

'Forgotten Revolution: The Limerick Soviet of April 1919'

Notes for an illustrated talk by Liam Cahill at the Granary Library, Limerick

10th April 2019

Our story begins with a young man named Robert Byrne.

He was born in Dublin on 28 November 1889 and was named after his father, Robert, a fitter by trade, from the North Strand. His mother was Annie Hurley, from Limerick and after his father died in 1907, the family moved to live at Town Wall Cottages.

SLIDE 1 Robert Byrne



Robert Byrne was employed as a telegraph operator in Limerick GPO and was elected as a delegate from the Post Office Clerks' Association to Limerick United Trades and Labour Council. He joined the 2nd Limerick Battalion, Irish Volunteers, under the command of Peadar Dunne, a veteran of Easter Week 1916. Byrne had been under Special Branch observation since before the 1916 Rising. Just before Christmas 1918 he was elected Adjutant of the Second Battalion but the tolerance of the postal authorities had reached its limits. In January 1919, he was dismissed from the Post Office because of his Republican activities.

On New Year's Eve 1918, a party of Royal Irish Constabulary had raided the family home in Town Wall Cottages. They found a revolver in a locker beside his bed and a military instruction manual in the kitchen. On January 13, 1919 the RIC arrested Byrne and charged him with possession of a revolver and ammunition and he was remanded in prison. For a short time after his imprisonment he refused to take food.

He was later court-martialled and sentenced to twelve months imprisonment with hard labour for being in possession of a revolver and ammunition.

The hunger strike

Because of his rank as a Captain and as Adjutant of the 2nd Battalion, Byrne took over leadership of the Republican prisoners in Limerick Prison. They were demanding to be treated as 'political' prisoners, not as criminals. Prisoners rioted several times and wrecked their cells and, in turn, were severely beaten and handcuffed by warders and police reinforcements. Limerick United Trades and Labour Council supported the prisoners.

SLIDE 2 Bishop Hallinan



The Catholic Bishop, Dr. Denis Hallinan, described attempts at forcible feeding as 'a breach of the commitment made by the Government after

the death of Thomas Ashe' who died on hunger strike for political status in Mountjoy Prison in 1917.

SLIDE 3 Workhouse Infirmary



Eventually, because of the mounting local pressure, the prison authorities abandoned force feeding. On 7 March Robert Byrne again began refusing food and, in a weakened condition, on the 12th he was removed to Ward One of the Workhouse Infirmary on Shelbourne Road. Not long after his arrival, he resumed taking food and the Prison Governor became suspicious as to why the doctors were slow to certify him fit to return to prison.

Commandant Peadar Dunne called a meeting of the Council of the 2nd Battalion in Hogan's hotel and bar in Lower Griffin Street, to plan a rescue. After his participation in the 1916 Rising and following his release from jail, Dunne had been sacked from Guinness's brewery. Madge Daly, whose brother, Edward, was a Commandant in the Rising and had been

executed, offered Dunne a job delivering bread from Dalys' bakery, located at 26 William Street.

The Irish Republican Brotherhood in Limerick

In 1917, the Volunteers GHQ ordered Peadar Dunne to organise a second Battalion in Limerick. This arose because of intense dissatisfaction locally and nationally at the disappointing performance of the original 1st Battalion, commanded by Michael Colivet, during Easter Week 1916. Professor Eoin McNeill's Countermanding Order, as the figure head Chief of Staff of the Irish Volunteers, cancelling the 'manoeuvres' planned for Easter Monday, caused utter confusion not just in Limerick but in many places outside of Dublin.

Prior to the Rising, the police had observed Thomas Clarke and Seán MacDiarmada (the military 'brains' of the Irish Republican Brotherhood) visiting Robert Byrne at his home, underlining his role and the importance of Limerick in the preparations. However, Limerick's failure to act decisively in 1916 was compounded by the inexplicable, naïve decision to hand over their arms 'temporarily' to the British military, with the city's unionist Mayor, Sir Stephen Quin, acting as intermediary.

The 2nd Battalion might be described as the 'IRB' Battalion in Limerick. In forming a battalion openly led and directed by their own men, the Irish Republican Brotherhood – the Fenians, described in the Easter Proclamation as Ireland's 'secret military organisation' – were correcting a fault line that had lain at the core of the Volunteer organisation since their foundation in November 1913.

The formation of that battalion formation was part of a determination by the IRB that, in the post-1916 renewed struggle for independence, they would never again put non-IRB members, like Eoin MacNeill, in a position to thwart the organisation's strategy or tactics.

The rescue

On Sunday, 6th April 1919 a party of IRA members assembled to carry out the Battalion plan. Five men from each IRA company formed into two Sections. Jack Gallagher in charge of one, Michael 'Batty' Stack the other. These two carried arms. On the dot of three o'clock, stack blew a whistle and the rescuers rushed the RIC and warders. A melee ensued.

Constable Spillane took out his revolver and leapt on Byrne. A bullet entered the prisoner's body between the 6th and 7th ribs.

SLIDE 4 Batty Stack



Batty Stack shattered Spillane's spine with a bullet from a .38 revolver. He fired again as Constable O'Brien drew his gun and the 114-kilo policeman collapsed to the floor. O'Brien died immediately and Stack coolly pocketed his gun as Byrne was being taken to the front entrance. The IRA party went along the public road towards Hassett's Cross. There, they commandeered a passing pony and cart driven by John Ryan of Knockalisheen, county Clare, and his daughter Nancy. They brought the wounded IRA man to their labourer's cottage, near Meelick, in county Clare. There, at half past eight on Sunday, April 6th, Robert Byrne died.

SLIDE 5 Knockalisheen



Death, funeral and inquest

The Coroner for East Clare opened an inquest into the death of Robert Byrne on Tuesday, April 8, in Meelick and then agreed to hand over Byrne's remains to his relatives for burial and adjourned the inquest for a week. An estimated ten thousand people attended the removal of Robert Byrne's body from John Ryan's house to Saint John's Cathedral. The following day, thousands of people passed by Robert Byrne's coffin, lying in repose before the high altar in the Cathedral and the flag of the City Hall flew at half-mast. On Thursday, April 10, he was buried in Mount Saint Laurence's Cemetery, following a massive funeral – a city's display of sorrow and defiance.

The decisive evidence at the resumed inquest on Robert Byrne was that of Doctor John Holmes, of Barrington's Hospital, who spent the last hour or so with Byrne before he died. Relying on Byrne's dying words, his evidence pointed towards either Constable O'Brien or Spillane as the man who had mortally wounded him. After only twenty minutes deliberation,

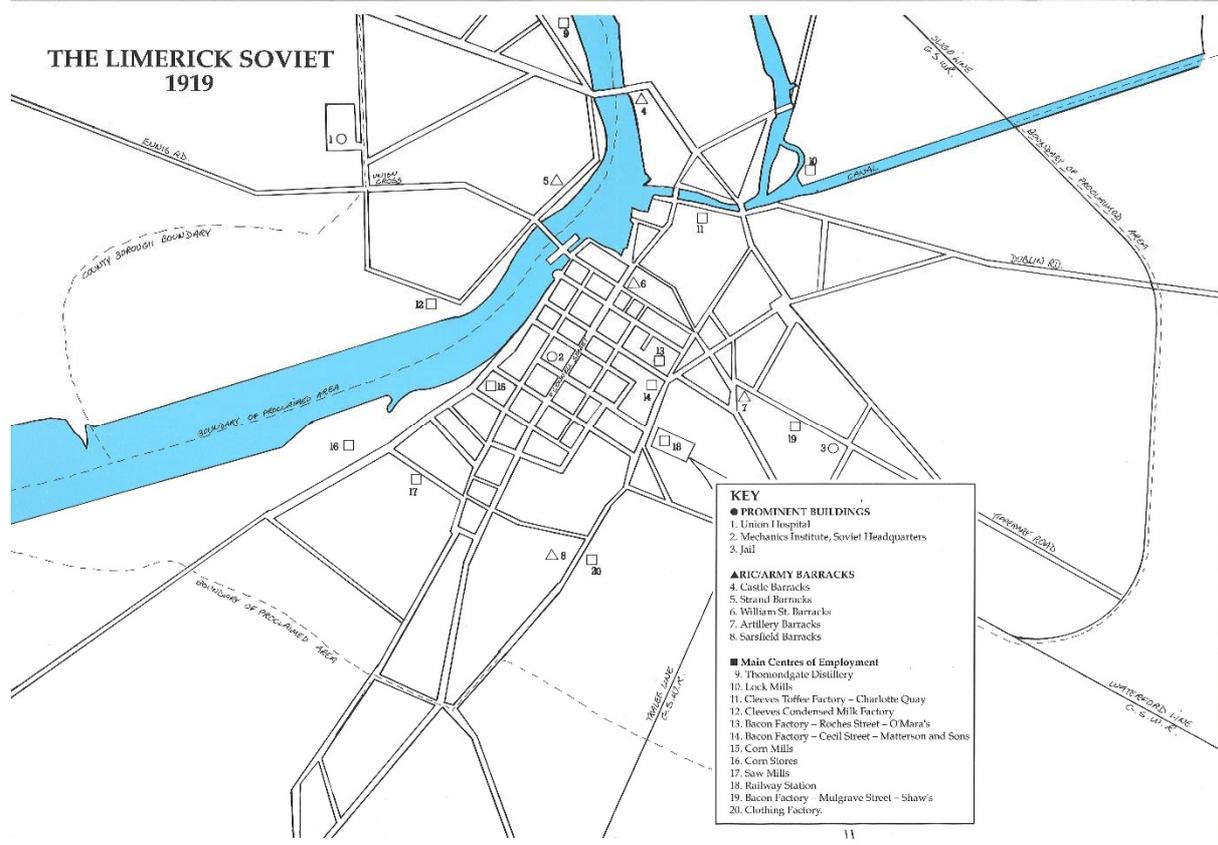
the jury found that 'Robert J Byrne met his death by a revolver bullet discharged by either Constable O'Brien or Constable Spillane.' Ironically, many years later, Michael Stack admitted that he, in fact, may have accidentally fired the shot that killed Robert Byrne.

Limerick placed under military law

On the Monday morning after the shooting at the Workhouse Infirmary – April 7th the Government decided to proclaim the district as a Special Military Area. On Wednesday, April 9, 1919, the Commander-in-Chief Ireland, Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Shaw, appointed Brigadier-General Christopher J Griffin, a Cork-born Catholic, as the Competent Military Authority throughout Ireland.

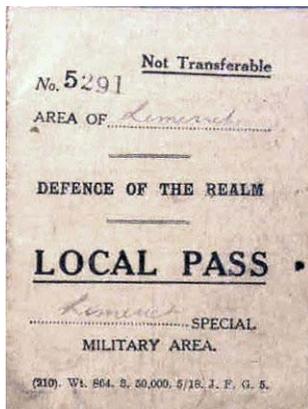
In a separate notice, most of Limerick City and part of the county were placed under General Griffin's authority, as a Special Military Area. All of this was done under the draconian provisions of the Defence of the Realm Acts and the Regulations made under the Acts. The Special Military Area was due to come into effect on the following Monday, April 14.

SLIDE 6 Map



The military designated the middle of the Shannon as the Northern boundary of the Military Area and the railway line looping in across the river from Clare formed most of the Southern and South Eastern boundary. The obvious flashpoint was that the boundary ran through the middle of Thomond Bridge and Sarsfield Bridge (then known as Wellesley Bridge), thus cutting off Thomondgate and big places of employment like Cleeves Lansdowne factory and Walkers distillery.

SLIDE 7 Military Pass



Citizens would be required to have military passes to move in or out of the city, including to and from work. They were required to report to General Griffin's headquarters at 78 O'Connell Street where they would be issued with a pass, on a recommendation from the RIC. It was estimated that the lives of as many as six thousand citizens would be disrupted by having to pass the barricades on the bridges.

SLIDE 8 Barricade A



Was this a panic reaction by the British authorities? Probably not. Towards the end of January, the separatist Dáil Éireann had held its first meeting in public and on the same date, 21 January 1919, the first shots of the Anglo-Irish War had been fired at Soloheadbeg, county Tipperary, resulting in the deaths of two policemen.

SLIDE 9 Barricade B



The second shooting incident of the War had taken place during the rescue of Robert Byrne at the Workhouse hospital and a policeman had been killed and another seriously wounded.

In fact, Byrne was the first IRA Volunteer to die in the War. The authorities wanted to nip the resistance and violence in the bud before it escalated out of control.

Limerick strikes back

They did not reckon, however, with the increasingly militant Limerick workers. The unskilled, general workers of Limerick had been radicalised and made militant by the founding of a branch of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in the city in September 1917.

SLIDE 10 John Dowling



The main union organiser was John Dowling, a militant socialist who had, at one time, been a member of James Connolly's Irish Socialist Republican Party. Just before the 1916 Rising, Dowling had pleaded with Connolly to allow him to participate, but instead, Connolly ordered him to 'Go down to the Galtees and organise some workers into the union'. Dowling followed Connolly's directive with enthusiasm. From late 1917 through to the beginning of 1919, ITGWU membership soared and a tidal wave of strikes rolled across Limerick city and county.

Two days before the military restrictions were to commence, six hundred members of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union and the Irish Clerical Workers' Union, employed across the river in the Cleeves Condensed Milk factory, voted to strike against the restrictions. Limerick United Trades and Labour Council met until almost midnight on Sunday 13th April and decided, in protest, to call a general strike for the following day.

SLIDE 11 John Cronin



The Council elected their President, the experienced and respected carpenter John Cronin, as Chairman of the Strike Committee, the printer James Casey as Treasurer and the engineer fitter, James Carr, as Secretary. Using the services of Michael Gleeson's printing works in Cornmarket Row, by midnight, the city was covered in posters declaring a general strike for the following day.

On Monday April 14, 1919, the 'Irish Independent' correspondent in Limerick telegraphed the Dublin office: *'Limerick City is on strike. Shops, warehouses and factories are closed. No work is being done and no business transacted.'*

Feeding the city

SLIDE 12 Soviet in Session



That Monday evening, in its first major assertion of power, the Strike Committee ordered the bakers to resume work. In its report on this development, the 'Irish Times', for the first time, sarcastically referred to the Committee as the local 'Soviet'. The report indicates that even on the first day of the strike it was being referred to in some quarters as a 'Soviet'. Public houses remained closed and the cinemas opened but only 'By Authority of the Strike Committee' and the 'Limerick Leader' masthead declared that it was published 'By Authority of the Strike Committee'.

From early on, the Soviet had the food situation well in hand. They issued hundreds of permits to shops to open and supply foodstuffs, between two and five o'clock in the afternoon. They strictly controlled the price of food and authorised the dockers to unload 7,000 tons of Canadian grain from a ship in the harbour, to supply the bakeries. They warned that drastic measures would be taken to prevent profiteering. Pickets wearing distinctive red badges patrolled the streets.

They ensured that no shops opened without permission and that they were not overcrowded during the hours of opening.

After a week, the 'Irish Independent' commented: 'It is certainly a remarkable tribute to the skill and organisation of the Strike Committee that while there has been a general suspension of all branches of industry in the city now for seven days, there has been no scarcity of food'. Many farmers in county Clare rallied round with supplies of eggs, milk and butter. A Catholic curate in Ennis, Father Kennedy, was a leading organiser of food for Limerick and earned himself the title of 'A Fighting Soggarth'. The Catholic bishops and clergy in Clare and Limerick came out strongly against the military restrictions and, implicitly, supported the strikers. After some days, the strikers published their own newspaper 'The Workers' Bulletin'.

SLIDE 13 Michael Brennan



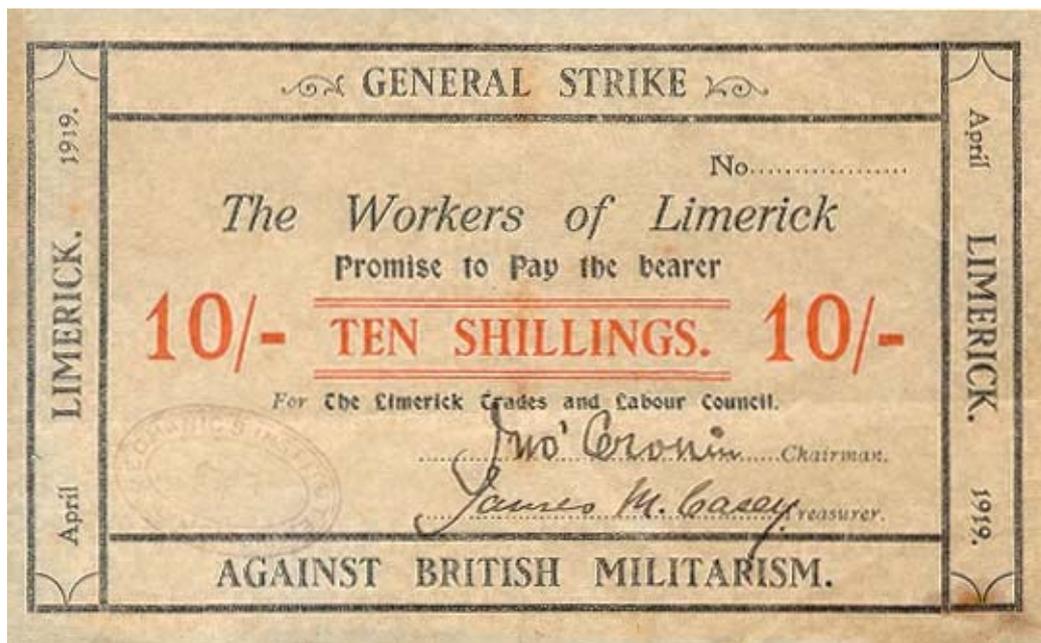
From the outset, as demonstrated by their control of food and transport, the Soviet was underpinned by remarkably effective organisation. Years later, in their Witness Statements to the Bureau of Military History, Michael Stack and Michael Brennan (Officer Commanding, East Clare Brigade of the IRA) stated that the local battalions of the IRA were involved in the on-the-ground organisation of affairs. Indeed, Michael Brennan states that he was co-opted to the Strike Committee for the duration of the strike. Thus, there was a clear link established between

the trade union leadership and the local IRA leadership. However, since Brennan and other key local IRA leaders were members of the clandestine Irish Republican Brotherhood, it might be more accurate to state that 'the hand of the IRB' was involved. This would also explain the willingness of the farmers surrounding the city – who would not normally have an affinity or sympathy with a purely Labour agitation – to supply abundant foodstuffs to the inhabitants.

Limerick's employers chafed at the restrictions imposed by the Soviet and this frustration was expressed through a number of statements by the Chamber of Commerce. Sensing the mood among the employers, towards the end of the first week, General Griffin offered a compromise. He would issue block booklets of passes to employers who could then issue them to employees to enable their attendance at work. The strikers rejected this out of hand. They would no more seek permits to work from their employers than they would from the British military.

Limerick's own currency

SLIDE 14 Currency



Towards the end of the first week, the Soviet took the momentous decision to issue its own currency. This marks it out as unique among labour agitations anywhere in the world, before or since. There was a practical background to the decision. Because of their opposition to any strike or agitation on 'political' grounds, the British-headquartered unions with membership in Ireland had refused to pay strike pay to their Limerick members. People were running out of money, so, backed by funds raised and promised by supporters and sympathisers around the country, including some Irish trade unions, the Soviet issued the currency in the form of promissory notes. They undertook to redeem them from shopkeepers and businesses after it had ended.

At the end of the first week, morale was high and the strikers were ready to further exercise their organisation and strength.

SLIDE 15 Caherdavin



On Easter Sunday 1919, more than a thousand young men and women left the city, crossing the Shannon to Caherdavin Heights where there was

to be a Gaelic football or hurling match and an outdoor festival of Irish music, song and dance known as an *Aeríocht*.

Towards the end of the day, the participants attempted to cross Sarsfield Bridge to return to the city but were met by armed sentries looking for passes. The small garrison temporarily occupying the premises of Shannon Rowing Club turned out and a whippet armoured car rushed forward to the bridge, testing its guns to prepare them for use.

Individually, each of the protesters stepped up to the sentry seeking entry and, as they were refused, they returned to the back of the line and started all over again.

The protestors spent overnight in Thomondgate where they were welcomed and well looked after by the sympathetic local populace. Many of them attended an all-night *céilí* in Saint Munchin's Temperance Hall. The following morning, the Clare farmers brought in hundreds of boxes of eggs and butter, many litres of new milk and loaves of home-made bread. The residents cooked the food and the demonstrators ate a hearty breakfast. About two hundred demonstrators lined up outside the Temperance Hall and marched to the nearby Long Pavement railway halt where sympathetic rail workers had assembled a train of sixty to seventy empty carriages. The protestors filled the train and it made its way across the Shannon and into Limerick railway station.

British intelligence officers and troops were waiting on the platform but the doors on that side were locked. A sympathetic rail worker produced a key and the doors on the off side were flung open. Several hundred people rushed out onto the centre platform and towards the main gate. Here, armed sentries barred the exit but, without pausing, the crowd rushed towards a side platform where only a solitary military policeman stood on guard. In vain, he held out his arms to block the rush. He was quickly brushed aside and, to the cheers of hundreds of onlookers outside

the station, the Caherdavin demonstrators broke the military blockade and were free.

Worldwide newspaper coverage

At this stage, the strikers benefitted from a lucky break that resulted in worldwide newspaper coverage and the proliferation of the name 'Limerick Soviet'. The 'Daily Mail' had offered a huge cash prize of about €600,000 in today's money to the first flier to cross the Atlantic from East to West. Major JCP Wood planned to use Limerick as the take off point for a flight to Newfoundland, since that represented the shortest distance across the open ocean. Preparations were made at the former Royal Flying Corps base at Bawnmore and – responding to an appeal from one of the local organisers, Sir Stephen Quin – the Soviet promised to authorise the transfer of about 2,200 litres of fuel to the site, provided the Major acknowledged that he was starting there by permission of the strikers. Sir Stephen conveyed this message to Wood and the fuel was delivered.

Hundreds of British and international journalists – including twenty cinema newsreel photographers – gathered in Limerick to await the Major's arrival and take off. Alas, after only four hours in the air, his plane cut out and he was forced to ditch it a short distance from the coast of Anglesey. Deprived of one story (and no doubt under pressure from their editors to justify the expense of sending them to Limerick) the assembled journalists' attention focussed on an even bigger story before them – the Limerick Soviet. Daily reports were filed and syndicated worldwide; eight hundred newspapers in the United States alone. Responding to Ruth Russell of 'The Chicago Tribune', John Cronin said 'Yes, this is a soviet.'

Attempt at national escalation fails

Entering the second week of the Soviet, attempts by the Limerick leadership to achieve a national escalation of their strike failed.

Having refused to sanction strike pay, the British-headquartered trade unions were equally resolutely opposed to any escalation in pursuit of a 'political' – as opposed to an 'industrial' – objective. In this respect, the attitude of the National Union of Railwaymen was crucial. In the early decades of the twentieth century the railways reached every part of Ireland and were vital arteries of life and commerce. Had they gone on strike, British administration in the country would have been severely hampered, if not crippled, and there would have been a bloody confrontation between strikers and military.

Limerick rail workers sent delegations seeking support to Cork and to the major marshalling yard and engineering works at Inchicore, in Dublin. The NUR members in both places dithered between visceral sympathy for the Limerick struggle and pressure from the union officers in London. In the end, they did nothing and Limerick was deprived of a vital element of support.

The national leadership of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress was torn between militant rhetoric and innate caution. Most of the ILPTUC Executive Council came to Limerick but, no sooner had they arrived, than they began trying to talk the local representatives out of seeking a national escalation. Instead, they proposed the hare-brained alternative of evacuating Limerick and leaving it empty, surrounded by British military. This proposal was a variant of a plan that had been drafted in early 1918 as part of the campaign against Conscription. It was agreed in three days of intensive discussions with members of the Dáil

Cabinet; the IRB leaders supported it but a majority of the Cabinet were opposed.

The Soviet peters out

As the Soviet moved into its second week, the employers were becoming increasingly impatient.

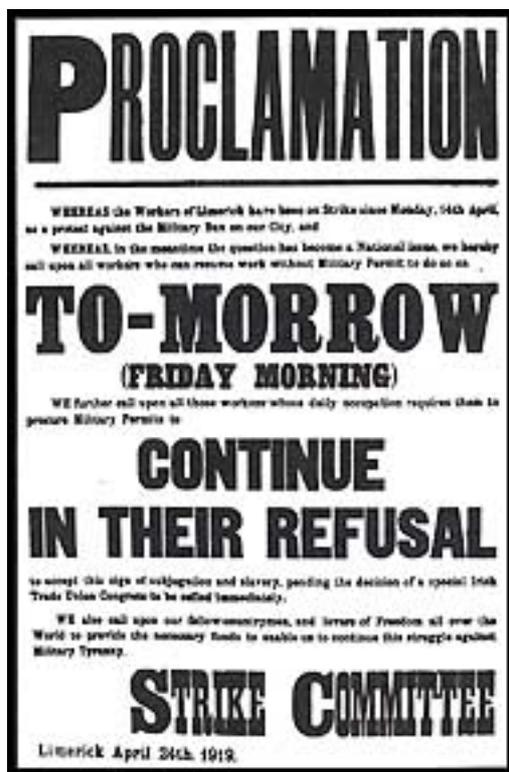
SLIDE 16 Alphonsus O'Mara



Under pressure from the Chamber of Commerce, the Catholic bishop, Denis Hallinan, the clergy and the Sinn Féin Mayor, Alphonsus O'Mara (himself a member of a wealthy family that owned a bacon processing factory) began to lobby hard for it to end. General Griffin repeated his earlier concession of allowing the employers to issue their own passes and offered a further one: there would be no checking of passes for workers

going to and from their dinner in the middle of the day and if the city was peaceful for seven days, he would lift the military restrictions. This offer hardened the determination of the Bishop and Mayor to get the Soviet ended and they issued a written ultimatum to the leaders demanding its end.

SLIDE 17 Proclamation



Bereft of support at national level and under increasing pressure from the local employers, the strike leaders ordered a partial resumption of work. Workers who did not require a military pass to reach their place of work (in other words, who did not need to cross a bridge over the Shannon) were to resume work, pending the convening of a promised Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress national conference to consider support for Limerick. This was a purely a face-saving formula since the ILPTUC had no intention of calling such a conference, once work had resumed in the city.

In contrast to the days preceding Robert Byrne's burial, there was never a high level of military or police activity in the city under the military regulations. Most troops and police were confined to barracks and the emphasis was on manning checkpoints on the boundaries of the military area. Even that was done in a low-key way. Only the bridges facing Northwards across the Shannon were fully manned. After some days, no one was prevented from *leaving* the city without a permit and it was easy enough to cross the river by boat. On the South side of the city – where it touched the boundary with county Limerick – access was uninhibited.

Late on Sunday night, April 27, the Strike Committee issued a proclamation ending the Soviet.

SLIDE 18 Strike Committee



John Cronin sent a telegram to the Congress Executive in Dublin announcing the end and stating that the strikers had decided that the holding of a special Trade Union Congress should be abandoned. The Limerick Soviet had ended as suddenly as it began, exactly fourteen days previously.

Why Limerick and why April 1919?

The re-invigorated militant strands of Republicanism and trade unionism that had been developing in Limerick since 1917 joined together in a *de facto* alliance that produced the Soviet.

Once the 1916 prisoners and internees were released, the Irish Volunteers, the highly influential Irish Republican Brotherhood and Sinn Féin were strongly re-established in the city. Then, the arrival of the rapidly growing Irish Transport and General Workers' Union meant that large numbers of unskilled and general workers became organised and were led by John Dowling, a radical socialist, and one of James Connolly's most trusted lieutenants.

For a time, in April 1919, the Republican and trade unions local interests and objectives were aligned but when they sought to escalate their actions, their respective national leaderships refused to support the call. The Republican leadership because they did not wish their forces in the impending War of Independence to be split along class lines, with the Left in the ascendant; and the trade unions because their only hope of avoiding the North splitting from their all-island movement was to concentrate on industrial issues and avoid political questions.

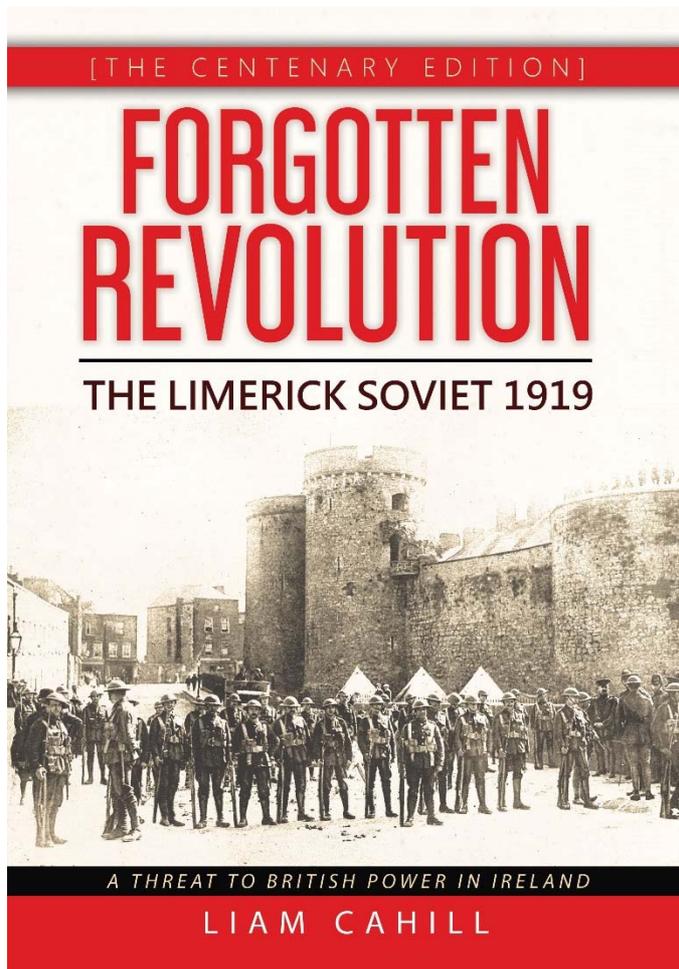
In the short term, in the city itself, the outcome of the general strike was an honourable draw. Few workers sought military passes and the Trades Council had upheld the principle of unhindered access to and from work

places. However, within a fortnight of the Soviet ending the socialist organisers and members of the ITGWU became involved in strikes in Cleeve's creameries in counties Limerick and Tipperary. The industrial struggles continued throughout the rest of 1919 and, in all, there were thirty-seven strikes and lockouts in Limerick that year, almost twice as many as in the previous year.

It is estimated that, ultimately, there were over a hundred soviets, seizures, occupations and strikes across Munster. Militarily, they were of no significance but, collectively, they represented a serious threat to the existing social order and an audacious bid to have Labour's voice heard. So much so, that several Republican leaders warned of the danger they posed to the all-class alliance they were trying to hold together, focussed solely on independence and ignoring other issues. These militant activities were all put down by either the British military, IRA, Free State troops or Anti-Treaty Irregulars - depending on when and where they happened and on which side was prevailing at that stage in the War of Independence or the Civil War. In an echo of how Limerick ended and was abandoned by outside forces, the later soviets were also opposed at every step by a curious coalition of timid national union leaders and Catholic bishops.

From a position of partnership with Sinn Féin up to early 1919, organised Labour was relegated to a subsidiary role in the struggle for independence. The gun had prevailed over the placard. Is that why the Soloheadbeg ambush - which happened on the same day that Robert Byrne was court martialled - was remembered but Limerick was largely forgotten?

SLIDE 19 Front Cover



The current Decade of Centenaries is an opportunity not only to commemorate and celebrate, but also to re-evaluate the seismic events from 1913 to 1923. One of the highlights of the Decade so far is the much better understanding and celebration of the role of women. As we move through 2019 into the succeeding years, it is time too for a re-evaluation of the leading role of the trade unions and the wider Labour movement. The Limerick Soviet must no longer be seen as some kind of exotic, regional aberration in the 'Confraternity' city but rather as a pivotal moment that triggered an important phase in the evolution of the War of Independence.