

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

by Derval 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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 meeting:

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...<sup>5</sup>

However, all these negotiations failed to halt a printers' strike, and the same paper reported on the strike which occurred in Limerick 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<sup>6</sup> 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...<sup>7</sup>

The employers tried to ease the situation by offering an increase of 2s 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 3s a week, but this was also refused and an amended claim for 5s 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 compositors 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 3s as a war bonus. It was refused, and the men's demands were reduced to 5s. Arbitration was declined by the men.<sup>8</sup>

Printers' Strike - The Limerick Printers' strike is still unsettled. Some 48 men are out.<sup>9</sup>

No settlement has been arrived at of the Limerick Printers' strike.<sup>10</sup>

The latest development in the Limerick Printers' Strike is that none of the apprentices came in to work.<sup>11</sup>

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 hamstring 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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 two radical socialist and nationalist newspapers, printed by the Record Printing Company, at 6 Cornmarket Row,<sup>14</sup> known as *The Factionist* and *The Bottom Dog*. *The Factionist* (with a sub-title *The Smallest Paper in the World*)<sup>15</sup> lasted from 27 January to 6 September 1917 and *The Bottom Dog* seems to have replaced it, lasting from October 1917 to August 1918. It was 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

# The "Factionist"

THE SMALLEST PAPER IN THE WORLD.

PRICE ONE HALF-PENNY

Vol. II.—No 8.

THURSDAY, 6th SEPTEMBER, 1917.

## MUNICIPAL ASSOCIATIONS CONFERENCE IN LIMERICK

### VISIT OF LORD WIMBOURNE.

#### Extraordinary Display of Public Enthusiasm.

The Council of Municipal Authorities held their Annual Conference in Limerick this year, under the Presidency of Stephen B. Quin, Mayor, and the distinguished patronage of Lord Lieutenant Wimbourne. Remembering that Wimbourne was dismissed after the insurrection in 1916 by the same English government he has the extremely doubtful honour of representing in Ireland to-day, for his lack of intelligence and statesmanship, and that Stephen B. Quin is looked upon by the other members of the Corporation, and the citizens generally, as somewhat lacking in brains, we can scarcely expect much, in the way of Civic or National improvement, to follow as a result of this Conference.

Stephen B. Quin was granted an increase of £50 to his mayoral salary for the purpose of entertaining the Delegates to this Conference, but he found it necessary to go round with the hat until he secured another £100, because he had the confounded cheek to take the responsibility on himself of inviting to our City the representative of the Government which murdered our Countrymen and Women last year, this year, and every year, since the curse of her connection fell on us.

A short time ago he attended the burial ceremony of the late Most Rev. Dr. O'Dwyer, and expressed keen disappointment that he had not the honour of being introduced to De Valera. What kind of principles does this man profess to have, or does he think he owes any responsibility to the position he holds? Previous to this we believed that the Mayor, or elected representative of any assembly, was supposed to represent, in some way, the views of the people who elected him, but our Mayor seems to represent the views of nobody except himself. Why, he even refused to give any information or consideration to the views of the members of the Corporation who still believe in Redmond, as regards his attendance at the Convention some time ago.

Seven members of the Corporation signed a requisition asking the Mayor to call a meeting to consider the proposed visit of the Lord Lieutenant to this Conference, but the Mayor refused to call the meeting. Nine members of the Corporation attended a large public meeting at the Town Hall and protested against the coming of Wimbourne, but he came although we hear only seven members of the Corporation were present at the Conference.

Title page of *The "Factionist"* (Limerick Museum)

and typographers',<sup>16</sup> 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 (wow) 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.<sup>17</sup>

The newspaper served as a vehicle to condemn employers who did not lean on 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. Councillors 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.<sup>18</sup>

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 "P. Gallagher, Nicholas Street". I am to state 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'<sup>19</sup> shop - Davis's, Thomas street...He got 2000 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.<sup>20</sup>

'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.

# — THE — BOTTOM DOG

"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."

No. 26.

13th APRIL, 1918

Price ½d.

## 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 consecration have been shown at a local cinema house side by side 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 horribly revolting and highly, infectious disease begotten of the immorality of the British soldiery. If ever it is our misfortune to meet his dis-Grace of Limerick, our strong inclination will be to raise a lump 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 the type of "John Bull" to continue to be sold in our midst. Worse still "John Bull" is sold—and bought—by local Catholics whose revered Bishop has been so grossly attacked 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 Davey Ryan to live without scabbing. Conscription 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 don Khaki. Davey Ryan can then make a present of his new suit to some poor relation.

Title page of *The Bottom Dog* (Limerick Museum)

### (Endnotes)

1. *Limerick Leader*, 16 March 1917.
2. *ibid*, 27 April 1917.
3. *Munster News*, 14 March 1917.
4. *Limerick Leader*, 14 February 1917.
5. *ibid*, 14 March 1917.
6. S is an abbreviation for shillings, of which there were twenty in a pound.
7. *Limerick Leader*, 16 March 1917.
8. *Freeman's Journal*, 20 March 1917.
9. *ibid*, 23 March 1917.
10. *ibid*, 27 March 1917.
11. *ibid*, 28 March 1917.
12. *Limerick Leader*, 19 March 1917.
13. *ibid*, 30 March 1917.
14. Seán Spellissy, *The history of Limerick city*. (Ennis 1998), p. 193.
15. This caption was printed on the first page of each issue.
16. Liam Cahill, *Forgotten revolution - Limerick soviet 1919*, (Dublin 1990), p. 38.
17. *The Bottom Dog*, 20 November 1917.
18. *ibid*, 17 November 1917.
19. A scab was a sobriquet applied to a worker who, in the course of a strike or lockout, assisted his employer to keep the business in operation.
20. *The Bottom Dog*, 8 December 1917.

**Derval O'Carroll** - This article is an extract of an MA in Local History (NUI Maynooth) thesis entitled *Aspects of Limerick's Printing Past* (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.