



The revolt of the Ennis labourers:

Incidents in the history of the working class of an Irish town in the 1930s

By Sean Matgamna



Above: a group of stonebreakers on the side of the road outside Ennis, County Clare, in the late 30s, on "relief work". Stones were broken with sledges and hammers into small chips for road making. "I'd rather go breaking stones" was a saying among these men, meaning that the work to which "breaking stones" was preferable was the world's worst. All of these men will have been members of the Ennis United Labourers' Union. The man on the right with a cigarette in his mouth is Tommy Mahony, one of the defendants in the trial of 24 Ennis labourers in 1934 described here, and the father of the present writer.

The Ennis labourers

In the evolution of civilisation, the progress of the fight for national liberty of any subject nation must, perforce, keep pace with the struggle for liberty of the most subject class in that nation.

James Connolly

*The children with whom I have played, the men and women with whom I have eaten
Have had masters over them, have been under the lash of masters,
and though gentle, have served churls.*

Patrick Pearse

Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast

The little tyrant of his fields withstood.

Thomas Gray

Introduction

The economic earthquakes that for three years now, from 2008, have shaken our capitalist world have led many people to look again, but with a more receptive mind, at the analysis of capitalism made long ago by Karl Marx.

They have disposed some of them to adopt a new view of the nature of capitalism. The ultra-Tory British newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*, carried a cartoon in 2008 of Karl Marx laughing in his grave at the woes on Wall Street.

Capitalism itself has once more forced to the attention of serious people the objective case for a socialist reorganisation of our world. This comes after two decades of breakneck globalisation in an enormous capitalist expansion and the collapse of the murderous and reactionary Stalinist counterfeit socialism.

In 2008, when this writer debated socialism with the Observer columnist Nick Cohen, Cohen thought he was dealing a commonsensical knockout blow when he asked: how could Karl Marx have understood the world we live in a century and a quarter after his death?

The fact, however, is that Marx uncovered the basic laws under which capitalism exists and moves. Capitalism has changed and developed enormously since then, of course, and shows a great power of adaptation. But what has adapted and modified is still recognisably the capitalism which Karl Marx anatomised.

Capitalism itself creates the basic economic elements of socialism. It creates gigantic, world-straddling enterprises, some of which have budgets bigger than governments. It “socialises” the forces of production, communication, and, in part, of exchange. This is the tendency which Frederick Engels long ago described as “the invading socialist society”.

We have seen governments that had made a God of free-market economics – for instance, the Bush regime in the USA and the pre-2010 New Labour government in Britain – forced to assume responsibility for the banks, and for orchestrating the economic affairs of society. The problem is that this *capitalist* “socialism”, spectacularly surprising though it was and is, was social regulation in the interests directly of the capitalist class

The “socialising” character of capitalism is a fact, a gigantic fact, no matter how defeated, the depleted and marginal the advocates of socialism may be at a given time.

But if even an honest Tory journalist can sometimes see and admit that Karl Marx’s basic analysis of capitalism still tells a lot of truth, and the fundamental truth, about the nature of capitalism, many of those who are inclined to adopt a general socialist critique of capitalism balk at the idea that the proletariat can remake the world, that we can overthrow capitalism and replace it with international socialism. They doubt the core idea of socialism, that, as Karl Marx put it back in 1864: “That the emancipation of the working

classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves”.

The proletariat, the wage-working class, is what James Connolly like his socialist contemporaries described as “the slave class of our age”; what Jim Larkin indignantly called the “undermen”; what an elitist snob, the liberal John Maynard Keynes, dismissed as the social “mud”. The visible working-class in our world, and for a long time now, seems too far from what the working class will have to be to play the role of the gravedigger of capitalism and builder of a new world in which first working-class solidarity and then human solidarity will replace the dog-eat-dog ethos, “the war of all against all”, which defines the bourgeois society in which we live.

The short answer to the doubt, though in itself not necessarily the conclusive one, is to point to the working class in history – what it has done and what it has tried to do. And not only to the great, big-scale, world-shaking deeds and attempted deeds and projects of the working class. There are many smaller actions and attempts by the working class which are buried, unmarked and unknown, in the subsoil of modern history.

For it is the victors who write history. The history of wars between countries and empires, and especially of the war of classes, where the defeated working class can so easily be misrepresented in the aftermath. Those who resisted are “Luddites”, senseless malcontents, justly defeated and conquered Calibans, dark forces from the subsoil of society, the yahoos, the morlocks, the weasels. The history of much of the working class, much of the time, is lost, sifted out by historians.

Just as the many local acts of resistance to the movement of food out of the country that must have occurred in the 1840s Irish famine are lost, buried in the obscurity of old newspaper files, so that the overall picture is one of passive acceptance of their own starvation, so too with many other aspects of the history of the working class.

And so too with the Irish working class during and after the Irish bourgeois revolutions, the economic revolution on the land and the political revolution after 1916.

The first modern labour movement, Chartism in the late 1830s and the 1840s, emerged out of the bitter disappointment of those who had helped the British bourgeoisie win its bloodless political victory in the Reform Act of 1832 and were then ill-treated by the bourgeoisie in power, and faced with being locked up in the workhouse prisons created by the New Poor Law of 1834. It would be strange if the working class which had participated in the revolutions that put the Irish bourgeoisie in power had shown no signs of fight for its own interests.

In at least two areas in County Clare, the working class showed a great deal of resistance to the conditions in which they found themselves under Irish bourgeois rule. It is probable that there were similar working-class movements in many areas. The working class of the towns, those disinherited when some of the people got the land from the old landlords, and many of whom would be doubly disinherited by being forced out of the country altogether, were anything but passive spectators of their own disinheritance, degradation and continuous victimisation.

My viewpoint, by inheritance and conviction, is that of the town labourers, a little of whose history I attempt to explore and chronicle here, in what can be no more than a rough sketch of the resistance of the working class of Ennis.

“Shrewsbury Twenty-Four”

In the events in Ennis which I describe here there is a strong parallel to events that took place in England in 1973 and 74. 31 building workers – oddly, the group is known as the “Shrewsbury 24” – were charged and tried in connection with trade-union activity.

After Britain’s first national building strike – June to September 1972 – 31 building workers were brought to trial for the mass picketing with which they had attempted to stop all sites in North Wales. In court the prosecutor described the mass picketing as “like Red Indians”. The strikers had demanded a 35 hour week, a minimum wage and an end to employment of casual workers organised by what we would now call gang masters – it was called “the lump” in the building trade. They won a big wage rise but not the end of “the lump”.

There were three “Shrewsbury” trials in all. In the first the 31 men were acquitted of all but minor charges. However five of them then had had the charge of “conspiracy to intimidate” added to the indictment against them.

During 1972 mass picketing had inflicted major defeats on the Tory government. The decisive turning point in the miners’ strike at the beginning of that year was when a mass picket of engineers, miners and other workers in Birmingham had forced the closure of the Saltley Coke Depot.

Five dock workers had been jailed in July for picketing that had recently been made illegal, only to be released under duress by the government when upwards of a quarter of a million workers all over the country immediately went on strike, and the TUC decided to call a one-day general strike. Many thousands of workers laid siege to Pentonville jail in North London for the whole time the five dockers were incarcerated. The one-day general strike proved unnecessary.

Someone in authority then decided to make an example of the mass-picketing builders. It was a political trial. Typical of the reckless misrepresentation of the workers in court had been a witness testifying that a mass of pickets had descended on a building site shouting “Kill! Kill! Kill!” Indeed, building workers all over the country had chanted “Kill!” ... But they specified what they wanted to kill. “Kill... the lump”.

Three of the prisoners, John McKinsie Jones, Des Warren, and Ricky Tomlinson, were charged with unlawful assembly and conspiracy to intimidate. They got sentences of nine months, three years and two years respectively.

They had been on the strike committee which had met in Chester on 31 August 1972 and among other things discussed the mass pickets that were to be mounted during the strike. On 24 February 1974, three more men were jailed for six months on the charges of “unlawful assembly” and “affray”. In response building workers struck in London, in Glasgow, and on 25 building sites in Manchester. Warren and Tomlinson went on hunger strike.

A Labour government had been elected on 28 February 1974, in an election called by the Tories against industrial militancy, under the demagogic slogan: “Who rules, government or unions?” Would Labour now act on behalf of the victimised building workers? No, of course they wouldn’t! They too wanted to demobilise working-class militancy.

It was as a result of that experience that I first became properly aware of what had happened in Ennis 40 years earlier. Watching a TV report early in 1974, both my father and my mother were visibly upset by a report that some appeal or other had failed. This was unusual, such a personal response to a big public event. Visiting them in Manchester from London, I talked to them about this and learned about the trial of

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the 24 labourers in Ennis in 1934.

My father had been one of 24 labourers in Ennis tried for a mass picket in 1934, as had his brother, Paddy, who was badly disabled in the Civil War at the beginning of the 1920s. The story I then heard for the first time as an adult and properly (I'd been politically at odds with my parents since I was 15) was, after 40 years, vague on detail. Both my father and my mother died within the year, and, living in London, I never got the chance to talk to them about it again.

Many years later I looked up what had happened in the files of the *Clare Champion* newspaper at the British library newspaper depot in Colindale. The events had taken place during the general upsurge that accompanied the establishment in 1932 and afterwards of the De Valera government, a government of those defeated in the Civil War nine years earlier.

Ennis, Christmas Eve 1933

On Christmas Eve, 24 December 1933, in the West of Ireland town of Ennis, County Clare, members of the Gardai visited 26 labourers. They handed each one of them a summons to appear in Court on charges of intimidation, assault, and conspiracy, in mid-January 1934.

All of those summoned were members of the Ennis United Labourers' Union. The charges arose out of a mass picket of 250 to 300 members of the union at a quarry outside the town. The total membership of the union was about 500, all of them in Ennis and its three-mile surrounding area, which the union claimed as its catchment. The mass picket, which had assembled behind the union's fife and drum band in the town, and marched, drums beating, to the quarry, had been an attempt to compel non-union members working there to join the union.

There must have been deliberate malice in the timing of the delivery of the summonses. Christmas was a great religious festival in the town. On Christmas eve, virtually all the Catholics, and that was not far from being all the people, in the town would flock to Midnight Mass at the Cathedral and at the Franciscan chapel. It was an event much anticipated and much looked forward to, as were Christmas Day and the rest of the twelve days of Christmas.

For years, every December the labourers in the town had demonstrated to beg the council to organise relief work for them – such as breaking stones which would be used in road repairs, or the quarry work – in order, as their placards invariably said, "That we may have a Christmas dinner". It is not hard to imagine some police man, or some other Jack in office, muttering as the summonses were being arranged: "We'll give them a Christmas dinner!"

For the previous two years at least, the labourers had shown a spectacular militancy and combativity, organising marches and pickets of hundreds of people to intervene in what were in fact very small disputes. Now someone in authority had decided to teach them a lesson. The summonses – so those who decided to prosecute the labourers must have intended – would teach them a lesson and put an end to it.

On that, the authorities were mistaken. Within two months of that Christmas Eve "present" from the police and those they served, to the labourers of Ennis, and before the men had been tried, there would be a three-day general strike in the town.

Paid helpers at the County Home. They went on strike, briefly, at one time, and won a small wage increase. Back row, to the right in the picture, Delia O'Brien, two of whose brothers stood trial in April 1934, Tommy and Paddy Mahony. Second from left at the back: Minnie Cleary, who married Tommy Mahony in February 1934.



The town

The events that are going to be described here took place long ago in a place which needs to be described in some detail to make sense of the story I am telling.

Ennis is the capital town of County Clare. In its range of functions it was and is a small city, the centre of the administration in the county, location of colleges and schools and lawyers and markets in livestock.

It is a very old town, founded in the middle of the 13th century, on an island in the River Fergus, initially around a Franciscan Abbey and the court of a local small king. It became an incorporated borough early in the 17th century, a Protestant borough, as all such towns were then. Protestants alone had the franchise. The town elite was an island in a surrounding Catholics sea.

Even so, in the 1730s, when John Wesley, the founder of Methodism attempted to speak at what is known locally as the "Height of the Street", he was shouted down by a large crowd of Catholics.

County Clare knows itself as the "Banner County" – the vanguard in Catholic, nationalist and republican advances. There Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, won the election in 1828 that heralded the emancipation of Catholics from the apartheid-like disabilities that still made second-class citizens of Catholics, even after active persecution was long in the past and many of the Penal Laws against Catholics had been abolished.

There in 1880 Charles Stewart Parnell, the leader of militant constitutional Irish nationalism, made a speech urging that any tenant who broke the solidarity of the tenants against the landlords should be "shunned", propounding the policy that came to be known as "boycotting", after its first target, a land agent called Boycott.

There de Valera won a famous by-election for Sinn Fein in 1917. There the last three men of the 77 captured Republican prisoners shot by the government during the Civil War, were killed, two of them after it was clear that the civil war had ended. There in 1923, not long after the Civil War ended, De Valera, now the political leader of the defeated Republicans, attempted to speak to a large crowd, over the heads of which soldiers fired shots and proceeded to take him into custody.

The town in the 1930s, and for a long time afterwards, is much smaller than it is in 2011 with its large surrounding housing estates. Then open countryside with narrow, hilly roads bordered by dry stone walls, scraggy bushes, ferns, and trees, begins at the edge of the town.

One consequence of the town's island origin (Ennis means island), is that some of the houses and one of the main streets, Parnell Street, are subject to flooding when the Fergus overflows, as it often does.

Ennis has a cathedral with a tall spire, dating from the 1840s, and a large and stately courthouse from the same period: around the walls of its grounds are ranged a number of small cannons from the Crimean

War of the 1850s, decorative not functional. It has a friary, a Franciscan church, and a convent.

It has a high column, topped by a statue of Daniel O'Connell, "The Liberator" of Catholics from old legal restrictions, rising above its central square – "the Height of the Street" to Ennis people, officially O'Connell Square.

From O'Connell Square branch out the town's four main streets. One of them, a place of banks, solicitors' offices, and big upper-class houses, is wide. The other three are narrow and almost medieval-seeming. So are the mazes of narrow lanes in which much of the Ennis working class then lived.

The ruins of the Franciscan abbey remain in Abbey Street, which in English-rule days was "Church Street"; the abbey was taken from the Franciscans and served as a Protestant church for a long time, and as a courthouse.

In the 1930s, the town has around five thousand people in it, and maybe twice that many in its rural periphery. In the 1840s, before the catastrophe of the 1845-8 Famine, the urban area had eight to nine thousand residents.

The town has long exported people. The world slump in the 1930s puts a stop to much of that: emigration falls to very little. It will resume helter-skelter when the World War creates jobs and the need for soldiers in Britain.

There is a college a mile or so from the town where, among other things, priests are ordained: a nun-run residential college for girls. The Bishop, Dr Fogarty, lives in a small palace (as palaces go) on the northern edge of the town, with lawns on which peacocks strut symbolically.

It had been the residence of a rich merchant, a miller, but now the great flour mills of the town are gone. The quays, where boats loaded up or discharged cargoes to or from the two miles or so to the Shannon, are idle.

The working class – which, much of the time, means the unemployed class – lives in tiny houses in narrow lanes off the central streets (where the shopkeepers mainly live, above their shops), and in three or four long, narrow streets of small one-storey houses radiating out of the town. On most of those houses, sedge thatch has by the 1930s been replaced by galvanised iron roofs.

Those radiating streets are Old Mill Street and its extension, Cloughleigh; The Turnpike; Drumbiggle (from which the great grandfather of Mohammed Ali migrated in the 1860s), to the west of the town; and Boreheen to the north. People also live in two old military barracks.

The tiny working-class houses have one "big" living-room/ kitchen, and two very small bedrooms. They have no running water or flush lavatories. Cooking is on open turf fires.

The working-class people pay rent for these houses. The people of Cloughleigh, where there is almost annual flooding, pay rent, collected by a local agent, to Mrs Linden, a woman living in genteel Hampstead, London.

The houses in the warren of small streets branching off the main streets are like those of the long proletarian streets – small, and, for those adjoining the quays



Paid helpers in the County Home. At the back: Minnie Cleary (left); in the front row: Delia O'Brien (left). The little man in the back row is Tommy Hennessy, a pauper inmate.

and in Market Street, subject to flooding.

Every so often, in the 30s, 40s, and 50s, conscientious Town Medical Officers report to the council — and their reports appear in the *Clare Champion* newspaper — that the houses of the Ennis working class are not fit for human beings. They are “hovels” (their word), not houses. They should be pulled down and replaced.

The last of those hovels, on The Turnpike, will not go until the mid 1970s.

A tiny number of new houses are being built. The story that this pamphlet tells centres on the conflict between workers and employers and County Council at the start of one small block of new houses, Ard na Griena.

Class structuring and finely-calibrated class distinctions stratify the population of Ennis. “Above” the workers who live in the lanes and long streets is a stratum of skilled workers (tailors, artisans); above them, the small and medium shopkeepers; and above them, the bigger shopkeepers and owners of big stores which deal in bulk goods with the country people when they come into town for supplies. One of those merchants, Dan McInerney, has his own small “palace”, surrounded by its grounds and high walls, not too far from Bishop Fogarty’s palace. There are school and college teachers and higher-up “professional men”. In this story, they need not concern us much: enough to note that they are there.

“Below” everyone else, including the lowest proletariat with some sort of fixed abode, are the travellers (as they call themselves), or “the tinkers” (as everyone else calls them). These are Ireland’s “gypsies” (except that they are not Roma), who bear old Irish names such as Carthy, Ward, etc. They hawk things, do repairs, sing in the streets, beg, get drunk and fight each other.

They are harassed by the gardai, and regular spells in jail of two weeks or a month at hard labour, for women and men alike, for drinking or begging or fighting, are a routine feature of their lives.

American anthropologists work in Clare, surveying the people, their occupations, their families, their lives. A famous study by two of them, Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, finds that of the town population, the proletarians are the most stable part, people of the same name going back centuries in the town. By contrast, there is a frequent turnover, within two generations, of the shopkeepers. Their children will be schooled to go into the “professions” or into the church as priest or nun. (They need “money behind them” even there. Nuns, for instance, have to bring a “dowry” to their notional marriage with Christ. Nuns who can’t do that become “lay sisters”, a class of menials and servants for the other nuns).

In two generations shopkeeping families move on. The proletarian families remain, unless the whole family emigrates.

The town, which its range of functions is a small city, is heavily dependent on the countryside — on its goods to market; on its purchasing power; on its flow of people, such as women who, dowried, marry shopkeepers, or young men who become apprenticed to learn the trade with shopkeepers.

Background: the revolution on the land

Clare, like the rest of Ireland, had experienced two revolutions in the two generations between the 1880s and the 1930s. For what concerns us here, so had the Ennis proletariat: things fixed for centuries began to dissolve and change. Anything was possible.

Millenarianism — the belief that there could be a great and complete transformation of life — was a substratum to Irish revolutionary political movements that, on the face of it, were very limited in their effects and what they achieved. So it was with Republicans after the split in Sinn Fein in 1921-2. So, I think, it was with some of the things that we will see at work in the minds of the Ennis proletarians.

The two revolutions were interconnected, of course, but distinct and divided in time. The first was a profound social revolution in land ownership. The second was the political revolution that followed after it.

The social revolution consisted in the transfer of landownership from big landlords whose ancestors had gained control of the land as part of English conquest. Their relationship with their tenants never lost the marks of that conquest.

In England, from the 14th and 15th centuries, a class of capitalist farmers had emerged, men who had rights in the work and capital they invested in what they rented from their landlord, who could sell on what they had contributed to the development of their farms, and who thus over generations accumulated wealth and capital.

In Catholic Ireland it was different. Farmers in the North, who had come as colonists and had a common interest with the landlords against the “natives” who had been displaced or pushed onto marginal land, had property rights similar to English farmers’. A tenant or sub-tenant in the rest of Ireland had no such rights. He could be evicted at will and have his improvements and “accumulations” confiscated by the landlord or by the landlord’s principal tenant.

Critics of that system, such as the English bourgeois radicals Richard Cobden and John Bright, referred to the land system in Ireland as a form of feudalism.

Michael Davitt, too, who led the tenants’ revolt and set up the Land League in 1879, called the system feudalism. It was true. In the old system, political power and force overrode what were normal capitalist relations in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The system was eventually dismantled “from above” by English governments, and most importantly by Tory governments.

The tenants had rebelled. They organised their own militant peasant union, the Land League, and, using the weapon of solidarity against the landlords and the government and against Irish farmers who “broke ranks” with their fellows, forced tremendous concessions.

In 1881 the Gladstone Liberal government brought in legislation for the so-called Three Fs — fair rents, freedom of sale, and fixity of tenure — for tenants who paid their rent. It was an attempt by legislation to reshape Irish relations on the land into something resembling landlord-tenant relations as they had been for centuries in England.

How was “fair rent” to be determined and imposed? By way of tribunals. They could insist on a cut in the rent the landlords charged, and would do so when tenants were mobilised and refusing to pay what they saw as exorbitant rents.

This created, so landlords and their supporters

said, and with some truth, a system in practice not far from “dual ownership”. The land was no longer the landlord’s to do as he liked with. The development of bulk grain transport from the USA and other countries, and then of frozen meat transport, to compete with Irish produce on the British market, made the landlords willing to divest themselves of the land, if they could get an acceptable price.

The Liberal legislation in 1870 made buying their land a possibility only for the better-off Irish farmers. They had to already have one-third of the total price before the government would advance on loan the rest of it. In practice it affected very few farmers.

The Liberals’ commitment on principle to “cheap government” limited what the British state felt it could and should do. The Tories were bolder. In a series of Acts of Parliament, beginning in 1885, they created a growing movement for the transfer of Irish land to the farmers. It was massively expedited by the 1903 Act.

Farmers were given the land by the government providing a full mortgage, to be paid back in instalments over decades ahead. Normally the mortgage payment was less than the rent had been.

The financing of this immense transfer of ownership hit a number of financial crises when government money dried up. There was a big one in 1909, under a Liberal government. The independent Irish state had work to do to complete this revolution, through its 1923 Land Act and others. But by 1914, when the World War changed everything, the land revolution had largely been carried out. Farmers were government mortgage-payers, not renting tenants.

Protestant tenants in Ulster gained tremendously from this too. Britain created a class of peasant owners. The Tories called this “killing Home Rule with kindness”. In well-known exchanges between Lenin and others during World War 1, some Marxists, Karl Radek for instance, believed that the Tories had indeed killed Home Rule and Irish nationalism. Some nationalist parliamentary leaders, like John Dillon and John Redmond, feared that they might have done too. On that they would be shown to be wrong, but it was not an unreasonable expectation.

What the Irish workers of places like Ennis — even not enlightened workers — learned from the land revolution was the importance and the possibility of solidarity as both an ideal and a weapon in the class war.

Michael Davitt, the leader of the Land League, a child of Irish migrants born in Lancashire who lost an arm as a child working in a cotton mill at the age of 11, was a socialist. Akin perhaps to the populist socialists of Russia, he did not always distinguish between, on one side, small farmers, and would-be small farmers intent on claiming a share of the land, and, on the other, proletarians such as those of Ennis (and of the port of Kilrush, the second town in the county, where the workers were organised and militant).

Davitt wanted not peasant ownership but the nationalisation of the land. So did James Connolly’s Irish Republican Socialist Party. Parnell, the political leader of parliamentary nationalism, who backed the tenants with disruption of parliamentary business (filibustering, etc.), favoured peasant ownership. So did the new and putative peasant proprietors.

Parnell once made a speech in which he urged the farmers to be kind to their labourers, but that was King Canute trying to command the sea of peasant avarice and “primary accumulation” of wealth.

However politically “inevitable” it was, the breaking-up of the old large estates into peasant ownerships was regressive and even in many ways reactionary. In some areas, in west Clare for instance, it meant a return to subsistence-level farming. It led to a fall in the number of wage-workers.

By the 1920s in Clare, the big bulk of the people owned their farms or shops and had relatives working for them. A large number of their relatives, the single sons and daughters, had to emigrate, to America until the early 1920s, when free immigration was heavily curtailed and subject to annual quotas, and then mainly to England, Scotland, and Wales.

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What the Tory-shaped land revolution meant for the Ennis proletarians and others like them was that they were trapped “aliens” in a petty-bourgeois world. By cutting off the “big battalions” of the Irish industrial working class in the North, Partition, or rather the deep divisions which underlay partition, further isolated and disempowered them.

Background: the political revolution

The second revolution was of course the “political revolution” between 1912, when the Third Irish Home Rule Bill was proposed to the London parliament, and 1922, when Britain vacated the 26 Counties, which then gained the status within the British Empire of the “White Dominions” like Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand.

The 26 Counties substantively had independence. Some unpleasant details, such as the forced oath of allegiance to the English monarch, remained to be torn up, as they were by De Valera in the 1930s.

In that political revolution, the Irish proletariat was politically two-headed: in the Protestant North, Unionist; and in the Catholic 26 Counties, nationalist.

The working class played an important part in the political revolution as fighters and as militants, but not as an independent political force. The bulk of the insurgents in Dublin in Easter Week 1916 were of course workers. One contingent of insurgents, the Irish Citizen Army, originated as a trade union defence force during the 1913-14 strike, and though fused into the nationalist army marched under its own banner, the Plough and the Stars.

The labour movement organised a general strike against conscription in 1918, and another general strike in April 1922 against “militarism” and the drift towards civil war between the two sides, Republican and “Free State”, of the sundered Sinn Fein. The “Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party” was organised as a single movement, formally committed to realising the “workers’ republic”.

James Connolly’s part in the 1916 Rising gave the labour movement a major claim to part of the political iconography of the Irish national revolution, and bestowed respectability on socialism, while leaving the decisive questions open to many conflicting answers: what is socialism? What sort of socialism?

The Labour Party stood no candidates in the December 1918 general election, in which Sinn Fein won 73 out of Ireland’s 105 seats for 47% of the votes cast (in 25 of its seats there was no contest). The Labour Party decided that immediately for practical reasons and out of concern about the political division of the members of the trade unions, North and South. But there was in it also a degree of Labour being overawed by Sinn Fein.

The Irish TUC and Labour Party retained a loud commitment to “Connolly’s workers’ republic”, but Connolly’s attempt to popularise working-class socialism in Ireland by grounding it in a supposed (essentially mythical) ancient Irish clan communism was a two-edged weapon. All sorts of regressive and even reactionary projects and ideals, among them clerical-utopian ideas, could be presented in terms of the “workers’ republic”. The British revolutionary socialist press, during the Irish war of independence (1919-21) and after, advertised, as an exposition of the workers’ republic, a thoroughly muddled and reactionary book by a Catholic writer, Aodh de Blacam.

But the fundamental weakness of the labour movement was the weakness of the Irish working class in the 26 Counties.



Posh street in Ennis, about 1950

In 1922-27, while De Valera’s Republicans abstained from entering the Dail and swearing the compulsory oath to the British King (though many of them had won elections), the Labour Party was the second party in the Dail. Again, it held the balance of power in the Dail (backing De Valera), between the general election early in 1932 and the one a year later.

Communism in Ireland

What of communism in Ireland? James Connolly, whose whole history suggests that he would have rallied to the Russian Revolution and joined in the work of building the new Communist International, was of course dead 18 months before the Bolshevik Revolution. Jim Larkin, who would join the Communist International, was in America, and in the last part of his stay there, in jail. He would not return to Ireland until 1923.

Connolly had led many of those who would have rallied to the Third International and worked to build an Irish section into an alliance with revolutionary nationalists such as Tom Clarke and Patrick Pearse, and, in the outcome, the bourgeois nationalists had gained hegemony in that alliance. From 1911 Connolly had concentrated on building the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union and the Citizen Army, with the result that the Socialist Party of Ireland which he nominally led was more a notion than an organised political force. Some of its members were interned after the 1916 Rising.

The party did not often meet. During the war with the British occupying army, the party had no meaningful existence. It resumed in October 1921, and started to produce its paper, Workers’ Republic.

The SP was reorganised by a group of young people, among them Connolly’s 20-year old son Roddy and his daughter Nora. They applied the conditions laid down for membership of the Communist International and expelled the old leaders, among them William O’Brien, who controlled what was now by far the biggest union in Ireland. They renamed the party “Communist Party of Ireland”, with Roddy Connolly as its secretary.

In the civil war, they acted as a political tail to the Republican side. The CP was still-born.

Larkin formed a breakaway union from the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union — the Workers’ Union of Ireland — and, with Comintern support, organised his own new “Communist Party”, the Irish

Workers’ League. This had two main problems. It scarcely existed as an organisation independent of Larkin and the Workers’ Union of Ireland (which affiliated to the Comintern’s trade-union wing, the Profintern). And, from the Fifth Congress of the Comintern, in mid 1924, emergent Stalinism was in control. All sorts of novel notions were introduced, such as “two-class parties”, subordination of communists to bourgeois nationalists, and an enormous lurch towards the notion of peasant parties being central to revolution. Someone commented that it seemed that for the Comintern, the peasants had replaced the workers as the central revolutionary class.

The guiding principle now was that the Communist Parties should embrace the policies, and seek the alliances, that would best serve Russian foreign policy. For Ireland, that meant that its old nationalism should be used to maximum extent against Britain, seen as one of Russia’s main enemies. In Yugoslavia, likewise, Croatian nationalism was fomented and used against the united south-Slav state, which militarily was the strongest state near Russia and was an ally of France, another main foe of the USSR.

The Irish communists were directed towards maximum concentration on “national” issues, and a near-obliteration of the distinction between workers and peasants. Irish Republicans moving into the orbit of communism, people like Peadar O’Donnell, were thrown back into a nationalist, anti-imperialist, populist nationalism.

This meant also that as the 26 Counties state loosened the shackles of the Treaty with Britain, and moved towards the fullest independence possible for a very small and weak state in a capitalist and imperialist world, Ireland’s would-be Marxists did not register the facts and incorporate them into their thinking.

When, in the mid-1930s, Russia and its “communist” political satellites, of which the Irish “communist” movement was part, turned to advocating an alliance of “the democracies”, Britain and France, with the USSR against fascism and Germany, the Republican populist-socialist-Stalinists such as O’Donnell and George Gilmore rectified themselves by going over lock, stock, and barrel to support for Britain and its allies in what looked like looming war with Germany. (The Stalin-Hitler pact introduced an interlude in which the CPs made propaganda for peace on Hitler’s terms).

This unity with the “democratic” imperialists had a debilitating effect on the Communist Party in Ireland. Irish communism was not a force except as a reinforcer and rationaliser of a mystical populist-nationalist revolutionism. The Stalinists developed a strong influence on Republicans in the mid 1930s, as they would again in the 1960s.

For what concerns us, communism in Ireland was

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not an independent political factor, but Stalinism dressed up as left-wing Republicanism. The Free State authorities in the early 1930s pronounced that Kiltrush was “the main centre” of Irish communism, but what they meant was, the centre of Irish populist Republicanism.

In the June 1927 general election, Jim Larkin, standing in the name of the Irish Workers’ League (the official section of the Comintern) won a seat in the Dail, with over 8000 votes in Dublin North, but he was banned as an undischarged bankrupt from taking his seat.

Early in 1930, a new start, now for a decidedly Stalinist party in organisation and ideas (at that point, ultra-left Third Period sectarianism), was begun with a conference in Dublin. “Revolutionary Workers’ Groups” were started, to work towards the launch of a new Communist Party of Ireland. Their manifesto described the Dublin regime as a British puppet government.

The peasant Krestintern was active in Ireland, too — it was involved in a movement of the small farmers in the west of Ireland — as was another Stalinist front, the League Against Imperialism, in which such leading IRA people as Sean MacBride also participated.

The Irish Stalinists began to produce a weekly paper, the Irish Workers’ Voice. They had a sizeable base in Dublin, but little elsewhere. Their sizeable growth would come through the left wing of the Republican movement. They seem to have no influence in Ennis. In so far as people like Peadar O’Donnell could get a hearing there, it was as Republicans.

The Ennis bourgeoisie

The fact that the Irish national bourgeoisie did not lead the national movement in 1916 and after did not inhibit them from from creating a thickly mythological account of Irish history as a nationalist, or ethnic-sectarian, heroic and unrelenting struggle for freedom. The working class in nationalist Ireland, left-wingers and socialists no less than others, accepted this mythological middle-class history. The Marxist James Connolly was made over into “the labour leader”, and a plaster-of-paris dead saint in the pantheon of the stultified Irish bourgeoisie.

Public life, and emotional and spiritual life, in the 26 Counties, revolved around an endless series of religious and religio-nationalist festivals and commemorations of “the dead who died for Ireland”.

Commenting on the fate of the dead Wolfe Tone, James Connolly wrote: “Apostles of Freedom are ever idolised when dead, but crucified when alive”.

The Ennis working class, like most Irish workers then, was locked into that ideological system. Papers such as the *Clare Champion* were remarkably like the sort of “cadre paper” published by socialist organisations. There was a regular, relentless series of articles at different times of the year, telling the story of some religious or nationalist-political saint, savant, or holy man (or occasionally woman). Anniversaries were marked and celebrated. Stories were told and retold again and again.

There was a notional but also real nationalist family, with a common history and tradition, common goals, and now a common state, with agreed objectives. Inevitably the “official” hagiography and history told of what had been class struggle — what else was the struggle of the farmers against the landlords? — but it was heavily disguised and muffled in nationalist and religious pieties. The landlords were “alien in race and creed”.

It was a national struggle, and a struggle for Catholic emancipation and self-assertion. Nationalism and Catholicism were taught almost as a two-

pronged, or two-godheaded, religion. The cause of Catholicism was the cause of Ireland; the cause of Ireland was the cause of Catholicism.

The real history of the Catholic church in its relationship to Irish nationalism was radically falsified (with the consequence, for some of us, that when we discovered the falsification, it shattered our religious beliefs).

The power of the priests in towns like Ennis was immense. They ran the education system either directly (nuns, Christian Brothers), or as managers, overseeing academic standards. The state left the schools to the church.

The epochal revulsion now, in the early 21st century, buffeting the Irish church, as the result of the exposure of mass pedophilia, gains force from the old power of the church. The island of saints and scholars has been revealed to be the island of clerical hypocrites, sadists, and pedophiles.

The working class in places like Ennis had to formulate its own goals and objectives within the double-pronged ideological dominance of nationalism and Catholicism, and under the direct domination of the priests. It was immensely difficult. Connolly’s standing as a national martyr helped, but what exactly was Connolly? What Connolly? Whose Connolly?

In December 1929 the annual march of the labourers through the town became a little rowdy, and someone shouted the threat: “Remember 1916? We’ll make you remember 1929!” It was a foretaste of the militancy that would soon erupt.

In fact the Ennis bourgeoisie had no reason to “remember 1916” with any pride in their own political prescience. Though they invoked Easter 1916 as one of the great dates in the calendar of the march towards national freedom, the urban council had responded to the Rising by passing this resolution:

“That we, the members of the Ennis Urban Council, while sympathising with the families of those who have fallen on both sides in the combat in the metropolis of Ireland, deeply deplore this awful bloodshed and on behalf of the people whom we have the honour to represent dissociate ourselves with [sic] and detest the action of those on whom should lay the responsibility for so many innocent victims cut down in the prime of manhood.

That we sympathise with the Leader of the Irish race now battling for the freedom of our native land for the stumbling block placed before him, and repose our implicit confidence in him to carry on the good cause to which he has unhesitatingly devoted his life.

That we also congratulate the people of Clare for the wise attitude they have adopted, following step by step the dictates [sic] of their wise and noble leader, Mr John Redmond, whose work was handed down to him from our late lamented Chief, Charles Stewart Parnell, and who has for 20 years had an unparalleled success, but now more than ever it is our belief that the Irish people should follow his good advice and wise counsel, and if they do so, Ireland’s aspirations will be realised — A Nation Once Again!...”

The council condemned college professors who misled youth. Referring to the “terrible tumult caused by the insurrection and the awful scenes enacted in Dublin”, it asserted “that the country just now was beginning to become prosperous and that before long, under the leadership of Mr John Redmond, they would have a national parliament in College Green”.

That was on 4 May, when Sean McDermott and James Connolly were still alive, though under sentence of death. The resolution took it for granted that the remaining leaders would be shot, as they were.

That would have been the reaction of such old-style nationalists all over Ireland. Their descendants today would probably consider that “first reaction” as a strong point in their favour. In the 1930s it did not stop the Ennis bourgeoisie, like the rest of the Irish bourgeoisie, invoking patriotism and “the national interest” to wrap up their own interests, and depicting themselves as the heirs, custodians, and beneficiaries of Ireland’s struggle for independence.

The Bishop of Killaloe, Michael Fogarty, was much more sensitive to the political realities. He it was who reoriented the bourgeois politicians after the Rising with a dignified and accurate assessment.

In a speech at Quin he expressed sorrow at the Rising, but refused to condemn the insurgents. He had sympathy for their intentions. He truly traced the Dublin rising back to the earlier rebellion against the British government of the Ulster Unionists, whose leaders were now in the British coalition government.

In Ennis, as in other parts of Ireland, the church (and specifically Fogarty) was central in the anti-conscription campaign of 1918 that assured the full shift from the old Irish parliamentary party to the new one, Sinn Fein.

The Ennis workers: origins of the union, and the civil war

The Ennis United Labourers’ Union was founded by P J McNamara in 1911. It would remain an independent one-town union until legislation in the 1940s requiring a high fee for any organisation that bargained on behalf of workers pushed it into fusing with the Irish and Transport General Workers’ Union sometime in the mid 1940s.

1911 was the time of labour’s so-named “Great Unrest”. In Britain there was a whole series of spectacular strikes. From 1908 Jim Larkin organised the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union, starting it as a breakaway from the National Dock Labour Union, of which Larkin had been an organiser. It can be taken that all this helped prime the birth of the EULU.

It never had more than 500 members, in the town and a periphery of three miles around it. This smallness and limited area was not unusual in Irish trade unionism then, as it had not been unusual in the early history of British trade unionism.

In the years after the end of the Dublin labour war of 1913-14, Irish trade unionism expanded enormously. Jim Larkin embodied the “charismatic” initial phase of its development. With Larkin in America (for nine years from 1914), the movement came under the leadership of William O’Brien, a long-time socialist and a close personal friend of James Connolly’s, and entered its “bureaucratic” stage. It expanded spectacularly from its base in Dublin across Ireland.

It would be the mid 40s before the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union absorbed the Ennis United Labourers’ Union. In 1918 an East Clare Trades Council was set up after a big public meeting addressed by William O’Brien. This organisation renamed itself the Clare Workers’ Council in 1922.

The broad outlook of the union was the then conventional outlook of militant nationalism, and overriding Catholicism — but within that there was a stark sense of class, of working-class separateness, of class interests. This was expressed in the commitment to the goal of a *workers’* republic.

One of the dominant characteristics of the big English general unions that were organised after the “match-girls”, dockers’, and gasworkers’ strikes of 1888-90 was that they quickly became bureaucratised, and the bureaucrats soon developed a distinct interest of their own that did not necessarily coincide with that of the rank and file members of the unions. The full-timers’ wages tended to diverge upwards from the average wage of the union members.

By the first and second decades of the 20th century

The Ennis labourers

the tide of working-class militancy found ways around the too-dominant union bureaucracies by way of “rank and file” organisations and shop-stewards’ committees based in workplaces.

The Ennis United Labourers’ Union had no bureaucracy, no full-timers. It corresponded, in a small, local way, to the “rank and file” organisation that around the time of World War 1 developed in Britain and in the 1920s would flow into the powerful Minority Movement, led by the Communist Party.

The Ennis United Labourers’ Union was part of a broader labour movement, knew it, and acted accordingly. Before its own general strike in 1934 it had already been part of the two general strikes, in 1918 against the threat of conscription into the British army and in April 1922 against “militarism” and the drift towards the civil war which broke out two months later, in June 1922.

The Irish workers, like workers everywhere, responded with great enthusiasm to the two Russian revolutions of 1917. In a number of areas striking workers in small dairy factories, creameries, declared themselves to be “soviets” — workers’ councils.

At the end of World War 1, “soviets” had spread from Russia to Germany, Austria, and Hungary. The German and Austrian soviets, genuine workers’ councils, were dominated by the Social Democrats and their leaders, who had backed their own governments during the War. That political leadership was decisive in the politics and political fate of the soviets.

The initial political leadership of the Ennis United Labourers’ Union lay with P J McNamara, then with Michael Glynn, who was a railway worker and a socialist. Paddy Hogan from Kilmaley, outside Ennis, was elected TD in 1923 and functioned as the main political leader of the EULU.

At the beginning of 1919, the Trades Council, or Workers’ Council, of Limerick city declared itself a soviet and contested control of the city with the British military authorities. It did for a while control the city. But this was a nationalist soviet, backed by people who condemned the Bolshevik soviets.

As the 1916 Rising was politically a hybrid merging working-class organisations and revolutionary nationalism, so too in its politics was the Limerick soviet, a mere 20 miles down the Shannon from Ennis.

At the outbreak of the civil war in Ennis, the labour movement took steps that went part of the way towards assuming the functions of a soviet.

The civil war of 1922-3 was a tragedy. Civil wars encompass many human tragedies, but as a whole some are necessary to resolve irreconcilable differences of class and regime. The Irish civil war was a true tragedy — a conflict of right against right. A civil war that should not have happened.

In terms of Irish independence, the common objective, history has vindicated Michael Collin’s claim that the Treaty with Britain gave the 26 Counties “the freedom to win freedom”. It did.

But the Republicans in their own, tragically incoherent, way — the rank and file Republicans anyway — were right too. The Free State rallied the “stake in the country” people (as the left-wing republican leader Liam Mellows, one of those prisoners shot by the Free State government in December 1922, put it). The Republic rallied those who had little “stake” in the country, town and farm labourers, people who had seen in the fight for “the Republic” a fight for a shining transformation of their lives that would mean social equality, prosperity and a greatly enlarged freedom.

There were small bourgeois, like Cathal Brugha, on the Republican side, but most of those who faced the firing squads and the internment camps and jails of the Free State, were mainly people of no property. Their tragedy was that they had no coherent policy against that of the Free State bourgeoisie.

The “stake in the country” people took control of Ireland in 1922 when the British withdrew, using as their instrument that section of the Sinn Fein party that regrouped around Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins (the head of the secret society, the Irish Republican Brotherhood), and the Catholic bishops.

Politically, Michael Collins’s claim that they had won “the freedom to win freedom” turned out to be

true, though it was De Valera and the defeated “diehard” Republicans of the civil war who would push it through in the mid 1930s.

Against the “rational bourgeois” line of the Free Staters was ranged an incoherent cluster of political forces — people who regarded their oath to the Republic as something absolute; more pragmatic politicians like De Valera, who wanted an accommodation with Britain but using a different formula of words to express it; and, “on the ground”, people who had expected “the Republic” to be a large-scale transformation of their lives.

“The Republic” for them had carried a promise that it had not carried for De Valera and others. They had understood the word republic as meaning people like themselves in control, and liberating from the old social shackles.

The confused but honest socialist Constance Markievicz put it into simple words in the debate on the Treaty in Dail Eireann: she was against the Treaty, she said, because the capitalists were for it.

For many farm “boys” and town workers, the “sacred name” of the Republic carried arcane promises and hopes. As well as that, for all of them, “the Republic” also had another emotional dimension: it was the opposite of partition.

Neither side in the civil war had any idea what to do to fend off partition. Both sides rejected the idea of coercing the Northern Unionists into a united Ireland, for both practical reasons (it was scarcely possible) and better ones: a united nation could not be built by such a conquest.

The civil war was bitter and terrible as civil wars tend to be. The new Dublin government killed 77 prisoners judicially (after court martial), and others were killed out of hand. Thousands were interned, many went on hunger strike.

What emerged out of this firestorm was a functioning parliamentary bourgeois democracy, albeit with peculiarities. The defeated side in the civil war had the electoral support of a large part of the population, and contested elections, until 1927, as abstentionists who would not take seats in the Dublin parliament if they won them. In the February 1932 the party representing the defeated side in the civil war got more seats in the Dail than the victors of the civil war, who left government peacefully (though some of them would have “second thoughts” about that and for a while organised a mass fascist movement against the “constitutional Republican” government headed by De Valera).

The Committee of Public Safety

In Ennis, during the civil war, Republicans and Free State forces confronted each other. The Republicans seized control of the police barracks standing beside the Fergus in the shadow of the old abbey. The Free Staters took control of the “Country Club” on the other side of the river. The Republicans withdrew.

Both sides in the civil war commandeered what they needed, and there was a threat of a food famine in the town. The Clare Workers’ Council acted to secure food for the workers.

The *Clare Champion* reported:

“Due to the suspension of banking business, Railway services, and the extensive commandeering of foodstuffs in Ennis, a rather serious situation has arisen in the town... A meeting of the County Clare Workers Council was held at Ennis to consider what action would be taken to conserve the food supply into town for the civilian population.

A [union] deputation had... interviewed the Master Bakers of Ennis [about] providing yeasts for baking [of which] there was a shortage in Ennis...”

The Workers’ Council decided to commandeer food itself — that is, to act as a civil authority — but went about it cautiously.

“Mr P J McNamara, in outlining the present situation, said that he and Mr Paddy Hogan... had interviewed the military and the officers they saw had not objected to the [Workers’ Council] commandeering the foodstuffs on behalf of the civilian population. The Republican officer they interviewed... had given it as his individual opinion that they would not be doing anything wrong. The other military force [the Free Staters]... had assured him of cooperation.

They went to the railway station to seize whatever foodstuffs they could, and [while they were talking to] the station master the Free State soldiers arrived and took away the flour, etc., from the wagons... The Free State officers said they were ‘doing for us what we intended doing ourselves’, and that they would take the flour and foodstuffs into the Home (the County Home) and supply the civilian population as required. It was also said that if they did not do that, the other side might commandeer stuff.

We did not altogether agree with that, but we had to bow to the inevitable or the force of arms if you like. We did succeed however, in getting a quantity of flour, tea, and sugar, for which we gave the ordinary receipts, because anything we commandeer must be paid for

We visited [Lipton’s] and took one and a half sacks of flour, three bags of sugar, and one chest of tea. Mr M S Honan willingly gave us one ton of flour, and Mr Dan McInerney a similar amount. We have decided to take over Mr Kenichi’s bacon stores... and sell [our provisions] to the civilian population under proper supervision”.

They would sanction no hoarding. “No person would be allowed to buy more than he or she needs... we shall sell to the civilian population irrespective of creed or class...”

He appealed to the traders who had foodstuffs to sell them to the poorer people, even though they could not pay for them at present. If tickets for staff were issued by the Council they would be honoured at a later date”.

How could they avoid having the food taken forcibly from them?

“Mr J McNamara said to protect what they had already seized they would want arms. Several members objected to Mr McNamara’s remark and reminded him that the Labour Party had always been against militarism...”

Mr Cahill said: if you don’t take the stuff tonight it won’t be there tomorrow. Mr J Duggan said that the traders of Ennis would be only too glad to cooperate... and would be more pleased if the Council commandeered their stuff than if any of the other party did, because they knew the Council would pay for it sometime”.

Paddy Hogan [who would be elected a TD for Clare the next year] said he objected to rationing the workers. “I see no reason to ration ourselves in order that other people might glut themselves. There is one point that seems to have been forgotten. I hold that the Urban Council should help us... form a Committee of Public Safety to conserve food supply in the town. My principal object is to get the food out of large stores and shops and distributed to the householders as quickly as possible. So long as food is easily accessible in large quantities in different places throughout the town the military will take it. For that reason I propose that a Public Safety Committee be formed to take the necessary action... Mr Hogan’s proposition was adopted and arrangements made to appoint the Public Safety Committee”.

De Valera's "Second Revolution" and the working class

In power after the war of independence and the civil war, the Irish bourgeoisie cut back on the elements of a welfare state that had been developed in the old United Kingdom. A wit said of the Sinn Fein faction that had won the civil war and had taken the name Cumann na nGaedheal (clan or gathering of the Irish): "come in a gale, go in a storm".

The Free State government, faced with the great international crisis that began with the Wall Street crash of October 1929, whipped up a storm before they finally went. In 1931 they brought in a strong coercion act, jailed Republicans, and banned a cluster of organisations (Republicans and others, including the tiny renaissance Irish "communist" (Stalinist) movement.

They cut wages of such as teachers, and made a 10% cut in the old age pension, from ten shillings to nine shillings, and went into the election boasting that they had "balanced the books".

The bishops backed the government from the pulpits, and in their pastoral letters to their flocks, in direct political commentaries. The bishops had led the way in preparing for the government crackdown in 1931. They raised a great outcry against De Valera and his Fianna Fail party.

De Valera, they said, was a stalking horse for communism. A De Valera regime would be a "Kerensky regime", an opening through which a communist government would follow. The IRA was communist, they said; and it did stand, so it said, for the nationalisation of the means of production.

The bishops did not listen to the sincere pleading of the IRA and the De Valera party that they were and would remain devout Catholics. Hadn't the Republicans defied the bishops in the civil war?

The alarm the bishops sounded with increasing shrillness against De Valera had a dimension of demagogic politics in it. But it was probably also sincere. The bourgeoisie were alarmed.

The government called a general election in February 1932, hoping to buttress its authority. The Fianna Fail and Labour Parties emerged with a Dail majority over the outgoing government party.

With the backing of the Labour Party from outside his ministry, De Valera became president of the council of the Irish Free State — the Taoiseach, the prime minister. He started a very weak version of what the New Deal was to be in the USA.

The eruption of the Ennis labourers took place against the background of tremendous upsets and transformations throughout Ireland. In Ennis itself these events had a strong and dramatic impact.

De Valera was TD for Clare. Ennis was the centre of his constituency. In his visits to Ennis in 1932 and 1933 he was received with extravagant enthusiasm. In one of those "comings" he was greeted outside the town by great crowds bearing lighted torches (bits of turf soaked in oil, on long sticks) and escorted into town by a troop of 77 horsemen. Perhaps the number was accidental; perhaps it represented the number of seats won by the new Fianna Fail; perhaps it symbolised the 77 dead De Valera-ite prisoners of war killed during

the civil war, after "trial", by the Free State government.

There was a song in the mouths of Republicans with the "punchline": "And we'll crown De Valera King of Ireland".

In Ennis, there were big Republican marches and commemorations — to greet returned Republican prisoners, to commemorate the three young men "executed" in Ennis in 1923 at the end of the civil war, Mahony, Quinn, and Shaughnessy (the last two, teenage boys), who had a Republican plot in Drumcliff graveyard.

To a serious extent, De Valera in his first and second years in power seemed to be dependent on forces outside the Dail, some of which (the IRA) were armed.

The released Republicans immediately started a vigorous campaign against the party that had won the civil war and thereafter ruled, under the general slogan: "No free speech for traitors".

To the ousted Free Staters it seemed that everything they had tried to stifle by a series of repressive measures against Republicans and communists in their last months in power had been set free and was flourishing. In February 1932 some civil war veterans and supporters of the Free State government organised an "Army Comrades' Association".

The chief of the Garda Síochána, Eoin O'Duffy, was dismissed by De Valera. O'Duffy became the leader of a new organisation, the National Guard, incorporating the ACA. Soon there had been a regrouping of all the Free State government forces.

They adopted a uniform of blue shirt and black beret, and began to advocate a corporate state. Ireland had "overnight" acquired a mass fascist movement, embracing the party of the recent government. It had clerical backing: in Ennis, Bishop Michael Fogarty demonstratively sat on its platform at a mass open-air meeting.

It also had eminent academics such as James Hogan to theorise about and advocate a corporate state in which there would be state-enforced control over the workers.

There were many battles between Republicans and Blueshirts, and between the working-class movement and Blueshirts. The labour movement raised the alarm against the threat which fascism posed to the working class. The Labour Party, now a separate entity from the ICTU, with which it had been fused in a single political-union organisation until 1930, and still standing for "the workers' republic", took a very strong stand against the Blueshirts, uneasily looking at events in Europe.

In Ennis, a big crowd of young men broke up a meeting of the "Army Comrades' Association". That sort of thing happened everywhere.

Workers in Ennis, even those whose families had sided with the Free Staters or had had members in the Free State army during the civil war, were alarmed at the threat of the Blueshirts. Workers were victimised for refusing to "put on a blue shirt". (The writer's father lost drovering work with a cattle-buyer, Johnnie Bruton). And the very limited "New Deal" activities of the Fianna Fail party in power were greatly appreciated by the workers.

The Labour Party, on whom the Fianna Fail government depended for a majority in the Dail in the year between the 1932 and 1933 elections, could claim much of the credit for what the government did on social issues, and Labour's working-class backers thus felt that they had had a direct influence, and could have that again.

In Ennis that feeling took the form of tremendous militancy and direct action, and the near-permanent mobilisation of most of the union members as a workers' "flying column". To understand how that was possible, remember that most of these men were most of the time unemployed.

There was militancy on such limited things as preserving town jobs for town people. In the early English trade union movement, according to its historians Beatrice and Sydney Webb, such demonstrations, activities, and disputes were the daily stuff of local trade unionism.

Kilrush Road, December 1932

Workers in the Free State faced a world of economic stagnation. In Clare the farmers were the new aristocracy, even though there were poor farmers in the west. The state was most responsive to their needs.

The shopkeepers were the bourgeoisie, and the proletarians divided into two distinct groups: those who had regular employment (transport workers, workers in big merchant stores, workers in institutions), who were badly paid but paid regularly, and the great pool of casual labourers who had no regular work and frequently for long periods had no work at all. In Ennis there was a great pool of at best only partly-employed people.

Karl Marx contrasted the proletariat under capitalism with the proletarians of the ancient world in a well-known epigram: "The Roman proletariat lived at the expense of society, while modern society lives at the expense of the proletariat".

In Ennis and Clare, most of the proletariat lived in the margins of a society of owner-occupiers where farmers mainly employed relatives, where division of the land had eliminated many of the old hired-labour jobs, and where there was very little industry. They were very much a surplus population. So were many of the sons and daughters of the farmers, who became emigration-fodder.

It was thus that the economic slump triggered by the 1929 Wall Street crash, and the political upheavals following Fianna Fail's election victory, found them.

We know of some of the militant actions by the Ennis unions only because they "made the papers". The incident that led to the trial of the 24 labourers in 1934 did not make the papers until they were charged. Most likely there were many more incidents that did not go on the public record.

The first appearance in the press of the distinct Ennis labourers' response to the crisis, and of the millenarian atmosphere created by the second coming of "President De Valera" and his opponents' loudly expressed fears and expectations, is in a report in the *Clare Champion* in December 1932.

"400 members of the local Labourers Organisation marched in processional order, headed by their fife and drum band, to the Kilrush Road, where seven men were... excavating... for sewers..."

When the procession reached the scene of the work, the employees continued working, but almost immediately an altercation arose and they were set upon... and beaten... The workers resisted for the short time, but they were, naturally, powerless to resist the attack..."

The EULU men picked up abandoned shovels and used them to fill trenches that had been dug.

"The four or five Gardai on duty under Inspector Hall were powerless to stop the replacement work... A few shovels were [then] broken, and cheers rang out as they were flung into the adjoining field.

The replacement work finished, the processionists again lined up and proceeded... to the courthouse [at the other side of town], where Michael Glynn (vice chairman of the organisation), Dan Burke (secretary), M Malone, J Ryan, Thomas Dinan, and W Ryan interviewed Mr F Dowling, the county surveyor [in charge of all County Council work]".

Michael Glynn spoke from the courthouse steps: "There is one thing I am proud of today, and that is that the old spirit and determination of Ennis men is still there".

Headed by the band, the EULU marched through the town, were addressed by P J McNamara, and dispersed.

Mr Glynn later explained to reporters that this work was Urban Council work, and the issue was [it] was

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being done by country men”.

We get a picture of how things worked in Ennis from the account of the conference to resolve the dispute published in full in the *Clare Champion* on 10 December 1932.

“The dispute that led to the [forcible closing down of] the sewage works on the Kilrush Road was discussed at a two day conference between Mr Meghen, Commissioner administering Urban affairs, four representatives of the Ennis United Labourers Organisation... and the contractor, Mr P McMahon.

Michael Glynn explained the point of view of the workers. “On Thursday, the Union Chairman, Mr M Malone, and the Secretary, Dan Burke approached Mr McMahon, contractor for sewage work in Ennis... They asked him if it was true that he intended starting this work at two shillings per cubic yard, and he said it was.

I informed him, on behalf of the Ennis United Labourers, that we could not agree to any contract on the piecework system, as we considered that it was establishing competition between man and man, which should not be. After a long discussion Mr McMahon agreed to pay 33 shillings (the union rate was 35 shillings a week... A mass meeting of the union members... unanimously rejected wages below the standard rate.

McMahon started the work on Monday afternoon, and... told applicants for work that [it would be] two shillings per cubic yard. The men put [this] to the union committee...

McMahon [told union representatives] he had not broken his agreement: they could start work in the morning at 33 shillings a week. The union leaders advised them to start work on the Tuesday morning, and wait until the Town Commissioner had pronounced on the issue.

At eight o'clock the following morning when they turned up for work, Mr McMahon told them he had no work for a couple of days... Mr McMahon broke his word to the deputation and... did not want any Ennis men on the job. The committee then appointed T Dinan and Michael Glynn to see Mr Dowling the County Surveyor, but he was not in town. The men decided on a protest march to the work site.

They called upon the men at work to cease, and one of the men working on the job raised a shovel in an intimidating attitude, which was resented by members of the demonstration. We realised that the situation was rather serious and dangerous... There was a bit of a melee.

I tried to get Mr Dowling to get the work stopped, for, to be candid with you, as a member of the Organisation, I was afraid something serious would happen. There is no man in the Organisation felt the position more than I did. For nearly two hours on Sunday night I advised the men to go to work and to adopt a peaceful attitude.

Their point was that he wanted to appoint no Ennis men. Yet the grant for the work is being given to provide work for the unemployed within the Urban area of Ennis. We have completed a register I have of all the unemployed in Ennis today, and if there is any work within the Urban area, the Urban men are entitled to it now, undoubtedly”.

The Commissioner said that the work had been given to Mr McMahon in the understanding that town men were to be employed. He is surprised that this trouble has arisen. He doesn't quite understand why.

Mr Dinan (union): “I can tell you what the state of affairs is now, sir, that McMahon and Mr Smyth are going to have a Hell of a lot of trouble with the labourers at this town... We don't care if Mr McMahon comes from Timbuktu. We don't object to working for a man who pays the local Trade Union rates.

The Commissioner asked what rate of wages they where “insisting” on. Glynn: “35 shillings a week”. The Commissioner agreed that this was “fair enough”.

Dinan made sure he understood: “For casual labour. Michael Glynn: “there is nothing extreme in that”. The Commissioner agreed, adding that Mr McMahon was supposed to take men from the Labour Exchange. The Commissioner: “not hearing his side at the moment I can only say you did seem to have reason on your

side.”

Michael Glynn: “Though he believed he bore a name to the contrary, he was always out for peaceful methods.”

Dinan: “The whole thing is that Mr McMahon did not meet us fair and square”.

Dinan expressed what the feelings of many workers about the Labour party backed Fianna Fail government in its first year: “I'd like to thank the government of the present-day for the way they are meeting the unemployment question”.

Dan Burke, who is and will remain for decades a leading Ennis trade unionist, is apologetic: “It is not an easy thing to keep them under control”.

He nailed down the attitude of the Ennis United Labourers Organisation: “They had no objection at all to outsiders coming into town, provided, of course, that there was work available for them”. In other words, in the given situation, they did object. Behind the apologetic manner and the stance of moderation, there is steely defiance there in that “provided, of course”.

Dinan underlines it again: “that is, providing the men in the town have already work. Then we have no objection to outsiders, no matter where they come from”.

Michael Glynn thought that McMahon, the contractor, may not have anticipated having to pay 35 shillings a week wages.

The Commissioner: “Mr McMahon's reason for the piecework was that of any other contractor – to get more work done”.

The next day the same delegation from the union confronted Mr McMahon. Glynn told him: “They would not be intimidated by any man. Ennis men would not be allowed to work outside Ennis, and they had decided that the rate for workers on this job would be 35 shillings per week.”

McMahon presented his case. “The Labour representatives asked that a wage of 35 shillings be paid to the men in the sewerage work at Kilrush Road. I pointed out that is also another and bigger relief scheme adjacent – the Fergus Drainage – where the rate of wages is 27 shillings. After discussion a rate of 33 shillings a week was agreed upon [and the Labour representatives said they would present it to the men]. I told them that I had already promised work to about eight men registered at the local Employment Exchange.

They asked under what conditions was I employing the men. I said I was giving them the option of doing excavation by the cubic yard. The alternative was a weekly wage. The representatives requested also that no one be employed unless he was a member of the Labour Organisation, and that they... would supply me with a list of good men.

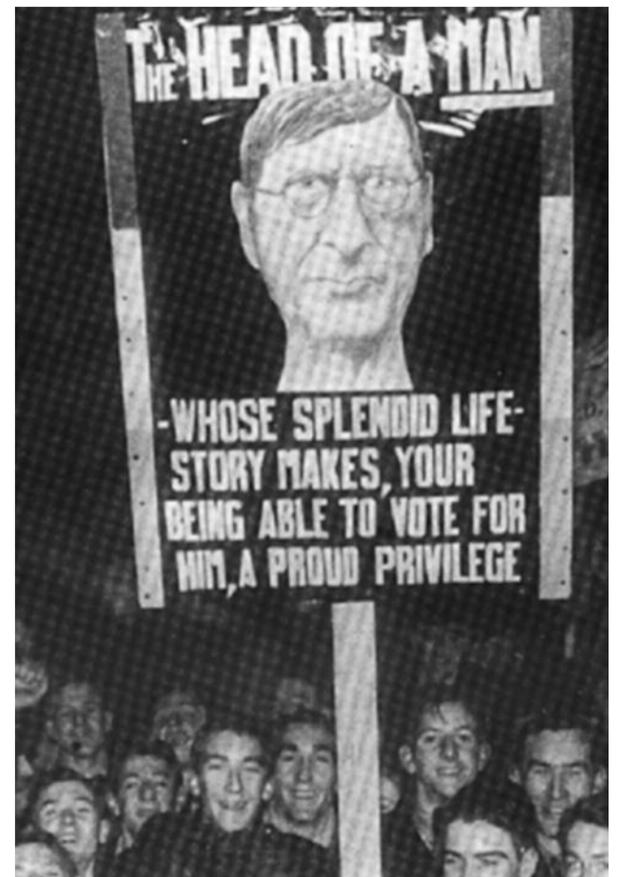
I told them I would not agree under any circumstances to this arrangement...

I told them he would probably need men on Monday but found afterwards that this was impossible. On Monday I started clearing the site with five of the men I had previously promised work. Shortly after starting the work a number of men, about 30, arrived at the scene with the object of obtaining work. I informed them I was not yet ready to employ. These men told me that they would not work at the rate of two shillings per cubic yard. I told them that was optional.

Next day when I arrived at work I was confronted with over 50 men looking for work. I was not yet ready, and had not made the necessary arrangements at the Employment Exchange, I told them I could not take any men that day. On hearing this the men became very restive and issued threats, etc. Now this dictation by the men as to how I was to conduct my own work I would not accept under any circumstances. Nor could I take a large number of men indiscriminately.

[Later the same day] I found a procession of men formed up in marching order and headed by a band. I also found three of the men who had been working with me bleeding from the face and some of the implements broken...

If the Labourers' Union repudiates the agreement arrived at between us, I feel at liberty to also repudi-



The cult of De Valera

ate it, and will adhere only to the rates presently existing in the adjacent relief works [27 shillings].”

Dinan questioned the assertion that they had broken their agreement... “We had the members of our Association waiting and wanted to go to work. When we came there on Tuesday morning you had either other men at work from within a radius of 10 miles of the town, to do this work for two shillings per yard”

The Commissioner asked the names of the men employed on this work.

Mr McMahon: John Hinchy of Market Street, Ennis, a married man; John O'Connor, single and registered at the Labour Exchange with an address at the Upper Jail Street.

Mr Dinan: He lives within 7 miles of the town, so it is not fair where there are over 300 men idle in the town that Mr McMahon or any other contractor should go outside the town... He considered a town man to be a man who is in the town a couple of years.

The Commissioner concurred: I would say a couple of years anyway.

Mr McMahon: the next man he had employed was John Hallinan, a married man. Mr Glynn said that there was a great objection to him. He had recently sold a farm of land for £900, and had purchased two houses in Ennis. There were more deserving cases than this. Mr McMahon: that man should get a chance to explain. The Commissioner agreed.

Mr McMahon: There was also John Bradley, a married man living in the vicinity of Clarecastle in a labourer's cottage. He had worked for him for about four years, but had been temporarily employed for the past three months.

The Commissioner: I think we must rule him out. He did not think that men of this type should be employed. This scheme is being financed from the rates. No man from the countryside should be employed. No man but an Ennis man, a man with two years' residence in Ennis, should get employment. He asked the Labour representatives what their attitude would be to these men if it were agreed to restart the work.

Mr Dinan: they had no objection to working with these men as long as there was no unemployment in the town. [In other words, they had very strong objections: there were 300 in the town without work].

The Commissioner said he had a list containing 217 names from the Labour Exchange, and Mr McMahon was entitled to employ any man on that list, no matter who he might be.

Mr Glynn: They would like to see Bradley working. He was in bad circumstances and had seven children to support...

Commissioner: “As far as I am concerned, McMa-

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hon is entitled to take any man from that [Labour Exchange] list".

Mr McMahon: "I should get a free hand in this matter, as otherwise I would have no real supervision over the men, and the whole thing would end in chaos".

Mr Glynn: we can guarantee that we will give you men who will be able to do the work. I think that is all you want. Reading the list from the Labour Exchange Mr Glynn said: all these men are from the urban area or within a mile of it. I have no objection either to a man named Purtill

Mr Dinan: Purtill was the one man he would like to see working. He was badly off and was living under terrible circumstances at the present moment...

The Commissioner said he would be inclined to be sympathetic with the labourers. [Not to be outdone] McMahon said: "So am I, too".

[On wages] the Commissioner made a "sporting offer" to Mr McMahon. Go on with the work at the 35 shillings a week rate, and at the end of the job, if he can show me from his books that the thing has worked out wrong for him I am willing to meet him. I can not make him a definite promise at the moment. The Commissioner asked if he would accept a limit to the number of men from outside the town and he would employ – would 10 out of 60 be enough? [McMahon] said that it would.

Michael Glynn asked McMahon to say definitely how many men he would want of his own choosing. McMahon said: about eight. Mr Glynn: I see no difficulty. McMahon agreed he would put 60 or 70 men opening the road in preparation for sewage pipe.

Now came the pious homilies.

The Town Commissioner said he did not want any bad feeling to persist between McMahon and the labourers. McMahon had developed a business and was creating more employment. Strikes and disturbances were additional expenditure. The work that had been interrupted on the Kilrush road would have to be done again. They had no excuse for demonstrations as was always willing to come and try and meet any reasonable grievance that they might have.

Calling men out on strike was putting them out of employment for three or four days. He appealed to everybody to do their best to keep men from going out on strike because it was a ridiculous thing to do nowadays when they had the sympathy of everybody in authority. He would like to see a good spirits in Ennis. The workers were not beating Mr McMahon and he was not grinding them.

Mr Glynn said that they did not want to do any injury to any man. They realised the position a contractor was placed in, but it must also be realised that they were catering for a lot of men. They themselves were stampeded, but he could say that very few did as much as they to prevent the demonstration. But they got beyond them.

[It is hard not to think there was a big element of "hard cop, soft cop" in the union leaders presenting themselves as moderate men and their members as dangerous if provoked].

The Commissioner said he would like if things were made as dignified as possible in Ennis. Any dispute should be settled... It would turn out better for the labourers and the employers in the end

Dan Burke: my own desire is to create harmony and peace between Mr McMahon and workers in the town. He hoped that in future they would live in peace and harmony. I am sure I'm speaking for the labourers when I wish him success and prosperity any future undertakings.

Mr Glynn... said that he considered McMahon's statement that he would know how to deal with the Ennis Labourers Organisation as a threat.

Mr McMahon came back: when one statement is made it means raising another. You'll know that a statement was made at the Labour Room by a certain gentleman addressing the crowd... Weren't gun-bullies referred to?

Michael Glynn: I never heard those words

Mr Burke: I did not hear that remark.

Mr Dinan: He made no references to gun bullies..

Mr McMahon replying to Mr Glynn, maintained that when fight was put up to a man he was no man

if he did not accept the challenge. He could not put men on indiscriminately and he had to take them from the Labour Exchange. But the men were too impetuous and that was the whole cause of the trouble.

Mr Glynn on behalf of the labourers of Ennis offered sincere thanks to the Commissioner.

The proceedings ended with Mr Burke and Mr McMahon shaking hands before the Commissioner.

The general strike, February 1934

Ennis labourers went on a three-day general strike in February 1934. Essentially the issue was who got jobs in the town: members of the union, or whoever the Labour Exchange and the employer chose.

In the build-up to the strike, the calibre of the EULU members and the strength of their commitment to labour solidarity was tested, and they passed the test magnificently.

In 1933, seven men were sent from the Labour Exchange to begin preparations for the building of five dozen houses at what is now Ard na Griena. Of those seven, one was not a member of the union.

The union members struck work, demanding that only union members be employed. The job was formally shut down, and the men discharged.

After an interval, the job was started again, and men were sent from the Labour Exchange, union members. The union insisted that the six men who had struck work were being victimised and by rights the jobs were theirs. The men sent from the Labour Exchange accepted that. So the Labour Exchange sent another batch of men.

The union ruling stood and the new men accepted that.

The men sent from the Labour Exchange would have been chosen on the basis of most need. These were people with no resources to fall back on, who sometimes went hungry and, worse, had to see their children hungry and sometimes without shoes. They believed in working-class solidarity, in the principles of the union, in the necessity of a common front. They knew the union would protect them and fight for them and with them.

They accepted the discipline of the union, labour solidarity, even when it cut painfully against their immediate interests.

The *Saturday Record* reported on the February 1934 general strike after it was over.

"Up to 4 o'clock on Monday last [12 February] the town of Ennis was in the throes of a general labour strike. Following the cessation of work of steamrollering the entrance to the sites of the new houses last week in Ard na Griena... a strike took place owing to the objection to the employment of seven particular men whom it is alleged refused to recognise the Ennis Labourers Association.

That was on Wednesday [7 February] and up to Wednesday evening everything was peaceful... Things, however, took a different turn on Thursday.

About 90 extra Civil Guards were observed to be on duty at various points at eight o'clock in the morning. The men who refused to go on strike were afforded strong protection. Strikers in groups paraded up and down the road where the men were working but there was no interference with them. At the same time, there was an unceasing parade through the streets of the town by a number of workmen carrying banners.

A conference was held on Thursday night at which it was decided to call out all the labourers and shop-porters, messenger-boys, etc. employed in the various

establishments in the town. This order came into effect on Friday morning, with the result that business of all kinds was completely dislocated.

Over 1000 men headed by the band took part in the general parade through the streets at three o'clock on Friday. There was a complete suspension of the delivery of coal, bread, and other commodities and it was strongly rumoured that the delivery of milk would be stopped...

Mr Paddy Hogan TD, in reply to a telegram from the Labour Organisation, arrived from Dublin on Friday night and addressed a conference in the Labour Hall.

The town suffered most on Saturday as a result of the dislocation of business. The gates of the market house closed, and people unable to dispose of their produce had to bring it home again.

There was practically no business transacted in the shops. The village of Clarecastle [two miles from Ennis] was besieged on Saturday evening by people from the town for their supply of coal [which came there up the Shannon, on ships]. Those who are not fortunate enough to be able to get an ass-cart were content to take supplies all the way on an ordinary handcart while in some instances a sack of coal was carried all the way on a man's back!

About 1500 men headed by the Ennis band again paraded the streets on Saturday, after which a public meeting was held outside the Labour Rooms and addressed by Deputy Hogan from one of the windows.

Hogan said that since midnight on Thursday the town of Ennis had been in the throes of a general strike and with the unity and solidarity they had amongst the workers in every country, the workers and Ennis had accepted the challenge thrown down to them. Many on strike were not members of the Ennis United Labourers Association, but had gone out to support their fellow workers. Even some traders in the town had indicated to their workers that because of the justness of the case they were perfectly pleased that their employees would take part with their colleagues.

I want to say to the people of Ennis people and to the traders in particular that the Committee of the Ennis United Labourers' Association regret the dislocation in trade and business necessarily caused. We would like to extend the same statement to the people of the country who came to do business in the town and found the markets and general business dislocated, but the fault is not ours.

This fight is not of our seeking. The challenge was thrown down to us in no uncertain fashion and we would be unworthy if we did not take up that challenge.

What is the history of this strike? Around the Christmas time a grant was given for the relief of unemployment in the town. A few men who were not members of the Ennis United Labourers' Association were employed on that work. They were asked to join the Association. They were given every facilities in the matter of paying arrears that might have accrued or entrance fees, but they definitely refuse to belong to the Association.

Workers demonstrated at the place where the men were employed and a dispute occurred which is at the present time before the courts, so I will not pursue it any further.

Immediately after, when the first work opened in the town, we find that these men were the very first to be sent on the work of steamrolling at Ard na Griena. The members of the Ennis United Labourers' Association refused to work with them as non-union labour, and the work was closed down.

Yet again we find that when steamrolling is begun on the Doora Road, that these same men are sent out. Sometimes we find that the Surveyor has taken one of these men and if I be organised workers of the town and put him on the County Council van and sent him to Ballynacally, to spread the trouble in that area.

In fact of that challenge by the County Surveyor, there was nothing left to do but to take the drastic step [the union took]. The County Surveyor says he is bound to accept the names sent him from the Ennis Employment Exchange. That statement is not true.

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The County Surveyor has powers of discretion.

Further, if the County Surveyor says he must take all names from the Labour Exchange. It would be interesting to know how he could reconcile that statement with the fact that he took Keane – one of the men concerned – and sent him on than to Ballynacally without getting his name from the local Labour Exchange?

Again, there is on the books of the Clare County Council a resolution proposed by Mr Sarsfield Maguire [the owner of the *Clare Champion* newspaper, and a member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Catholic equivalent of the Orange Order]. when he was Vice-Chairman of the Clare County Council. The County Council deliberately ignored that resolution.

There is also a resolution passed by the Clare County Council that wherever possible stones will be quarried for steamrolling purposes in order to absorb the unemployed. The County Surveyor in as many cases as possible for him to do so, is buying stones from the largest farmers all over the county. In fact some farmers have opened quarries on their own land and are supplying the material to the roads as the workers stand idly by.

I have asked the Minister for Local Government for an enquiry into the working of direct labour in the county and I intend to press that as far as I can, because we are determined that no tools, used by whom we do not know, will smashed the Labour Organisation in this county. We will not allow the County Surveyor steamroll us into submission.

Whilst I say that this fight has been forced upon us, and whilst I say that we are in no way responsible for it, we should at all times be prepared to confer on the basis of fair play and just recognition of our demands, but only on that basis, because the justice of our cause is clear, and we intend to pursue it to victory”.

The County Council resolution: the workers seem to win

The militancy of the Ennis working class was of course political, no matter how limited its trade unions focus at any given time. Its fundamental day-to-day politics were trade-union-style bargaining within the existing system. The Ennis workers also used militant direct action in politics.

The decisions that shaped the lives of an Ennis working class dependent on relief work were taken by the Urban and County Councils. There too the union made itself felt. Just how much they made themselves felt can be read off from the headlines in the two weekly papers published in Ennis, after a mass demonstration outside and inside the County Council chamber in February 1934 in support of a motion there which would secure the demands of the general strike.

The EULU advocated the recognition of trade union wages and conditions on all works under the County Council, and that all work was to be given to trade-unionists, members of the EULU.. The Finance Committee of the Council had adopted a resolution to this effect and the question was now on the agenda for consideration by the General Council.

“Yahooism” and “claptrap” shouted the *Clare Champion* (18 February 1933) the paper backing Fianna Fail

and De Valera, but picking up the words of a fascist, “Blueshirt”, Councillor, Falvey.

“Unprecedented in the history of Clare”, headlined the Blueshirt-friendly *Saturday Record* of the same date. Four smaller headlines, in decreasing size, outlined its view of the affair: Labourers march to County Council meeting/ And refused admission by gardai/ Protests by Labour deputy and others/ Recognition of Trade Union wages and conditions advocated.

The labourers were debarred from entering the courthouse where the monthly meeting of the Clare County Council was in session, although notification had been received of deputations on behalf of the Ennis United Labourers’ Association and the Kilrush Transport Workers’ Union.

Before the meeting about 700 members of EULU assembled at their headquarters in Market Street, and headed by their fife and drum band, marched to the courthouse. There were met by a large force of Gardai. The leaders were informed by Superintendent Casey that only a deputation would be allowed to enter the courthouse.

As the councillors arrived, the Garda authorities informed the leader of the EULU, Paddy Hogan TD, and other members of the County Council of this decision.

An anxious Hogan addressed the workers from the steps of the courthouse. He knew of no previous occasion on which citizens of the County had been refused admission to the Council Chamber. Deputations and Labour representatives had been admitted to the space reserved for the purpose on numerous occasions and there never had been the slightest damage done, nor was the public peace endangered in anyway. How it had come about that they were refused admission to the Council Chamber now, he could not say.

He did not know on whose authority such an order had been issued. He had phoned the Department of the Minister for Justice, and had been informed that they knew nothing about it. He had just got in touch with the Police Commissioner’s department to see if the order could be countermanded.

He appealed to the workers to do nothing that would in any way endanger their reputation as respectable citizens and workers. Their rights had been filched from them and he would raise the matter in the National Assembly.

He again asked them in the interests of their reputation as sensible, decent men. Their interest in the Council Chamber would be well looked after. While the meeting was in progress they should do nothing that would lead to a disturbance with the Gardai. The majority of the rank and file of the Gardai are in sympathy with Labour.

Later on the person responsible for the order opposing the right of entry to the Council Chamber would be found out and dragged into the limelight.

Hogan raised the exclusion of the labourers at the beginning of the Council meeting. “The Civic Guards were at the moment downstairs preventing the workers of the town and a portion of the County from coming into the Chamber. He did not know on what authority or what order. He knew simply they that force was being used to keep them out. The Council Chamber was being closed to a section of the community by force, with the threat of violence, on the part of those who should be the public peace preservers. He protested emphatically, on his own behalf, on the part of the democracy of the state, on behalf of the Labour Party, and on behalf of right-thinking honest men”.

Hogan was still anxious: “He hoped that the locking out of these men would not have a worse effect than letting them into the Council Chamber would have”.

Councillor Henchy supported the protest. He said that at any time the labourers had been present during a meeting of the Council, they had conducted themselves decently. Other councillors also joined the protest. Paddy Hogan moved that the council adjourn as a protest against the action of whoever was responsible for locking out the labourers.

The chairman announced that if the feeling of the council was that the men should be admitted, then he would get in touch which Chief Superintendent Gilroy. The Council was unanimous for letting in the

men.

When they reassembled the Chairman delivered a message from Chief Supt Gilroy: he had taken it on himself to exclude the men in the interests of peace, and his action was upheld by the Commissioner of the Garda Siochana. The Chairman reported that he had given Gilroy an assurance that there would be no breach of the peace.

The hundreds of labourers then entered the public gallery. There were some policemen in the chamber. The Council received deputations from the labourers of Ennis, Kilrush, Ennistymon and Ballynacally.

In the resumed council meeting, Hogan advocated a direct-works council scheme. “There are at the present time a good many people unemployed. There is a big bill for Home Assistance, and he thought it was false economy to keep people from work and at the same time sustain them, because if they did not give them work they would have to sustain them. What was their game?

“He put it to the people who said that the present administration was not doing as much as they might to relieve unemployment, to show what the Clare county council would do in the matter of relieving unemployment. There would not be any advantage accruing to the ratepayers by toning down this scheme. What was lost on one hand was gained on the other. It was of no advantage to ratepayers to pay Home Assistance. The workers did not seek Home Assistance; they sought work”.

The 300 or so workers who had come in had not been quite as gentlemanly as Paddy Hogan had asked them to be. Councillor Kerin asked the Chairman to ask them to allow the council to carry on, and not to make any demonstration.

Councillor Crow was all for giving work to the workers, but not at the 35 shillings a week union rate. Many labourers were happy to work for 24 or 25 shillings a week. “If Mr Hogan is satisfied to take that, I’m with him; but I certainly will not give him 35 shillings a week”.

This was greeted by derisive cheering from those in the gallery. The Chairman had to appeal for order twice before he could make himself heard. He told those in the gallery that councillors “have the right to use their voice and vote in this issue and they will not be intimidated”.

Councillor Falvey, a Blueshirt, said that no-one “liked to cut the wages of labour. But there were plenty of decent labourers who would prefer a cut in wages and to get more work”.

During Falvey’s speech, and after, there was almost continuous shouting by those in the gallery.

The resolution was carried by a vote of 16 against 12, with two abstentions. When the chairman announced the result, there were prolonged cheers from the public gallery. Hands were raised high and if shouting continued even though Mr Hogan TD stood up on his chair to appeal for order.

Opponents of the resolution interpreted the position of Hogan and the EULU to mean that only men who were members of trade unions would be eligible for employment in public works.

Paddy Hogan explained that he wrote the resolution so that the most needy people would get work given on the relief schemes. “It was well known to every councillor in the Chamber that people were employed on relief work who were not really in need of that work, why around the corner they were needy people idle. There were farmers with anywhere between £10 and £40 valuation employed on relief work, while they were workers in the same locality, with possibly nothing but four walls of a house, without work”.

At the end of the general strike, and the passing of the County Council resolution moved by Hogan, the EULU seemed to have won a victory. But it was a victory that the ministry in Dublin could, with a flick of an official’s wrist, cancelled.

And that is what happened. The ministry overruled the council a couple of weeks later, and some of the councillors who gave the resolution its small majority probably voted for it knowing that they could rely on the government to sort it out for them.

The trial of the 24

The general strike was followed by the trial, in April 1934, of union members arrested on 24 December 1933 after the union demonstration at the quarry on 21 December, involving similar issues of non-union labour to those in the general strike over the work at Ard na Griena.

The charges of intimidation, assault, and conspiracy had been reduced to the charge of unlawful assembly.

On 21 December 1933, thirty men had been working on relief work at a quarry in Fountain, two miles outside Ennis. Twenty were members of the EULU (referred to colloquially as “the Labour Room” or “the Room”). Ten were not.

Let the prosecutor in the trial on 12 April 1934 at the Circuit Court, Mr Griffin, tell what happened next. Only details of the story are in dispute, not the main lines.

“At the end of last year money was allocated to the Clare County Council for relief and as a result work was opened at preparing road repairing material at Fountain. In all about 30 men were employed, 20 of whom were members of the Labour Room, the others being non-members.

On 16 December, Andrew Butler, one of the accused, went to the quarry and asked the men why they would not join the union. The 10 men said they would not join the union. Butler said that he would give them a few days to become members, and approaching them subsequently asked them for membership subscriptions. The men again refused to join the Association on 20 December, and the members of the association who were employed were withdrawn from the work and it was announced that there was going to be a strike.

On 21 December the 10 unassociated men were at work about an hour when they heard the beating of drums and music and saw a band followed by two or three hundred men coming towards the quarry. Some men got over the wall and approached the workers.

The workers refused again to become members of the Room... workers were injured and the work was stopped. The men at work are prepared to identify the 24 accused as being among the men came to the quarry and formed part of the unlawful assembly that took place there”.

John Joe Reidy, secretary to the Ennis United Labourers’ Association, put the union’s side of the story.

On 21 December only two men, in himself and Butler, went into the quarry. He asked the men if they would join a union. Molloy at the same time came into the quarry to get his shovel, which Arthur Power had. They had some argument, and it was then that the crowd came in over the wall.

The incident only lasted a few minutes, and the injuries the men complained of were sustained when they fell over themselves running away.

The Association had no objection to non-members working in gangs by themselves. The objection was that having members and non-members working together. Only about 30 men entered the quarry from the road.

The men did not go to the a quarry with the intention of frightening the men who were working there.

John Maloney said he was one of the crowd. He did not go into the quarry until George Molloy and Walsh fought over the shovel. He struck somebody, but not until he was struck. He was hit with the handle of a pick and he then hit back.

George Molloy stated that he was one of the crowd, and when he saw Power using his shovel he went to get it. As he was going towards Power, to get his shovel, Walsh struck him, and he hit Walsh back.

The judge took a ten minute break, during which he

seems to have proposed to Reidy that they plead guilty, on a promise that he would not send any of them to jail. The proposal was evidently rejected. The judge could of course have kept his word and given suspended sentences that would have tied up the militants.

In the summing-up, Judge E J McElligott made it plain why the charges had been brought. He even went near to instructing the jury to convict.

“This charge of unlawful assembly was a particularly grave one, but he had intimated to Mr Reidy that none of the accused would be sent to jail.

Labour was absolutely entitled to organise and form trade unions. Trade unions should be and almost invariably are of great faith in the advancement of the cause of Labour. They can conduct negotiations between employers and workmen in a peaceful and harmonious spirit. They are a great protection for the hard-working people who belonged to the labouring classes.

He admired trade unions very much, especially when, as a result of peaceful negotiations, they were able to advance the cause and interests of hard-working, decent people.

Sometimes, unfortunately, these organisations get out of hand and they violated the law. It might not be a serious violation, but at times any real violation of the law that was for the protection of the whole community was to a certain degree a serious matter.

This demonstration started out from Ennis, two miles away. What was its object? Was it for the peaceful persuasion of the three men who were members of the organisation to leave the work? If it was that, an intelligent man like John Joe Reidy would be able to exercise peaceful persuasion without the crowd.

As a result of the first visit from the union, 20 men had withdrawn their labour from the County Council, and gone to claim unemployment benefit at the expense of the ratepayers of the county.

Witness after witness comes forward to say that the Labour leaders came over the wall into the quarry. That in itself was an illegal thing to do. It was a trespass on the property. The action of the 20, 100 or 250 men as described even by themselves, constituted beyond any doubt an illegal assembly and that was the offence with which the accused were charged.

Do you believe, gentlemen of the jury, that these men went to the quarry for the purpose of peacefully persuading three of their members to abandon the job, and introduce seven or eight non-members to join the Association? He was amazed when he was told the sad history of these men, one of whom was without work 12 months, and another who had only two months’ work in the previous year. Certainly it seemed to him that it was a terrible burden on their resources, that they should be asked to pay out of two weeks’ charity money – for that was what it was – of 35 shillings a week, a subscription of two shillings and sixpence to what probably was a very deserving society. It could be well imagined that the men would resist having to meet this burden.

He pointed out that as a matter of law, when these men came across the fence into the quarry, they invaded property other than their own, and they constituted an illegal assembly. He always told a jury if there was a doubt the prisoner was entitled to the benefit of it. There was no doubt whatever in the present case, even on the evidence of the accused themselves.

He did not like appealing to the conscience of the jury, to remind them of the sanctity of the oath. The oath was a sacred thing. Unlawful assembly was a crime, but not much harm was done on this occasion. He had intimated to Mr Reidy that if a certain course was taken he would not send the accused men to jail. That course was not taken, but I have never broken my word with the jury”.

The judge directed the jury to acquit one defendant, Joseph Moroney.

But then, after a 20 minutes’ absence, the jury brought a verdict of not guilty for all 24 accused, and they were discharged.

When the verdict was announced somebody clapped in the back of the court, and McElligott’s bad temper burst out: if there was any more noise made in

court, he would send the person responsible to prison. The clapping at the back of the court continued and the judge directed the Gardai to take the person into custody.

The Gardai could not identify the person who clapped, and the people left the court quietly.

Solidarity against the odds

The labourers of Ennis were proud people, condemned to endless humiliation, quick to take offence and willing where they could to avenge themselves. They cared how they appear in each others’ eyes and in their own.

The poverty of this proletarian underclass was dire and permanent. There were big families and bigger clans of extended families in the streets of “hovels”. There was much sporting competition — a “town league” of hurling teams from the different streets and districts — and some feuding. Somehow out of this bonding together in families, hurling teams, named local clubs that hunt on foot with local packs of beagles, card schools and street patriotism, a magnificent culture of labour solidarity developed.

Where you might expect savage competition for the little work there was, there grew up the opposite — a culture of working class solidarity. In the period 1932-34, in the euphoria around the change of government, this took the form of labour demonstrations that led to three three-day General Strike in the town and the mass trial of 24 picketing workers.

The workers in Ennis maintained their union, which was to a serious extent a union of the unemployed — the unemployed of a pre-welfare society, who had to rely on a pittance of “Home Assistance” at the discretion of a “Relieving Officer” and on the Catholic charity of the St Vincent de Paul organisation. The members of the union maintained a magnificent solidarity and coordination of its members in action.

As a corporate body the union played its part in the life of the town. As we have seen, it had its own fife and drum band that took part in town parades other than union parades, including some political parades. They welcomed De Valera to the town, for instance, in 1932 and 1933.

The national organisation it was affiliated to — the “Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party”, a single organisation until 1930, when the industrial and political wings were made separate organisations — proclaimed its goal to be the workers’ republic, “Connolly’s workers’ republic”, a “red” republic as its opponents sometimes put it. It would maintain that commitment to a workers’ republic until 1938, when it retreated under church pressure.

Yet the Ennis labour movement could go nowhere politically. It was a minority in the society, and cut off by divergent ideas and identities from the “big battalions” of labour in the industrial north of Ireland. In a town like Ennis the militant labour movement was like a squirrel in a cage — active but captive, and still captive, no matter how active it managed to be.

When World War 2 made jobs in England, these workers flocked across the Irish Sea to English towns and cities. Many of them settled permanently, bringing families with them.

The great lesson they can teach us today is that working-class militancy, whatever the odds against us, is always a power for the ruling class to reckon with. And in favourable conditions it will allow us eventually to destroy the capitalist ruling class.