

# THE BRITISH LABOUR MOVEMENT AND THE 1913-14 DUBLIN LOCKOUT

## The Potential and Limits of Solidarity Action

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### Introduction

The Dublin lockout of 1913-14 is without any doubt the most important industrial struggle in Irish history. When some 25,000 workers were promptly locked out of their workplaces by over 400 employers for refusing to sign an undertaking not to be a member of Jim Larkin's Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU), there was a concerted attempt to crush independent and militant trade union organisation. In the past, the union's great strength had been working class solidarity whereby individual employers found themselves having to confront the strength of the whole union, actively mobilised against them. The lockout effectively countered this with working class solidarity now matched by employers' solidarity as the ITGWU found itself confronted with a prolonged battle of attrition, designed to bleed away its resources, both financial and moral. With inspirational defiance, courage and tenacity the Dublin workers, many of them casual labourers and with the lowest wages and the worst living standards in Western Europe, held out for nearly six months between 26 August 1913 and 18 January 1914 in a battle of epic proportions, before finally being driven back to work defeated.

Yet while most accounts of the Dublin Lockout consider it primarily as an event in Irish history, it was also one of the most important struggles in twentieth century British history. It was undoubtedly influenced by, and was an integral part (if not the high point) of the great 'labour unrest' that swept over Britain in the years 1911 to 1914 and had tremendous repercussions in Britain as well as Ireland (Newsinger, 1984: 3; Whitson, 2013). A victory for the Dublin workers would have shaken the resolve of employers throughout Britain, while the defeat of the Dublin workers only gave them encouragement. While the embattled ITWU was staunchly nationalist, Ireland was still part of the United Kingdom and the union regarded itself as part of the widespread movement of working class insurgency that was challenging employers, government and union officials in both countries, and

Larkin's explicit attempt to spread the dispute into the heart of the British labour movement - via the appeal to take industrial action in support of their Dublin counterparts by refusing to handle tainted goods - served to underline its ramifications in Britain.

However, remarkably little detailed attention has been given to the nature, extent and dynamics of the solidarity campaign that was generated on the British mainland for the Lockout (probably the only other comparable event was the national miners' strike of 1984-5) in the form of public rallies, financial assistance, food ships, assistance to strikers' children, sympathetic industrial action by railway workers and dockers, and a special Trades Union Congress (TUC) conference; the reasons why such widespread support was forthcoming; and its broader implications for understanding the radicalised nature of industrial relations in Britain during this period. In an attempt to fill the gap, this paper provides a comprehensive re-examination of the historical record (including Board of Trade Reports; Home Office reports; House of Commons parliamentary papers; TUC Reports; trade union archives; daily newspapers and the radical press), in the process foregrounding hitherto neglected aspects of the subject and deploying new archival findings to explore the potential and limits of Larkin's campaign to secure sympathetic industrial action inside the British labour movement.

Moreover, it offers a critical analysis of existing predominant historiographical interpretations of the dispute that have claimed Larkin's lacerating personal attacks on individual British labour movement figures for their failure to organise sympathetic industrial action was a 'fatal mistake' (Yeates, 2000: 435; O'Connor, 2002: 45-46; Larkin, 1965: 132-133), and that the decision taken at the special TUC conference to refuse to agree to mobilise official trade union support for such action should not be understood as a 'betrayal' of the Dublin strikers (Yeates, 2000: 583).

The paper utilises evidence to suggest it was the solidarity of the British labour movement that allowed the Dublin workers to survive for as long as they did, but a key factor (apart from the fierce opposition mounted by the Dublin employers backed up by the police, clergy, judiciary and press) explaining why they went down to defeat was the TUC's refusal to mobilise effective sympathetic industrial action in Britain; that sympathetic industrial action (in the context of the strike unrest of 1910-13 and momentum for a campaign of industrial unity between different sections) was by no means a completely unrealistic prospect, even if whether it would have ensured a different outcome to the dispute is unknowable; that Larkin's critique of British labour movement leaders can be both understood and justified within the context of his own direct experiences of trade union

officialdom and his embrace of the general syndicalist analysis of the limitations of union officialdom; and that rank-and-file militants (and syndicalist and socialist activists generally) were too unorganised and uncoordinated to overcome the entrenched resistance of the TUC leadership, but this was compounded by the way Larkin's solidarity appeal to the special TUC conference oriented primarily on putting pressure on union officials to call action rather on the need for independent initiative from below.

### **Solidarity Generated**

The extent of the British labour movement's solidarity for the Dublin workers was expressed in a variety of way. To begin with, there was the sheer level of financial assistance generated by the TUC and its affiliated unions, which apart from being of considerable moral comfort, was undoubtedly materially crucial in allowing the ITGWU to continue to fight over the long months of the Lockout. There was also numerous specially chartered food ships (notably the *SS Hare*) that were sent to the Dublin strikers in very public displays of support organised under the auspices of the TUC. The enthusiastic response to the call for support for the Dublin workers was evidenced by the attendance at many huge public rallies/meetings held across the country which Larkin addressed as part of a 'Fiery Cross' propaganda crusade organised by an amalgam of militant socialist groups, including the *Daily Herald* Leagues and Clarion Clubs.

Larkin's arrest and seven months' imprisonment for 'seditious libel' also provoked widespread grassroots protests. Meanwhile, there was the so-called 'Kiddies Scheme' devised by the socialist-feminist Dora Montefiore in association with a group of suffragettes connected with the *Daily Herald* League in London, which aimed at alleviating distress by sending some of the strikers' children to stay with sympathetic families in England for the duration of the dispute. Most significantly, there were two bouts of rank-and-file unofficial sympathetic action by railway workers across the country. There was also solidarity action taken by some dockers in Liverpool and Salford.

It was the sheer extent and depth of the British labour movement's solidarity for the Dublin dispute, combined with Larkin's campaign for sympathetic industrial action, which secured the unprecedented agreement of the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC to call a special conference (held in December 1913 following its annual congress earlier in September) to consider the British trade unions' future strategy and continuing financial

support for the Dublin dispute; it was the only occasion that such a conference had occurred since the founding of the TUC in 1868.

In sum, the unflinching solidarity of thousands of men and women represented a potent symbol of international solidarity. James Connolly, who had returned to Dublin from the United States to join Larkin as the Belfast organiser of the ITGWU, praised the trade union rank-and-file of Britain: 'I say in all solemnity and seriousness that in its attitude towards Dublin, the Working Class Movement of Great Britain reached its highest point of grandeur – attained for a moment to a realisation of that sublime unity towards which the best of us must continually aspire' (*Forward*, 9 February, 1914).

### **Explanation for Extent of Solidarity**

There are a variety of factors which help to explain the extent of British labour movement support. The extensive coverage in the British press and cinema newsreels of the dispute and the event of 'Bloody Sunday' (when police drew batons, set upon demonstrators listening to Larkin and badly injured 300 people) aroused public consciousness and support among British workers who were made aware of the Dublin employers' aggressive tactics and the sheer burden of the Lockout, particularly on already poverty-stricken women and children. Meanwhile Official TUC and affiliated unions' support for the Dublin workers also encouraged a widespread appreciation of the generalised threat to trade unionism and the right to organise. At the same time Larkin's 'Fiery Cross' propaganda crusade, at which his flamboyant and charismatic personality and 'oratorical and rhetorical magic' were displayed, met with an enthusiastic response which 'astounded most observers and alarmed many' (Cockburn, 1976: 45).

In some parts of the country it was not inconsequential that many sympathetic people had strong Irish family connections, notably in Lancashire generally and Liverpool specifically. The level of solidarity demonstrated previously by the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) for British mainland trade unionists also helps to explain the extent support subsequently around the Dublin lockout. There was also the broader context of the 'Labour Unrest' that had swept Britain from 1911, an unprecedented period of labour militancy with national strikes by dockers, seamen, miners, railway workers and many others, often involving unskilled, non-unionised workers (Board of Trade, 1912). In each of the years 1910, 1911 and 1913 there were around 10 million days lost due to stoppages, and in 1912 (with the national miners' strike) the figure was nearly 41 million. During the four

years 1910-1914 somewhere between 25-30 per cent of the British workforce went on strike, and more than 85 per cent of those who went on strike were victorious to some degree or another, underlining the way (despite the dramatic reversal of fortune in some individual battles) there was a spectacular growth in the total power of organised labour (Williams, 1954: 272). Trade union organisation in Britain was completely transformed by this 'Labour Unrest' with a massive increase in union membership from 2.4 million at the end of 1909 to 4.1 million by the end of 1913. By 1914 union density had risen to 23 per cent. It is against this backdrop of an assertive and growing trade union movement that the high level of solidarity for the Dublin dispute can be understood.

One of the most striking features of this labour militancy was its predominately unofficial character with strikers often clashing with their trade union officials. According to Jack Murphy (1941: 81): 'To be "agin" the officials was as much a part of the nature of the syndicalist-minded workers of that time as to be "agin the Government" was a part of the nature of an Irishman'. Moreover, as the historian James Cronin (1979: 100) has noted: 'the fundamental strategic innovation of 1910-1914 was the "sympathetic strike"'; not only were sympathetic strikes common, so too was their use in order to extend the field of combat and transform sectional demands into broader, even national, ones. Clearly such an unofficial and solidaristic dynamic to the industrial unrest helps explain the willingness of rank-and-file union members on the railways and docks to take unofficial action in support of the Dublin dispute, and for many others to be critical of trade union leader's refusal to mobilise wider sympathetic industrial action. Another important factor was the way in which the widespread industrial unrest contributed to an implicit questioning and challenge to the existing political system in Edwardian Britain, even if the attempt by historians like Elie Halévy (1961) and George Dangerfield (1997) to suggest it destroyed the liberal values on which British society had rested since the early part of the twentieth century exaggerates the process. Also of crucial significance in explaining the extent of solidarity for the Dublin Lockout was the ideological and organisational influence of the radical left, notably the revolutionary syndicalists, such as Tom Mann's Industrial Syndicalist Education League, the Unofficial Reform Committee of the South Wales Miners (which published the widely read pamphlet *The Miners Next Step*), and *The Syndicalist Railwayman* newspaper, all who criticised the timidity of union officialdom and advocated militant unofficial 'direct action' and revolutionary industrial unionism.

A number of historians, such as Hugh Clegg (1985: 22-74), Henry Pelling (1987: 130; see also 1968) and Keith Laybourn (1997: 119), have suggested British syndicalism's role

within the labour unrest was not particularly significant, while Eric Hobsbawm (1984: 273) has asserted 'its influence was almost certainly much smaller than enthusiastic historians of the left have sometimes supposed'. Of course, it is true there were probably no more than a few thousand members of the ISEL at any one time, But the sheer size and scope of the labour unrest undoubtedly provided a context for syndicalist ideas to be broadcast, grievances identified, and workers persuaded that strike action that bypassed the perceived 'class collaboration' of official union leaders was the logical means to seek redress to both employers' pressure and state repression, and for syndicalists like Tom Mann and others to assume leadership of strikes out of proportion to their formal numerical strength, notably in the 1910 South Wales Cambrian Combine dispute, 1911 Liverpool general transport strike, and 1914 London building workers' lockout (Bagwell, 1963; Brown, 1974; Holton, 1973; 1976; Darlington, 2013a).

It was these uncompromising working class agitators and propagandists, who had played a key role in generating support for militant trade unionism and solidarity action generally, that were also now important in building support for the Lockout and encouraging a mood of sympathy for the aggressive syndicalist aims of the ITGWU.

### **Larkin's Strategy: Sympathetic Industrial Action**

We can now turn attention to Larkin's strategy to win the dispute: the call for sympathetic industrial action by the British labour movement. In light of the outright refusal of the Dublin employers to agree to any compromise settlement of the dispute (on the basis of seeking not merely the defeat but the destruction of the ITGWU and 'Larkinism'), and with shipping employers importing large numbers of strike-breakers (many of them from Britain) into Dublin to keep the port open, the ITGWU was confronted with a battle for its very existence, and it became clear that financial and food assistance from the TUC, no matter how generous, was going to win the dispute. Hence the ITGWU, Larkin argued, needed urgent solidarity industrial action in Britain. While the *Daily Herald* propagandised in favour of a general strike in support of the Dublin workers, Larkin appealed more concretely and feasibly for solidarity 'blacking' action to secure the boycott of Dublin traffic, with British trade unionists called upon to refuse to handle either goods in transit to Dublin or 'tainted goods' from Dublin' that had been handled by imported scabs brought to Dublin to break the strike.

In the process of appealing for British labour movement support, Larkin controversially castigated in a directly personalised fashion individual TUC and Labour Party leaders for their failure to agree to organise sympathetic industrial action. While most labour historians have criticised this approach, it should be understood that Larkin's attacks, reflected primarily his own direct personal experience (and embrace of the general syndicalist analysis) of the limitations of trade union officialdom as being synonymous with compromise, betrayal and defeat. Larkin was also well aware of the way that during the labour unrest that has swept Britain one group of workers after another had clashed with their own trade union officials who attempted to dampen down militancy in ways which were detrimental to rank-and-file interests and aspirations. As a consequence he assumed his appeals for solidarity industrial action had to be primarily addressed to the *rank-and-file* and not the union bureaucracies.

But this raises the question: was there any serious prospect of such rank-and-file sympathetic industrial action gaining traction in practice?

### **Potential for Sympathetic Industrial Action**

Although the number of workers involved in strikes during 1913 was less than it had been in 1911 and 1912 it was still very high at 689,000, and there was the largest number (1,497) of individual strikes recorded. The scale of rank-and-file railway workers' militancy during this period was demonstrated in 1911 with unofficial action in Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield forcing union officials' into calling the first ever national railway strike of over 145,000 workers over the central demands for union recognition and an end to the unsatisfactory conciliation procedures established four years earlier. After the strike persistent workers' discontent manifested itself in a series of local unofficial disputes over disciplinary matters in 1912-13 prior to the Lockout which further underlined the continuing gap between rank-and-file members and union officials. In all this continuing railway unrest the influence of syndicalist ideas via leading militants such as Charles Watkins (Sheffield) and *The Syndicalist Railwayman* newspaper played an influential role.

With the outbreak of the Dublin Lockout, and following Larkin arrest and imprisonment, more than 300 NUR branches, representing some 85,000 members, passed a vote of no confidence in their leaders for tolerating 'blacklegging' and 'tainted traffic' and calling for a national strike in solidarity with the Dublin dispute (Yeates, 2000: 304; 377). In the process, there was the possibility of linking the railwaymen's own outstanding grievances with the growing demands for solidarity with the ITGWU.

There was also a considerable amount of willingness to take sympathetic industrial action by dockers in different parts of the country, despite the fact dockers had engaged in a national strike in 1911, and London dockers had again been on strike in 1912 and had sustained a crushing defeat. Likewise some other unions expressed a willingness to take sympathetic industrial action with Dublin. The unprecedented decision by the TUC to call a special conference, the first ever in its history since its foundation in 1868, was an indication of the extent of the solidarity pressure building up from below. Meanwhile the growth of the idea of sympathetic industrial action as the means to leverage greater pressure on employers, and its widespread popularity among many union activists, was highlighted by the way it had become a powerful factor in the success of strikes of 1911, notably in the Liverpool general transport strike. As Tom Mann (1967: 212) commented: 'Solidarity had truly worked wonders'. But there were many other examples of such solidarity action in which workers took then put forward demands on their own account, and there was the also the general appeal of industrial unionism and industrial solidarity more broadly, as advocated by the syndicalists and others, as the means to overcome the sectionalism and fragmentation of craft unions, contributing to the establishment of the National Transport Workers' Federation (NTWF) and the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR). The growing rank-and-file interest in industrial unity that had developed in 1911 and 1912 encouraged the progress of official union negotiations during 1913-13 towards a *permanent* body linking some 1.5 million transport workers, railwaymen and miners in the form of a 'Triple Alliance' that could provide for the co-ordination of strike action between its constituent unions.

In sum, against the backdrop of a wide-scale labour unrest over the previous 2-3 years and continuing considerable unrest on the docks, railways and elsewhere, and in a context in which an underlying general feature of such unrest was its unofficial character, there was clearly some potential for the call for sympathetic industrial action over the Dublin Lockout to win widespread support. But there were also considerable obstacles to such a development that need to be considered.

### **Limitations of Sympathetic Industrial Action**

Although there was a higher number of disputes in 1913 than in the previous year, the number of strikers involved was less than in both previous years and the number of working days lost also fell commensurately in both years, plus there was less overt national conflict compared to 1911-1912 (Board of Trade, 1911; 1912; 1913). Meanwhile there were



tremendous difficulties in attempting to convince workers who might have felt they had no direct interest in the Dublin dispute that they should refuse to do certain kinds of work in order to help fellow trade unionists. Such difficulties were compounded where it threatened victimisation and the threat of loss of permanent employment. Some activists unable to generate action on their own domestic issues may have felt reluctant to fight over the concerns of workers elsewhere, however sympathetic they may have been to Dublin. Another obstacle to solidarity industrial action for the Dublin dispute was the fact the 1912 London transport strike had been decisively defeated in a dispute that had been effectively restricted to the capital, with the failure of the National Transport Workers Federation (NTWF) to secure sympathetic strike action from its members in most other ports across the country. It should also be noted that the numbers calling for sympathetic industrial action with Dublin was only a small (if not insignificant) minority of the labour movement, with the most embedded level of support generated in those areas, such as Liverpool, Bristol and south Wales, where the syndicalist movement had its greatest influence.

But crucially most union leaders were emphatically opposed to the sympathetic strike being advocated by militants within their ranks and did what they could to stymie unofficial action. Union officials such as Thomas, Sexton, and Wilson viewed spasmodic unofficial stoppages as undesirable, for they undermined their credibility with employers with whom they had struck agreements on behalf of their members; and they regarded sympathy strikes with particular disfavour on the basis their priority perceived to be building union organisation and looking after *their* members' interests, not the interests of members of *other* unions (Richardson, 2013: 24). They were concerned to resolve those disputes affecting their members directly, rather than to wage a struggle against employers on a broad united front. In the light of the fact they had experienced tough battles with advocates of militant rank-and-file action inside their own unions, the Dublin dispute ran the risk of merely increasing such pressures with Larkin as the hero of such radicals. Thus during the lockout, Jimmy Thomas, of the National Union of Railwaymen, faced with the unofficial strike action, directly intervened, refused to offer official union support, and secured a return to work.

Paradoxically the amalgamation of the different railway workers' unions into a single organisation with a 'model' industrial structure, the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR), did not lead to a more fighting union as anticipated, and while on the face of it the Triple Alliance amounted to a significant step towards industrial unionism, for many trade union officials involved it was not seen as a means of promoting class unity through sympathetic strike action, still less a revolutionary weapon to overthrow capitalism as the syndicalists

advocated, but rather merely a means of equipping themselves with greater bargaining leverage whereby mere threats of strike action could force employers to make concessions and the government to intervene, thereby preventing or reducing spontaneous unofficial outbursts of rank-and-file militancy and sympathetic action (Clegg, 1985: 114-115).

Crucially the rank-and-file unofficial action taken by railway workers in support of the Dublin dispute was too limited and isolated to be an effective counterweight to the determination of the union officials. And even where other union members expressed a willingness to take action, they lacked the confidence to do so independently of their own union officials, and instead awaited official direction and a lead from the TUC. There was an insufficient level of rank-and-file *cross-industry* organisation (as opposed to intra organisation, such as the railway vigilance committees) that could initiative and co-ordinate action from below across the trade union movement. This was compounded by the fact that the syndicalist and socialist left were not well organised/experienced in mobilising across industries to overcome the officials' dead hand and proved unable to mobilise broader unofficial solidarity action for Dublin.

Nonetheless, despite these weaknesses, if the TUC *had* issued a call for sympathetic industrial action, it seems reasonable to suggest it could have potentially transformed the situation, accentuating the positives and diminishing the negatives, encouraging those rank-and-file activists who did not have the confidence and strength to deliver such action on their own but may have been prepared to take action if they had been given an official lead.

## **TUC Betrayal**

Despite calling an unprecedented special conference to consider the British trade unions' future strategy and continuing support for the Dublin dispute, it deplored and condemned the 'unfair' attacks upon British trade union officials, and expressed confidence in those who had been 'unjustly assailed'. As a result of this TUC decision the movement for unofficial action was decisively crushed and the Dublin workers, left to struggle on isolated, eventually went down some weeks later to crushing defeat, with hundreds falling victim to the blacklist and those who retained their jobs only returning on humiliating terms. Although the ITWU survived as an organisation, the movement of working class revolt in Ireland was decisively defeated (albeit wartime conditions were to allow a remarkable recovery from 1917-1923) and the tide of Larkinism turned back. More generally, the defeat of the Lockout was also a serious blow to the British labour movement (underlined by the subsequent

building workers' lockout of early 1914) and of the syndicalist left that had failed to overcome the union leadership's opposition to solidarity industrial action.

Did the TUC 'betray' the Dublin strikers? On the one hand, according to Yeates (2000: 583) 'there is no reason to doubt the good faith of the TUC', and that 'it is certainly a mistake to portray the TUC's action as some sort of betrayal of the Dublin men' (2000: 583). The TUC's Parliamentary Committee had no constitutional power to impose any kind of boycott or strike in support of the Dublin workers. In addition many TUC leaders felt that sympathetic action would be costly in terms of depleting their union's strike funds, would disrupt existing bargaining arrangements with employers, open up the prospect of putting their union into constant dispute, fritter away their members' power fighting *other* workers' battles without any real benefits to themselves, and anyway be ineffective compared to securing a compromise settlement with the Dublin employers. In addition, the officials were wary of unleashing rank-and-file membership militancy inside their own unions that they would be unable to control (having barely kept control amidst the whirlwind of strikes since 1911), and of a victory for Larkinism increasing support for the syndicalist objectives they were so opposed to. So in attempting to steer a path between the extremes of Murphyism and Larkinism, the officials hoped to secure a compromise settlement, if necessary negotiated over the head of Larkin and the Dublin workers.

But arguably to understand what happened we also can draw on the sophisticated British syndicalist critique of official trade unionism, to which Larkin subscribed, as being synonymous with compromise, betrayal and defeat, and which located this not merely in personal terms but in relation to their distinct social position. Thus the syndicalists highlighted the existence of a conservative social stratum of full-time union officials and the fundamental conflict of interest between the interests of this 'bureaucracy' and their rank-and-file members. They drew attention to the collaborationist logic of formalised collective bargaining and conciliation procedures which encouraged an attachment to the need for compromise in negotiations, the avoidance of strikes, and a commitment to the existing social and political order. It was for this reason union officials acted as a brake on workers' struggles, betrayed their members in strikes and prevented a decisive challenge to the employers and government (Darlington, 2008).

## **Weaknesses of Rank-and-File and Socialist Organisation**

Clearly the lack of effective sympathetic industrial action for the Dublin strikers cannot entirely be put down to the limitations of trade union officialdom; there is also the question of the limitations of rank-and-file organisation. As we have seen, although there was enormous sympathy for Dublin workers inside the British labour movement and the willingness of a significant minority across the country who rallied behind Larkin on his 'fiery cross' campaign to take solidarity action, they did not have the confidence to deliver solidarity action *on their own*. This lack of confidence did not mean those who supported the Dublin workers would refuse to take action if they were offered a lead, and an active campaign by union leaders to persuade their members of the need for action might have provided a focus for the minority of militants who wanted to help the Dublin workers but felt unable to take the initiative themselves. However, in the vacuum what it meant was that even some of the most militant activists tended to look towards the official leadership of the movement to deliver action, something which Larkin's approach further encouraged in the lead up to the special TUC conference with high expectations placed on the trade union leaders. In addition, rank-and-file militancy and anger was not organised and given a political direction by the syndicalist and socialist militants within the movement, who were too loose, uncoordinated, and unorganised to overcome the opposition of union officialdom.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion Yeates (2000: 581) has argued the Dublin Lockout was: 'unquestionably a tragedy', and an unnecessary one, and yet, like all tragedies, it was almost inevitable'. Arguably this view is not justified. Although a devastating defeat, the Lockout also stands as a vivid example of workers' defiance, courage and tenacity, combined with the importance of inspirational leadership and militant tactics. But crucially it was the solidarity of British labour movement that allowed the Dublin workers to survive for as long as they did. But if the strikers' fighting endurance proved unable to overcome the united front mounted by the Dublin employers, backed up by the full weight of the British state, as well as the Catholic Church, the other crucial factor in the equation explaining why it went down to defeat was undoubtedly the failure of effective sympathetic industrial action in Britain.