

The Limerick Printers' Strikes in early Twentieth Century (Part 2)

by Derval O'Carroll

A strong Nationalist feeling was present in Limerick during the First World War. Many Irish and Limerick men did not believe that their fellow countrymen should be dying on the fields of France. Home Rule had been postponed because of the advent of the War, but Irish Nationalists were not content to sit back and wait. This feeling was reflected in references in the local and national newspapers to flags being raised on various public buildings in the city and county:

About seven o'clock this morning the Republican Flag was observed floating from the flag mast over the Town Hall, Limerick. It remained there until close on nine 'clock... The flag was about two feet square and it is understood that it was placed over the Town Hall during the night or early hours of the morning.¹

On 7 May 1917, the *Limerick Leader* reported that flags were seen on public buildings in Kilrush, Kilkee (County Clare) and reported that 'Tarbert Coastguard Station and Post Office had the 'Republican flag' flying' on 9 May.

In March of the same year, the *Irish Times* reported on an incident which reflected growing dissatisfaction with British Rule:

On Friday night, a disturbance occurred in Limerick.

Mr. H.H. Moran, solicitor, arrived in the city on the expiration of a sentence of two months imprisonment for a breach of the Defence of the Realm Regulations, and was accompanied to his home by a cheering crowd. Later in the night two plain clothes policemen were attacked, but a body of constables came to their assistance. A crowd collected outside the William Street Police Barracks, singing and cheering. Stones were thrown and it is said some shots

were fired. But no injury was done. The crowd afterwards dispersed. Extra police arrived in Limerick on Saturday, but there was no renewal of the disturbances.²

Following the failure of the 1916 Rising there was increased support for Nationalism, due to the anger felt by the public following the execution of the rebel leaders by the British authorities. Change order of this sentence: For the first time since its epic battle with the employers of Dublin in the 1913 Lockout, the trade union movement was growing in tandem with the flourishing Nationalist enthusiasm. During 1918 the I.T.G.W.U. (now merged into S.I.P.T.U.) membership figure rose to 68,000 with a further 40,000 signed up in the following eighteen months.³

The increasing opposition to the World War, combined with the Russian Revolution in March 1917, which led to the formation of a Provisional Government, generated a mood for change,⁴ and for many workers, including the printers of Limerick, this was not just directed against the British government but against native exploiters as well.

In 1918 up to 15,000 workers, taking part in Limerick's first ever May Day parade, passed a resolution:

That we, the workers of Limerick and district, in mass meeting assembled, extend fraternal greetings to the workers of all countries, paying particular tribute to our Russian comrades who have waged such a magnificent struggle for their social and political emancipation.⁵

That year the British parliament voted to extend conscription to Ireland. The trade unions met this with a general strike on 23 April which covered the whole country

apart from the region around Belfast. The British government took fright and scrapped their plans to draft Irishmen into the trenches of France and Belgium. The victory gave confidence to workers and many wanted to push on with a fight against their employers.

In 1919, 40,000 Belfast engineering workers came out on strike for a 44 hour week. Electricity supply was stopped, except for supplies to hospitals. Pickets of up to 2,000 strikers closed the shipyards. The *Belfast Telegraph* was also shut and the *Worker's Bulletin* of the strike committee became the most widely read paper in Belfast.⁶

That year Limerick printers joined their fellow workers to form a 'Limerick Soviet.' The I.T.G.W.U. claimed 3,000 members in Limerick city in 1919.⁷

It was in this context of trade union militancy and the Republican war against British rule that this momentous event occurred. The incident that sparked it was the death of local IRA officer Robert Byrne, who was also a delegate to the Trades Council from the Irish Post Office Clerks Association.

Byrne had gone on hunger strike and an IRA rescue attempt had failed, leaving Byrne and an R.I.C. man mortally injured.



Robert (Bobby) Byrne.

In retaliation for the policeman's death the British Army occupied the central area of Limerick and declared martial law. Everyone passing in or out of the city had to show special military passes.

The River Shannon was designated the northern border of the Special Military area, with the result that the large working class area of Thomondgate was cut off from the rest of the city. Workers from this area would have to go through military checks four times a day as they went to and from their work. Between 5,000 and 6,000 people were affected by the restriction. Furthermore, two of the largest factories in the city, Cleeve's Condensed Milk and Butter factory (employing 600 workers) and Walker's Distillery were also cut off from the rest of the city. This also meant that the supply of milk to the city, mostly from Cleeve's would be severely disrupted.

People needing permits had to report to the offices of the military commander with a letter from their local R.I.C. sergeant certifying that their loyalty to the crown was not in doubt. Known Republicans therefore did not get permits and so could not get to work and people could be isolated and taken into custody on mere suspicion of having committed a crime. Local rate payers were levied with half the cost of sending the extra police into the area. The Trades Council called a general strike in protest which began on 13 April 1919. For the next two weeks the Council ran the city. No shop opened without their permission. Food prices were regulated to stop profiteering. Only transport authorised by the Council was able to move through the city. Printing presses were taken over to publicise the activities of the Soviet and a daily bulletin was produced. The Council also issued its own money. The *Worker's Bulletin*

newspaper was issued by the 'Limerick Proletariat'⁸ during the strike and served as a medium to encourage the strikers. The following report ended one of the *Worker's Bulletins*:

The strike has now entered its sixth day and Limerick, though still invested by the military might of England, shows no inclination to surrender. Though we have tanks, machine guns, aeroplanes, artillery, barbed wire, rifles, bayonets, trench helmets etc., etc. in, above and around the city, still no one seems the least disposed to be frightened. The day when such displays might frighten is gone for ever and the sooner the foreign government in this country recognises this fact the better.⁹

The newspaper also reported that propaganda in the English press claimed that the strike was a Sinn Féin one, but it reiterated that it was 'a worker's strike, and is no more Sinn Féin than any other strike against tyranny and inhuman oppression.'¹⁰

Posters, bank notes and indeed the newspapers were printed at the Record Printing Works, Cornmarket Row, which also produced the *Factionist and Bottom Dog*. The late W. W. Gleeson's uncle was proprietor of the firm and Willie later recalled:

Each evening my father, after finishing work at McKern's, would visit his brother's printing works at Cornmarket Row, working on seditious printing for the Sinn Féin Party. The type for most jobs - including the monetary notes, during the 1919 siege - was set by my father in the room off the kitchen...From 1916 onwards, scarcely had the printed matter seen the light of day when the RIC and military would descend on my uncle's premises, turn the place topsy-turvy, but alas, too late for the intruders, as a young boy, Tom Moloney, having done the printing would 'escape' to his mother's clothing shop next door...with what

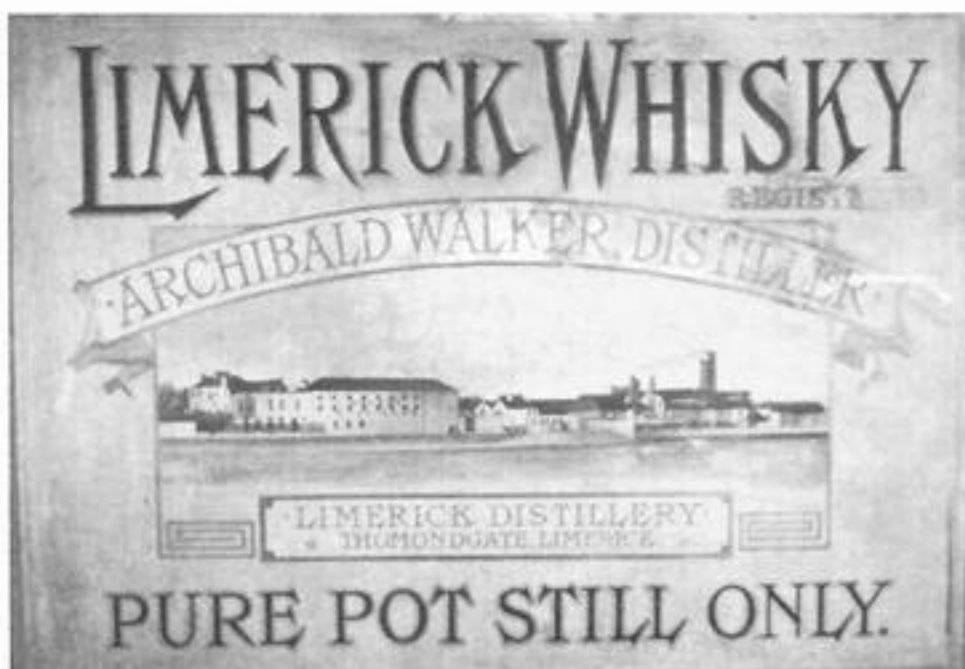
'mattered most' safely tucked away in his schoolbag. The printing works was wrecked half-a-dozen times, but never once did the *Factionist* or *Bottom Dog* fail to make their appearance.¹¹

The proprietor was usually warned of impending R.I.C. raids by Sergeant McCarthy of Clare Street, who used to give 'three taps on the window pane nearest to the door of the premises.'¹²

Ten days into the strike, the *Worker's Bulletin* was proudly declaring the determination of Limerick men and women to stand behind their beliefs against all odds:

Be then of good cheer, men and women of Limerick, our cause is a grand and noble cause and what matter though we suffer hunger, misery, aye! even death itself when we know that our cause is certain to triumph. Hereafter we can proudly say that when danger threatened, and men were wanted to stand in the breach, Limerick proudly kept the flag aloft. Therefore, let us be true to ourselves and our great traditions, and let every man, woman and child be of good cheer, as victory is near at hand.¹³

On Thursday 24 April, the Catholic bishop, Dr Hallinan and the Sinn Féin Mayor produced a peace formula. At this stage the Trades Council had run out of options and issued a proclamation which allowed all workers who could get to work without having to pass military barricades



Advertisement for Walker's Distillery



WW Gleeson (Courtesy of the Gleeson family).

to do so. By 5 May the military restrictions on Limerick were officially ended.

The strike attracted much national and international media attention. Many trade unions in Britain and Ireland sent relief funds to assist the striking workers. One such union was Irish Women Workers Union, which had formed a Printers' Committee in 1919 in response to the growing number of its members involved in the printing industry. Though the strike was nearing its close by this time, the minutes of a meeting of the Executive Committee held on 24 April 1919 contained the following:

Secretary suggests that contributions sheets should be sent out to all shop stewards with a printed heading 'Appeal for Limerick' - 200 slips to be done in Foleys' of Bachelors' Walk and some sent to the country. It was agreed that a cheque for £25 be sent to the Secretary of the Limerick Strike Committee - money to be paid out of the Union's Funds and refunded from contributions received.¹⁴

The Limerick Soviet reflected the growing confidence of newly unionised workers and a political idealism that looked to an Ireland free not only of the British army but also free of native bosses. They named their occupations 'Soviets' because they were impressed by the example set by the Russian workers who had established their own elected councils, called 'Soviets' in their country.

On 24 May 1919, a National Wage Basis Agreement came into force for printers in Britain and by July, the Typographical Association (T.A.) had succeeded in negotiating similar agreements for Ireland. This provided for a 10s increase by 1920

for Irish T.A. members.¹⁵ By the end of 1920, the post-war trading boom was spiralling downwards and industry bosses were faced with having to reduce wages to survive. Though the T.A. had secured a further 5s increase for printers by the end of 1920, this had not yet been agreed for Ireland so members were vehemently opposed to any wage decreases, their rates already lower than their fellow printers in Britain.

A long struggle against wage reductions for Irish printers carried on through 1922 and 1923. On many occasions, the Irish members rejected proposals recommended by the executive of the T.A. and the employers threatened lock-out notices, but the members refused to give way and the utmost the employers could get was a reduction of 5s compared to 7s-12s in Britain. Negotiations in Limerick came to a head in January 1923 with printers striking against proposed wage decreases by their employers. The *Limerick Leader* notified its readers of the strike as follows:

Printers' Wages Dispute. Owing to a dispute in the printing trade in Limerick on the issue of a proposed wages cut, publication of the *Limerick Leader* will be suspended until further notice.¹⁶

In most printing houses in Limerick the strike lasted until April 1923. The *Limerick Echo* reported a settlement: 'To Our Readers. We are pleased to announce that as a result of an amicable settlement with the printing trade, the *Echo* has resumed publication.'¹⁷ The *Limerick Leader* did not resume publication until June and made no reference to the strike in its first issue following the strike resolution.

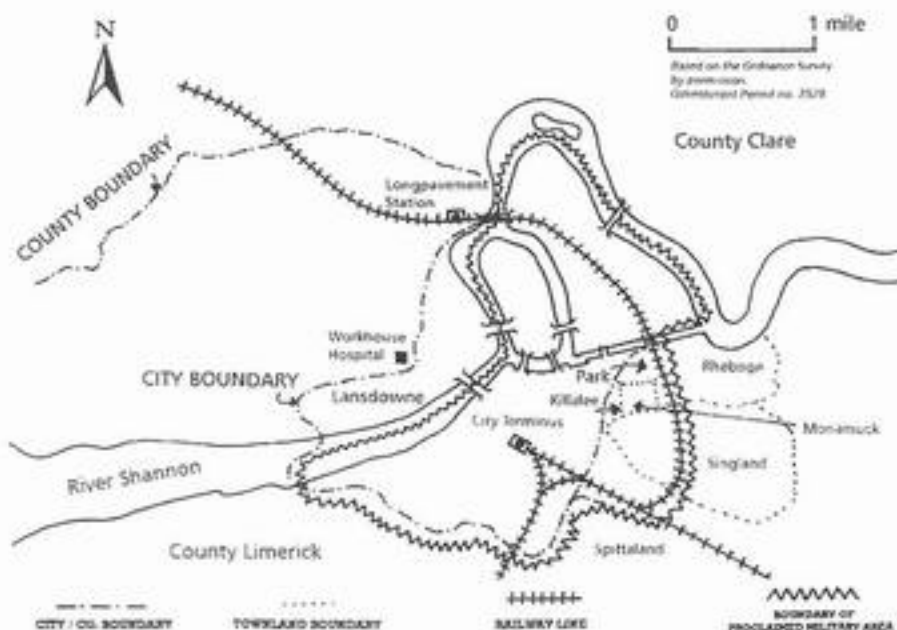
The strike resulted in printing work being lost in Limerick as reported by the *Freeman's Journal*:

Limerick Printing Strike. Voters' lists, on which several printers had been employed prior to the strike on January 29, have been taken away from Limerick by the Irish Stationery Department, which wishes to make sure they will be finished elsewhere within the limited time fixed for completion.¹⁸

Denis O'Shaughnessy, whose father worked for the *Limerick Leader*, recalled his father telling him of the difficulties experienced by printers and their families in Limerick during this period. His father was not married at the time, so he spent the strike months fishing for salmon for his dinner in the Shannon! He did however remark on how harsh conditions would have been if he had to feed a wife and family.¹⁹

There was a possibility during the following years that Ireland might break away from the T.A. The Dublin union (D.T.P.S.) had always remained independent and in 1920, it had made an attempt to establish an Irish Typographical Union. Though Irish Nationalists continued to advocate a split from the T.A., provincial members remained loyal and their attempts failed.²⁰

The sixteen week printers' strike which lasted from October 1937 to February 1938 meant that printer families suffered once again. Though trade opportunities were favourable for the industry in the years leading up to the Second World War and working conditions for printers had improved, wages in Limerick printing houses remained low, with the cost of living increasing rapidly.



Map of the Military area in Limerick in 1919.



Barricade on Thomond Bridge in 1919 (Courtesy of Limerick Museum).

On 23 October 1937, the *Limerick Chronicle* reported:

Owing to the proposed withdrawal of typographical labour by the Limerick Branch of the Typographical Association, it is probable that this will be the last issue of the *Limerick Chronicle* to reach the public for some time to come.²¹

The paper was out of circulation for sixteen weeks and reported on its return to print:

The *Chronicle*, we are pleased to say, resumes publication with this issue, after a lapse of sixteen weeks, consequent on a strike which we regret. We are now happy to be in a position to say that the dispute between the employees and this journal, as well as of the *Limerick Leader*, Messrs. G. McKern Ltd., and the City Printing Company, has been amicably settled. It will be our aim to give the public a continuance of a full service of local and external news, with other interesting features.²²

As in 1923, negotiations to settle the strike were assisted by the intervention of the local clergy and local politicians. The newspaper paid credit to 'the kindly intervention and good offices of the Very Rev. Canon Hannon P.P., V.F., the Mayor (Ald. D. Bourke, T.D.), the City Manager (Mr. T.C. O'Mahoney), Ald. J. Reidy, Ald. A.E. Goodwin, and Mr. M.J. Keyes, T.D., B.C.'²³

There is also a note, handwritten in pencil, on the top of the copy sent to the National Library: 'publication resumed after strike.'²⁴

All Limerick printers did not adhere to the strike as some newspaper and printing houses agreed to the demands for an increase in wages shortly after the stoppage of work. The *Limerick Weekly Echo* did not appear for one issue but resumed on 30 October:

To Our Readers. The Proprietors of the *Limerick Echo* and the *Limerick Weekly Echo* has acceded to the

demand made by the members of the Limerick Branch of the Typographical Association for an increase in the weekly wage of her staff. There will therefore be no interruption of work, and these journals will publish as usual.²⁵

The *Limerick Leader* was also affected by the strike and did not appear for over four months and reported on the end of the strike:

Seventeen weeks have elapsed since there was an issue of the *Limerick Leader*. The temporary stoppage of publication as our readers are aware was due to a strike now happily at an end.²⁶

Printers were joining their fellow workers in a serious attempt to increase their standard of living in an ever-growing consumer-oriented society. Luxury goods were becoming increasingly available in the inter-war years. Limerick carpenters,²⁷ bus drivers, painters²⁸ and 650 men employed at Rineanna Air Base (Shannon)²⁹ all went out on strike for better pay in the winter of 1937-38. This attracted considerable attention around the country and in December that year, the Limerick workers' efforts to raise their wages and improve working conditions over the previous number of years were praised at a gathering in Dublin:

The Southern and Northern Groups of the Typographical Association, at a meeting in Dublin on Saturday passed a resolution endorsing 'the efforts of the Limerick branch to raise the standard of Irish printers'. The meeting was of the opinion that the Limerick branch was entitled to the full support of the Executive Council of the Association. A motion in favour of all Irish printers moving for an increase in wages was passed. The following branches were represented - Drogheda, Dundalk, Newry, Kilkenny, Cork, Limerick, Waterford, Wexford and Naas. Letters promising support were received from Belfast, Clonmel and Derry branches.³⁰

The resolution passed in Dublin reflected the determination and commitment of Limerick men and women, who suffered great hardship and misery in an attempt to improve their lives and the lives of their children. The spirit of Nationalism was ever prevalent during this time and certainly served as a catalyst to spur on the workers in their quest for better working conditions. Those who enjoy the quality of life in Limerick today owe a debt of gratitude to those who struggled in the face of adversity and through sheer perseverance emerged triumphant.

Endnotes

- 1 *Limerick Leader*, 25 April 1917.
- 2 *Irish Times*, 26 March 1917.
- 3 Liam Cahill, *Forgotten revolution - Limerick soviet 1919*, (Dublin 1990), p. 16.
- 4 After the Tsar was deposed in March 1917, a Provisional Government was formed. It was very weak and failed in its promise of end Russia's involvement in the war. Lenin and the Bolshevik party had established themselves as the only party opposed to continuing the war effort. In October 1917 the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government and formed their own government under a soviet system.
- 5 *ibid*, p. 7.
- 6 *ibid*, p. 14.
- 7 *ibid*, p. 38.
- 8 This caption was printed on the last page of each issue.
- 9 *Worker's Bulletin*, 19 April 1919.
- 10 *ibid*, 21 April 1919.
- 11 Willie W. Gleeson says farewell to print! in *Irish printer*, (October 1978), p. 39.
- 12 Seán Spellissy, *The history of Limerick city*, (Ennis 1998), p. 193.
- 13 *Worker's Bulletin*, 23 April 1919.
- 14 I.W.W.U., *Minutes of Executive committee meeting*, 24 April 1919.
- 15 A.E. Mussen, *The typographical association - origins and history up to 1949*, (London 1954) pp. 332-4.
- 16 *Limerick Leader*, 26 January 1923.
- 17 *Limerick Echo*, 21 April 1923.
- 18 *Freeman's Journal*, 16 February 1923.
- 19 Transcript of recorded oral interview with Denis O'Shaughnessy, 24 January 1999.
- 20 Mussen, p. 359.
- 21 *Limerick Chronicle*, 23 October 1937.
- 22 *ibid*, 17 February 1937.
- 23 *ibid*, 17 February 1938.
- 24 *Limerick Chronicle*, 17 February 1938.
- 25 *Limerick Weekly Echo*, 30 October 1937.
- 26 *Limerick Leader*, 25 October - 21 February 1938.
- 27 *Limerick Weekly Echo*, 29 January 1938.
- 28 *ibid*, 11 December 1937.
- 29 *ibid*, 26 February 1938.
- 30 *Limerick Leader*, 11 December 1937.

This article is (Part 2) of an extract from 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.