

# The Limerick Soviet - a review article

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*Liam Cahill, Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet 1919: a Threat to British Power in Ireland, The O'Brien Press Ltd., Dublin 1990, pp. 168; ISBN 0-86278-194-9. Price: £14.95.*

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Despite his background as a lifelong trade union activist and former full time official of the Workers' Union of Ireland, Liam Cahill has resisted the temptation to describe the events that gave rise to the Limerick Soviet in April 1919, from that constricted focus. One of Ireland's most respected and authoritative journalists and a former Deputy Political Correspondent of RTE prior to his transfer to Brussels in 1990 as press spokesperson for the Irish Presidency of the European Community, he sets the central event of this scholarly work against the political turmoil that prevailed in Europe and in Ireland in the aftermath of World War I and the Bolshevik October Revolution of 1917. His depiction of the red revolutionary turmoil that swept Europe between 1917 and 1919 is graphically realistic; Germany and Austria had each lost their thousand year old monarchies. In April 1919 both countries reeled under a succession of Bolshevik victories, especially Germany. At Munich, Bavaria was declared a Soviet Republic and there were general strikes in Dusseldorf, Augsburg, Würzburg and Regensburg. Ninety-eight thousand Rühr miners went on strike followed by a general stoppage in Krupps' Engineering. Hungary, also, had already declared itself a Soviet Republic. If the vanquished nations had their problems, so also had the victors and there is vivid recall of the fissures that were beginning to appear in the structure of the British Empire. In early 1919 Britain faced revolt in Egypt, Afganistan and India; the April 15th issue of *The Times* which carried the report of the Limerick Soviet had a further account of "grave disturbances" at Amritsar in the Punjab, led by "a misguided and excitable person", a Mr. M.K. Gandhi. Nearer home there were strikes in Glasgow, Belfast, Liverpool, Southampton, Tyneside and London. Sixty tanks and a hundred army lorries were sent by the Government to quell the "Bolshevik rising" in Glasgow; troops garrisoned all the main buildings and patrolled in full battledress, barbed wire and machine guns surrounded the City Chambers.

The author's account of the contemporary Irish scene is superbly researched and outlined. It recaptures vividly the battle for the hearts and minds of the Irish Trade unions between Labour and Sinn Féin. The latter, triumphant in the 1918 General Election, were anxious to exploit the resurgence of Labour, more especially through the phenomenal expansion of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (described by the author as "the most practical manifestation of Connolly's syndicalist<sup>1</sup> legacy to the working class") into rural Ireland, for their own political agenda. The author gives an incisive insight into the superb back-ground organisation and strategies employed by Sinn Féin, and more especially by the I.R.B.

The left wing tone of the First Dáil's Democratic Programme was a gesture to the

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\* "Avondonn", Bóthar Chreatlaich, Clochán an Mhaoir, Luimneach.

<sup>1</sup> Syndicalism: "A movement among industrial workers having as its object the transfer of the means of production & distribution from their present owners to unions of workers" - *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 5th ed., Oxford 1964, p. 1313.



influence of Labour and an appreciation of their controversial decision to give Sinn Féin a clear run in the 1918 Election thereby ensuring victory in 73 out of 105 constituencies. Liam Cahill proves convincingly, however, that it involved something more than that and shows with impressive detail, how the First Dáil Eireann in January 1919 were anxious to strengthen the hands of the Irish delegates to the international Socialist Conference which was due to be held in the following month in Berne. This Conference had been arranged in the aftermath of World War I to brief the representatives of the Labour International who were to attend the Peace Conference in Paris the following April. The Irish Trade Union Congress was represented by Thomas Johnson and Cathal O'Shannon at the Socialist International Conference. In a major boost to independence sentiment they succeeded in having Ireland recognised and seated as a separate delegation. Their special report in Irish, English, French and German on Ireland's case for independence was endorsed by the conference which called on the Great Powers to "make good this rightful claim of the Irish people".

The author appears to accept that the same Sinn Féin influence was involved also in the decision of the Limerick United Trades and Labour Council to call a general strike of all city workers, on Sunday the 13th April, 1919. The previous Sunday the I.R.A. had tried to rescue Robert Byrne, a republican and Trades Council delegate who was on hunger strike under R.I.C. guard in the No. 1 ward of the Limerick Workhouse Hospital (also called the City's Union Infirmary - now St. Camillus' Hospital). The attempt was of limited success: Byrne was rescued but an R.I.C. officer, Constable Martin O'Brien, was fatally wounded, another was seriously wounded, and Byrne was also shot; he died later that day in a cottage in Meelick, Co. Clare. His body lay in state in Limerick's St. John's Cathedral and on April 10th an estimated 10,000 mourners attended the funeral, amongst whom was the deceased's cousin Alfie Byrne, later to become Dublin's famous Lord Mayor. In an official response to the shooting of Constable O'Brien, Brigadier General C.J. Griffin designated the city as a 'Special Military Area' on Wednesday the 9th of April, to come into force the following Monday. The Trades Council met on Palm Sunday, the 13th, and declared a general strike against this decision which would have forced workers from outside the areas to sign permits to get to the work places, notably, for example, those hundreds of workers from Thomondgate who worked in Cleeves Factory. The following day the city came to a standstill and the Trades Council, now designated a Soviet, took complete and effective control. The event achieved world wide media attention through the fortuitous presence of a group of journalists who were gathered in Limerick to witness the start of a transatlantic air race, sponsored by the *Daily Mail* for a prize of £10,000. The race, which was due to start from Bawnmore in Limerick failed to take place due to the non-arrival of some fliers, but the newspaper made full use of the 'Soviet' for their papers.

Led by Trades Council Chairman John Cronin, ("father of the baby Soviet", the author quotes an American journalist as calling him), the Soviet ensured a supply of food and fuel for the citizens. They printed their own money notes (*Illus. 1*) which were accepted as legal tender by the city's businesses with the notable exception of the fuel merchants (see Appendix). Their sense of organisation was favourably noted even by their critics, such as *The Irish Times*. Their appeal for outside help from the Irish Trade Union Congress by way of a general strike was unsuccessful. The National Union of Railwaymen were instructed by their English Head-Office not to become involved and the efforts of Congress were further impeded by the absolute refusal of Northern Ireland Unionists to come out in sympathy with what they perceived to be a Sinn Féin inspired strike. The ensuing bitterness and dissension ensured an early hearing of the call for a return to work towards the end of the strike's second week, by the Catholic Bishop, Dr. Denis Hallinan, and the Sinn Féin Mayor, Alphonsus



O'Mara, who, with Michael Colivet, the Sinn Féin T.D., had backed the strikers originally and was therefore well accepted by them as a mediator when the strike clearly was seen to fail in obtaining national support, and was about to peter out. On Sunday the 27th April the Strike Committee called on the workers to resume work and the Limerick Soviet passed into folklore. The term 'Soviet' in the accepted meaning of the word was undoubtedly a misnomer. The Strike Committee were for the most part conservative tradesmen who would heed their church leaders in most matters. This is highlighted by a vignette from one of the visiting journalists, Ruth Russell of the *Chicago Tribune* in which she recalled that while sitting in on a meeting of the strike committee "the bells of the nearby St. Munchin's Church tolled the Angelus and all the red-badged guards rose and blessed themselves".

A good historian not only describes his researches and their results, but also presents his conclusions, commenting on how the events described affected future events. This Liam Cahill, an acknowledged expert on Irish labour history of the period from 1916 to 1923, has done.

The following quotes sum up his more important conclusions:

In terms of strict theory, the Limerick strike could not be described as a soviet. There was take-over of private property, and when the coal merchants quickly asserted their property rights in the face of the strike committee's orders, the committee backed down ... The soviet attitude to private property was essentially pragmatic. So long as shopkeepers were willing to act under the soviet dictates, there was no practical reason to commandeer their premises (p. 144)

Other than a contribution to trade folklore, the Limerick general strike left little mark on trade unionism or politics in the city (p. 146)

In the end, the soviet was basically an emotional and spontaneous protest on essentially nationalist and humanitarian grounds, rather than anything based on socialist or even trade union aims (p. 148).

From then on, Labour's role in the struggle for independence diminished from joint partnership to a subsidiary place. The outcome of the Limerick strike clearly determined and expressed Labour's subordination to 'nation' from that point onwards (p. 149)

After Labour's capitulation over Limerick, the struggle for national independence was largely left up to the farming and middle classes (p. 146).

That there were political, nationalistic overtones inherent in the Limerick strike is apparent. The soviet seems to have appreciated this, although "for tactical reasons, in order to secure or maintain British Labour support, the strikers supporters stressed that it was a "labour question" (p. 138). Indeed, *The Irish Times*, a paper antagonistic to the strikers, had to report "seeing very few emblems of Sinn Féin, and except for the daubing of the Treaty Stone in Republican colours there was 'no glaring display of the tricolour' (pp. 138-139)

However, while interpreting the events surrounding the strike as symbolic of Labour's subsequent marginalisation in Irish politics, the author also recognises its more militant aspects:

The Limerick strike was a clear warning that many elements in the civilian population were disaffected enough to provide the silent support that the Volunteers needed to launch their guerrilla war (p. 149)

The Limerick soviet was organised Labour's first - and fatally flawed - intervention in the Irish War of Independence (p.13).

This book by an acknowledged expert on Irish Labour history of the period from 1916 to 1923, is an enduring and valuable commentary for the historian and student of that era; it carries an extensive index and a comprehensive bibliography, but lacks a list of the many illustrations. There is a foreword by Jim Kemmy whose pioneering work on the Limerick Soviet is generously acknowledged by the author.



## APPENDIX

### THE LIMERICK SOVIET'S UNIQUE CURRENCY

The following account of the method by which the Limerick Soviet solved its financial problems is taken directly from Liam Cahill's book, pages 74-76.

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After a week, the cautious *Irish Times* commented that "while the food question seems to have been solved for the present, the question of money is causing anxiety to many families ...". The majority of trade unions seemed to have been prepared to pay their members strike pay for the duration of the soviet, but a key trade union like the National Union of Railwaymen made it clear that it would not. In addition, at the end of the first week, while outside food supplies were readily forthcoming, little money had been received.

Faced with this prospect, the soviet took one of its most historic and, indeed, spectacular decisions. This was to print its own currency, in denominations of one, five and ten shillings. The decision does not seem to have been based on any ideological considerations, but was a straightforward pragmatic response to a shortage of money.

Tom Johnson, treasurer of the Trade Union Congress, who had been sent by the executive to liaise with the Limerick strikers, said the security for the notes, in the first place, would be the stocks of food being presented free by outsider sympathisers, then the financial support and integrity of the workers of Limerick, backed by the national feeling. Later, the currency was backed by the trades council and the Trade Union Congress itself and accepted by approved shops. A list was compiled of merchants and shopkeepers who were willing to give credit to the trades council.

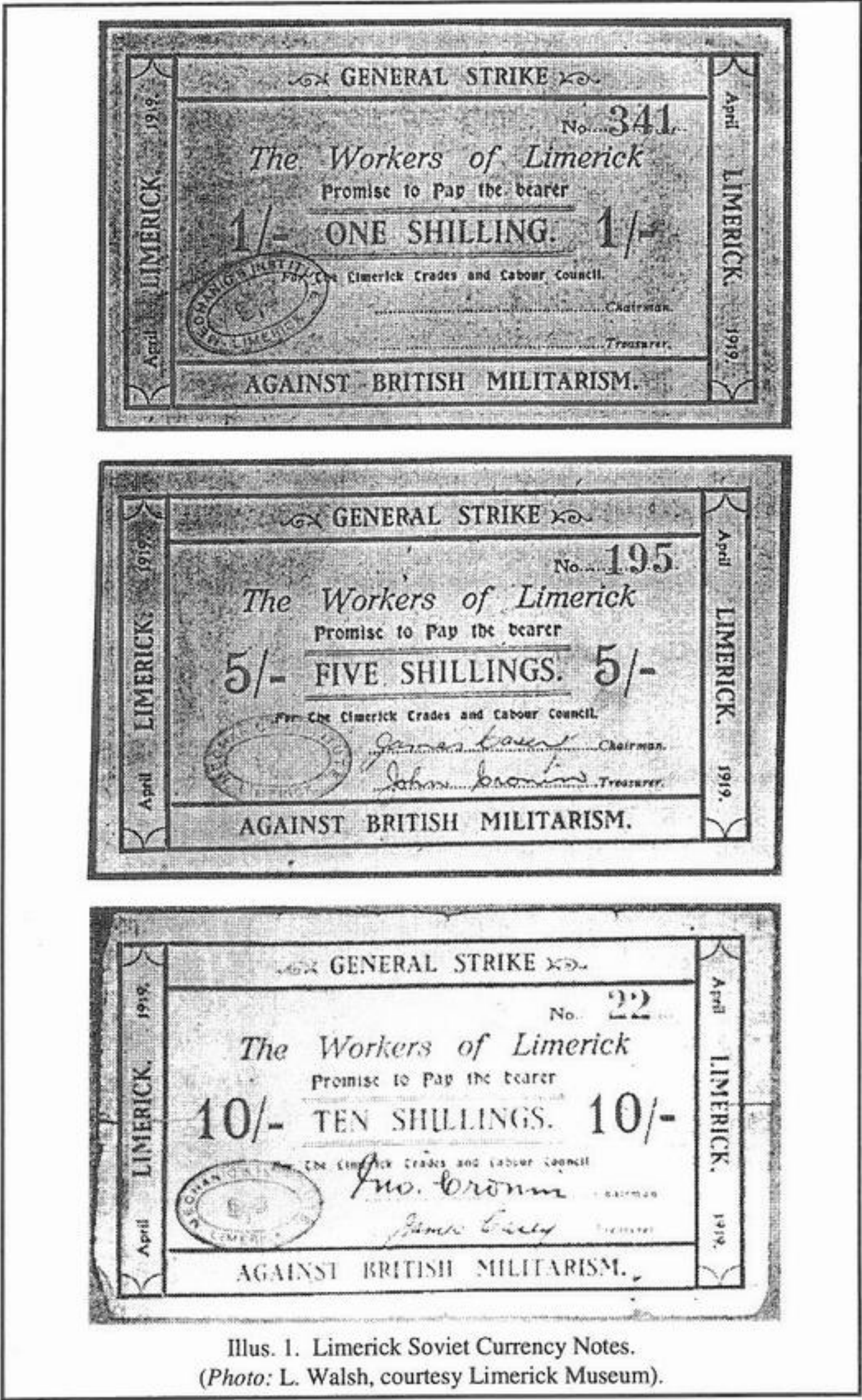
Johnson said the notes issue was "sound finance" and was a sign the strike could be prolonged. The *Irish Times* saw the currency more as a type of promissory note or food voucher and therefore as "a sign of growing financial weakness ... The impression, therefore, is gaining ground that the crisis has passed and that the close of the week will synchronise with the close of the strike."

There has been controversy over whether some notes were counterfeited. In an article in the *Irish Times* in May 1969, Jim Kemmy used illustrations of two notes denominated as one shilling and five shillings. The illustrations were copied by the *Irish Times* from the publication *Fifty Years of Liberty Hall*, edited by Cathal O'Shannon. Subsequently, in a letter to the newspaper, a son of John Cronin - Jeremiah - challenged the authenticity of his father's signature on the notes reproduced. The signature in the illustration accompanying his letter was certainly different from the earlier illustration. But Jeremiah Cronin offered no explanation or theory as to how the difference in signature arose. Opinion differs as to whether the notes were forgeries, or whether someone signed them in John Cronin's name with his delegated authority. After the strike was over, surplus money was sought as souvenirs and this too might account for the forgeries.

A sub-committee of the propaganda committee was responsible for the printing and issuing of the currency and, not unexpectedly, the sub-committee mainly consisted of accounts staff from large firms like Cleaves, the bacon factories, the flour mills and the corporation. According to James Casey, when the notes were ultimately redeemed, a small surplus remained in a fund that had been subscribed to by sympathisers in all parts of Ireland.

Whatever the original motivation for the issuing of currency that decision alone places

Limerick in a unique position in labour history. At the time the significance of the currency was not lost on socialists. At the annual conference of the Independent Labour Party, in Britain, "Councillor Cradford of 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-class of this country do the same. In spite of what Mr. Ramsay McDonald had said, the 'Limerick soviet' was the first working-class soviet on practical lines established in these islands ..."



Illus. 1. Limerick Soviet Currency Notes.  
(Photo: L. Walsh, courtesy Limerick Museum).