayor Paul O'Brien

reason for all the fuss. He appealed to Labour to take a broader view: "I hope the Labour Party will not really interfere in this serious matter, because it is a serious matter to encourage men who are only too anxious to make a little mischief". (79) The Labour motion was defeated.

At this stage it was becoming increasingly evident that the unions had lost the fight. At the local level, however, the boycott was maintained and intensified. Dance halls, picture houses and the Market's Field were closed to scabs. The first list of scabs was sent to all labour halls in the city. Top of the list were the names of the two ex-servicemen - Tim Murphy and Terry Casey. (80) A second list followed a week later.

The dispute dragged on over the Christmas with very little of note occurring except some occasional attacks on the Germans. (82) Meanwhile other issues, such as the 'Boundary Crisis', had begun to occupy the public mind. The press interest waned and little or no space was at this stage being given to what had become known in the newspapers as "The Shannon Scheme Crux".

On Monday January 11 pickets did not appear at Strand Barracks, the Longpavement, Ardnacrusha and Siemens office in Limerick. A prominent Labour leader announced that the strike was as dead as Julius Caesar, but the strike committee said that the boycott was still on. (83) On the following Friday January 15 the dockers, who had played such a vital roll in the whole dispute, decided to return to work on the old conditions.

Building work on the Shannon Scheme now began in earnest, and by the middle of February the first unit of electricity was produced in the temporary power station at Ardnacrusha. There was no official announcement from the Transport Union that the strike was over. The only indication of how things stood came in a letter to the

Limerick Leader on February 2 from M. O'Shea of the strike committee calling on everyone to build a "greater Limerick":-

If Limerick is all wrong
 Who's to blame?
 If the people all starve on
 Who's the shame?
 Will you help this wrong to right?
 Come along and spread the light
 And do your share.

After this forlorn plea the strike gradually petered out, but much bitterness remained for years afterwards.

Though the strike has been neglected in labour history studies, a reference to it was made last year (1979) in the Electricity Supply Board's publication to mark the fifty year's anniversary of the completion of the project. (84) The anonymous writer gives a brief outline of the cause of the dispute from the Board's point of view and concludes with an explanation for its failure.

Lorries bringing material to Ardnacrusha and Clonlara each carried an armed soldier. Ships were unloaded at the Docks under the protection of soldiers with fixed bayonets. This incensed the dockers, who occasionally used to pelt stones at workers bringing material up the Shannon by boat, or try to pull them out of the boats with grappling hooks. On one well remembered occasion, when the army escort was absent for some reason, the dockers made a move to throw a light engine, which had just been unloaded, into the river. The foreman in charge of the ex-servicemen who were unloading the ship, an ex-army captain, immediately drew a revolver, and pointing it at the dockers said: "The first person to touch that engine is a dead man". On this occasion the dockers had no option but to withdraw quietly. This tough approach by the ex-servicemen, and the heavy police and army protection, ensured that the strike had no chance of succeeding in Limerick city. It had even less chance of success in Ardnacrusha and the surrounding district. The country was going through a severe economic depression and work was scarce. People were only too anxious to work for the wages being offered. Many workers lived in the area. Others came from as far away as Scotland, and there was a large contingent from the West of Ireland. In all these circumstances the strike was doomed to failure from the start. An additional factor was the feeling that Siemens would have been willing to pay more, but were forbidden to do so by the Government. Early in 1926 the strike fizzled out, and no more labour troubles occurred for the duration of the Scheme. As one newspaper editor put it at the time: "The strike was by men who themselves had no complaint to make on behalf of men who made no complaint".

The Shannon Scheme strike has long been forgotten, but the struggle by Limerick workers against low wages is worthy of a place in the annals of Irish labour history.

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