

Red Flag Marches in Country Louth.

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The year 1919, was a seminal moment in the history of the twentieth century. The continent of Europe had just emerged from the horrors of the First World War, and the Age of Empires was at an end.² The people of Europe looked to new ideas and systems, to ensure that this carnage would never again occur.³ One of the ideologies to prosper from this uncompromising new approach was the radical socialist philosophy, Communism.⁴ The success of the Russian Revolution of 1917, had generated and inspired a radicalised labour-force throughout Europe, it looked as if socialism was an unstoppable force.⁵ The Bolshevik's in Russia, under the leadership of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, had established control over the vast majority of the country, and the iconic Bolshevik Red Flag flew proudly over Russia.⁶ On the western periphery of the continent of Europe, Ireland was not immune from the spread of the socialist ideology. Whilst nationalism was the dominant theme in Ireland from the beginning of the twentieth century, a core element of dedicated socialist activists, were determined to foster the spirit of Bolshevik revolution in Ireland.⁷ However, the revolutionary social changes failed to materialise in Ireland. While there may well have been a nationalist revolution, it was in the words of Kevin O'Higgins the Minister of Justice in the 1920s, "a conservative revolution".⁸ The reality of the Irish War of Independence was that the leaders of nationalist Ireland did not envisage any change in the social or economic order of Ireland, after they achieved independence.⁹ Nevertheless, for a time during the turbulent revolutionary period of 1919 and its immediate aftermath, matters appeared different. Examples of this socialist militancy were the Red Flag Parades, held all over Ireland on May Day 1919. Two of the parades occurred in Co. Louth, when marchers in Drogheda and Dundalk, displayed banners, and flew flags commemorating the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.¹⁰ While the marchers were not huge in numbers, the significance of the flying of red flags, rather than the tri-colour of the Sinn Féin movement, was noteworthy.¹¹ This essay will look at the development of Bolshevism in Russia, and the birth of socialism in Ireland, and the eventual rise of a small, but determined group of Bolshevik revolutionaries in Ireland. It will also deal with the circumstances leading up to the Red Flag Parades in Ireland, and the events of the day in the towns of Drogheda and Dundalk.

The methodology adopted in the research will be qualitative, primarily desk research: close reading and analysis of relevant documents and transcripts. The research will consist of using historical documents and secondary research to analyse a specific moment in Irish history and Irish socialism. Also the qualitative approach will use historical evidence to

¹ This dissertation was submitted in partial fulfillment of the BA(Hons) in Digital Humanities, May 2017.

² M. Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York, 2000), p. 22

³ *Ibid.*, p. 22

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵ E. O' Connor, *Reds and the Green, Ireland, Russia and the communist Internationals 1919-43* (Dublin, 2004), p. 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.30.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁸ A. Beatty, "An Irish Revolution without a Revolution", in *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 22, 1 (2016), p. 56.

⁹ F. Costelloe, "Labour, Irish Republicanism, and the Social Order during the Anglo-Irish War", in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 17, 2 (1991), p. 1.

¹⁰ S. Cody, "May Day in Dublin, 1890 to the Present" in *Saothar* 5 (1979), p. 76.

¹¹ M. Maguire, "Labour in County Louth, 1912-1923" in D. Hall and M. Maguire (eds), *County Louth and the Irish Revolution 1912-1923* (Newbridge, 2017), p. 72.

construct a cogent argument as to why Irish socialism emerged at this particular time. The qualitative approach will consist of the further gathering of primary evidence principally archival material (newspaper reports, police transcripts, etc.) and compiling this material into a digital format for analysis. The newspapers from the period include, *The Irish Times*, *The Dundalk Democrat*, *Drogheda Independent*, *Irish Worker* and *The Northern Standard*. The papers from the particular era give a distinct flavour of the period, and display their particular prejudices towards socialist and nationalist ideology. The journalists from the provincial newspapers in particular, wrote precise reports of the meetings held before and after the parades in Co. Louth. Therefore, their reports are an invaluable source of primary material, regarding the incidents which occurred, and paints a picture of the individuals who were participants in the proceedings.

The starting point for any discussion on world revolution, and socialist theory in the modern era is mainly centred on the French Revolution of 1789, which created what was in essence a new political culture.¹² From its roots sprung the basis and inspiration for revolutionary change. It produced the blueprint and language for further revolutions, with their battle-cry, "liberté, égalité, fraternité".¹³ From this moment, violent revolution was seen as a viable option in the struggle to achieve social change within society.¹⁴ The primary cause of this revolutionary fervour was the notion that all humans were born with equal rights, but that those rights have been overturned through time.¹⁵ The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote in his treatise *Social Contract*, "Man is born free, and he is everywhere in chains".¹⁶ As the nineteenth century progressed, major developments in the growth of industrial capitalism, and the state, ensured an increased disparity in the wealth between the different classes within society.¹⁷ However, no longer were a sizeable proportion of the population prepared to tolerate these inequalities. There was a growing sense of disillusionment, and frustration throughout Europe, as people began looking for new answers, to age old social questions.¹⁸

One answer was to be found in a new revolutionary ideology, communism, which was developed in the nineteenth century primarily by the German philosopher and social revolutionary Karl Marx, and his compatriot Friedrich Engels.¹⁹ Communism and its nemeses, in ideological terms, capitalism, dominated the political landscape of the twentieth century.²⁰ *The Communist Manifesto* published in 1848, outlined the elements which Marx regarded as the inherent problems within the capitalist model, and the means to combat and overcome these problems.²¹ For Marx, the fundamental issue in any understanding of society is to acknowledge the crucial importance of economics throughout the history of mankind, and the constant struggle between the two classes within society, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.²² Marx believed that revolution was an inevitable consequence of history, and it was only a matter of time before the proletariat rise up to overthrow the bourgeoisie in a violent revolution.²³

¹² G. Rude, *The French Revolution* (New York, 1991), p. 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34

¹⁵ J. J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (New York, 2010), p. 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁷ F. Bourguignon and C. Morisson, "Inequality among World Citizens: 1820-1992 in *The American Economic Review*, 92, 4 (2002), p. 727.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.727.

¹⁹ T. Lansford, *Political Systems in the World, Communism* (New York, 2008), p. 10.

²⁰ T. Lansford, *Political Systems in the World, Communism* (New York, 2008), p. 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Bolshevism was an attempt to apply the ideology of Marxism to an autocratic state, Russia, at the turn of the nineteenth century.²⁴ To oppose this autocratic regime, a revolutionary socialist political party, the Social Democratic Party, was formed in 1898.²⁵ It was founded to unite the various revolutionary organisations of the Russian Empire into one component.²⁶ In 1903 at its annual congress the party split into two distinct groups, the Bolsheviks, and the Mensheviks.²⁷ The Russian word Bolshevik means literally a person in the majority, as opposed to Menshevik, a person in the minority.²⁸ The differences between the two groups were of an ideological nature, with the Bolsheviks determined that the revolution would occur immediately, and be a peasant led proletarian uprising against the bourgeoisie forces within Russia. The leader of the Bolsheviks was the charismatic figure of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, commonly known as Lenin.²⁹ While there was widespread dissatisfaction with the tsarist regime within Russia, it was not until World War One, (hereafter WWI), began to go disastrously wrong for the Russians, that the unrest precipitated a revolution, in 1917.³⁰ This rebellion led to the overthrow of the Tsar, but crucially not an end to the war, as the new leaders insisted on continuing the unpopular war.³¹ Eventually, this resulted in another rebellion in October 1917, when Lenin and his Bolshevik comrades assumed control of the country.³² In their struggle against reactionary forces during this period, the Red Flag became an iconic symbol for the Bolsheviks within Russia, and their supporters throughout the world.³³ However, for the many detractors of Bolshevism, the Red Flag symbolised oppression and anarchy, and had to be opposed.³⁴

In Ireland, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the socialist agenda was the sole preserve of the few. Revolutionary ideas were swirling all around the capital city Dublin, but for the most part they were concerned with the national and cultural questions. Nevertheless, a socialist political group called the Irish Socialist Republican Party (hereafter ISRP), and proclaiming itself in favour of a “Workers Republic”, was founded by James Connolly and a small group of fellow-minded socialists in 1896.³⁵ Its duration as a political was short, it ceased to be a political party in 1904, but nevertheless, the ISRP left a legacy in its wake. Its inherent belief in an armed struggle against imperialism, and that the national struggle was irretrievably intertwined into a socialist context, was an important element in the eventual insurrection which occurred in 1916. Many of the members of the fledgling party were to participate in the Easter Rising, most notably their leader James Connolly.³⁶

While Connolly will remain forever the iconic socialist revolutionary figure in Irish history, one other character that loomed large during this period, Jim Larkin, affectionately referred to as “Big Jim”.³⁷ Whether or not he was the most influential, there is little doubt that he was the most charismatic, and divisive leader, of the socialist movement in Ireland. His form of militant opposition to the capitalist ruling class entered into the lexicon as

²⁴ A. Woods, *Bolshevism: The Road to Revolution* (London, 2010), p. 46.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.53.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁸ C. Corin, *Russia under Tsarism and Communism 1881-1953* (London, 2011), p. 79.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³⁰ C. Corin, *Russia under Tsarism and Communism 1881-1953* (London, 2011), p. 134.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³³ E. O’ Connor, *Reds and the Green, Ireland, Russia and the communist Internationals 1919-43* (Dublin, 2004), p. 32.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁵ D. Lynch, *Radical Politics in Modern Ireland, The Irish Socialist Republican Party 1896-1904* (Dublin, 2005), p.4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

³⁷ E. O’ Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824-2000* (Dublin, 2011), p. 74.

“Larkinism”, and became a bye word for “militancy, the cult of the agitator, and the sympathetic strike”.³⁸ His oratorical and organisational skills soon grew the trade union movement to unprecedented levels.³⁹ In 1913, a strike began in Dublin led by Larkin, the Dublin Lockout, which ultimately changed the face of Irish trade unionism and socialism for generations.⁴⁰ It developed into a struggle between capitalist businessmen led by William Martin Murphy, and trade unionists led by Larkin.⁴¹ It resulted in a crushing defeat for the workers; the dispute lasted from August 1913 to January 1914, and ended when the workers reluctantly returned to work after a bitter strike.⁴² Nevertheless, trade unionism survived this bitter blow and, the defeat ensured that many of its core members became more militant and radical in the ensuing years.⁴³ This shift in emphasis was to play a large part in the next chapter in the socialist struggle, the Easter Rising of 1916. The armed wing of the trade union movement termed the Irish Citizen Army (hereafter ICA) was radically bolstered, and the beginning of WWI, gave a major impetus to the ideal of an independent, socialist Ireland. The socialist newspaper, *Irish Worker*, in an editorial suggested, “England’s need: our opportunity. The men are ready. The guns must be got, and at once”.⁴⁴ Eventually in 1916, James Connolly led the ICA into armed revolt against the British forces, which ended in the defeat of the rebel forces.⁴⁵ Casualties on the ICA side were fourteen men killed in action, and two, James Connolly and Michael Mallin, executed in the aftermath of the rebellion.⁴⁶

From the ashes of this defeat sprang a new tide of socialist and nationalist fervour, principally on the back of an anti-conscription fight.⁴⁷ The war in France during 1918 was at a stalemate, for the British Army, who were in urgent need of more fighting men.⁴⁸ The idea was mooted by the British Government, to conscript Irishmen to fight in the war, this measure galvanised large sections of the Irish community in opposition to this plan.⁴⁹ One of the groups in the vanguard of this anti-conscription movement was the trade union movement, who benefitted enormously from their stand against the wishes of the British Government. Trade union membership grew from 100,000 in 1916 to 225,000 in 1920.⁵⁰

While undoubtedly, WWI was catastrophic with regard to the massive loss of life, and human suffering, it also was to provide a catalyst for change, in social and economic terms.⁵¹ Amidst the suffering of the war, the workers sensed opportunities, they realised how valuable their labour had become, and they wished to participate in the wealth that they were generating.⁵² A feature of the new-found militancy amongst the workers was the frequent use of strike action, between 1917 and 1920 there were eighteen general strikes throughout Ireland.⁵³ This sympathetic strike was a policy adopted by trade unions throughout the

³⁸ E. O’ Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824-2000* (Dublin, 2011), p. 75.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴⁰ E. Larkin, “Socialism and Catholicism in Ireland” in *An Irish Quarterly Review*, 74, 293 (1985), p. 86.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.86.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁴³ R. Fanning, *Fatal Path, British Government and Irish Revolution 1910-1922* (London, 2013), p. 95.

⁴⁴ E. O’ Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824-2000* (Dublin, 2011), p. 97.

⁴⁵ R. Fanning, *Fatal Path, British Government and Irish Revolution 1910-1922* (London, 2013), p. 140.

⁴⁶ E. O’ Connor, *Reds and the Green, Ireland, Russia and the communist Internationals 1919-43* (Dublin, 2004), p. 17.

⁴⁷ A. J. Ward, “Lloyd George and the 1918 Irish Conscription Crisis” in *The Historical Journal*, 17, 1 (1974), p. 108.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁵⁰ E. O’ Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824-2000* (Dublin, 2011), p. 102.

⁵¹ M. Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (New York, 2000), p. 46.

⁵² T. Lansford, *Political Systems in the World, Communism* (New York, 2008), p. 93.

⁵³ E. O’ Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824-2000* (Dublin, 2011), p. 106.

western world during this period, and was referred to as syndicalism.⁵⁴ Another tactic adopted by the Irish workforce during this era was the seizure of workplaces by the workers, and renamed soviets, after the growing influence of the Russian bolshevik movement.⁵⁵ One of these successful seizures occurred in Monaghan mental institution under the leadership of a socialist revolutionary Peadar O' Donnell, which resulted in a victory for the workers, leading to an increase in wages.⁵⁶ The growing strength of the trade union movement was evidenced by the calling of a general strike all over Ireland on 20 April 1918, which was an unqualified success.⁵⁷

A crucial element to the future of the socialist movement in Ireland occurred in 1918, when the Labour Party decided not to contest any seats in the election held that year. This left the way open for Sinn Fein to obtain an electoral landslide. This wasted opportunity for the Labour Party to put before the electorate a socialist manifesto at the beginning of a new dawn for Irish politics, was to haunt the Labour Party for years.⁵⁸ As a sop to the Labour Party, Eamon de Valera convinced the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis to adopt a motion supporting a proposed May Day general strike, "for international proletarian solidarity and self-determination for all peoples".⁵⁹ However, in reality De Valera had little time for socialism or socialists, as he wrote in a Sinn Fein propaganda pamphlet from 1917, "It has been said that a Free Ireland means an Army and Navy. That is so. It has also been said that this means Red Ruin and Revolution... These are the facts. A Free Ireland does not mean Revolution: It means peace and prosperity... A Free Ireland means not Red Ruin, but the salvation from Red Ruin".⁶⁰ De Valera's reaction to a set of proposals put forward by Labour leaders in 1918, was indicative of his scant regard for the social issues of the period, he curtly replied, "labour must wait".⁶¹ He was, of course, referring to the fact that he believed that the national question preceded all others including social questions in Ireland. In actual fact De Valera never uttered these words, but it remained a general policy of the vast majority of nationalist leaders during this crucial phase.⁶² Labour leaders acquiesced to his demands, and stood no candidates in the 1918 election, which to a large degree moulded Irish social politics into the foreseeable future.⁶³

The perception of many socialists on the continent, of Ireland, was not a very flattering one, "...a Holy Isle whose aspirations must on no account be mixed with the profane class-struggles of the rest of the sinful world".⁶⁴ Nonetheless, Ireland was not to be immune from the great tidal wave of support, which Bolshevism engendered all over Europe. There was a growing sense of a burgeoning socialist based agenda within Irish politics. During this period, the Labour Party made contact with the Bolshevik regime in Russia, and they were all too aware of Irish problems within the British imperialist system.⁶⁵ At a rally in

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁵⁵ E. O' Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824-2000* (Dublin, 2011), p. 106.

⁵⁶ M. Walsh, *Bitter Freedom, Ireland in a Revolutionary World 1918-1923* (London, 2015), p. 166.

⁵⁷ E. O' Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824-2000* (Dublin, 2011), p. 110.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁵⁹ E. O' Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824-2000* (Dublin, 2011), p.113.

⁶⁰ A. Beatty, "An Irish Revolution without a Revolution", in *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 22, 1 (2016), p. 66.

⁶¹ D.R. O'Connor Lysaght, "Labour in Waiting: the After-Effects of the Dublin Lockout" in *History Ireland*, 21, 4 (2013), p. 45.

⁶² D.R. O'Connor Lysaght, "Labour in Waiting: the After-Effects of the Dublin Lockout" in *History Ireland*, 21, 4 (2013), p.45.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.47.

⁶⁴ S. White, "Ireland, Russia, Communism, Post-Communism", in *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 8 (1997), p. 155.

⁶⁵ E. O' Connor, *Reds and the Green, Ireland, Russia and the communist Internationals 1919-43* (Dublin, 2004), p. 117.

February 1918, to support the revolution in Russia, over 10,000 people attended, which declared, "...hails with delight the advent of the Russian Bolshevik Revolution".⁶⁶ The Bolshevik message was to reach many parts of Ireland in the ensuing period, and one of the areas affected by this radicalism was Co. Louth.

There was a long history of trade union activity in the Co. Louth region primarily revolving around the twin urban hubs of Drogheda and Dundalk.⁶⁷ The two towns began to develop a large industrial base, with the coming of the railways, and the building of the Boyne viaduct in 1853.⁶⁸ This facilitated the transport of goods between the two major cities on the eastern seaboard of Ireland, Dublin and Belfast. Local tradesmen organised trade unions, with the Drogheda Trades Council founded in 1887, which was dominated by the local craft unions.⁶⁹ It was not initially a radical organization, as its declared aim was to, "cultivate a spirit of harmony between employer and employee".⁷⁰ In 1889 at the International Workers' Congress in Paris, a motion was passed calling for a worldwide universal worker's celebration on May Day.⁷¹ The Drogheda Trades Council duly held their first May Day celebration on 3 May 1891, with a major trade union rally and parade through the town.⁷²

By 1919, circumstances had radically altered in Ireland; it was a period of revolution, nationalist and socialist. The Labour Party and Irish Trade Union Congress called for a national strike to coincide with May Day. It was uniformly successful all over Ireland, apart from Limerick and Belfast.⁷³ It was, up to this point, the most successful May Day celebration organised by the trade unions, and in retrospect, is considered the highpoint of radical, socialist politics in Ireland.⁷⁴ The May Day celebrations were celebrated all over Ireland, in defiance of warnings from the police that the gatherings were deemed to be illegal, and the participants would be liable to the full rigour of the law.⁷⁵ The local Trades Council in Drogheda held an emergency meeting on 30 April, and the decision was made to cancel the demonstration.⁷⁶ The reason for the cancellation was the planned display of socialist emblems during the parade.⁷⁷ However, on hearing of this decision, a hastily arranged meeting of the rank and file members of the various trade unions, professed unease with the decision taken on their behalf, by the leaders of the Trades Council. The decision was described as "...a surrender to the police".⁷⁸ It was decided that the demonstration would take place, under the auspices of the ITGWU, led by Eamon Rooney, who was the union organiser of the agricultural labourers in Co Meath.⁷⁹

The Drogheda Independent described the events on the day of the demonstration, when large numbers of working people paraded around the town of Drogheda behind union

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.15.

⁶⁷ M. Maguire, "Labour in County Louth, 1912-1923" in D. Hall and M. Maguire (eds), *County Louth and the Irish Revolution 1912-1923* (Newbridge, 2017), p. 60.

⁶⁸ M. Maguire, "Labour in County Louth, 1912-1923" in D. Hall and M. Maguire (eds), *County Louth and the Irish Revolution 1912-1923* (Newbridge, 2017), p. 60.

⁶⁹ Frank Gallagher, 'Founding of the Drogheda Council of Trade Unions-new research' in *Journal of the Old Drogheda Society*, 18, (2011), p. 66.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.66.

⁷¹ F. Gallagher, "May Day 1919- Drogheda's Red Flag Revolt" in *Journal of the Old Drogheda Society*, 21 (2014), p. 123.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁷³ S. Cody, "May Day in Dublin, 1890 to the Present", in *Saothar 5 Journal of the Irish Labour History Society*.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*,

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*,

⁷⁶ *Drogheda Independent*, 10 May 1919.

⁷⁷ *Drogheda Independent*, 10 May 1919.

⁷⁸ *Drogheda Independent*, 10 May 1919.

⁷⁹ *Drogheda Independent*, 10 May 1919.

banners, with Red Flags very much in evidence during the parade.⁸⁰ A large amount of the marchers also wore “red favours”, to signify their allegiance to the Bolshevik cause. The principal speaker at the meeting was Eamon Rooney, who berated the leaders of the Trades Council, for their cowardice in face of intimidation and threats by the police.⁸¹ He refused to be intimidated by the police, and told the demonstration, “...that no policeman would tell them what should be their symbol or the colour of their flag”.⁸² The meeting ended with the singing of the *Red Flag*, the international song of the socialist movement, which coincidentally was composed by a Co. Meath man, Jim O’ Connell, in 1889.⁸³ The numbers vary as to how many actually participated in the demonstration, with the best estimate being approximately 1,000 people, with the parade led by four bands amidst a sea of red flags and trade union banners.⁸⁴ In Dundalk while the GNR railwaymen stayed at work on the trains, the men in the locomotive workshops refused to work and participated in the march, led by the Emmet Band.⁸⁵ The day was generally observed as a holiday, while two large red flags, carrying Labour slogans were carried through the town, and after the parade a meeting was held in the Market Square.⁸⁶ The police did not try to interfere with the parade, and both parades passed off peacefully.⁸⁷ One speaker at the parade in Dundalk, Mr. Mc Gee, was at pains to point out to the public, “that the carrying of red flags in the procession had no revolutionary significance”.⁸⁸ An interesting aside to the marches, was the reaction of one local priest, Archdeacon Seagrove, at the following Sunday Catholic service, who condemned in a very forthright manner the Bolshevik parade, and the flying of the symbolic red flags through the streets of Drogheda.⁸⁹ In his homily, the archdeacon regaled his parishioners with stories of poor unfortunate women, “being mated like animals”, under red flags in communist Russia!⁹⁰

In the aftermath of the demonstration, there was a great deal of anger at the initial postponement of the demonstration. The Mayor of Drogheda, Mr. M. McGowan, hon. President of the Council, and the President of the Trades Council, Mr. James Smith, resigned their positions.⁹¹ In a rancorous debate, the two men felt their positions were untenable due to the lack of confidence they were held in, by the ordinary workers of the area.⁹² The Mayor in his resignation letter addressed the principal reasons for the authorities forbidding the march, namely flying the socialist emblems of the red flag, “The reasons given were that the authorities had taken objection to the Red Flag, and out of consideration for some of their officials, owing to the statement made by some of the delegates present that they would carry the emblem in the procession, it was unanimously decided to abandon the whole thing”.⁹³ At the acrimonious meeting, one trade union member castigated the Mayor and the President of

⁸⁰ *Drogheda Independent*, 10 May 1919.

⁸¹ M. Maguire, “Labour in County Louth, 1912-1923” in D. Hall and M. Maguire (eds), *County Louth and the Irish Revolution 1912-1923* (Newbridge, 2017), p. 71.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁸³ *Drogheda Independent*, 10 May 1919.

⁸⁴ *Drogheda Independent*, 10 May 1919.

⁸⁵ *Dundalk Democrat*, 3 May 1919.

⁸⁶ *Irish Times*, 2 May 1919.

⁸⁷ *Irish Times*, 2 May 1919.

⁸⁸ *Dundalk Democrat*, 3 May 1919.

⁸⁹ F. Gallagher, “May Day 1919- Drogheda’s Red Flag Revolt” in *Journal of the Old Drogheda Society*, 21 (2014), p. 131.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁹¹ *Drogheda Independent*, 10 May 1919.

⁹² *Drogheda Independent*, 10 May 1919.

⁹³ *Drogheda Independent*, May 10 1919.

the Trades Council for their cowardice in bowing to the pressure of the authorities, “they wanted men at the head of affairs who were not afraid to carry the Red Flag”.⁹⁴

For a short period, from 1918 to the end of the War of Independence in 1921, there were possibilities of developing, and implementing a socialist led programme to improve the situation of the working class in Ireland. Amongst a small number of the Catholic clergy, there was a degree of sympathy towards the plight of the Irish labour force, and the horrendous work conditions, that they were forced to endure.⁹⁵ During the period of the Limerick soviet in April 1919, the local Catholic Bishop when told of the red-badged guards kneeling to say the Angelus, “Isn’t it well that communism is to be Christianised?”⁹⁶ It was not only amongst the clergy that a degree of sympathy towards socialism was apparent. Within the higher echelons of the republican leadership, Liam Mellows and Peadar O’Donnell were socialist republicans.⁹⁷ At one particularly difficult stage in the War of Independence, when weapons were scarce, members of the republican leadership tried to source weapons from the Russian Bolsheviks, however, no weapons were forthcoming, and this avenue was closed.⁹⁸ However, socialist militants were in a small minority within the republican leadership, and as the War of Independence spread in Ireland, the nationalist agenda became the sole aim of the IRA.⁹⁹ While there was some hope of an alliance between republicans and socialists originally, this idea soon dissipated. The only concern for the majority of republicans was the struggle for independence, the idea of a workers republic, was not their concern.¹⁰⁰

Nonetheless, the ever vigilant authorities were aware of the, while small, still significant support for Bolshevism in Ireland during this period. In April 1919, Limerick soviets were created with the seizure of creameries owned by the Cleeve family, the workers were demanding improved wages and working conditions.¹⁰¹ A red flag was hoisted over the creamery with the words, “We make butter, not profits. Knocklong Creamery Soviet”, emboldened on it.¹⁰² In April 1920, the workers in Waterford city went on strike, and with the acquiescence of the Sinn Fein controlled council, they to all intents and purpose controlled the city.¹⁰³ The city was regulated as per a soviet, and remained so, until the workers achieved their aims, the release of political prisoners.¹⁰⁴ The British press reported the incident in Waterford, “A red flag floated over the Town Hall, and a sort of “Red Guard” was established under three transport leaders. In short, the city was ruled by a Soviet during the time of the strike”.¹⁰⁵ The red flag had come to signify direct action and workers control in Ireland during this era.¹⁰⁶

It was not only the British who were concerned with the advance of “red flag bolshevism”, people in the higher strata of authority in Ireland began to see the dangers of the spread of socialist ideals. An editorial in the *Irish Independent* in October 1919, castigated

⁹⁴ *Drogheda Independent*, May 10 1919.

⁹⁵ E. Larkin, “Socialism and Catholicism in Ireland” in *An Irish Quarterly Review*, 74, 293 (1985), p. 70.

⁹⁶ M. Walsh, *Bitter Freedom, Ireland in a Revolutionary World 1918-1923* (London, 2015), p. 173.

⁹⁷ E. O’ Connor, “Communists, Russia, and the IRA, 1920-1923”, in *The Historical Journal*, 46, 1 (2003), p. 116.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁹⁹ R. English, “Socialism: Socialist Intellectuals and the Irish Revolution” in J. Augustein(ed), *The Irish Revolution* (Hampshire, 2002), pp 203-224.

¹⁰⁰ M. Walsh, *Bitter Freedom, Ireland in a Revolutionary World 1918-1923* (London, 2015), p. 173.

¹⁰¹ E. O’ Connor, *Reds and the Green, Ireland, Russia and the communist Internationals 1919-43* (Dublin, 2004), p. 32.

¹⁰² E. O’ Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824-2000* (Dublin, 2011), p. 106.

¹⁰³ E. O’ Connor, “The Waterford Soviet: Fact or Fancy?”, in *History Ireland*, 8, 1 (2000), p. 11.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁵ E. O’ Connor, “The Waterford Soviet: Fact or Fancy?”, in *History Ireland*, 8, 1 (2000), p. 11.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

the Russians for spreading anti-Christian doctrines among the illiterate poor of Dublin city.¹⁰⁷ The provincial newspapers were, for the most part, opposed to any changes within the social fabric of Ireland. The *Northern Standard*, a local North-East paper, on 3 May 1919, wrote disparagingly of the organisers of the strike action.¹⁰⁸ In an editorial, their suggestion was that the people in charge of the ITGWU appeared, “anxious to encourage idleness rather than industry”.¹⁰⁹ The Catholic Church had a very fractious relationship with socialism throughout Europe, and Ireland was no exception to this tempestuous relationship. The Church feared the new ideology, and attacked it at every opportunity, one of the principal Catholic journals of the period, *The Catholic Journal*, in a forthright condemnation of socialism exclaimed, “What the socialist aims at is the production of chaos, through the destruction of the family and the home, by the abolition of Christian baptism and Christian marriage, as well as of the obligations and sanctity of every other form of social contract”.¹¹⁰ There was a general belief within the Church, that the class system, while problematic and not faultless, nevertheless, was undoubtedly the best system to ensure stability within society, as inequality between the classes was for the most part unavoidable. One Catholic journal, the *Irish Rosary* declared, “Two classes, by whatever name we choose to call them, must always exist, it is wicked to delude the ignorant with false ideas about equality. For these ideas run counter to the divinely constituted plan of society”.¹¹¹ This conservative thinking ensured that the Catholic Church and socialists were on two distinctly different paths throughout the following years in Ireland.

The Church’s attitude to socialism, coupled with the reticence of many nationalist politicians to embrace socialist ideals, ensured that socialism was to play very little part in the early formative years of the state. The historian Tom Garvan suggests that the period of 1916 to 1923, was in reality “not as an episode of unfinished radical reconstruction, but rather as the birth of a conservative democracy stabilised in subsequent years”.¹¹² While there were examples of small victories for socialism, the red flag marches being just one example, in general, the forces of conservatism were in control of decision-making in Ireland for the greater part of the twentieth century. From the high-water mark of 1919, socialism retreated to a position where it was no longer a viable alternative to the right-wing parties which came to dominate Irish politics and governments. The trade union movement became embroiled in an unseemly leadership struggle during the mid-1920s, and proved unable to provide leadership to the working-class, when it was most needed.¹¹³ Nevertheless, there was a proportionate degree of working-class radicalism displayed throughout the country in the era, which was defined by revolutionary thought, and action. While Co. Louth was perhaps not as active as various other regions throughout the country, nevertheless, there were examples of this radical socialism displayed.¹¹⁴ The Red Flag Marches of 1919 were examples of this radical behaviour, which for a brief period, presumed to overthrow the conservative hegemony that assumed control of the state during this period.

¹⁰⁷ *Irish Independent*, 10 October 1919.

¹⁰⁸ *Northern Standard*, 3 May 1919.

¹⁰⁹ *Northern Standard*, 3 May 1919.

¹¹⁰ E. Larkin, “Socialism and Catholicism in Ireland” in *An Irish Quarterly Review*, 74, 293 (1985), p. 71.

¹¹¹ J. A. Mac Mahon, “The Catholic Clergy and the Social Question in Ireland, 1891-1916”, in *An Irish Quarterly Review*, 70, 280 (1981), p. 267.

¹¹² T. Garvan, *1922: The Birth of Irish Democracy* (Dublin, 1996), p. 25.

¹¹³ D. Keogh, *Twentieth Century Ireland: Revolution and State building*, (Dublin, 2005), p. 39.

¹¹⁴ M. Maguire, “Labour in County Louth, 1912-1923” in D. Hall and M. Maguire (eds), *County Louth and the Irish Revolution 1912-1923* (Newbridge, 2017), p. 59.

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