

CHAPTER SIX

Soldiers and Strikers

"We, as organised workers refuse to ask them for permits to earn our daily bread and this strike is a protest against their action."

- John Cronin, Chairman, Limerick Strike Committee.

On Wednesday, April 9, 1919, Lieutenant-General the Right Honourable Sir Frederick Shaw KCB, Commander-in-Chief Ireland, appointed Brigadier-General C J Griffin as the Competent Military Authority throughout Ireland. (1) In a separate notice, most of Limerick City and a part of the county were placed under General Griffin's authority, as a Special Military Area.

All of this was done under the provisions of the Defence of the Realm Acts and the Regulations made under the Acts. This Act - DORA as it was usually known - was introduced by the British authorities early in World War One to give them sweeping powers, literally, to defend the Realm. One of its key provisions was the power to proclaim entire districts as Special Military Areas, under what was termed a Competent Military Authority. This enabled the military to issue entrance and exit permits and to weed out spies by frequent and close checking of passes. Later on, as the Anglo-Irish War increased in ferocity, Special Military Areas were used to pressurise the local citizenry into disowning the gunmen in their midst

General Shaw's signature simply gave legal effect to the authorities' swift response, already announced, to the events in Limerick. On the Monday morning after the shooting at the Infirmary, the following official announcement was issued:

"In consequence of the attack by armed men on police constables and the brutal murder of one of them at Limerick yesterday, the Government has decided to proclaim the district as a special military area."

As General Officer in Command of Forces in Ireland, General Shaw attended a top-level meeting that Monday morning at the Vice Regal Lodge in Dublin, together with the heads of the Royal Irish Constabulary and the Dublin Metropolitan Police. Later the same day, the Lord Chancellor had a meeting with the Lord Lieutenant, Viscount French.

Three days later, French and the Chief Secretary for Ireland, MacPherson, jointly sent an urgent, almost panic-stricken, demand for troop reinforcements to the Adjutant-General in London: "The situation here grows worse and worse. It cannot be dealt with efficiently unless the eight battalions which were promised to the Chief Secretary by you are immediately sent. Five are understood to be ordered. These are not enough for the purpose. It is absolutely imperative that great expedition should be used in the dispatch of these troops". In January, the War Office had promised Dublin they would not be "let down" below the minimum requirements of troops and mechanical transport. Now the reply was that necessary steps were being taken to expedite the

dispatch of troops.

Although the formal proclamation of the military area was made on Wednesday, April 9, it was not to come into practical effect until the beginning of the following week. The military and police spent the intervening period mapping out the area to be covered, securing positions and selecting sites for military outposts leading to the city. They commandeered the extensive premises of the Shannon Rowing Club, something they had previously done after the disturbances of Easter week, 1916.

Already, the "Irish Times" noted that respectable citizens "who took natural pride in the city's industries" were beginning to wonder how far they would be affected by the proclamation. Most people, the newspaper said, realised the restrictions would seriously affect the commercial interests of the city. That was indeed a classic understatement. It was as if the regulations had been deliberately drafted to punish, if not provoke, the citizens of Limerick.

The River Shannon was designated as the Northern boundary of the special military area. Immediately, this meant the large working-class area of Thomondgate, to the North, was cut off from the rest of the city. Workers from there would have to show permits and undergo military checks four times a day, on two bridges, as they went to and from their work. Similarly, workers who lived on the Southern side of the river would face police and military scrutiny going to Thomondgate. Between five and six thousand workers were directly affected by the restrictions. Two of the city's largest factories were North of the river and therefore cut off - Cleeves' Condensed Milk and Butter Company, employing six hundred workers (mostly women) and Walkers' Distillery.

Entire suburbs had been divided under the regulations and the supply of milk to the city, mostly from Cleeves, would be seriously disrupted. Tenants who held vegetable allotments in the rural area North of the Shannon would be unable to tend them.

People who needed permits were required to report to the offices of the Military Commandant, General Griffin, at 78, O'Connell Street - the former recruiting office. They were required to produce a letter of identification from the RIC sergeant in their district. If the police thought the applicant was a fit person to get a permit, one whose loyalty was beyond doubt, they would recommend him to the military authorities. In this way, known Republican sympathisers faced economic punishment for their views, if they could not exercise their trade or vocation. In addition, people suspected of crimes could be isolated and taken into custody.

After the police recommendation, the military recorded the applicants' height, weight, colour of hair and eyes and other details. These were kept on a card, duly stamped and dated. In some cases, applicants faced the trouble of having to apply every day. Only children under the age of sixteen were permitted to cross the bridges without a permit.

At this time, people in seven districts in Ireland faced such

restrictions. To add insult to injury, the ratepayers could be levied with half the cost of sending extra police to the area. In Westport, County Mayo, for example, no potatoes or other farm produce or turf were allowed in and poor people were suffering particularly badly because of the lack of fuel. Even most of the mourners at a funeral were turned back a mile outside the town.

Trade union organisation and tradition, the frequent overlapping of membership between the Labour and Republican movements and the heightened passions after the death and funeral of Robert Byrne all ensured Limerick's response would be sterner, and more effective, than that of other areas.

The IRA man who pulled the trigger at the Workhouse rescue, Batty Stack, was employed in Cleeves Factory. For him, and for other Volunteers, the prospect of being checked and questioned by the military four times a day was a dangerous one. In addition, there was probably a genuine sense of grievance among Cleeves employees over the way the military boundaries had been planned. On the Saturday before the strike started, the Cleeves workers rejected an offer by the authorities to supply them with permits for the coming week. Some authorities have suggested that it was, in fact, a decision by the Cleeves workers to strike from Monday that forced the hand of the Trades Council. A confidential police report said the strike had its origins among a number of Sinn Fein members employed at Cleeve's factory. The report went further, and said Sinn Fein had "instigated" the general strike.

On Sunday, April 13 1919 - Palm Sunday in the Christian liturgy - delegates from the thirty five unions affiliated to Limerick United Trades and Labour Council met to consider the situation. Their discussions lasted for almost twelve hours, ending at half past eleven that night. In the end, the decision was unanimous. The Council decided to call a general strike of all Limerick workers as a protest against the proclamation of the city as a special military area. At a sympathetic printing works in Cornmarket Row, printers worked through the night on a strike proclamation. Within two hours, the city's walls were covered with this notice:

"Limerick United Trades and Labour Council
Proclamation

The workers of Limerick, assembled in Council, hereby declare cessation of all work from 5 am on Monday April 14, 1919, as a protest against the decision of the British Government in compelling them to procure permits in order to earn their bread.

By order of the Strike Committee

Mechanics' Institute.

Any information with reference to the above can be had from the Strike Committee. "

The Council elected a Strike Committee, chaired by the Council President, John Cronin, a delegate from the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters. Cronin was an unassuming person, but a great craftsman, having won a gold medal and certificate from the Worshipful Company of Carpenters for proficiency in his trade. Cronin's father had been also been President of the Trades Council and the son had followed diligently in his footsteps. The Trades Council Treasurer, the printer James Casey, was elected Treasurer of the strike committee. The third officer of the strike committee was an engineering worker named James Carr. Afterwards, in the folklore of Limerick trade unionists, the strike leaders were remembered as "The Three Cs". The strikers also elected subcommittees to take charge of propaganda, finance, food and vigilance - an early indication, perhaps, that they expected a long, rather than a short, strike.

The speedy and efficient way in which the Trades' Council meeting was organised would seem to underline an element of Sinn Fein influence and support. Certainly, the normal, cumbersome methods of consultation with the members of individual affiliated unions were not followed.

On Monday April 14, 1919 the "Irish Independent" correspondent in Limerick cabled the Dublin office:

"Limerick City is on strike. Shops warehouses and factories are closed. No work is being done and no business transacted."

The strikers intended to maintain public utilities like water, gas and electricity though street lighting was turned off. The strike took the city and its workers by surprise. Nevertheless, almost all workers stayed out and, apart from the Post Office and the banks, practically every branch of industry stopped and all places of business were closed. The banks did little or no business, but the Post Office was kept busy by journalists filing copy on Robert Byrne's inquest and the start of the strike. Even the public houses followed the lead.

To avoid the loss of perishable commodities, on the first day of the strike the Strike Committee allowed people to work at the bacon and condensed milk factories and the tanneries. The employees of Cleeves' creamery did not turn up for work, but instead, joined in a parade by thousands of workers through streets filled with a holiday style atmosphere. Bakers' and butchers' assistants joined the strike. Bread was not obtainable, but it was announced that the bakers would return to work that night, easing initial fears of a food shortage.

In all, more than fourteen thousand workers were on strike. The "Irish Times" noted: "...nothing doing anywhere, except a Coroner's inquest on the Sinn Fein prisoner, Byrne, who was shot during an attempt to rescue him."

At Kingsbridge Railway Station, in Dublin, and at other stations, passengers were refused tickets to Limerick unless they had a permit from the military authorities. Some passengers persisted in making the journey. But the few who arrived in Limerick that Monday morning had considerable difficulty in getting hotel accommodation. Pickets

visited all the hotels and ordered them to close their doors. Where visitors were admitted, they were told there could be no guarantee they would be supplied with food and that supplies could not last beyond the evening. Restaurants, too, were closed.

The three thousand or so members of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union were crucial in the strike. Goods for Limerick were not dispatched from the North Wall, in Dublin, nor accepted at Kingsbridge when it became known they would not be handled by the transport workers in Limerick.

The "Independent" reported: "Every thoroughfare in the city is full of people moving about and discussing the situation. There is considerable suppressed excitement, but the people show no disposition to be otherwise than quiet and orderly...." In a perceptive comment, the newspaper's correspondent wrote: "The strike is in every way complete, and it looks as if there is a possibility of a fierce struggle between organised labour and the Government."

The "Irish Times" report blamed the Transport Union as the "dominating factor" in encouraging the strike decision. "Associated to some degree with labour in its action", the newspaper claimed, "is the irresponsible element of Sinn Fein, which, of course, regards the situation as a challenge to British law. The ordinary citizen, however, who has at heart the welfare of the city, and realises how costly will be the strike and the other incidents, is gravely concerned, and anticipates a permanent setback to its trade and commerce. The bill that he will have to meet for the maintenance of the extra police will be a heavy one...."

The Chairman of the Strike Committee, John Cronin telegraphed a message to William O'Brien, General Secretary of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress: "General strike here as protest against permit restrictions."

Cronin outlined his assessment of the causes of the strike to newspaper reporters. He said the present industrial situation had arisen out of the tragedy at the Workhouse. "The military authorities have seen fit to place Limerick under martial law. In doing that, they have fixed their boundaries inside the city, which makes it necessary for workers to pass in and out to their work. We, as organised workers, refuse to ask them for permits to earn our daily bread, and this strike is a protest against their action. What we want is to have this ban removed so that the workers may have free access to their work in and out of their native city. It is our intention to carry on the strike until this ban is removed. This strike is likely to become more serious."

The strike call threw the Castle authorities, particularly the RIC, into immediate difficulties. Within a half hour of the strike meeting ending, Dublin Castle was being told of the decision. At five minutes to midnight, on the Sunday, District Inspector Craig of the RIC telephoned Dublin. The succinct official record of the telephone message shows that Craig asked for at least three hundred extra constables, if possible, to be sent on the first morning train.

Alternatively, he would settle for a hundred men sent in advance from the Dublin Depot. Craig's initial assessment was wise: "The situation looks very serious."

The message from Craig prompted a handwritten message to Brigadier-General Joseph Byrne, the Inspector-General of the RIC, from the Deputy Inspector-General W M Davies, at twenty to two in the morning. (17) The request for three hundred police reinforcements was impossible to meet, even with more time available. Davies pointed out that he was reluctant to take men from any of the Southern companies, because "there are so many strikes going on elsewhere" - an interesting comment on the level of trade union militancy at the time. Although he knew the military did not intervene in strikes, they would have to do so if disorder arose. This comment suggests this very senior RIC officer did not quite appreciate the extraordinary challenge to authority posed by this particular strike. Indeed, the whole tone of his message to the Inspector General is querulous and indecisive.

Forty minutes later, at twenty minutes past two in the morning, a decisive reply came back. (19) Fifty men were to be sent from the Depot on the first train. GHQ were to be informed of the policing difficulties. The Inspector General's assessment was blunt: "Say to GHQ that as this is no ordinary strike it is presumed instruction will be tonight sent for military to help police."

On the same file in Dublin Castle on the headed notepaper of the Vice Regal Lodge, is a note of two matters decided upon there, that Monday. The first was the text of a communique to be telegraphed to Limerick and issued to the Dublin press by the Press Censor's Office. This read: "The public of Limerick are informed that although Limerick has been proclaimed a military area, this in no way prevents the inhabitants from getting their supplies in the ordinary way. If, owing to the wanton action of ill-disposed persons, the inhabitants suffer through lack of the necessities of life, the Government are in no way responsible, and cannot do anything to ameliorate the consequences of such action."

The second decision noted was an instruction to inform the C in C that "the Government instructs him to give every possible assistance in the maintenance of Law and Order, especially in view of the fact that Limerick is a military area."

After a slight initial hesitancy, Dublin Castle had recognised the challenge for what it was and made its dispositions to deal with it.

If the lives of Limerick's workers were disrupted by the military regulations, so too were the arrangements of more "respectable" citizens elsewhere. The Company Secretary of Switzer's department store in Dublin, Mr W F Hanna, applied for a permit, saying it was "of extreme importance" that he travel on the Thursday. He wished to be in his native Limerick for the Easter holidays. In the initial period prior to the exact details of the control regulations being published, the Limerick RIC had referred Mr Hanna to the Dublin Metropolitan Police. Indignantly, he pointed out that they professed "complete ignorance - or rather absence of

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information ! ". Mr Hanna said that he was a "most law-abiding citizen anxious to mind my own business and no politician." In exasperation he asked the Chief Secretary for Ireland: "Tell me what I am to do please."

From 56 Monson Street, in Lincoln, came a request from Patrick Noonan for a permit to return to Rathkeale, in County Limerick, also for the Easter Holidays. (24) Noonan explained that he had gone to Lincoln to replace a man who had gone to fight at the Front, being too old himself for military service. He enclosed a newspaper clipping showing he was the author of a telegram to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, from the "loyal Irishmen of Lincoln", expressing deepest sympathy at the sinking of the passenger ferry "Leinster" in October 1918, with a loss of more than five hundred lives. The telegram had expressed the hope that the "fiendish outrage which called aloud to Heaven for vengeance would fire the youth of Ireland with the fighting spirit of their race to give, even at the eleventh hour, the final knockout blow to the murderers of our countrymen."

Noonan also enclosed a copy of a reference written for him in 1916 by Major General T F Lloyd, Colonel the Prince of Wales North Stafford Regiment, at Rathkeale, County Limerick. Apart from describing Noonan as a strong Loyalist, the reference said his life had been erratic, taking up various pursuits, among others, correspondent to newspapers, writing especially articles on hunting. "And I never saw anything written by him that was not loyal in every sense of the word", the General commented. Not surprisingly, Noonan got his permit.

Other applicants were referred to their local police. One came from W F Enright, a wholesale spirits, cork, butter and general produce merchant in Belfast and another from a person called Walsh in Liverpool.

A week into the strike, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, the Scot Ian McPherson, received an anonymous letter from Limerick, signed "An Anxious One". The letter began by endorsing a recent speech by McPherson in the House of Commons. Of this speech the Parliamentary Correspondent of the "British Weekly" - himself an experienced Scottish member of the Press Gallery - had laconically commented: "This was not the type of speech which Mr McPherson, a Home Ruler, would have liked to deliver, but the man who becomes Chief Secretary for Ireland cannot always do what he likes."

In general, the Chief Secretary's anonymous Limerick correspondent berated him about the dangers facing the country and the need to maintain morale in the police force. Unless the force was supported, the writer warned, the younger men especially would go over to the Rebels, "leaving the country in a bad way and all loyal citizens at the mercy of Rebels who will turn the place into another Russia." This letter was written after the strike had lasted for a week and the writer's reference to Russia is of some interest.

The tribulations of the Loyal citizens of Limerick even found their way into the hallowed chambers of Buckingham Palace. On the fourth day of the strike, Mrs Anna Worrall of Catherine Place, in Limerick, wrote to his Majesty King George V. Mrs Worrall wrote to ask a favour of the

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King, knowing she said, that since the War he was "only too ready to hear all about his subjects." She hoped the letter would not be thrown in the wastepaper basket but would be given to the King himself.

Mrs Worrall's request was to have the military tanks removed from the Wellesley Bridge (now called Sarsfield Bridge) to the Borough Boundary at the Workhouse Cross in County Clare. This, she pointed out, would allow the men and women workers to go freely to Cleeves' factory. The General Strike, she complained, "makes it hard for everyone". The grocers and bakers were the only shops allowed to open, from 2 pm. to 5 pm.

"They are all 'Sinn Feiners'," she declared, "but the Government ought to think a little of us few loyal subjects and it is no use making them more bitter than they are, nor do we want bloodshed here over it. No one knows I am writing to your Majesty. Will you send orders to Head Quarters in Dublin by return and grant the request I ask."

King George's Private Secretary passed the letter to Dublin Castle. District Inspector Rodwell reported from Limerick that Mrs Worrall was a most respectable and loyal old lady, but was considered "slightly eccentric". She frequently visited her brother, the well-known auctioneer Mr Fitt, who lived on the Ennis Road and had to show her pass when crossing the Wellesley Bridge. Laconically, Rodwell noted: "She probably does not like doing this."

Other concerned citizens were expressing their views too on the effects of the proclamation. Limerick Corporation adopted a resolution criticising the allocation of extra police and the ever-active P J Kelly, Resident Magistrate, convened a meeting of his colleagues to consider the state of the city.

Now the powder keg had exploded, and the pieces could never be put back again.