

The 1913 Dublin Housing inquiry.

In September 1913, soon after the commencement of the Lockout, two tenement houses in Church Street collapsed leading to seven deaths and a greater number were only narrowly avoided. This tragedy highlighted the living conditions of many of the the Dublin working class which, in the minds of trade unionists and social reformers, was inextricably linked to the class divisions and antagonisms being played out in the streets of Dublin at the timeⁱ. This link was shared by the Irish Times, no friend of the locked out workers in 1913 when an editorial concluded;

'The condition of the Dublin slums is responsible not only for disease and crime, but for much of our industrial unrest... the members of the ITGWU live for the most part in slums like Church Street. Their domestic conditions make them an easy prey to plausible agitators. We believe that, if every unskilled labourer in Dublin were the tenant of a decent cottage of three, or even two, rooms, the city would not be divided today into two hostile camps'.ⁱⁱ

The Chief Secretary, Augustine Birrell agreed to the establishment of a Commission, to be conducted by members of the Local Government Board of Ireland, to inquire into the housing conditions of the working classes in the city of Dublin. The Commission commenced its work with a public sitting in November 1913 and issued its report in February 1914. Seventy six witnesses gave evidence and the report provided a detailed account of the terrible conditions in much of the city's tenement housing. The report highlighted that 160,000 people were living in tenements, what was termed second or third class housing or working class houses and cottages owned by several private concerns in the city. The commission estimated that over half the Dublin working class lived in tenements.

Within this tenement system there were three distinct categories. The first type were those houses designated by the authorities as basically structurally sound. The second type were decayed tenements and the third type were those declared unfit for human habitation. There were 1,516 tenements of the first type in which 8,295 families or 27,052 people lived. There were 2,288 tenements of the second type with 10,696 families or 37,552 people. There were 2,288 tenements unfit for human habitation where 6,831 families or 22,701 people lived. An even more serious fact was that of the 25,822 families living in tenements, 20,108 lived in units of only one room. In other words, almost 23 per cent of the population of the city of Dublin lived in one room accommodationⁱⁱⁱ. Another 19 per cent lived in two roomed accommodation. This situation was considerably worse than any other large centre of population in the rest of the United Kingdom. Glasgow was the closest comparator to Dublin in this respect as 13 per cent lived in one room units there.

Even these statistics, frightening as they were, disguise the real extent of human misery in these squalid conditions. The commissioners reported that 'we have visited one house that we found to be occupied by ninety eight persons, another by seventy four and a third by seventy three.^{iv} It must be remembered that these houses were originally built to accommodate one family, albeit from the opposite end of the social spectrum.

The usual water supply for these tenements was one tap in the back yard. The roofs were as a rule, bad, and the passages, landings and stairs were bad and woodwork defective. 'In nearly every case human excreta is to be found scattered about the yards and on the floors of the closets and in some cases, even in the passages of the house itself'.^v

A generation of Trade union activists in the first decade of the new century revived the struggles of unskilled workers.^{vi} Their experiences and political beliefs led to a criticism not only of the oppressive working conditions that were so obvious but also of the social structures that gave rise to them. It was inevitable that developing attitudes on social questions would both determine and reflect changes on industrial organisation and in the political arena as the labour movement moved into the second decade of the twentieth century. The 1913 housing report gives us an insight into the horrific social conditions of Dublin in 1913.

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ⁱ Lydia Carroll *The 1913 housing inquiry: Sir Charles Cameron, public health and housing in Dublin* in *A Capital in Conflict: Dublin City and the 1913 Lockout* (Dublin 2013) Ed Francis Devine.

ⁱⁱ Irish Times editorial from 1913 quoted in Murray Fraser *John Bull's other homes; State housing and British policy in Ireland 1883-1922*. Liverpool. P. 107.

ⁱⁱⁱ Report of the Departmental Committee pp 3-4.

^{iv} Report of the Departmental Committee p. 4.

^v Ibid p. 5.

^{vi} There had been occasional periods of union organisation and industrial action by general workers in Dublin especially around 1890 which mirrored 'new unionism' in Britain. The generation that came to the fore in the early 20th century established a trade union movement that has continued to organise into the current century.