1913, Jim Larkin and the British Labour Movement

BILL MORAN

The main focus of this paper is the impact of the events of the 1913 Lock-Out on the British labour movement. While the great battles of the Lock-Out were fought on the streets of Dublin, and the burden of the long struggle was borne by the men, women and children of the Dublin tenements, the result of the struggle was in large part decided by the trade union movement in England, Wales and Scotland. Without the massive financial and material support, epitomised by the food ships, which was generated within the labour movement as a whole, the Dublin strikers and their families would have been hard put to stand out so long against the might of Murphysim, the Dublin Employers Federation and Dublin Metropolitan Police batons. When British trade union support was withdrawn in the aftermath of the disastrous Special Conference in December 1913, the strikers were doomed to defeat. Only the fact that most employers were as exhausted as the men of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union prevented the return to work degenerating into a debacle. As it was, victimisation was widespread and it would appear that only the outbreak of World War I restored the fortunes of the union.

The imposing figure of Jim Larkin looms large in these events. He was more than just the spokesman for the embattled Dublin workers. He was their ambassador and prophet. His 'fiery cross' tour through Britain played a major part in raising financial and practical aid for the Dublin strikers, and his personality contributed not a little to the disastrous rows and personal conflicts which marred the T.U.C. Special Conference in December and led to the withdrawal of financial support for the Dublin men.

It is, however, a mistake to see the issues solely in terms of personality conflicts. The Dublin Lock-Out highlighted in a dramatic way the great differences between the situation of the Irish and British working classes. The personality conflicts were in many ways symptoms of these deeper differences. While these differences need emphasising and elaborating it is important not to forget the factors which British and Irish workers shared in common. It is to the common characteristics and inspirations to which I now wish to turn.

I. THE LABOUR UNREST

The period of 1900 to 1914 were years of relatively uninterrupted price rises coupled with a fairly general failure of wages to keep pace with these rises. The retail price index in London rose from 100 in 1900 to 114.5 in 1912.1 Wage rises for skilled workers in the comparable period were around 8%.2 Consequently there was severe pressure on working class incomes and this pressure was particularly acute on the subsistence level incomes of unskilled workers who were, in addition, the most prone to periods of seasonal or sporadic unemployment. In 1908 and 1909 unemployment in the U.K. even on the incomplete statistics of the time, was in excess of one and a half million. In these circumstances the growth of trade union membership was sluggish until the period between 1910–1914. These same years yield the highest figures for the number of stoppages and the number of working days lost through stoppages. Significantly these are also the years when unemployment was at its lowest. 1913, the peak year for the number of disputes – 1,459 – was the year of lowest unemployment – 2%.3 The fact that the disputes of this period were characterised as the 'Labour Unrest' points to a vital element in the events of these years. There was a new spirit of determination and defiance in the mood of many working class people; and this spirit cannot be simply explained by the effect of rising prices and falling unemployment.

Working class political organisations and trade unions both experienced great increases in membership and activity. Growing political consciousness and determination is reflected too, in the number of labour and socialist papers
in circulation at the time. The gains in membership of the labour movement in these years were to be consolidated and retained so one can agree with Pelling’s verdict that ‘The immediate pre-war years in fact saw the fulfilment of the promise of New Unionism’.4

Another feature of the growing militancy of these years was the spread of syndicalist notions of direct industrial action to secure revolutionary political change. There were never all that many syndicalists in the trade union movement, and they were only able to win widespread support in a few areas like the South Wales mines, but their influence extended far beyond the ranks of their converts. The vigour of their direct action tactics contrasted sharply with the stolid parliamentarianism of the Labour Party, while their watchword of ‘An injury to one is an injury to all’ was of real practical significance to dockers and transport workers whose strikes could be evaded by the employers unless there was a general willingness to block the goods concerned. It is no accident that a rapid spread of sympathetic strike action was to be a major feature of the disputes of the period. Irish workers participated fully in these developments.

The Labour Unrest was accompanied by a tremendous growth of trade union membership and organisation, and its extension into sections of the working class hitherto considered unorganisable. The strikes of the period often involved violent clashes with the forces of law and order and were frequently national in character. Most significant for Irish workers, was the application of sympathetic strike action in several of the largest disputes. In short, it seemed that the working class was not only becoming more combative and aggressive but also more united and cohesive. The Dublin Lock-Out was to prove a crucial test of these developments.

In Ireland the symbol of the labour unrest was Big Jim Larkin. He arrived in Ireland in 1907 as organiser for the National Union of Dock Labourers. He rapidly established a reputation by successfully uniting an extraordinary alliance of Belfast workers and police across the sectarian divide in defiance of the employers, the A.O.H. and the Orange establishment. The alliance was eventually broken but to have even managed to create it was a truly remarkable achievement. Sacked from the National Union of Dock Labourers, he went on to create the Irish Transport and General Workers Union drawing together many of the unskilled and hitherto unorganised manual workers of Ireland. He built the union up in the face of constant pressure from employers, the Dublin Castle Administration, and the Hibernians. Some of the skilled unions resented his unorthodox methods and for some time the I.T.G.W.U. was unrepresented at the Irish T.U.C.

I have already pointed out that the labour unrest was in particular a revolt by the casual labourer against low pay and uncertain conditions of employment. Larkin had, in Ireland, fertile ground in which to sow the seeds of revolt. Not only were Irish wages consistently lower than their English counterparts but the differentials between skilled and unskilled in Ireland were much greater. For example the monthly Board of Trade figures for November 1913 show that Bricklayers, Carpenters and Masons got an hourly rate of 8¼d in Dublin, 10½d in London and 9 to 10d in Manchester and Birmingham. The builders labourer got only 4½d in Dublin compared to 7d in the other three cities. The cost of living index was the same in all four cities.5 The grinding poverty of many Dublin workers was exacerbated by their appalling living conditions. A parliamentary inquiry into housing conditions in Dublin was held following the collapse of two tenements in September 1913. This Inquiry revealed that of the 25,800 families living in tenements, 20,100 or 4/5ths were crammed into one room. Sixty thousand, two hundred people were living in dwellings that were either ‘on or past approaching the borderline of being fit for human habitation’; or ‘unfit for human habitation, and incapable of being rendered fit for human habitation’;6 It is hardly surprising that the death rate was 24.8 per thousand,7 a figure equalled only in Moscow and Calcutta.

It was against this background of poverty and struggle that Larkin and the I.T.G.W.U. decided in 1913 to extend their organisation into the financial empire of William Martin Murphy. Murphy who owned the Dublin United Tramway company, and the Irish Independent was an avowed opponent of Larkinism and a very remarkable specimen of the nationalist bourgeoisie. His nationalism had led him to refuse a knighthood in 1907 yet his financial empire was an early example of the modern
They dared give Harvey Duff a kick,
They didn't care a damn.
They lie in gaol, they can't get bail
Who fought their corner thus
But you men, with sticks men
Must make the Peelers cuss. 11

The great Lock-Out began with a dramatic
and defiant gesture by the I.T.G.W.U. men in
the Dublin Tramway Company. At about 9.45
a.m. on the morning of Tuesday 26th August, at
the height of the Horse Show week, drivers and
conductors fixed the 'Red Hand' badge to their
lapels and walked off their trams leaving them
stranded in their tracks all over the city. This
brought the industrial conflict that had been
smouldering throughout the month of August
into open warfare.

Murphy had already dismissed suspected
I.T.G.W.U. members in the Irish Independent
and this had led to efforts by union members to
prevent the distribution of the paper. Easons
had been picketed for selling the paper and
dockers had prevented Easons stationery sup-
plies from being unloaded. Once the tramway
men came out on strike, the Dublin Castle
authorities moved into support Murphy and the
employers. Pickets were harassed and
arrested, and Larkin and Daly of the
I.T.G.W.U., O'Brien and Lawlor of the Dublin
Tailors Society, and Partridge of the A.S.E.,
were charged with 'incitement' and 'making
seditious utterances' at an evening meeting out-
side Liberty Hall in support of the strikers.
Despite these attempts at intimidation a mass
meeting was planned for O'Connell Street on
the Sunday. The authorities acting in collusion
with the Murphy gang, and against the express
wishes of the Lord Mayor and Corporation of
Dublin, proclaimed the meeting.

Larkin publicly burnt the Proclamation on
Friday and then went into hiding at Constance
Markeiwicz's home in the Dublin suburbs.
Meanwhile non-union labour tried to maintain
a reduced tram service and this led to frequent
scuffles with the policy. Murphy, as he later
admitted to the Askhaw Tribunal, had visited
Dublin Castle to secure

Protection for the people and property I'm con-
cerned with. 12

This protection was no mean undertaking.

II. THE LOCK-OUT

‘Who fears to wear the blood Red Badge
Upon his manly breast;
What scab obeys the vile command
of Murphy and the rest;
He's all a knave, and half a slave
Who slights his union thus
But true men, like you men,
Will show the badge with us.

They dared to fling a manly brick
They wrecked a blackleg tram
The police force of the city was augmented during the strike by a force of five District Inspectors, thirteen Head Constables, and 488 men; and that of the County by two District Inspectors, three Head Constables and 137 men of the Royal Irish Constabulary. This formidable addition to the Dublin Metropolitan Police was used to virtually suspend all rights of picketing and free speech. Inevitably violence followed. There were baton charges and street fights after Larkin had burnt the Proclamation on Friday evening, and, in the words of the Commission set up to enquire into the Dublin Disturbances

On August 30th and 31st, and September 1st and 21st, 1913, fifteen separate and distinct riots took place in the city of Dublin. Although all the riots were directly or indirectly the result of industrial disputes, they were not confined to working men, and in all of them the worst element was supplied by those who seldom or never work, and who may be described as the corner boys and criminal class in the city. It is a remarkable feature of the disturbances on which it is our duty to report, that between 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. on Sunday evening, August 31st serious rioting occurred in six widely separated districts in the city.

The ‘remarkable feature’ of six riots in three hours on Sunday evening was in fact the climax of virtually continuous fighting with the police in working class slum districts that had begun on Friday evening. Two union members had been batonned to death on Saturday evening and on Sunday the police had attacked crowds of strollers in O’Connell Street after Larkin made a brief appearance on the balcony of the Imperial Hotel (owned by Murphy) disguised as an old clergyman. The ‘dictatorship of the police trunccheon’ over the weekend left two dead, over 500 injured and an enormous amount of hatred for the police and those who had unleashed them, which prevented any possibility of arriving at an early settlement of the dispute. The weekend police violence also had another effect— it thrust the Dublin dispute onto the front page headlines of the British press.

From this point on, the progress of the dispute was inextricably bound up with the level of support from the English trade union movement. As it happened the annual conference of the British TUC commenced on Monday September 1st and an emergency resolution about the Dublin events was immediately tabled con-

demning police brutality. Although this resolution was passed unanimously; the actual debate was anything but unanimous and presaged all the later tensions and disagreements about the right way of offering support to the strikers. Sexton was an unfortunate choice as mover of the resolution, given his past record of expelling Larkin from the National Union of Dock Labourers and then getting him gaoled on false charges of misappropriating union funds in 1910. He referred amidst uproar to the ‘blackness of Connolly and Larkin being white compared to Carson and Lord Londonderry’. However most other speakers to the debate were unequivocal in their support for the strikers in Dublin and one suggested that the whole congress adjourn to Dublin to assert the rights of free speech.

This mood of militancy and willingness to ‘endorse enthusiastically the hottest declarations’ was in no way diminished when a delegation from the Dublin Trades Council arrived on the second day of the conference to appeal for assistance. Councillor Partridge of the A.S.E. (who had already been twice charged with ‘seditious utterances’) told Congress that Murphy had declared war on the I.T.G.W.U. in Dublin.

We of the skilled trades in Dublin recognised that the defeat of that union would mean the destruction of trade unionism throughout the length and breadth of Ireland.

He warned people against falling for the employers’ tactic of portraying the dispute as a clash of personalities between an ‘unreasonable’ Larkin and a responsible Murphy.

I particularly wish to impress you with the fact that this is not an attack upon Larkin which we are witnessing, but an attack upon the entire trade union movement of Ireland. They have simply marked Larkin out, and keep his name well to the front because they think in that way they will win their fight; but they will not win it. (cheers)

However, in a way the damage had already been done when Sexton had revived the animosities which he and other conservative trade union leaders like Havelock Wilson and J.H. Thomas, had for Larkin and the vigorous trade unionism he stood for. This issue of personalities was to be the chink in the armour of trade union unanimity on the Dublin dispute,
and ultimately solidarity action was to falter and then peter out because of personality clashes between Larkin and some of the English trade union leaders.

The T.U.C. congress sent a delegation over to Dublin and it arrived to find the situation deteriorating rapidly. Larkin and Connolly were in gaol and the employers were stepping up their offensive. Jacob's Biscuits locked out union members on September 1st and the Dublin Coal Merchants' Association took the same course of action the next day. On September 3rd 404 Dublin employers meeting under the chairmanship of William Martin Murphy pledged themselves to lock out all I.T.G.W.U. members. During the next fortnight, workers all over Dublin were presented with the hated 'document' binding them:

I hereby undertake to carry out all instructions given me by or on behalf of my employers, and further I agree to immediately resign my membership of the I.T.G.W.U. (if a member) and I further undertake that I will not join or in any way support this union.19

The government's Askwith Tribunal later commented that the document:

imposes upon the signatories conditions which are contrary to individual liberty, and which no workman, or body of workmen could be reasonably expected to accept.20

The Dublin men were of the same opinion as the learned gentlemen of the Tribunal and whenever the document was presented, the men, whether members of I.T.G.W.U., or other unions or no union at all, walked out. By the end of September the total of locked out men was over 20,000.21

The first direct intervention by the British T.U.C. ended abruptly and inconclusively on September 12th when the T.U.C. delegation's offer to negotiate was curtly rejected by the employers. The delegation did manage to successfully re-establish the right of free speech in O'Connell Street, despite harrassment right up to the last minute by the Dublin Castle Authorities. In the event, a massive, peaceful public meeting was held on Sunday September 7th without a single incident or arrest. The delegates report back to the T.U.C. revealed a significant, and potentially dangerous, difference of interpretation about the nature of the strike. The attitude of the Dublin men had been made quite clear when Partridge had told the congress 'that trade unionism throughout the length and breadth of Ireland' was at stake. Connolly had underlined this in an article in the Glasgow Socialist paper 'Forward':

The Dublin fight is more than a trade union fight; it is a class struggle, and recognised as such by all sides. We in Ireland feel that to doubt our victory would be to lose faith in the destiny of our class.22

In contrast to this broad interpretation of events, the T.U.C. report began by observing that the I.T.G.W.U.

... had adopted a very aggressive policy... involving the use of the sympathetic strike, the refusal to handle what is termed 'tainted goods'... This policy is being met by the employers with an equally aggressive policy of sympathetic lock-out...

and went on to allege that

... the dispute had degenerated into a personal quarrel between Mr Murphy and Mr Larkin.23

This sort of allegation obscured the issues involved and left the door wide open for the wave of personal abuse and recrimination which was to follow all too soon.

In a spontaneous move, typical of the spirit of solidarity which permeated the 'labour unrest', rank and file railwaymen started to black 'tainted goods' bound to or from Dublin. The action started in Liverpool on September 16th but within days it had spread to places as far away as Birmingham and Sheffield. By September 19th, 10,000 men were out in the Midlands and another 3,000 or 4,000 in the Northwest. The N.U.R. leaders like J. H. Thomas ordered the men back to work, condemning the strikes as 'sectional and local disputes'.24 While they were undermining efforts at effective solidarity action by dismissing it as 'sectional and local', one of the leading figures in the Parliamentary Labour Party set about condemning strikes in toto - Philip Snowden, who was later to achieve infamy when he joined MacDonald in the 1931 National Government, chose the right wing Morning Post to air his anti-strike views. He followed this up with an editorial in the I.L.P. paper Labour Leader along the same lines, arguing that the energy that went into strikes would be much more usefully diverted
into building the Labour Party. His remark that it:

... would really be the most merciful thing to hasten
the end of the strike

was particularly harmful because it came days
after the T.U.C. Parliamentary Committee had
voted to send £5,000 worth of food to Dublin.
This decision to send practical aid was wel-
comed by the Dublin strike committee but they
felt bitter about the suppression of the move-
ment to black Dublin goods and angry about
Snowden's attempts to sabotage relief. Suspic-
ions about the sincerity of English support had
been aroused, although as yet they remained
private. However a man of Larkin's tempera-
ment was unlikely to suffer, for any length of
time, in silence. It is unfortunate that the 'Relief
of Dublin' was ultimately to be limited to the
sending of food ships and Desmond Greaves,
Connolly's biographer, has commented that

... the splendid solidarity movement was side-
tracked into a campaign to send food ships to Dublin.
As an adjunct to a sympathetic strike movement or
boycott this would have been admirable. It was to be
a substitute.

As the T.U.C. appeal for funds to send food
ships to Dublin - 'Bread Bullets to Beat the
Bosses' the Daily Herald called it - gathered
momentum; hopes for a settlement rose.
The government set up a Board of Trade Inquiry
under Sir George Askwith. Larkin gave evi-
dence in his usual robust fashion and used it as a
platform to underline the appalling living condi-
tions in Dublin. The employers were repres-
teled by the able but devious lawyer and
Nationalist politician T.M. Healy. The Tribu-
unal report condemned the tactics of sympa-
thetic strike as well as the employers' docu-
ment and lock-out. The Dublin workers
immediately accepted the report as a basis for
negotiations, but the employer's side summarily
rejected it provoking even The Times into scold-
ing them for their obduracy.

The continued intransigence of Murphy and
the other employers led to a considerable
movement of middle class opinion towards
sympathy for the locked out men. Whilst the
Home Rule politicians studiously ignored the
events taking place under their noses (many of
them had shares in Murphy's companies any-
way), an assortment of cultural nationalists,
intellectuals and republicans expressed support
for the Dublin workers. Both Pearse and
Eamon Ceannt parted company with Arthur
Griffith and Sinn Fein on this issue after he had
condemned Larkin and trade unions as alien to
Irish life. The response of the intellectuals is
best expressed in George Russell's (AE) open
letter to the Dublin Employers in the Irish
Times of October 8th.

Sirs - I address this warning to you, the aristocracy of
industry in this city, because, like aristocracies, you
tend to go blind in long authority, and to be unaware
that you and your class and its every action are being
considered and judged day by day by those who have
to power to shake or overturn the whole Social Order
... Your insolence and ignorance of the rights con-
ceded to workers universally in the modern world are
incredible, and as great as your inhumanity. If you
had between you collectively a portion of human soul
as large as a threepenny bit, you would have sat night
and day with the representatives of labour, trying this
or that solution of the trouble, mindful of the women
and children, who were at least innocent of wrong
against you. But no! you reminded labour you could
always have your three square meals a day while it
went hungry. ... You may succeed in your policy and
ensure your own damnation by your victory. The men
whose manhood you have broken will loathe you,
and will always be brooding and scheming to strike a
fresh blow. The children will be taught to curse you.
The infant being moulded in the womb will have
breathed into its starved body the vitality of hate. It is
not they - it is you - who are blind Samsons pulling
down the pillars of the social order. ... Be warned
'ere it is too late.

Yours, etc., 'AE'.

It was at this stage in early October, with the
Lock-Out having dragged on for six weeks and
the government attempts at arbitration in ruins,
that Larkin decided to carry the campaign of the
Dublin workers to England in person. He
addressed a series of rallies organised by the
Daily Herald. Typical of the treatment he meted
out to the critics of sympathetic strikes was this
extract:

The official labour leaders are standing in our road,
and like the engine to the cow, we've got to bump
them out of it. The Labour Party could wrap them-
selves up in cloth tomorrow and they would be just as
useful as the mummies in the museum. These dam-
able hypocrites get up and tell you, you must not use
the sympathetic strike because you are going to dis-
commode the public. If our mates are injured, aren't
we injured too.
Not surprisingly the ‘damnable hypocrites’ were very annoyed and the repercussions of Larkin’s speeches were reflected in the decisions at the next meeting of the T.U.C. Parliamentary Committee in mid-October – Gosling:

making reference to the scandalous manner in which Mr. Larkin of Dublin, boomed by the capitalist press, was villifying the Trade Union leaders of this country, a general discussion arose on this question, but ultimately, it was agreed by the committee, that in the interests of the men on strike and locked out in Dublin, not to take any definite action for the time being. 31

A request for direct financial aid to the I.T.G.W.U. was turned down and they ruled that the T.U.C. fund could only be used for supplying food, clothing, and fuel to the men and their families. 32 Larkin’s speeches were condemned in the Labour Leader which made a call for unity and “the closing of ranks”. 33 However, these quarrels were unlikely to be repressed by appeals for unity, for differences of method lay at their heart. The I.T.G.W.U. had only managed to survive and grow by the vigorous exercise of the weapon of the sympathetic strike. To men like Larkin it must have seemed like a stab in the back to see sympathetic strikes unequivocally condemned by the likes of J. H. Thomas and Snowden.

The already visibly strained relations between the Dublin strike leaders and the English T.U.C., were, in no way eased by the next episode. Mrs. Montefiore, an English suffragette, evolved a scheme for organising holidays for striker’s children at the homes of English trade unionists. The mighty wrath of the Roman Catholic church burst about their heads. Priests led pickets of religious bigots from the A.O.H. to forcibly prevent the departure of the children. Mrs. Montefiore and her assistant were arrested and charged with ‘kidnapping’. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Walshe, expressed horror and consternation at the scheme, while Larkin commented caustically that it was a poor religion that couldn’t stand a fortnight’s holiday. Eventually, Connolly rescued something from the confusion by suspending free dinners in Liberty Hall and sending the children out to the Archbishop’s palace with a suggestion that his concern for their souls could usefully be extended to their bellies. Within a week the Archbishop had sponsored a new attempt at a negotiated settlement.

At the end of October, the Dublin Strike Committee appealed once again to the British T.U.C. for direct financial aid. The financial position of the Dublin unions was critical. The I.T.G.W.U., for example, with 11,857 men and women on strike had only £706 left in the bank to meet weekly payments of £2,909.34 Other unions were in just as critical a position. The T.U.C. authorised that up to £2,000 could be distributed, but only to affiliated unions. As the I.T.G.W.U. was not affiliated to the British T.U.C. it was not able to have any of this money. This crude manœuvre enraged many members of the Dublin Strike Committee, particularly when the distribution of the money was coupled with an attempt by Seddon and Gosling to force a settlement on them. Larkin had been jailed the previous day on the incitement charge arising out of Bloody Sunday and there is a possibility that the British T.U.C. leaders thought this would clear the way for a settlement without guarantees of reinstatement for I.T.G.W.U. members. The attempt at negotiations fell flat because the employers’ side, after seeing Seddon and Gosling, refused to meet the Dublin Strike Committee if any I.T.G.W.U. members were present and the Committee, not surprisingly, refused to exclude them at any price.

Meanwhile, solidarity action in England reached new heights as protests mounted against Larkin’s imprisonment. Liberals were heckled at by-election meetings and working class voters were encouraged not to vote for ‘Liberal gaolers of Larkin’. The government lost the Keighley seat and two further by-election setbacks at Reading and Linlithgow really rattled the Liberal cabinet. On November 13th, Connolly significantly extended the dispute by pulling out the dockers and closing Dublin port “tight as a drum”. On the same evening Larkin was released after spending barely a fortnight in prison. On his release, he issued a joint manifesto with Connolly appealing for further support from British Workers:

We appeal to our brethren in Great Britain to second our efforts [closing the Port of Dublin] We thank them for that cordial support that has made our blow so successful and we counsel them to go ahead and strike while the iron of revolt is hot in our souls. 35

This rather vague but stirring appeal was taken
to be an endorsement of the campaign for a national strike which the Daily Herald had been urging since November 5th. The pressure for a strike built up as many union branches sent resolutions to the T.U.C. meeting due for November 18th. When the meeting was convened, the secretary reported that:

he had received many letters asking the committee to call a conference for the purpose of considering the question of a general ‘down-tools’ policy. but it was decided to defer this item until the delegation from Dublin arrived in the afternoon – it was agreed to try and persuade the Dublin leaders to meet some of the employers and ‘thus drive a wedge between the employing class’. The moment the Dublin delegation arrived the atmosphere changed. MacPartlin declared they ‘were in favour of a fight to the finish’ and Larkin followed with an appeal for a conference:

We ask you in no uncertain way that the working class of England be called together, and be asked to give their opinion, and we will abide by whatever verdict they give. There was not a rank and file man of any value who was not prepared at this moment to aid them in their struggle.

He also urged a complete blacking of all goods bound to and from the port of Dublin. The delegates did agree to meet some of the employers that evening provided any settlement would be conditional; but when the T.U.C. meeting was reconvened the next day there was a ferocious row because Larkin had walked out of the previous evening’s meeting on the grounds that some of the employers were insincere – ‘there were men with whom it was no use treating’. There followed an extraordinary exchange

The committee pointed out to Mr. Larkin that if a strike of other men were called in order to stop goods going to and from Dublin, it would mean that the money flowing to Dublin would be diverted in other directions – had he thought of that possibility?

Mr. Larkin replied that:

he had realised the gravity of the situation if other men were called out in support, but although money was a very useful thing it had never won a strike.

The atmosphere of distrust and animosity that had been increasing throughout October and November, was intensified as a consequence of the exchanges during this meeting. The T.U.C. committee decided to call a Special Conference in Dublin to be held on December 9th. The three-week gap was to enable delegates to be mandated so that the decisions would be genuinely representative of the wishes of the labour movement. Whether the committee was totally sincere when it gave this reason is not certain; but what in fact happened was that the three weeks were used to intensify the personal mistrust and deepen the divisions within the British labour movement about the best means of supporting the Dublin strikers. The level to which personal abuse and vituperation was to sink, effectively sabotaged the conference before it had even met.

The immediate response of the advocates of direct action to the calling of the conference was anything but enthusiastic. At a Daily Herald rally on November 19th:

A striking scene ensued when Mr. Naylor said that the Parliamentary committee of the T.U.C. had come to a decision that afternoon – (Derisive cries) – to call a special national conference of the Unions – (cheers) – to meet the challenge of the employers to trade unionism. That conference, however, was not to be held for three weeks – (fierce groans and hisses, which prevented the speaker proceeding for several minutes, during which the Chairman appealed for order. His appeal was followed by shouts for a revolution). When silence was restored Mr. Naylor said that the conference should have been called in three days – (cheers) – that is if the trade union leaders were in earnest. At a time like the present no other alternative would have any effect on the present government short of a general national stoppage of labour – (applause) –

The ‘direct actionist’ left wing of the labour movement was not only disgusted at the three week’s delay but also highly suspicious of the reasons advanced for it. A Daily Herald editorial suggested that the delay had not been proposed so that delegates could be properly mandated; but so that the government would be forced to intervene and compel the employers to back down. Larkin issued a manifesto which was to unleash another wave of personal bickering and abuse. He began:

Comrades in the British Labour Movement – Giving every credit to your leaders of the best of intentions with reference to the accomplishment of our work in Dublin, I feel that something more might have been done. . . . Your leaders suggest, not in words, that
you of the rank and file are not with us in the struggle in Dublin; ... that you of the rank and file are apathetic; and never intended to give us of yourselves; that you are prepared to back up your sympathy only in word and money value, but not in deeds.

He went on to deny that this was so and urged them to prove he had judged the mood of the British worker correctly:

Be earnest in this fight. ... Send resolutions, send instructions, demands to your leaders that they shall strike a true and honest note, that they shall lead from the front and not from the rear, that they shall give voice to the beliefs of the rank and file ... when you give your instructions to those you have elected you mean that they must carry them out, that you as organised workers will no longer blackleg on your fellow workers, no matter what Conciliation Boards may say, no matter what contracts may bind you to.43

This time, left wing, as well as conservative trade unionists joined in the backlash against the manifesto and there was a consensus of opinion that it was divisive and badly timed.

While British trade union leaders were becoming increasingly unanimous in their condemnation of style, and his appeals to the rank and file over their heads; the situation in Dublin steadily deteriorated. Larkin had never pretended to be a diplomat and he had good reason for his sense of desperation. The need for effective solidarity action was underlined by the ability of some Dublin employers to continue business operations, albeit at a reduced level. Murphy’s Tramway Company and Jacob’s Biscuit factory had been able to maintain a skeleton service all along because their men had only been partly organised when the strike began, but events took a more ominous turn when shipping companies were able to resume sailings to and from the port of Dublin within a fortnight of Connolly closing it ‘tight as a drum’. According to Dublin Castle intelligence.

... towards the end of the month (November) practically all the shipping firms along the North and South Walls were able to maintain their regular sailings.44

A breach in the workers’ ranks like this, after the lock-out had dragged on for three months, was bound to have a serious effect on morale. What made the resumption of sailings from the port doubly serious was that it enabled Jacobs, Murphy, and other employers to bring in coal and raw materials which had become extremely scarce. Another grave aspect of the renewed working at the port was the action of Havelock Wilson in ordering the National Sailors and Firemens Union to resume work. The Dublin members of the union refused to obey their General Secretary but he arranged for their £80 strike pay to be withheld from the T.U.C. funds sent to Dublin and helped the Shipping Federation to bring in blacklegs to unload the ships as no scab dockers could be found. Havelock Wilson backed this betrayal up with a pamphlet justifying his actions and condemning Larkin explicitly for prolonging the dispute.

He, and he alone, could save the Dublin workers much misery, and he alone stands in the way of a proper settlement.45

This belief that Larkin had become the main obstacle to settlement was widely held. It appeared that the employers’ strategy, which Partridge had described at September’s T.U.C. of ‘marking Larkin out’ and ‘keeping his name well to the front’ was bearing fruit.46 It is only fair to point out that Larkin had aided this policy by his tempestuous speeches during the ‘fiery cross’ tours of England, but in reality his behaviour was used as a justification for rejecting policies which trade unionists like Thomas and Havelock Wilson, had set their minds against in any case.

The final episode to poison the atmosphere among trade unionists before the Special Conference began was the South Wales rail strike. Its origins lay in the refusal of some Llanelli engine drivers to run trains with coal bound for Dublin. The men, members of A.S.L.E.F., were suspended and then dismissed. Thirty thousand railway men struck in sympathy, but J. H. Thomas came down to South Wales and ordered the men back. He even ordered N.U.R. men to take the A.S.L.E.F. members’ jobs and didn’t miss the opportunity of condemning all sympathetic strikes into the bargain.47 To add insult to injury, the N.U.R. announced that their executive had appointed its thirteen member delegation to the Special Conference. This completely negated the purpose of the three week delay as it meant that one of the unions whose members had already been in the forefront of unofficial action to black goods bound for Dublin, would not have an elected or mandated delegation at the conference. Consequently there was no way that the railwaymen of
South Wales or Merseyside and the North West would have their views represented at the conference. Thus before the conference assembled, the leadership of two unions – the N.U.R. and N.S.F.U. – of crucial importance in any blacking of Dublin goods, had signified their complete opposition to such a course of action. In these circumstances the conference was bound to assemble in a very embittered atmosphere.

Three alternative courses of action had been put forward in the Labour movement and were open for discussion by the delegates. First, a general strike of all trade unionists to force the Dublin employers to surrender. This course of action had been advocated by the Daily Herald and its supporters in the Herald League. Will Dyson, the Herald cartoonist, produced a famous front page drawing of a worker with folded arms towering over silent factories, and the caption 'How to settle Dublin – Fold Arms' for the Special Conference issue on December 9th. Larkin in his wilder moments, had spoken of a general strike in support of the Dublin workers, but the Dublin Strike Committee's official request was for the conference to take:

...every step possible to see that the introduction of blacklegs into Dublin is stopped, and that the manufacture and distribution of blackleg goods is hampered.48

The third course of action involved raising a general levy on trade unions to support the Dublin strikers. Some form of levy was essential as the T.U.C. Dublin fund had run dangerously low and the Irish unions had no financial reserves left.

Of the 600 delegates representing 350 unions who assembled on the morning of Tuesday 9th December for the first ever Special Conference the T.U.C. had held, I have not been able to trace a single one who had been formally elected or mandated. The majority were selected from the delegates at the previous annual conference or were appointed by the executives of their unions. The conference opened with a report from the T.U.C. negotiators who had been in Dublin the previous week. Both Connolly for the strike committee and Gosling for the T.U.C. agreed that the only outstanding point at issue was full reinstatement of the locked-out men. There were one or two acrimonious exchanges between Larkin and delegates in the hall but nothing compared to what was to come. Instead of moving on from the report to discuss what action should be taken; a motion was moved by Ben Tillett condemning

...the unfair attacks made by men inside the Trade Union movement upon British Trade Union officials.49

Tillett himself made a very mild speech more or less urging the conference not to dwell on personalities and to deal with the resolution speedily before moving on to the more important business of deciding what practical action should be taken in support of the Dublin strikers. Given the degree of personal animosity that had already been aroused between Larkin and some of the English trade union leaders it was surely a little naive to expect delegates not to dwell on personalities. J.H. Thomas of the N.U.R. set the tone of the debate by accusing Larkin of sowing dissension in the ranks of British Trade Unionism

and describing the South Wales railway strikers as a 'disgrace to the trade union movement'. When a heckler asked if this was 'peacemaking' Thomas replied

Are we to stand silently by and allow ourselves to be libelled and slandered? I am not going to for fifty Larkins. I am not here to apologise...50

Havelock Wilson of the N.S. & F.U. was even more emphatic in his denunciations –

Mr. Larkin had made great blunders from the inception, and carried them right to the end. The state of affairs in Dublin would not have existed for 24 hours had he shown a little common sense. They talked about Murphyism in Dublin but there was Murphyism on their side as well. He had been called a renegade and a scab because he had tried to impress a little common sense into the heads of those who had been mismanaging this business in Dublin.51

Larkin was obviously in a towering rage when he rose to reply. Addressing them as 'Mr. Chairman and human beings' and then continuing amidst interruptions

I am not concerned whether you allow me to go on or not. If you are not going to give me an opportunity of replying to these foul lying statements it would only be what I would expect from a good many of you.52
Trading insult for insult with Thomas and Havelock Wilson amid continuous uproar, he appealed for a refusal to handle ‘tainted goods’.

We say your money is useful, but money never won a strike . . . I say we could win the Dublin strike tomorrow if you meant it. If you don’t mean it, shut up! if the Union men of this country want to win the strike all they have to do is to say: Dublin is a self-contained city now. She will live upon herself with the exception that food will be taken in for the men who are in the trenches in Dublin and their women and children.53

He finished his tirade by referring to rumours in circulation before the conference that he was to be set aside and a settlement made over his head:

Gentlemen, you try this business on. You are a lot of big men and you carry big weight. Larkin will not get out of the road. Larkin will go down fighting. Larkin when he finishes this campaign goes to Dublin, and if we never see a cent of your money we will never give in.54

The motion was carried with only six votes against – a shattering blow for Larkin.

The afternoon debate on practical measures had been soured by the morning rows. It was agreed that efforts to negotiate a settlement should be continued and financial support maintained; but a crucial amendment to secure a ban on the handling of goods bound to and from Dublin was crushed 2,280,000 votes to 203,000. Connolly spoke for all the Dublin strike Committee of their deep sense of humiliation and regretted that their dirty linen had been washed so publicly. The general verdict was that the conference had achieved nothing except to draw the attention of everyone to the divisions within the movement. ‘Cacklers at the cooked Congress’ was how the Daily Herald described it the following day but their ultra-left optimism showed little perception of the totality of the defeat.

Officialism has had its inglorious day. It is now the turn of the real men and minds to show their mastery and retrieve the situation. Officialism can only prevail so long as you tolerate it. In the last analysis it is your servant. Sweep it aside – and act.55

The harsh truth of the matter was that the vast majority of the British trade union leadership had rejected direct action decisively and bogeymen like ‘officialdom’ could hardly be blamed for a decision which reflected a regrettably widespread exasperation within the British trade union movement for the Dublin dispute.

The implications of the conference’s failure to extend solidarity action in support of the Dublin men was not lost on the Dublin Strike Committee. On December 16th Connolly ordered men to return to work whenever they could do so without having to sign the hated ‘document’ renouncing the I.T.G.W.U., or work with blacklegs.56 Most employers, with the exception of firms like Murphy’s and Jacob’s, had agreed to withdraw the ‘document’ so the question of settlement revolved round the issue of full reinstatement. There was a real problem here because many small employers were close to bankruptcy and genuinely unable to resume normal working until the dislocated trade of the city had revived. Equally, however, union members were mainly concerned with the dangers of victimisation unless full employment was resumed. The dockers of the City of Dublin Steamship Company refused to return to work in early January and held out until the 19th when they won their terms with full reinstatement and the dismissal of all blacklegs.57 Sometimes men and women held out for full reinstatement like this, and succeeded, but more often militants were isolated and blacklisted and the return to work became a sullen fragmented affair.

Financially the position was soon critical. Contributions to the Dublin Strike Fund dried up in the aftermath of the conference and in early January strike pay had to be suspended. On January 21st 8,000 I.T.G.W.U. members and 1,200 Builders’ labourers were still out and in need of relief but the T.U.C. informed Larkin that no help could be given. The fund was wound up amidst indifference among the British public on February 9th. There had been a brief revival of concern when a sixteen year old girl was shot dead by one of the many armed scabs that were working on the docks in early January. The murderer was charged with manslaughter and released on bail. The incident aroused intense hatred in Dublin, especially as it was not the first case of armed scabs shooting at people, but also because the leniency shown to the scab contrasted sharply with the treatment of the 656 trade unionists arrested for picketing during the Lock-Out, of whom 416 had been gaol.58

With the drying up of funds the return to
work gained momentum. The Builders' labourers and the skilled building tradesmen returned to work on the last day of January on humiliating terms which included having to sign the document and agree to work with scabs. The Tramway men also returned in January and the last to return were the women of Jacob's Biscuits who held out heroically until mid-March.

The Lock-Out had not ended in defeat but it had come perilously close to it. The T.I.G.W.U. had survived but its membership was depleted, its funds exhausted, and its general secretary Larkin on the verge of a breakdown. In mid January Connolly wrote to William O'Brien:

My advice (to Larkin) was to announce that as the cross-channel unions had definitely resolved not to assist us in fighting the battle against Dublin sweaters in the only way they could be fought, viz: by holding up their goods, and as these unions were handling all sorts of traffic loaded in Dublin by seabs ... we are now prepared to advise on general resumption of work, and the handling of all goods pending a more general acceptance of the doctrine of tied goods by the trade union world. (Connolly's emphasis). But having completely foiled the attempts of the employers to crush our union affiliations, we reserve to ourselves the right to refuse to work with non-union labour where such labour has not formerly been employed ... This would put the sole responsibility for our temporary check upon the cross-channel unions and also leave every employer free to act as he thought best, and I do not believe that the Murphy gang would be able to hold them any longer. It would also save us from the danger of being compelled to sign an unsatisfactory general settlement.60

The Lock-Out ended more or less along the lines proposed in this letter. Neither side had gained a victory and both employers and unions were exhausted and embittered. Connolly wrote the bitter epitaph on February 9th:

And so we Irish workers must go down into Hell, bow our backs to the lash of the slave driver, let our hearts be seared by the iron of hatred and instead of the sacramental wafer of brotherhood and common sacrifice, eat the dust of defeat and betrayal. Dublin is isolated.61

III. CONCLUSION

It is now time to step back from the stirring narrative of events and try and assess the impact and significance of the Lock-Out in the history of the British and Irish labour movements. From the British perspective it was the last of the great strikes of the 'labour unrest'. The sudden eruption of the First World War preempted a new wave of strikes which were widely predicted for the autumn of 1914, including a massive strike by the Triple Alliance of Railwaymen, Miners, and Transport Workers. The Lock-Out lasted over six months, involved over 20,000 trade unionists, and more than 1,700,000 working days were lost.62 It dominated the industrial record of 1913 which was, in turn, the most turbulent year of the unrest. One thousand four hundred and fifty nine disputes commenced in 1913, which was twice as many as in any other year of the Unrest. Nearly ten million working days were lost and over half a million workers involved in strike action.63 Furthermore, the Dublin struggle generated an unprecedented wave of solidarity action. One hundred and fifty thousand pounds was raised for the various relief funds; two thirds by the English T.U.C. and the rest by private subscription, and groups like the Daily Herald League. The sum would equal at least one and half million pounds at today's prices.64 The struggle led the T.U.C. to summon its first ever Special Conference. It is hard to quibble with Connolly's assertion that:

I say in all solemnity and seriousness that in its attitude towards Dublin the Working Class Movement of Great Britain reached its highest point of moral grandeur - attained for a moment to a realisation of that sublime unity towards which the best in us must continually aspire.65

Despite this high point of moral grandeur we have the apparent paradox of a Special Conference decisively rejecting support for sympathetic blacking of Dublin goods; although vast sums of money had been collected, innumerable resolutions in support of sympathetic strikes received, and several actual strikes having taken place.

This paradox highlights the differences between the British and the Irish situation which were, I believe, much more decisive than say Larkin's personality in leading to the Special Conference defeat. Were the Dublin strike leaders, as some writers have assumed, making an impossible demand when they appealed for a sympathetic blacking of Dublin goods? Emmet Larkin, in his invaluable biography of Larkin, certainly seems to think so:
What has been generally overlooked is that whether Larkin denounced them (the British T.U.C. leaders) or not, they could not have agreed to his demand for sympathetic action in support of the Dublin men, because it would have involved them in a general industrial war in Britain. This the British labour leaders were not willing to undertake.\textsuperscript{66}

This was certainly true of some leaders like J. H. Thomas or Havelock Wilson, but it does less than justice to the position of people like Robert Williams and Ben Tillett. Furthermore, it is by no means certain that 'general industrial war' would have followed a blacking decision. The Dublin employers had by their arrogance and intransigence earned widespread condemnation and isolation. Murphy was having increasing difficulty in keeping the smaller employers in line. It is highly likely that further pressure from the Liberal government and English employers, which would almost certainly have followed a blacking decision, would have led to a settlement by the majority of Dublin firms. Even without this pressure, many Dublin employers were to back down in January and February 1914 and withdraw the document. Probably many more would have done so if the outcome of the Special Conference had been different.

Obviously, the failure of the Special Conference owed much to the hesitations and uncertainties of many left-wing trade unionists. Their lack of organisational coherence was reflected in their inability to translate fiery speeches and resolutions into committed mandated delegations at the Conference. Another factor was a real fear among some right wing trade union leaders that the movement could run away from them. They were determined to settle Larkin and regain control of increasingly assertive rank and file. Many strikes of the labour unrest had followed a pattern of spontaneous combustion at an unofficial local level, followed belatedly by official organisation and approval from the trade union machine. For example one writer described the great national railway strike of 1911 as:

\ldots a soldier's battle with 50,000 men, or about a quarter of the total force ultimately involved, already engaging the enemy before the general staff belatedly took control \ldots it was reported as another unusual feature of the strikes that non-trade unionist strikers seemed to be in the majority.\textsuperscript{67}

The whole 'labour unrest' was characterised by sympathetic strikes and unofficial strike action at local level in advance of more cautious leadership from union head office. Nevertheless, familiar though the sympathetic strike weapon was to the British worker, it was used to further what were essentially traditional trade union demands — union recognition, reduction in hours, and an increase in wages. In other words although the tactic of the sympathetic strike had a revolutionary potential, it was being used for strictly reformist purposes. Halevy captures the ambiguity of the situation perfectly:

England was not perhaps on the brink of revolution as understood on the continent. British labour did not revolt against patriotism in the name of class loyalty nor did it seek to abolish the state or even capitalism. But in the pursuit of more restricted objectives — recognition of the unions, increase of wages, reduction of hours, it was making preparations by the employment of a new strategy to involve England in a class war on a scale in excess of anything previously witnessed.\textsuperscript{68}

What made Larkin really dangerous to right wing English trade union leaders was that he was spokesman for a much more unequivocally aggressive trade unionism. In Britain trade union tactics might be becoming more militant but their strategy remained reformist. In Ireland the distinction was less marked. The economic consequence of Ireland's subordinate colonial status compelled Irish employers to be more ruthless and penny-pinching. There was little of the English parliamentary tradition to divert working class energies down constitutional channels, whilst the dead weight of a conservative Irish peasantry offered a vast pool of cheap labour and a powerful obstacle to the development of an effective Irish labour party even if Home Rule became a reality. Inevitably, the situation of the Irish working class made syndicalism, not just as a tactic, but as an overall strategy, very attractive. Both Connolly and Larkin were heavily influenced by syndicalist thinking. Irish trade unionism tended in these years to be revolutionary not only in tactics but also in aims. This was the threat which Larkin represented to conservative British trade unionists. He was a fiery giant who threatened to detach whole sections of the British working class from their allegiance to the Labour Party's parliamentary opportunism and obsession with 'responsible harmonising' trade unionism. It was for this reason that Larkin came under so
much personal attack. The absence of any unity or organisation focus on the left, stranded Larkin on a limb from which he struck back with increasing fury and frustration. His isolation and predicament was shared by the Dublin workers as a whole. While trade union militants failed to build a common programme of support for besieged Dublin, conservative trade unionists hesitated to escalate a conflict led by people who they felt to be hotheads and revolutionary extremists. In such a situation, delay led to disunity, and finally disillusion set in. I will leave the last word to James Connolly, who wrote in February 1914:

We asked our friends of the transport trade unions to isolate the capitalist class of Dublin, and we asked the other unions to back them up. But no, they said we would rather help you by giving you funds. We argued that a strike is an attempt to stop the capitalist from carrying on their business without us. We asked for the isolation of the capitalists of Dublin and for answer the leaders of the British labour movement proceeded calmly to isolate the working classes of Dublin. But why go on? Sufficient to say that the working class unity of the first days of the Dublin fight was sacrificed in the interests of sectional officialism.  

FOOTNOTES

2. ibid.
9. ibid., p. 350.
10. ibid., p. 191.
12. Labour Leader, 9 October, 1913.
16. Labour Leader, 4 September, 1913.
18. ibid., p. 192.
20. ibid., p. 270.
22. Nevin, op. cit., quoted p. 43.
28. The Times, 7 October, 1913.
29. Irish Times, 7 October, 1913.
31. Minutes of the The Parliamentary Committee, 15 October, 1913.
32. ibid.
33. Labour Leader, 16 October, 1913.
34. Minutes T.U.C. Parliamentary Committee, 28 October, 1913.
35. Daily Herald, 14 November, 1913.
36. ibid., 5 November, 1913.
37. Minutes T.U.C. Parliamentary Committee, 18 November, 1913.
38. ibid.
39. ibid.
40. ibid., 19 November, 1913.
41. Daily Herald, 22 November, 1913.
42. British Seafarer, Journal of the British Seafarers' Union, December, 1913.
43. Daily Herald, 22 November, 1913.
44. MacGilliú Chóille, op. cit., p. 52.
45. J. Havelock Wilson, 'The Dublin Dispute: A Statement of the Seamen's Case,' (undated pamphlet, but most likely late November/early December, 1913), p. 3.
47. Daily Herald, 11 and 19 November, 4, 6 and 8 December, 1913.
48. Labour Leader, 4 December, 1913.
49. Daily Herald, 10 December, 1913. All conference quotations are from the Herald as the T.U.C. minutes of proceedings are very abbreviated and given no content of speeches. I have cross checked with The Times and Freeman's Journal conference reports.
50. ibid., 10 December, 1913.
51. ibid.
52. ibid.
53. ibid.
54. ibid.
55. ibid.
63. ibid.
64. Nevin, op. cit., p. 46-47.
66. Larkin, op. cit., p. 142.