The apostle of labour solidarity

Jim Larkin and his message for workers today

By John O'Mahony

IN Dublin, 50 years ago, March 1947, an immense crowd of people, 200,000 of them, many of the men bare-headed in freakishly Arctic weather, marched behind the coffin of Jim Larkin. Larkin was the founder of the modern Irish labour movement. He is the greatest figure in Irish labour history. James Connolly, Larkin's partner between 1910 and 1914, was far more clever and far better educated, but it was Larkin who touched the workers of the slums with the holy fire of righteous indignation, and ignited them in revolt.

Larkin was a union organiser in Liverpool, Belfast, Dublin and in the USA — where he was jailed in the aftermath of World War One. He was a founder of the US Communist Party and a — none too competent — leader of an Irish communist party in the '20s. A man of contradictions, he was both a practising Catholic and a member of the Executive of the Communist International! He never abandoned revolutionary socialism. Dublin's workers elected him to the Dail in 1944.

The magnificent quality of Larkin and of Larkin's work is best seen in the heroism which the workers he inspired and organised displayed in such abundance during Dublin's Labour War of 1913-14. Let us look at Larkin — and Connolly, and the workers they led — in action. We will see in them what working-class solidarity is and what it can achieve. Larkin's great message of labour solidarity has as much meaning — and urgency — for British workers today as it had in Dublin before the First World War.

IN the beginning of 1916, when the British army began to grow desperate for recruits for the imperialist slaughter-house in France, it plastered Dublin with posters conveying the following encouragement: "The trenches in France are healthier than the slums of Dublin"!

The posters were right. Dublin had the highest general death rate of any city in Europe, including Russia. Moscow: 26.3 per 1,000, Calcutta: 27 per 1,000, Dublin: 27.6 per 1,000. The death rate for working class children was 27.7 per 1,000.

The mass of the Dublin working class, the general labourers, dockers, transport workers, etc. lived from the miserable pittances which the city's small-scale, under-developed and backward capitalist industry allowed them. Living in this festering degraded condition, they died like flies. The trade union movement in Southern Ireland, paralleling industry, was craft-centred, puny, confined to the dozen or so large towns, and to the upper stratum of relatively well-off artisans. This movement was strong enough to organise an Irish TUC only in 1894, nearly 30 years after the British TUC was founded.

When the Irish TUC was being organised the British movement was already past the craft union stage, and, from 1889 onwards fighting heroic battles, like the great fight for the "docker's tanner". This "New Unionism" of the masses of the "unskilled" workers was less an organisation of a secure, relatively respectable section of society such as craft unionism was, and more a fighting organisation of the general working class.

The especially crushed masses of the class in Ireland remained unorganised until Larkin came, in 1907. In that year the National Union of Dock Labourers sent Jim Larkin, a Liverpool-Irish militant, to organise the Belfast docks. Larkin had been a foreman on the Liverpool docks, and was sacked for siding with his gang when they went on strike. He was a member of the Independent Labour Party. Larkin roused the Belfast workers, appealing to them successfully along class lines, and for a time swept aside the capitalist-fostered "religious" and national hatreds that divided the workers by showing them the real common enemy.

When the "infection" spread to the Belfast police, troops were brought in and set upon the Catholic areas of the city in order to smash the unity Larkin had welded between the hitherto interwarring sections of the working class. Without success. What finally smashed the great dock strike and the promising unity of the Belfast working class was the action of the union bureaucrats in Liverpool. Union leader James Sexton repudiated Larkin, stopped strike pay, and treacherously accepted conditions that made a mockery of the great fight of the Belfast workers. Thus betrayed and confused, their class organisation in disarray, the Belfast workers were again easy prey to the splitting tactics of the bosses.

But the torch lit in the North was seen all over Ireland by workers living in conditions like those of Belfast, and worse. From all over Ireland, workers appealed to Larkin as to some sort of a champion to come and help them break their chains. From this beginning grew a union of the unskilled workers in Ireland, the ITGWU (now merged in SIPTU). By 1920 it would embrace

50% of the organised workers of Ireland — 100,000 people.

These were the years of the great "labour unrest" in Britain. Wave after wave of strikes — dockers, railway-men, miners — erupted in the centre of the British Empire. These strikes were mainly unofficial because the new unions of the 1890s had immediately come under the pressures of the capitalist system and quickly been bureaucratised.

In 1910 James Connolly returned from America where he had been an organiser for the IWW and took on the job of overcoming the demoralisation in Belfast and building up the union. Connolly's understanding of the class struggle together with his experience in America, Larkin's flaming personification of the workers' drive to win that struggle, and the determination of thousands of workers to rise up — these elements now came together and made the ITGWU a terrific and hitherto unheard of power in Dublin.

The Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) grew, put down roots gathered into itself the unskilled and unorganised including the thrice enslaved women workers of Dublin. It put into practice the new methods of class as opposed to sectional and craft struggle developed by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in America and used by the great rank and file movement in Britain. In particular they used the sympathetic strike.

The sympathetic strike in practice meant that when a small group of workers had a dispute with their employers they spoke not with the voice of their own puny dozen or few dozen against the entrenched wealth and consequent staying power of the capitalist organisation, but with the voice of their class. After a few test cases the bosses came to know it.

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Connolly: "The ITGWU found the labourers of Ireland on their knees, and has striven to raise them to the erect position of manhood. It found them with no other weapons of defence than the arts of the liar, the lickspittle and the toady, and it combined them and taught them to abhor those arts and rely proudly on the defensive power of combination..."

For example, in 1911 the Dublin dockers held up all the ships entering the harbour until the sailors joined the seamen's union and were given union rates of pay and conditions!

When the Dublin coachmakers went on strike, the transport workers' union paid the labourers in that industry strike-pay and continued to do so until the coachmakers won.

The ITGWU struck in demand of the recognition by the bosses of the Mill-Sawers Union, winning recognition and a pay increase. Connolly: "The ITGWU up and down the docks preached most energetically the doctrine of the sympathetic strike, and the doctrine was readily assimilated by the dockers and carters. It brought the union into a long and bitter struggle along the quays, a struggle which cost it thousands of pounds, imperilled its very existence, and earned for it the bitterest hatred of every employer and sweater in the city, every one of whom swore they would wait their chance to 'get even with Larkin and his crew'."

The standard of living of Dublin workers began to be pushed slowly upwards. Their militancy, self-confidence and consciousness of their power as a class rose correspondingly.

Thus the roused workers of Dublin "took the fierce beast of capital by the throat all over Dublin and loosened its hold on the vitals of thousands of our class" (Connolly). But the fierce beast has its police and its army and, so long as it controls industry and the banks, vast reserves of strength. It rallied its forces for a determined effort to hurl the workers back to where they had been before the coming of the union.

Four hundred Dublin capitalists banded together around a man named William Martin Murphy, owner of the tramways of Dublin, a national newspaper still in existence, the *Irish Independent*, and many other concerns, and declared war to the death on the ITGWU.

Each of the gallant four hundred deposited a sum of money, in proportion to the size of his concern, in a common pool, and signed a document forfeiting the sum if he made peace with the union before all the other four hundred did so. One day soon, after the Easter Rising of 1916, the Dublin Chamber of Commerce would denounce the Rising as "Larkinism run amok". Murphy would demand through his paper that the British authorities shoot James Connolly; now he contented himself with lining up these authorities for the coming struggle.

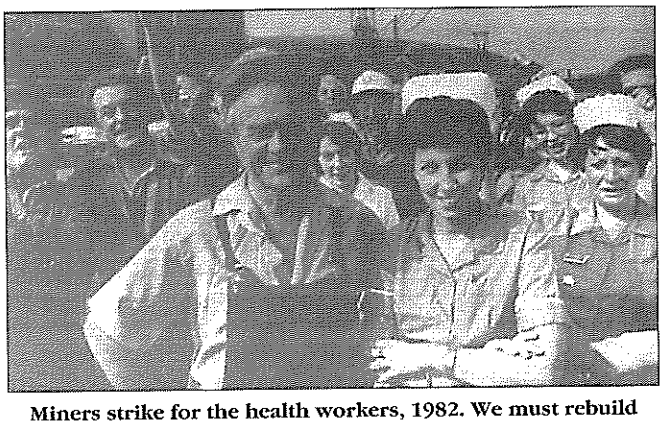
In August 1913 Murphy presented an ultimatum to the tramway workers of Dublin: the union or their jobs. The tramwaymen struck.

All over Dublin, wherever the union had members, dockers, carters, gas workers, factory hands are presented with the demand of the four hundred masters of the wealth of Dublin: sign a declaration repudiating the ITGWU, or get out.

But the workers have felt their strength. They know what is at stake.

All over Dublin they refuse to sign the repudiation document and are locked out. So much has the idea of solidarity taken hold of all sections of the workers of Dublin that even those who might avoid the long, hard struggle, the half a year of starvation and the murderous clashes with the police, choose to join their comrades in the street. Thus it is with the members of the Women Workers Union of Ireland. It is only affiliated to the ITGWU and "the document" demands only repudiation by name of the General Workers Union. But, "the second part pledges them to refuse to help the ITGWU — in every shop, factory and sweating hell-hole in Dublin, as the agreement is presented they march out with pinched faces, threadbare clothes and miserable footgear, but with high hopes, undaunted spirit, and glorious resolve shining out of their eyes" (Connolly).

Other unions too are presented by the arrogant and determined bosses with the demand that their members will neither become members of the ITGWU nor give it help. Nearly all of them refuse to sign the document. All over Dublin "...each trade that is served by general labourers, walks out along with the ITGWU boys; refuses to even promise to work with anyone who signs the employer's agreement, and, cheering, lines up with their class." Even old established craft unions, caught up in the general class movement of the past period, join their class in the streets. Thirty seven other unions support the ITGWU. The line-up has begun;



Miners strike for the health workers, 1982. We must rebuild the tradition of solidarity.

Larkin under arrest. In disguise, he had been speaking to striking workers when the police pounced.

the rumbling skirmishing class struggles of the past years are on the brink of becoming open class war.

As the bosses organise themselves, thrashing out their policies, making their deposits in the bank, giving their instructions to their police and the rest of their bourgeois-serving class state machine, so too the ITGWU prepares. The revolutionary leaders of the union and the roused workers are well aware that they have won what they have only by struggle and that they will keep it now only by prevailing in a bitter conflict. They set about mobilising the class for battle. Connolly is brought back from Belfast. Meetings are organised all over Dublin to rally the class for the coming battles.

The workers are confident of their strength, with the desperate confidence of people who have learned the hard lesson that existence is class struggle and yet again class struggle. In the *Irish Worker*, Connolly asks: "Shall we crawl back into our slums, abase our hearts, bow our knees, and crawl once more to lick the hand that would smite us? Shall we, who have been carving out for our children a brighter future, a cleaner city, a freer life, consent to betray them instead into the grasp of the blood-suckers from whom we have dreamt of escaping? No, no and yet again, no! Let them declare their lock-out: it will only hasten the day when the working class will lock-out the capitalist class for good and all." (30 August 1913)

A mass meeting is announced for Sunday 31 August as the culminating point of the lesser meetings of support for the tramway strikers used all over Dublin to mobilise support for the coming life or death battle.

But now the state moves into action. Larkin and four other leaders of the union are arrested. Why? Larkin has said that if force is used against the workers they will retaliate. He and his companions are charged with arousing discontent between the workers of Dublin and the police and soldiers of the crown, with disturbing the public peace and with incitement to murder. A proclamation is issued forbidding the mass meeting in O'Connell Street. Connolly points out that freedom of speech and assembly are only scraps of paper and can be torn up when the interests of the masters require it. When that happens only the determination and activity of the workers can maintain these freedoms.

Larkin is sent for trial. Released on bail, he pledges that the mass meeting will take place as arranged despite having been "proclaimed" by the government and that nothing but death will stop him from speaking there.

On Saturday 30 August, the morning before the mass meeting, Connolly is arrested. The evening before he has openly talked of the need for the workers to arm in self-defence. He is charged with incitement to riot and disorderly conduct. Sentenced to 3 months in jail, he goes on hunger strike. In a week he is free. The workers of Dublin have leaders fit for the job!

Terror reigns in Dublin. In the tense atmosphere there are clashes between the police and workers. That same Saturday night the first casualties of the labour war die. Two men, Nolan and Byrne, have their skulls smashed in by drunken policemen. Witnesses will testify that they were deliberately beaten to death — beaten down, followed, beaten down again, and then again until they stopped moving.

The scene is set for Dublin's Bloody Sunday. From early morning dense masses of police are concentrated in O'Connell Street and the surrounding area to make sure the meeting is not held. Equally determined, tens of thousands of workers gather in O'Connell Street. Larkin, who is pledged to speak, will be arrested on sight.

Larkin arrives, disguised as an old invalid and dressed like a bourgeois. Accompanied by his "niece" — who is Constance Markiewiez — the old man makes his way to the Imperial hotel — owned by none other than Murphy — and out onto a balcony overlooking the crowded O'Connell Street. Suddenly the invalid straightens his back, whips off his beard, is recognised by the crowd, and a roar of triumph goes up from the thousands of workers as he begins to speak.

"The good Catholic employers, the nationalist men who 'love Ireland' and would 'win its freedom' — to them starvation is a fitting weapon to use against Irish workers."

Now the class hatred of the Dublin blood suckers, all their fierce resentment at the revolt and the gains of the working class, takes a physical form — that of flying, flailing police truncheons. The hundreds of police hurl themselves on the crowd, lashing out indiscriminately. When the day is over more than 500 people will have been treated in hospital.

With this bloody day the long months of slow starvation have begun for the workers of Dublin. The months of battling with the police and armed scabs imported by the bosses. The long months of acute starvation for the children of the Dublin workers. Already the death rate amongst working-class children in this city is frightfully high.

The good Catholic employers, the nationalist men who "love Ireland" and would "win its freedom" — to them starvation is a fitting weapon to use against Irish workers. Their patriotism allows them to accept help and protection from the British Imperial state machine. But later, when the strike has dragged on for months and desperate plans are made to evacuate the starving working-class children from the embattled city to be housed by English workers — then the patriotic and religious feelings of these nationalist capitalists will revolt. They will create a big outcry against a diabolical plot to steal away these "Catholic children" and expose them to the contaminating contact of English Protes-

tants. Their priests and their press will whip up mob-violence against those trying to save the children from slow starvation.

In this battle all the advantage is with the employers: they have wealth which gives them staying power, and the ability to starve out the workers. They have a mass army of thugs in police uniform at their command to intimidate and beat up pickets, break-up union meetings, jail militant strikers and protect scabs — who hardly need protection for they have guns and impunity in using them. When a drunken scab shoots trade unionist Alice Brady dead, he is arrested and then immediately released. One more worker is beaten to death by the police.

Now the leaders of the union show their quality. Released from jail by his hunger strike, Connolly joins Larkin in organising workers' defence squads. Bands of workers up and down the city are drilled and armed with hockey-stick-like hurleys. In future they will march with union demonstrations to protect meetings and pickets from the police. After a few clashes the police will learn to be a little easier on the strikers, learn to let union demonstrations alone, to refrain from attacking pickets. In their own way, they accept Connolly's truth: freedom for the workers securely exists when the workers are able and willing to defend it.

These defence squads will grow into a union army, the Irish Citizen Army, acquire uniforms and later guns. In 1916 they will be led by Connolly — Larkin is in the USA — to form part of the Republican forces that rise to strike a blow at the British empire, one of the bloody warring empires then bleeding Europe to death.

In Britain the Dublin strike/lock-out and the police atrocities call forth immediate solidarity action.

British rail workers strike, refusing to handle "black" goods. The best sections of the working class, the conscious militants in this Britain of the great pre-war "labour unrest" and unofficial strikes, link up the battle of the Dublin workers with their own struggles.

"This is the first time that the idea of a general strike in Britain is seriously proposed since the days of the Chartists."

In South Wales two drivers, James and Reynolds, refuse to handle black goods, link up the feeling of solidarity with the Dubliners with the fight for the eight-hour day, and bring all the locomotivemen in South Wales out.

This strike is sabotaged and demobilised by the trade union leader J H Thomas.

The Co-op sends food ships up the Liffey.

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The advanced layers of the class all over the British Isles is striving to link up, to use its strength against its enemies. All the sectional interests and struggles are seen as part of a whole. The idea of class solidarity is the predominant one. Desperately the conservative union bureaucrats hold on, they manoeuvre, they make promises. They make pretences of militancy while sabotaging the movement for class action.

Because there is no adequate revolutionary party that understands what needs to be done and has the militants in place to get it done throughout industry, linking up and co-ordinating this movement, the trade union leaders manage to contain it.

They denounce the "erratic activities" of Larkin in the same breath as they condemn the Dublin sweaters and the murdering Dublin police. They sabotage the activities of their own rank-and-file in support of Dublin. They won't hear of strike action to support the locked-out Dubliners, but they offer money. Where the workers can be absolute, in industry, where they can cripple the boss by stopping him from going about his business, there they are opposed to all activity. Where the capitalists are absolute, in cash, here they are willing to "help" Dublin. They make donations! They send a delegation to Dublin to try and restore peace.

Larkin goes on a speaking tour around Britain to rouse support for Dublin. Demands for a general strike become clamorous. To head off the movement the union leaders call a special TUC conference in December 1913 to consider the question. Here the anger of the bureaucrats at the "trouble making" movement of the class is turned on the representatives of Dublin's workers, Larkin and Connolly. Their special hatred is reserved for Larkin, who taunts them with bitter irony calling them "human beings", to imply they were a great deal less. He is denounced as disrupter, the call for a general strike is defeated.

But the idea of the general strike, once disinterred from the Chartist period is not forgotten.

THE strike/lock-out continued for eight months, becoming a war of attrition in which the workers were at a massive disadvantage. Once the British union bureaucrats succeed in containing and stopping the movement in Britain for action in solidarity with Dublin, confining solidarity to the sending of food, money and similar aid, then the chance of outright victory for Dublin's workers was over.

This general strike limited to one city became a prolonged test of the heroism of the workers and of the resoluteness and seriousness of their leaders. Because the workers were determined and heroic they stopped the bosses' drive to exterminate the union. Because the workers' leaders were serious, because they were not afraid to take on the state machine, because they answered force with force, organising a workers' army to defend the workers against the police, the ITGWU was preserved.

By the spring of 1914 most Dublin workers had drifted back to work. They signed no document repudiating the union. There was victimisation, but the union still existed and could fight it. The gains in wages and conditions could still be protected. The workers were not demoralised, although the doctrine of the sympathetic strike had received some severe blows.

Working-class solidarity was the source of the great strength shown by Dublin's workers; the lack of adequate UK-wide solidarity was the reason why they did not crush the boss class of Dublin. Let James Connolly have the last word:

It was the isolation of Dublin that saved the Dublin bloodsuckers. "The Dublin fighters received their defeat, met their Waterloo, at the London Conference... At the conference the representatives of organised labour declared that they would not counsel the use of any kind of economic force or industrial action in support of the Dublin workers, and immediately this was known the fight was lost. At the next peace conference in Dublin the employer would not even look at the joint proposals unanimously agreed to by the representatives of the British and Irish trade unions. They knew that they had nothing to fear, as their opponents in the labour camp had solemnly sworn not to hurt them" (*Forward*, Glasgow, 14 March 1914).

Jim Larkin has been dead 50 years. In Ireland he is a respected, mythic figure even to the descendants of those who were his lifelong enemies. "Larkinite" is no longer the term of abuse for militant working-class fighters it once was. There is today a statue of Larkin in O'Connell Street, where the police batoned workers on 31 August 1913. Larkin is dead, but as the song about Larkin's early contemporary, Joe Hill says: He never died. Where working men — and women — defend their rights, there you'll find Jim Larkin. Every serious working-class militant, even those who have never heard of Jim Larkin, is a Larkinite. It is an affinity we should be proud of!