The Limerick Printers’ Strikes in the early Twentieth Century (Part 1)

by Derwal O’Carroll

The first few decades of the twentieth century heralded a period of high unemployment and difficult working conditions for workers in Ireland and printers were not excluded. Though many newspaper and print houses had changed over to the new ‘hot metal’ technology, Limerick was slower to install the new technology as demonstrated by the following statement made in March 1917:

...In addition to serious competition from Dublin and other centres well equipped with machinery which is not in use in Limerick, unfair competition in the city itself, and the increase in the cost of paper, over 300 per cent, and the restrictions on the supply, made the outlook very black for the trade generally.

Many workers felt threatened by new technology, which they believed would make their skills redundant, and also cost them their jobs. However, newspaper production was reaching its zenith and even though the new machines did spell the end of an era, those willing to adapt and learn the new methods were guaranteed employment.

The First World War years brought new difficulties for the trade. The Royal Commission on Paper imposed many restrictions due to shortages which affected production around the country including Limerick. The Limerick Leader reported in April 1917 that the Clare Journal, which had been established in 1776, had suspended publication owing to a scarcity of paper.

It was not only newspapers that were affected as the production of posters was also constrained because of the paper restrictions.

...Those principally affected are clerks, lithographers, printers and others concerned with the printing trade; and as regards billposters, their occupation has practically been abolished. The extension of the time to execute contracts already entered upon and to dispose of stock is but a small concession to the job printing trade, many firms engaged in which will be seriously hit.

A conference of the proprietors and managers of newspapers in the West of Ireland and the Midlands and the heads of printing houses was held, in Athenry, County Galway, on 14 February 1917. The agenda included an item on:

...the increased price and the scarcity of paper, the additional cost of materials and the increased price of labour in an endeavour to adopt some practical measures which will, to some extent, relieve the present critical situation.

On 10 March that same year Limerick printers were also represented at a larger meeting in Dublin to address the crisis-reaching situation. The contingents met in the Oak Room of the Mansion House and over forty delegates from provincial newspapers were present.

The Limerick Leader reported on the meetings:

The position of provincial newspapers was regarded as extremely serious, and a resolution was unanimously decided upon, expressing the emphatic opinion that it was absolutely necessary, owing to the increased cost of production, and the increased cost of paper, that newspaper owners should demand an increased revenue from their customers, or reduce considerably the size of the newspapers, or both...

However, all these negotiations failed to halt a printers’ strike, and the same paper reported on the strike which occurred in Limerick in the same month:

We regret to announce that a dispute has arisen in the local printing trade. Last month the men made a demand for an increase in 7s 6d per week in their wages on the ground that it was impossible to them to live with provisions at the present high price on their existing wages, namely 33s per week on jobbing and 31s per week in newspaper offices. At a conference between the employers and the men these facts and others were emphasised and it was pointed out on behalf of the employers that the printing trade had suffered very severely as a result of the war. In these circumstances, the employers maintained that the state of the trade did not justify any increase...

The employers tried to ease the situation by offering an increase of 5s per week as a ‘war bonus’ on the understanding that the men would co-operate as far as possible to keep printing work in the city. The offer was rejected and the Limerick Typographical Society stated that “even 7s a week would not be accepted as a war bonus.” The employers then offered 5s a week, but this was also refused and an amended claim for 6s a week was asked as a permanency. At a meeting on 16 March 1917, the employers decided that no further offers would be made and that arbitration would be offered to the printers.

The strike lasted until the end of the month and gained attention in the national newspapers, with the Freeman’s Journal reporting on a number of days of the occurrences in Limerick:

A strike of printers, involving the composition in 4 newspapers and 3 jobbing offices, occurred on Friday in Limerick. The men asked it appears for 7s a week permanent increase. The employers offered 5s as a war bonus. It was refused, and the men’s demands were reduced to 5s. Arbitration was declined by the men.

Printers’ Strike - The Limerick Printers’ strike is still unsettled. Some 48 men are out.

No settlement has been arrived at of the Limerick Printers’ strike.

The latest development in the Limerick Printers’ Strike is that none of the apprentices came in to work.

The employers of the Limerick Leader did manage to keep the journal going for a few issues and even though they stressed their commitment to providing their readers with a continued service, it did not materialise. On Monday, 19 March, the following statement was printed, reflecting the employers’ anger at the situation:
To Readers and Advertisers.

The dispute in the printing trade of Limerick referred to in our last issue, has now reached a crisis. The men have refused the arbitration suggested by the employers on Friday and went out on strike that evening. This action is calculated to hamper the printing trade in the city, already in a very bad state, but the proprietors of the four newspapers, anxious that the public should not be deprived of the latest news in these stirring times, have decided to produce each journal on the usual days of issue. They appeal with confidence for public support in a dispute which has been forced on them, and beg the indulgence of readers for the necessarily restricted supply of news and of some advertisers for the compression of their advertisements.

To City Subscribers: We must request city subscribers to call for their papers as delivery is not possible at present. 12

The issue of 21 March contained mostly advertisements and little editorial and then on 30 March, the issue was dated 'Friday, Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings March 23, 26, 28 and 30, 1917' and a small article appeared on the bottom of page three:

The Printers' Strike: A Settlement.

The strike of local printers was settled last evening and the men are back at work today. The employers have granted an increase of 4s per week now and 1s more in three months. 13

This compromise gave the printers some success in obtaining their wage increase, though it was certainly a compromise, with the workers having to wait three months to see the extra shilling increase.

The printers were certainly encouraged in their strike action by the many journalists and political activists in the city, constantly advocating for better conditions for workers and many believing that the union with Britain was one of the main reasons for the workers' miserable existence. Limerick became home to radical socialist and nationalist newspapers, printed by the Rec consequential Printing Company, at 6 Corner Market Row, known as The Factionist and The Bottom Dog. The Factionist and The Bottom Dog seem to have replaced each other, lasting from October 1917 to August 1918. We published by the Limerick Trades Council and reflected the confidence and strength of Limerick and Irish labour due to its gains achieved during the First World War. Printed by sympathetic compositors and typographers, the first page of every issue carried the following slogan: "We must look at life in all its aspects from the point of view of the Bottom Dog - the oppressed - be it nation, class or sex."

The first issue of the paper carried the following introduction:

In making his bow (wog) to the public THE BOTTOM DOG wishes to offer a word by way of explanation. For a long time he has been the butt of ridicule and odium as well as the target for cheap sneers of those whose hands are raised against him. If THE BOTTOM DOG bites occasionally and makes himself felt, it will not be his fault; rather will it be the fault of the opponent, who seeks to wipe his feet on him, or kick him about like a football. He believes in the truth of the old saw that 'Every dog has his day' but at the same time he must assert that THE BOTTOM DOG's day appears to be a long way off, shrouded in the misty future. To work at hand then - hastening the day of THE BOTTOM DOG. 17

The newspaper served as a vehicle to condemn employers who did not treat the side of the worker and this is reflected in the following attack on Limerick County Council revealing the existence of unemployment among printers in Limerick at the time:

Limerick Money Sent Out of Limerick.

The Limerick Co. Council have given their constituents and the rate-payers a glimpse at economic management, and shown their sympathy with the idle Limerick Printer. In a £500 contract, they have sent the printing out of Limerick, as the Limerick firms were £17 higher - so the fine fat Co. Councilors thought, but the
BOTTOM DOG has seen by the
Press that when other expenses, such as
telephone, postage etc. are counted
on, the Limerick tender was the
lowest. "It did not matter to (them)
whether there was emigration from
or poverty in Limerick City."

The editor of the Bottom Dog also informed
on those printers in Limerick who were not
members of the Limerick Typographical
Society and printed outside of the Society's
rules and regulations:

Mr. G.C. Carey, President, Limerick
Typographical Society writes:

"My attention has been called to
patriotic Xmas cards bearing a verse of
"The Soldiers Song" and to a
Calendar with a portrait of the late
Most Rev. Dr. O'Dwyer, now on
sale in the city. The latter bears the
imprint of "B. Gallagher, Nicholas
Street". I am sure that neither of
the above mentioned have been
executed by the members of the
Limerick Typographical Society.

We consider it nothing short of a
scandal that this man of many
parts - Gallagher - should be allowed to
rake in the kudos by trading on
the memory of men whom he was
deadly opposed to when they were
alive. These cards and calendars are
printed in a 'scab' shop - Davis's,
Thomas Street...He got 200 copies
printed in a Society house and then
had 5000 done at Davis's, but his
sins have found him out. It is only
the National Aid Association or
some such body should have the
privilege of publishing pictures of
our noble dead, the proceeds then
going towards a very worthy object.
Gallagher's crime is all the worse
when the printing is done in a non-
society house."

'Non-society' or non-union houses were
generally boycotted by members of the
L.T.S. and expulsion from the union was
immediate if a member took work from a
non-union printing house.

ATTACK ON THE BISHOP OF LIMERICK

A reader has drawn our attention to the following extract from
Horatio Bottomley's intelligent organ of English opinion "John Bull" -
"We observe that the Most Rev. Dr. Hallinan, Bishop of
Limerick, is on his hind legs because photographs of his recent
satisfaction have been shown at a local cinema house beside with
films of a more secular character. With a tortured logic which we
cannot pretend to follow, his Reverence believes that this kind of
thing will gradually prepare the way for the establishment. In our
midst of the leper hospitals for the treatment of the hideously
revolting and highly, infectious disease begotten of the immorality of the British
soldiers. If ever it is our misfortune to meet his dis-Grace of Limerick,
it will be a strong indication will be to raise a lamp on his unholy
visage."

This is not surprising to those who know the character and
career of Bottomley. What does surprise us is that Limerick
citizens who inaugurated the crusade against unclean imported
English papers should allow periodicals of this type of "John Bull" to
continue to be sold in our midst. Worse still "John Bull" is said—and
bought—by local Catholics whose revered Bishop has been so
grossly attached by this sample of the gutter-type Press.

DROMBANNA CREAMERY DISPUTE.

The "B.D."
was honored by being produced in Court at the
hearing of Ryan's claim for compensation. Ryan got £500, so the
"B.D." must count for something. This ought enable Davy Ryan
to live without scabbing. Taxation looms large in the Irish horizon
and if it is put into force farmers' sons who can be spared from the
land to blackleg in a Creamery will surely be the first to do Khaele.
Davy Ryan can then make a present of his new suit to some poor
relatives.

Derval O'Carroll - This article is an extract of an MA in Local History (NUi Maynooth) thesis entitled Aspects of Limerick's Printing Pasi (1999) by Derval O'Carroll. A native of Limerick and graduate of UL, Derval was Manager of the National Print Museum, Beggars Bush, Dublin from 1996 to 2000 and is currently Head of Operations and Administration at the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. She was also researcher and co-editor of Hoggers, Lords and Railwaymen - a history of the Custom House Docks area of Dublin, published in 1996.