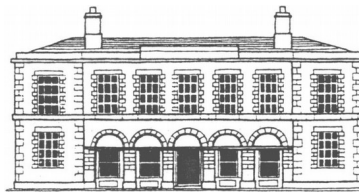


An Camann
Scaire Lucht
Saothar



Irish
Labour
History

Museum & Archives
Beggars Bush, Haddington Road, Dublin 4, Ireland.

Ireland at Berne

Within a few days of the sitting of the first Dáil, delegates from the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, Tom Johnson and Cathal O'Shannon left Ireland to attend the first post-war International Labour and Socialist Conference which was held in Bern, Switzerland in February 1919.¹ They were late in arriving for the start of the conference as the British authorities delayed issuing them with visas to travel.

When they arrived in Switzerland, they used the opportunity to inform international delegates of developments in Ireland and they distributed memoranda on the situation in four languages – Irish, English, French and German. Irish and English editions of the papers were subsequently published by the Talbot Press under the title *Ireland at Berne*.

The Democratic Programme, drafted by Johnson, had been adopted as policy by the Dáil and was a significant statement of the policy and aspirations of the labour movement and the revolutionary state. It was a useful tool in the armoury of the Congress delegates. They secured recognition for the Irish delegation as a distinct unit in the International, separate from the British delegation. They secured support for self-determination for Ireland, Irish representation on the Permanent Commission of the International, and significantly, moved the British delegation beyond their previous support for Home Rule. The International conference was seen as an important first step in securing international recognition and support for the recently declared Republic. Before travelling to Bern, Johnson and O'Shannon met with the Sinn Fein and Volunteer leadership, including Michael Collins, Harry Boland, Richard Mulcahy and Rory O'Connor, on a number of occasions to discuss their approach. On their way home, Johnson and O'Shannon visited Paris to meet with Sean T. O'Kelly who was there representing the Dáil as an envoy and they met with the leadership of the French Socialist and Trade Union movement and enlisted their daily newspapers on the side of the Irish struggle.

Despite the success of the conference from an Irish perspective, Johnson and O'Shannon gave a realistic account of the importance of Ireland in international circles.

'Outside certain circles, there is general indifference to the claims and the state of Ireland, but no hostility, and some friendliness. This, we think, is due to several causes. Chief amongst them is the lack of knowledge, information and propaganda about Ireland..... In short, Europe knows little, and cares little about Ireland, especially since Parnell's day.'²

One notable aspect of the conference was the decision of the Irish delegation to vote against a majority resolution condemning the soviet system and the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. This was against the background of initial support for the Russian Revolution in Irish Labour circles and a willingness on the part of the Sinn Fein leadership to open dialogue and exchanges with the new soviet regime. Johnson, along with O'Brien and O'Shannon, had spoken at a public meeting arranged to welcome the Russian Revolution in February 1918. The 'minority report' at the conference was represented as favouring the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' but Johnson subsequently argued that he had voted against the majority report on the narrow ground there were no soviet delegates or supporters in attendance to argue their case. It is clear that whatever initial sympathy Johnson had for the Russian Revolution and the soviet system, he abandoned these views more rapidly than some of his colleagues.³

A full report by the two delegates on the work of the conference is contained on pages 21 to 40 of the annual report of the ILP and TUC for 1919 available here [25th-annual-report-1919.pdf \(irishlabourhistorysociety.com\)](#).

¹ William O'Brien and Thomas MacPartlin were also due to attend but were unable to travel.

² ILP and TUC *Report of the Annual Meeting 1919*. Pp 21-35.

³ NLI Ms 17,149/15. This manuscript contains the evidence given by Johnson in his libel case against Larkin in 1925.