

# 'When the people of Limerick took on the British Empire'



■ In the first of a two-part piece, former Solidarity councillor **Cian Prendiville** winds the clock back 100 years to a real-life Game of Thrones

TANKS on the streets of Limerick. Workers on strike. A soviet is declared. The workers control prices and production. The Limerick Leader carries a notice that it was "Published by permission of the Limerick Strike Committee". The workers even have their own police force and currency.

It sounds like some fantasy. But this is actually our history. A history hidden from us by those who would prefer we forget that workers ran Limerick without the bosses, the clergy or the politicians telling them what to do.

This battle was part of a momentous 'Game of Thrones' to decide who would rule Ireland: British Imperialism, Irish capitalism or the Working Class.

There are no dragons in this captivating saga, but there are heroes and villains, tragedy and betrayal.

## The Workers' Rising

In July 1917 Limerick got its first ever branch of the ITGWU, the radical trade union set up by Jim Larkin and James Connolly. The union grew rapidly to 3,000 members in the city, organising workers other unions had ignored: the lower paid, unskilled, precarious and women workers.

There was a growing wave of revolutions right across Europe, from Russia to Germany, Italy to Scotland. In Limerick's Markets Field, a 10,000 strong crowd passed a motion of solidarity with the Russian revolution on May Day 1918.

Soon after Sean Dowling, a close friend and ally of Connolly, came to the Mid-West as an ITGWU organiser. Dowling was a Marxist, and was the organiser of the workers in the Cleaves factory, who were the first to call a strike in April 1919. The trigger for this was the decision of the British Military to impose martial law in Limerick following a massive funeral for IRA member Bobby Byrne.



The Limerick Soviet is an often overlooked part of the city's history; it was triggered after the British imposed martial law following Robert Byrne's funeral

run things themselves, through the 'Soviet' and special sub-committees they set up. A food sub-committee ordered grain in the docks to be unloaded, and the bakeries to make bread. Shops were reopened with prices and opening times set by the Soviet.

This demonstrated a truth which we should remember today: Workers don't need the bosses. They need us. In fact, workers can run society more efficiently and more humanely. In the Bruree So-

viet a few years later, when the workers took over the factory and declared 'We make bread, not profits', they managed to cut prices, increase wages and increase production.

## Revolution betrayed

A week into the strike, the Limerick workers had fought the British state and the Irish bosses to a stalemate. The army and the RIC didn't dare leave their barracks.

But they also refused to lift martial law.

From day one, the hope had been that the trade unions nationally would organise solidarity action with Limerick to pile extra pressure on. The rail workers had indicated that they would come out on strike too, as had others. But that decision rested with the national leaders of the unions and the Labour Party.

Far from being revolutionaries like Dowling, these leaders had a

very different vision for the role of trade unions. They were people like William O'Brien who had been building a close relationship with the leaders of Sinn Fein, hoping to help them come to power and win a 'seat at the table' with them in a new republic.

When they talked to the Sinn Fein leaders, they were quickly told to wrap up the Soviet. Sinn Fein didn't like the British army, but they feared the working class in control even more.

So, the national union leaders said they wouldn't support escalating the dispute outside Limerick, taking the risk of the British



Fresh out the oven: Kelly Blackledge, student at Limerick Youth Service with Paul O'Brien, professional bakery

## Soviet bread to spread in city

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YOUNGSTERS at the Limerick Youth Service have been busy baking a very special batch of bread to mark the centenary of the Soviet.

Led by master-baker Paul O'Brien from Woodview Park, and artist Ann Ryan, batches of 'Soviet Bread' are being baked during the month of April, and will be served up at the first night of Mike Finn's Bread not Profits play on April 16, as well as in the Urban Co-Op at the Ballysimon Road and each Thursday and at the Youth Service in Lower Mallow Street.

"It's based on a recipe very similar to the 1919 recipe. It would be a different type of wheat, the texture and make-up of the bread would be slightly different. But like during the Limerick Soviet, the bread was quite dense and very heavy. Our Soviet bread would be similar in that regard," Paul explained.

Through the research, it was discovered that Canadian grain was used in the original pans supplied to workers involved in the

strike.

"Used grain was commandeered from a ship docked in Limerick Port, which held 7,000 tonnes of it," artist Ann explains, "Canadian grain would have been in usage in the British Isles during the war period."

Ann, who studied at the Limerick School of Art and Design, has been interested in the Soviet for the last 20 years, and saw the production of bread as a good way into the launch of a project.

She said: "It is particularly relevant as a symbolic aspect as well as a material aspect, because it is an international symbol of resistance around the world, from the French Revolution, the Boston riots, and right up to today in Tunisia, Egypt and Palestine."

Although the students of the Youth Service were quite understandably tired from their day of baking the Soviet bread on site in Mallow Street, they have developed a new appreciation of one of Limerick's key episodes.

Paul added: "Thanks to Ann, she has opened their minds to what happened 100 years ago - and mine to be honest!"

Podcast looks back at events of 1910

Events this week

On April 13, Dowling attended a meeting of all the trade unions in Limerick where they agreed to follow the example of the Cleeves workers, and call a general strike.

### A new 'Boss' in Town

The general strike saw the whole city come to a standstill. Factories, pubs and shops were closed. The only things open on the first day was the printers making posters for the strike, and the trade union headquarters where the trade union leaders, now termed the 'Limerick Soviet' met.

An indefinite general strike does more than just terrify the bosses and the state, it poses the question of power - who runs society? Clearly the bosses and the British military weren't able to run things, they couldn't even get a shop willing to sell them food.

Instead, the workers began to

## Podcast looks back at events of 1919

A SPECIAL podcast looking back at the events of the Limerick Soviet has been recorded by former councillor Cian Prendiville.

Since the start of this year, Mr Prendiville has put together five 25-minute long episodes looking back at the time when workers fought back after Limerick was placed under martial law.

"Each episode is built around two or three interviews, plus some dramatisations. Local actor Darren Maher has played out some quotes from the time, while music from Post Punk Podge also feature. We also have some clips of some of the music from Mike Finn's new play," he said.

Mr Prendiville has interviewed

a number of people with expertise on the Limerick Soviet, including the foremost authority on the matter Dr Liam Cahill.

He also met Dominic Haugh, who is also putting together a book on the matter, Rayner Lysaght, who wrote the first pamphlet on the Soviet back in 1979, as well as Trades Council president Mike McNamara, and union activist Mary O'Donnell, who sits on the commemoration committee.

Something he hopes to redress through the podcast is a better recognition of the role women played in the Soviet.

"It's something which is easy to overlook as all the trade union leaders were men, all the main

spokespeople were men. But if you scratch the surface, there is another story. For instance, the key workplace, the people where the first people to come out on strike was at Cleeves. It was a predominantly female workforce," Mr Prendiville explains.

The former Solidarity councillor recorded the podcast at Wired FM's studios in Mary Immaculate College, and is hoping it will be broadcast on Limerick City Community Radio.

In the meantime, a new episode will be uploaded each Saturday during April.

You can visit [www.limericksociety.ie](http://www.limericksociety.ie), or download it from the Podcast telephone app, by searching for Limerick Soviet.

taking the wind out of the sails of the Soviet. The Sinn Fein Mayor, Bishop and the Chamber of Commerce saw their opportunity and proposed a 'compromise'. Workers were to go back to work immediately, and if they behaved themselves martial law would be withdrawn a week later.

### Part two in next week's Limerick Leader

**Cian Prendiville is a member of the Socialist Party and the Limerick Soviet Centenary Committee. He has just released a 5-part documentary podcast 'Bottom Dog - The Story of the Limerick Soviet', which is available on [limericksociety.ie](http://limericksociety.ie) and in all podcast apps. The podcast tells the story of the Limerick Soviet through interviews, re-enactments and dramatisation.**

**Thursday April 11:** Book launch of Limerick Soviet: The Revolt of the Bottom Dog by Dominic Haugh, at the Mechanic's Institute 7pm; Solidarity: TD Ruth Coppinger will do the honours. Also tonight, Killaloe songwriter Norma Manly will play a free gig at the Commercial Bar in Catherine Street from 8pm.

**Saturday April 13:** An exhibition of memorabilia from the Limerick Soviet will be put on display between 10am and 12noon, while later that day from 4pm, at the Forsa building in Roxboro Road (the old Impact site), respected historian Dr Liam Cahill will give a public talk on the Soviet. A live storytelling event focused on the workers of Limerick will then take place at Narrative Four in O'Connell Street.

**Sunday April 14:** Trades council president Mike McNamara and Dr Cahill will be on hand to take people on a bus tour of the sites of the Limerick Soviet, kicking off from the Mechanic's Institute at 12.30pm. Tickets cost €8. Later there will be a session at The Commercial Bar, focused on Songs of Protest.

**Monday April 15:** Between today and April 27, Fab Lab will play host to a Laboratory of Common Interest, with exhibitions focused specifically on the Limerick Soviet.

**Tuesday April 17:** It's curtain up at 7.30pm for the first performance of Bread Not Profits. Written by Mike Finn, the old Cleeves factory will play host to a modern day retelling of the Limerick Soviet. Tickets are limited to 120 people a night, due to the venue's size, and are available from [www.limetreetheatre.ie](http://www.limetreetheatre.ie), or telephone 061-953400. The show runs nightly until April 27, save for Easter Sunday and Easter Monday.

# 'The Soviet has finally found its time'

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LEADING local playwright Mike Finn has admitted he is "not sure when he was last as excited" about a performance as the one he is putting on next week.

It's just days now until the doors of the former Cleeves factory at O'Callaghan Strand open to the public for Bread Not Profits, which focuses on the two-week period in 1919 when Limerick workers took on the might of the British empire.

A 30-strong cast made up of professional actors, community players and three musicians have been busy putting the final touches to the play, which kicks off next Wednesday, April 17, with a preview the night before.

"I have wanted to write this play for the longest time, and obviously the centenary was the time to do it," said Mike, who spent his year as the artist-in-residence at the Belltable theatre penning the play.

"It's exciting to see it get this far. I can't wait for it to open. It's a big monster of a play, because of where it is. To be doing it in this location, 100 years almost to the day is a privilege for sure," Mike added.

Setting the play in Cleeves was an easy decision for the writer, and it's apt, given the fact workers at the old toffee factory were among the first people out on strike - in spite of the anti-republican sentiments of the firm's



Some of the Limerick Soviet cast photographed outside of the Cleeves factory during rehearsals, left to right: Aidan Crowe, Martha Breen, Conor Madden, Karl Quinn, Gene Rooney, Kit Thompson, Ann Blake, Charlie Bonner, Lucia Smyth and Pat

owners.

"Rehearsals have been going really well. Paul Mead, who is one of the producers from Guna Nua theatre company in Dublin, he came down on Friday, his first visit, to make sure we were doing what we were supposed to be doing. And he described it as being like on a film set. And it is like a film set - there are so many people going around. It re-

sembles more a film set than a theatre play," Mike said.

In the play, Mike has attempted to drill down to the most basic level of the Soviet - arguments in the family home, among husbands and wives of the time.

"One of the things that's a difficulty when you take in something which is so big and broad and political is how do you find a way into it? What I've chosen to do is

to look for some kind of domestic situations which might illustrate the larger picture. For example, one of the scenes, is between a baker and his wife. The wife is quite enthusiastic about the strike, and is excited as to what it might develop into. Her husband is more sceptical - understandable really as he has a business which he might lose," Mike explains.

There is a deep county Limerick connection to the title of Bread not Profits, Mike adds, pointing to Bruree and a bakery in the village.

"The name is a bit of a steal to be honest with you. There were about 100 Soviets altogether in Munster between 1919 and 1920. A few of them were in the county. One of which happened in 1920 in a

bakery in Bruree. Workers took over the bakery as they were in dispute with their management. They painted across the front of it: Bruree Soviet Mills: We make bread not profits," he recalled.

Interestingly, the audience at the performances will be split up into small groups and see different parts of the performance at different times, a task which Mike says has made things even more difficult.

"It's a little crazy to say the least, but it's been working out so far. When the audience come in first, they are greeted.

"Then they will be told how the evening will progress. Once the first scene is over in the committee room, they will be divided into groups. People will get a coloured armband, and depending on which colour, you have a different route through the factory. We come back together at the end," he explained.

Mike adds he is surprised at the amount of sheer goodwill there is in the cast, saying: "Even the actors from out of town really and truly want to tell this story to Limerick."

"I think the Limerick Soviet has finally found its time. It's taken 100 years, and a lot of people up until recently had not heard of it. It's so unique to Limerick, it didn't happen anywhere else. It's the only part of the country where people took over the running of the city as a response to the British military."

## New book on key Soviet man

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THE revolutionary spirit of the Limerick Soviet can provide a blueprint for everyday struggles in 2019.

That's according to a number of people gathered at the launch of a new book focusing on murder victim Robert Byrne, and the Limerick Soviet by local Sinn Fein councillor Séighin Ó Ceallaigh. His party colleague Maurice Quinlivan was on hand to formally launch his 105-page reprisal of the key role Byrne played, which was born out of a project at the University of Limerick.

It was the death of the IRA hunger striker which sparked the Limerick Soviet, and Cllr Ó Ceallaigh has studied this, and other causes in depth, as part of his book.

On Sunday last, following a commemoration at the grave of Robert Byrne in Mount St Lawrence, the book was launched at the Mechanic's Institute. The book

has been a labour of love for the City East councillor, although he acknowledged there have been some "late nights" to get the self-published title out on time.

"The first time I came across the Soviet was in school, although not in any textbooks. It was actually part of a Leaving Cert project. We had a free choice of what to pick. I looked at the Tan War in Limerick and came across this man."

Cllr Ó Ceallaigh says he regrets the fact the Soviet is not being taught in Limerick secondary schools, given the year that is in it.

Dublin TD Eoin Ó Broin was present, and he said the spirit of the Soviet strikers in 1919 could be applied to workers today.

"Talk to working people, working long hours for poor wages due to the rising cost of living, not being able to get by at the end of the month. We need to capture some of the Soviet spirit, of that revolutionary generation, modernise it and update it for today."