

**CHAPTER ONE**

**The Empires Crumble**

*"On Monday, April 14, there began in Limerick City a strike protest against military tyranny, which because of its dramatic suddenness, its completeness and the proof it offered that workers' control signifies perfect order, excited world-wide attention."*

**- Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, Annual Report 1919.**

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

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

The strike had been declared by Limerick United Trades and Labour Council to protest against the proclamation of the city by the British authorities as a Special Military Area, under the Defence of the Realm Act. The military control regulations required all citizens to carry special permits and thousands of workers faced the prospect of police scrutiny several times a day as they went to and from work.

By Monday evening, fourteen thousand Limerick workers had joined the strike.

Within twenty four hours, the Strike Committee became the effective governing body of Ireland's fourth largest city for the duration of the strike. The Strike Committee - or the Soviet as it became known - regulated the price and distribution of food, published its own newspaper and printed its own currency. It was the first workers' Soviet in Britain or Ireland and it brought the Irish Labour movement to the brink of a revolutionary confrontation with British power in Ireland.

The Limerick Soviet was organised Labour's first - and in the event, fatally flawed - intervention in the Irish War of Independence.

The years 1917 to 1919 saw Europe in a red, revolutionary turmoil. The Bolshevik October Revolution in Russia, and the defeat of Germany and the Central European Powers, had broken the old moulds with a vengeance.

In an editorial on April 7, 1919, the "Irish Times" summed up the situation aptly: "The mind of the world is still torn between war and peace." During that month of April, Europe held its breath as the old order in Germany, in particular, reeled under a succession of Bolshevik victories. At Munich, Bavaria was declared a Soviet Republic. There were general strikes or soviets in Dusseldorf, Augsburg, Wuerzburg and Regensburg. Thirty eight thousand Ruhr miners went on strike, there was a general strike in the Krups engineering company and the strike movement was said to be spreading.

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The April newspapers reported that the Red Army had occupied Sebastopol, in the Crimea, as the Bolsheviks' efforts to drive the Allies out of Russia continued to meet with success. With a Hungarian Soviet Republic already in existence, a Bavarian delegate to the Berlin Soldiers' Council could hardly be faulted for boasting: "...nothing could prevent a red revolution....The whole continent of Europe would become Bolshevik."

Further afield, the aftermath of the Great War was bringing increasing pressure to bear on the British Empire, and fissures were beginning to appear in the imperial structure. In early 1919, Britain faced revolt in Egypt, Afghanistan and India. In the same edition of April 15, that reported the proclamation of Limerick and the ensuing general strike, "The Times" reported very grave disturbances at Amritsar, in the Punjab. An editorial laconically noted a Mr M K Gandhi figuring conspicuously in the reports and described him as a "misguided and excitable person".

Nearer home, the great engineering cities like Glasgow and Belfast were feeling the effects of the run-down of the war machine and there were demands to reduce the resultant unemployment and create jobs for the demobilised soldiers. The unions had negotiated a forty seven hour week, but in Belfast the workers struck for a forty four hour week and in Glasgow they demanded a forty hour week, with no reduction in wages.

Belfast moved first and stayed out longer. There were twenty six trade unions on the General Strike Committee, including representatives of workers in municipal transport and electricity. All factories, except those able to generate their own power, were closed but power to hospitals was maintained. Theatres and cinemas were closed and even the gravediggers were on strike ! To move a ship in or out of the harbour or dry dock required permission from the Strike Committee. The Belfast strike involved over forty thousand workers in a loss of three quarters of a million workdays. After almost a month on strike, and after enduring a virtual military occupation, Belfast returned to work without a victory.

The Government called out the troops to deal with Glasgow as well. The Secretary of State for Scotland described the strike as "a Bolshevik rising" and sixty tanks and a hundred army lorries were sent North by rail. Troops garrisoned all the major public buildings and the power stations and patrolled the streets in full battle order. Barbed wire and machine guns surrounded the City Chambers. The show of force eventually caused a drift back to work. Later on, there were major strikes in Liverpool, Southampton, Tyneside and London.

Ireland had been going through something of a revolutionary ferment during those years, too, though its place in the British Empire meant the revolution would be political in form and content as well as social or economic. Largely through the events of the Limerick Soviet, the year 1919 saw the resolution of the question of whether political issues could be separated from social or economic issues, and if they could, which took primacy.

During the latter part of the Nineteenth Century and the first decade and a half of the Twentieth, Irish disaffection with British rule found expression mainly through the constitutional pressure of the Irish

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National Party and the extra-constitutional agitation of the Land League for land reform. Since the abortive Fenian Risings of the Eighteen Sixties, many men of the physical force tradition of Irish nationalism were forced to lick their wounds and brood over past wrongs as exiles in the United States or as convicts in Britain's distant colonies. At home, Parnell's charismatic leadership and his ambivalent attitude towards the Fenians had enticed the young men towards politics. Davitt's Land League campaign offered a potent mixture of direct action and economic aims that were attractive on an individual as well as a national level.

By the outbreak of World War One, the land question had been well settled by a succession of Land Acts transforming the Irish peasant from a precarious tenant of an often distant landlord into a doughty land proprietor in his own right.

In politics, the Liberal Government's Home Rule Bill of 1912 seemed to give just the measure of self-government that was needed to satisfy the demands of Ireland's "strong" farmers and business men. But Ulster and Conservative opposition, and the outbreak of World War One, forced the postponement, until the end of hostilities, of the Irish Party's most prized achievement. In June 1916, John Redmond, the leader of the Party, was forced to accept Ulster's "temporary" exclusion from the terms of the Home Rule Act, whenever it came into force. This capitulation was extremely unpopular in Nationalist Ireland and the Irish Party began to decline in popularity. The Party's virtual demise in the General Election of 1918 was hastened by its advocacy of Irishmen fighting in the War, by the executions of the leaders of the 1916 Rising and by the death of Redmond in March 1918.

The Easter Rising of 1916 represented a new and more advanced phase in the Irish struggle for independence. The Rising came as a great shock to a Britain lulled into a false sense of security by the apparently passive acceptance of Home Rule by the great majority of Nationalists. Militarily, the insurgents did better than expected, though internal wrangling about strategy on the eve of the Rising thinned out their numbers considerably. Coming, as it did, while the Great War was not going well for Britain and her Allies, the rebellion in the second city of the Empire provoked a vehement reaction. Courts martial sentenced ninety prisoners to death and twenty five of them were actually executed. A total of three thousand five hundred people were arrested. More than a hundred and seventy of those faced courts martial while over eighteen hundred were interned without trial in Britain.

The execution of the leaders and the imprisonment and internment of the rank and file helped generate a growing disillusionment with British rule, with the suspended offer of Home Rule and with the moderate Irish National Party, led by John Redmond.

For over eighteen months after Easter 1916, many of the leading figures in the independence movement were out of political circulation and the stage was, largely, left free to the trade unions. In the years immediately after 1916, the upsurge of independence sentiment found its nearest and clearest expression through the Labour movement and through associated strikes and agrarian unrest.

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"By the autumn and winter of 1916 ", an Irish Trade Union Congress report noted, " the Transport Union and Liberty Hall had begun to rise literally from their ashes...All through the country the unions had the same tale of successful organisation and successful movements to tell in 1917...and indeed the two great phenomena of 1917 in Ireland were the rapid rise of Sinn Fein, the Irish Republican Party and the equally rapid rise to both power and popularity of the militant Labour movement."

James Larkin and James Connolly had founded the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in 1909. After initial successes in Belfast, Wexford, Dublin and other cities, the union had been almost bled to death by the Great Lock Out of 1913 in Dublin. By April 1916, it had a membership of only five thousand, mostly in Dublin. It was burdened with debts from the Lock Out and its headquarters had been destroyed in the Rising.

The ITGWU Annual Report for 1918 summed up the union's progress after the Rising by saying that Easter Week 1916 had saved the union, by cancelling out the reaction from 1913 and giving birth to the links between the Labour and Nationalist movements. The report noted that the ITGWU had got the full advantage of "a general zeal for Trade Unionism", stimulated by the economic conditions created by the War and the growth of a more self-reliant spirit in the country.

During 1918, the ITGWU nearly trebled its membership, to almost sixty eight thousand. That was more than double the twenty five thousand of the previous year. Over the following eighteen months, the union signed up more than forty thousand further members. Many of them were farm labourers spurred on by the prospect of sharing in the benefits of the relatively high Wartime levels of prosperity and employment in agriculture and by the erosion of earnings through price inflation. The Wartime switch from pasture to the more labour intensive tillage farming led to an increased demand for labourers, while at the same time, the supply of male labour was constrained by people joining the British army or working in munitions factories. The Government recognised the upward pressure on farm wages by the establishment, in 1917, of Agricultural Wages Boards. These provided a new and more effective forum where the ITGWU could satisfy its increasing membership with tangible results. In addition, the benevolent support of Sinn Fein and the Irish Party, both anxious to win Labour's favour, was a further factor in the union's tremendous growth.

The expansion of the ITGWU into many parts of rural Ireland not only brought extra membership, but gave the union an improved geographical spread and an improved balance between urban and rural membership. The union mopped up many of the existing small rural labourers' societies. The traditional labourer's aspiration to independently owning a bigger plot of land was replaced by the more immediate aim of improved wages and conditions, achieved by group action - the creation of a rural working-class. In another union publication of 1918, "Lines of Progress", the ITGWU declared: "The days of the local society are dead; the day of the Craft Union is passing; the day for the One Big Union has come". (9) These developments gave the ITGWU a dominant role in the Irish Trade Union Congress. The union was centrally strong, and tightly organised, and the TUC's influence expanded as the Transport

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Union spread. By the beginning of 1918, the overall Labour movement had doubled its membership.

In April of that year, Labour entered the forefront of the national struggle. It took its place as an equal partner with the declining Irish Party and the resurgent Sinn Fein in the Mansion House Conference against Conscription. This position, at the centre of events, reflected Labour's greatly increased strength, influence and prestige.

Early in 1918 the British Army badly needed more troops for the Western Front. On March 21 1918, the Germans began a bombardment along a forty to fifty mile front, with an advantage in numbers of four to one. There was a grave danger General Ludendorff's superior forces would break through, capture Paris and cut off the Allies' lifeline of the Channel ports. The British Government turned to Ireland, and conscription of the Irish, as an untapped reservoir of manpower for the battlefields. Despite opposition from the entire Irish Party, conscription for Ireland was voted through at Westminster on April 18, 1918.

That same day, acting on a resolution of Dublin Corporation, the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Lawrence O'Neill, convened a conference or "National Cabinet" at the Mansion House to "formulate a national policy to defeat this menace" of conscription. Three representatives of the Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party - William O'Brien, Thomas Johnson and Michael Egan - took their places along with national figures like Eamon de Valera and Arthur Griffith for Sinn Fein and John Dillon and T M Healy for the Irish Parliamentary Party.

The Conference issued an anti-Conscription Pledge and Declaration. The pledge promised to use "all the means that may be deemed effective" to resist compulsory military service and the declaration regarded the passing of the Conscription Bill as a declaration of war on the Irish nation. That same evening, the Catholic bishops were holding their annual meeting at Maynooth and they met a delegation from the Conference. The bishops said that conscription, forced on Ireland against its will and against the protests of its leaders, was an oppressive and inhuman law, which the Irish people had the right to resist by every means consonant with the law of God.

Throughout Nationalist Ireland the pledge was signed by tens of thousands, often outside Catholic church gates. Despite a ban by the authorities, a substantial National Defence Fund was built up.

But Labour made its own distinctive contribution to the anti-Conscription campaign. Fifteen hundred delegates attended an Extraordinary Labour Conference in Dublin and "amid scenes of indescribable enthusiasm" called for a general strike on April 23, 1918 in protest at the Government's proposal. The call was responded to everywhere except in the Unionist areas of North East Ulster. Railways, docks, factories, mills, theatres, cinemas, trams, public services, shipyards, newspapers, shops, even Government munitions factories all stopped. The strike was described as "complete and entire, an unprecedented event outside the continental countries." It was, in fact, the first general strike in any country against measures for the more vigorous prosecution of the Great War.

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The "Irish Times" commented that April 23 would be "chiefly remembered as the day on which Irish Labour realised its strength". The Irish TUC strike declaration stressed the claim to "independent status as a nation and the right of self-determination". But it also contained an internationalist call to workers in other countries involved in the Great War to emulate the Irish example and "rise against their oppressors and bring the war to an end". The day after the strike, the Irish TUC conveyed the international message in a Manifesto to the Organised Workers of England and Wales. The Manifesto said Irish Labour was resolutely against conscription for any war, whether imposed by a British or Irish or any other authority. The British Labour movement responded with an appeal to their Government not to apply conscription to Ireland, mainly because of the appalling consequences for both countries that would ensue.

In the Summer of 1918, the Labour members of the Anti-Conscription Conference put forward a plan for the further use of strikes in the campaign and this was adopted formally by the Conference in October 1918. The trade union plan was to swing the entire country behind the first area where the terms of the Military Service Act was imposed. If martial law was imposed and permits became necessary, special anti-Conscription organisations, based on the military areas, would be set up. The unions' "Plan of Campaign" included the calling of a railway strike for a limited period and a general stoppage. All civil servants, including the constabulary, were to be urged to join in the downing of tools.

A trade union memorandum on the Campaign considered the possibility of calling a general strike in Dublin. It would last one week, and would be a massive demonstration of passive resistance. Food supplies would have to be maintained and it was hoped sympathetic farmers in County Dublin would help out. Inside the city, there would be a central committee to organise rationing and food distribution.

The Government eventually withdrew its threat of conscription, so the trade union Plan never had to be put into action. But the planning for a general strike in Dublin bears a close resemblance to what happened later in Limerick.

By August 1918, the Press Censor was reporting that Labour had replaced Sinn Fein as the leaders in the fight against conscription. The Censor regarded the development of the Irish TUC since the month of April as the most noteworthy aspect of the previous few months. A British Cabinet report noted that Labour and Sinn Fein "were now working together and had come to an arrangement."

Not everyone in the all-class Nationalist alliance against conscription was pleased at the Mansion Conference's public endorsement of Labour's predominant role. Senior, influential elements of Sinn Fein were unhappy because they recognised that "direct action", such as strikes, would be outside their control and would give too much influence to the trade unions in determining the outcome of the struggle. People like Arthur Griffith, the founder of Sinn Fein, ostensibly did not want to foster any trends that might disrupt the all-class unity of the national movement, but equally, they did not foresee a dominant role for Labour in their vision of a free

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Ireland. In January 1919, Griffith wrote: "The General Strike is a weapon that might injure as much as serve. It would be injudicious at present and might be injudicious at any time, unless under extreme circumstances..."

From another perspective, in the same month, another observer noted the growing rivalry for the pre-eminent national position between Sinn Fein and Labour. In his monthly report for January 1919, the Inspector-General of the Royal Irish Constabulary, Joseph Aloysius Byrne, remarked that he saw Labour sooner or later becoming a formidable rival to Sinn Fein.

Towards the end of 1918, the only check to Labour's advance was its decision, under Sinn Fein persuasion and pressure, not to contest the December General Election. Sinn Fein wanted to ensure that the election in Ireland was fought on the simple issue of self-determination, uncluttered by any social issues.

The original, unanimous decision of the Labour Executive was to contest a number of seats. The Waterford annual Congress, in August 1918, had called for the setting up of Labour electoral machinery in every municipal and parliamentary constituency where this was found practicable. Conscious that the new franchise laws would greatly increase the electoral register, local Labour organisations were given a four point plan of action to maximise their vote.

The Labour-Congress decision to contest was based on three grounds: to give workers an opportunity to vote Labour, to strengthen the Irish movement's standing with the Socialist International and to prepare the way for full Labour representation in any future Irish parliament. But, in a concession to the Sinn Fein view, elected Labour members would not take their seats at Westminster unless an annual or special Congress decided otherwise.

Labour in Dublin made an early decision to contest four seats. Elsewhere, there was confusion and indeed opposition to the Executive's decision - in places like Meath, Bray, Cork, Waterford and Kilkenny. At a meeting of forty three rail workers in Kingstown, County Dublin, only six were prepared to vote Labour. The rest thought it better to have a straight fight between Sinn Fein and the Irish National Party solely on the issue of self-determination. At election rallies, Labour speakers came under increasing pressure.

Nationally, there were confidential but inconclusive negotiations between Sinn Fein and Labour to see if a compromise could be found. Some Sinn Fein leaders feared that if there was no agreement, while Labour would not win any seats, they might prevent Sinn Fein winning in up to twenty constituencies.

On November 1 1918, the Congress Executive returned to the question of the election. The Congress Treasurer, Tom Johnson, who initiated the discussion, pointed out that great changes had taken place since the first decision and said it was desirable to review the whole position in the light of the new circumstances. At a special Congress that day, Johnson argued that they had originally envisaged the election as a "War" election, but it had now become a "Peace" election. With the possibility of new national boundaries being drawn elsewhere, Labour in

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Ireland should withdraw to allow a demonstration of unity on the question of self-determination.

Cathal O'Shannon, of the ITGWU, was against any change in electoral strategy. He said they would not get full representation at the Socialist International unless they had a Parliamentary Labour Party. They were cutting away one third of their numerical representation and one half of their moral strength. But, many delegates reported a determination at local level to vote Sinn Fein and the National Executive's change of policy was endorsed by ninety six votes to twenty three.

The desire to give Sinn Fein a "clear run" on the issue of self-determination was obviously a major factor in Labour's decision. Equally, the national leadership could hardly impose a policy of electoral participation in the teeth of widespread local determination to support Sinn Fein. That would have led to a damaging confrontation with an increasingly confident and united Sinn Fein. In addition, because of the nature of its organisation and the looser degree of adherence of its members, Labour did not have the same organisational or electoral coherence as Sinn Fein. The latter had a highly politicised organisation and its members were strongly under the influence or control of its leaders. Labour, on the other hand was made up of people might be staunch trade unionists in industrial matters but were often pledged supporters of Sinn Fein when it came to politics.

In the minds of some Labour leaders there was a another factor - the North. It would have been relatively easy to have reached a pact with Sinn Fein on the contesting of seats, but how would that have been viewed by the Loyalist trade unionists of Ulster ? As we shall see later, in Labour's reaction to the Limerick general strike, the dilemma of trying to reconcile a united trade union centre, North and South, with the conflicting nationalist aspirations of the rank and file membership paralysed the leadership and was at the root of its political impotence. Finally, Labour's commitment to syndicalist policies may have been a residual influence in restraining the movement from engaging in electoral or parliamentary politics.

In a sense, it could be argued that the abstention decision freed attention and resources to concentrate on the industrial issues at hand.

Nevertheless, Labour's decision not to contest the 1918 General Election is regarded by many, especially on the Left, as the starting point of the Left's subsequent historical weakness. An analysis of the electoral register for that election shows the potential there was for advance. Among many reforms, the Representation of the People Act 1918 provided a vote on a simple basis of age and residence in a constituency. The system of plural voting, loaded in favour of property owners, was abolished. In Ireland, the result was a dramatic restructuring and increase in the electorate. The number of voters in the major cities was trebled, providing fertile ground for Labour progress.

Because of the international recognition it might bring, Sinn Fein and the Volunteers had to maintain close and friendly ties with Labour. In

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February 1919, Thomas Johnson and Cathal O'Shannon represented the Irish Trade Union Congress at the International Socialist conference in Berne called by Socialist and Labour leaders to consider the post-War situation. In a major fillip to independence sentiment, Johnson and O'Shannon succeeded in getting Ireland recognised, and seated, as a separate delegation to the conference.

At Berne, the Irish delegates presented a special report to the International outlining the case for Irish independence. This was prepared in Irish, English, French and German. A further memorandum was issued in French and German sketching Irish history, reviewing the current situation and expressing working-class and Nationalist aspirations. The memorandum was intended to brief the representatives of the Labour International who were to attend the Paris Peace Conference.

At Amsterdam, in April 1919, the principles of national independence and self-determination, agreed at Berne, were applied to Ireland. A resolution, adopted unanimously, demanded that the principle of free and absolute self-determination be applied to Ireland. It affirmed the right of the Irish people to political independence and required that "self-determination should rest on a democratic decision expressed by the free, equal, adult and secret vote of the people without any military, political or economic pressure from outside, or any reservation or restriction imposed by any government". The International called on the Great Powers and the Peace Conference to "make good this rightful claim of the Irish people".

The rapid growth and negotiating successes of the trade unions, and the emphasis on industrial action over politics, intensified in 1919. In February, for example, a Special Conference was held in the Mansion House, in Dublin, to initiate a national wages and hours movement - for a forty four hour week, a 150 per cent increase in pay and a minimum adult wage of fifty shillings a week. The conference was attended by delegates representing more than a hundred unions. Early in April, the Executive of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union completed a two day session reviewing the union's activity. Since the beginning of the year, there had been an increase of 79 new branches, making a total of 289. Total membership was now eighty five thousand - an increase of nine thousand in just over three months ! The Executive decided on an extensive campaign of organisation and increased by five the existing complement of seventeen organisers.

The Drapers' Assistants' Association held their annual meeting in the City Hall, in Dublin, on Easter Sunday, April 22, 1919. According to newspaper reports, "an optimistic and cheerful note pervaded the reports and speeches" and delegates were told Association membership was a thousand stronger than in the best year previously recorded. Again underlining the growth in trade unionism, the meeting heard that sixty thousand pounds had been secured in bonuses during the previous year and one hundred and forty thousand pounds in permanent salary increases.

In his Presidential Address to the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis, held in the Mansion House in Dublin during the week beginning April 7 1919, Eamon de Valera made it clear that he understood the essential importance of Labour's role in the independence movement: "When we wanted the help of

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Labour against conscription, Labour gave it to us (cheers). When we wanted the help of Labour in Berne, Labour gave it to us and got Ireland recognised as a distinct nation (cheers). When we wanted Labour to stand down at the election, and not divide us, but that we should stand forsworn against the enemy, Labour fell in with us. I say Labour deserves well of the Irish people: the Labour man deserves the best the country can give (cheers)."

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