

Labour in County Louth, 1912–1923.

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If the history of the Irish revolution 1912–23 is written as an armed struggle between the IRA and the Crown forces then Co. Louth, as one of the less active areas, would seem to be disengaged from the revolution. However, the strength of the national mobilisation in 1919–23 cannot be measured by IRA activity alone.² Labour militancy, whilst supportive of the abstract nationalism of the republican movement, mobilised the working class on concrete and specific grievances, which it was expected, the republic would address.³ In the course of the Irish revolution, labour resistance to the British state at local level in Co. Louth was organised in direct action, in non-violent strikes, embargoes and in civil disobedience.⁴ When the working class organises itself as ‘labour’, the objective is to achieve better wages and working conditions. But militancy on wages is never about wages alone. It is also about a better and more secure future. This, as it seemed to some in Ireland in the years 1912–23, may be through revolutionary struggle to establish a completely new society, but for most workers it is usually through trade union mobilisation to confront capital or through political mobilisation to drive state action in support of the working class.

In Co. Louth between 1912 and 1923, working class radicalism was more extensive than has been appreciated, with engagement in a range of labour struggles, calling upon an eclectic range of mobilisations. During the First World War, strike action compelled the state to intervene on behalf of labour to maintain industrial peace. In the period after the end of the World War, as the nationalist revolution developed, labour fought hard to hold on to the gains made and to win new improvements. Various ideologies were drawn upon as required – ‘Red Flag’ Bolshevism, Sovietism, republicanism, syndicalism and agrarianism – but always in pursuit of the goal of securing a better life for the working class.

The first developments of the welfare state under Asquith’s Liberal government, followed by the enormously complex task of mobilising society and economy for world war, aligned the British state with the social demands of the working class. The state became guarantor of sickness and unemployment benefits, old-age pensions, wage compensation for inflation, and regulation of workplace. The resurrection of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) in 1917, after the crushing defeat of the Union by the combined forces of Martin Murphy-led employers in the Lockout of 1913, gave workers a powerful trade union organisation. The parliamentary Labour Party, formally created in 1912 but remaining aloof from activism for ten years, proved less useful to the working class. The emergence, after 1916, of the revolutionary Sinn Féin and its establishment of the republican counter-state of Dáil Éireann in 1919, created a new state force upon which labour could hope to exert pressure. Finally, the 1917 Russian Revolution inspired working class militants with a new social model in the ‘soviet’ and also with the efficacy of the tactic of direct action.⁵

¹ This essay was published in D. Hall and M. Maguire (eds), *County Louth and the Irish Revolution 1912-1923* (Newbridge, 2017), pp 59-86.

² Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2002), pp. 146–7.

³ Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation and Not A Rabble the Irish Revolution 1913-1923* (London: Profile Books, 2015), p. 7.

⁴ Natasha Claire Grayson, ‘The quality of nationalism in Counties Cavan, Louth, and Meath during the Irish Revolution’ (PhD, 2007) Keele University; Claire Fitzpatrick, ‘Nationalising the ideal: Labour and Nationalism in Ireland, 1909-1923’ in Eugenio F. Biagini (ed.) *Citizenship and Community Liberals, Radicals and Collective Identities in the British Isles, 1865-1931* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 276–304.

⁵ Emmet O’Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland 1917-1923* (Cork, Cork University Press, 1988) pp. xi–xix.

Dundalk and Drogheda developed initially as industrial and service centres for rural Co. Louth. Dundalk Distillery was established in 1799. The multi-storey tower windmill in the town was attuned to the extensive commercial market in cereal production across the county. Hoffmann's brick works, with a ten-chambered kiln, was built in the 1890s to service the expansion in house building. A water-driven spade mill in Ravensdale serviced the need for a variety of spade shapes for Irish agricultural production. However, it was the development of the railway that gave Louth 'industrial lift-off'. With the completion of the Boyne viaduct in 1853, Belfast and Dublin were linked by rail. The Great Northern Railway (GNR), established in 1875, amalgamated four separate enterprises: the Dublin-Drogheda line, the Dublin-Belfast Junction Company, the Ulster Railway and the Irish North-West Railway. With the creation of the GNR, Dundalk was selected as the site for the railway company workshop and engineering works. In 1914 the works employed close to 1,000 skilled and well-paid tradesmen such as fitters, turners, boilermakers, blacksmiths and brass fitters. New housing was built close to the works to accommodate these workers. The railway, with its freight service, also enabled larger scale production. In 1919 W & H.M. Goulding established a chemical fertiliser factory in Drogheda. The railways also established the ports of Greenore, Dundalk and Drogheda for passenger and livestock trade. Local foundries, such as Shekletons and Manistys in Dundalk and Grendons in Drogheda, that had been established in the 1820s and 1830s to service the local market, expanded in line with the growth of the railways. By 1914, Dundalk had, along with the railway works, two breweries, a distillery, Carrolls cigarette factory and May Street Linen Mills (both significant employers of women), three brickworks, and other manufacturing and industrial concerns. A large and complex working class of men and women, of various skills and trades, made Dundalk and Drogheda not unlike many British industrial towns.⁶

The 1911 census showed that Co. Louth had 3,642 agricultural labourers and 3,101 general industrial labourers, reminding us that the pay and benefits that attached to the skilled trades were very favourable compared to the condition of the mass of the unskilled rural and general labourers that constituted the working class of the rest of the county.⁷ It also reminds us that labour in Ireland was still dominated by the rural economy and that it was agrarian rather than industrial unrest that traditionally fuelled militancy and political mobilisation. In January 1890, the agrarian radical and Fenian, Michael Davitt, formed the Irish Democratic Trade and Labour Federation to forward the demands of labour within the nationalist movement, hitherto dominated by the tenant farmers. Davitt's organisation aimed to organise town and agricultural labour as a single working class.⁸ Out of this grew the Irish Land and Labour League that campaigned for housing, better wages and conditions for rural labourers. In 1891, Davitt addressed the Drogheda Trades Council. The condition of the agricultural labourer, in Louth as elsewhere, was harsh; casualised under the hiring fair system, such labourers were subject to long hours and poor wages, of low social status and as a live-in servant, vulnerable to the whim of the farmer.⁹ Agricultural labourers looked to local

⁶ For the industrial development of Louth see Colin Rynne, *Industrial Ireland 1750-1930* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2006); Harold O'Sullivan (ed), *Irish Historical Towns Atlas, No.16 Dundalk* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2006); Richard Gerrard, *The Mill: A History of Usher's Linen Mill Greenhills Drogheda and the People Who Worked There 1836-1993* (Drogheda: Anglo Printers, 2013); Maureen Wilson, 'The railways of Dundalk' in *Tempest Annual 1975-6*; Jack McQuillan, *The Railway Town: The Story of the Great Northern Railway Works and Dundalk* (Dundalk: Dun Dealgan Press, 1993); Manistys Dundalk Iron Works' in *Co Louth Archaeological and Historical Society* (CLAHS) Journal, XXIII, 3, 1995; Charlie Flynn, 'Dundalk An Oral History' PhD thesis, NUI Maynooth, 2000.

⁷ Ireland Census 1911, Co. Louth, Table XX, 'occupation of males'.

⁸ Laurence Marley, *Michael Davitt Freelance Radical and Frondeur* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), pp. 104-5.

⁹ Dan Bradley, *Farm Labourers: Irish Struggle 1900-1976* (Belfast: Athol Books, 1988), p. 15-20.

authority direct labour schemes to tide them over periods of unemployment. The great advance for the agricultural labourer was achieved through political pressure by Parnell and later by Davitt and the Land and Labour Association, that led to the passing of the 1883 and 1906 Labourers (Ireland) Acts. These acts compelled the building of rural labourers' cottages by local authorities, thus giving agricultural labourers independence and security from eviction by the employing farmer class. In Co. Louth over 1,500 rural labourer cottages were built.¹⁰

Trade unions, as the organisations of, for, and by the working class, began in the skilled trades and were confined to the craft and the locality. Local trade unions developed a rich culture of banners and ceremonies, expressing their local identity and craft pride.¹¹ These local trades councils maintained the craft tradition and represented a relatively secure and privileged sector of the working class that sought a non-confrontational relationship with capital. Drogheda Trades Councils, founded in 1887, was dominated by the local craft unions and sought to 'cultivate a spirit of harmony between employer and employee'.¹² The 1871 Trade Union Act gave legal status to labour organisations and encouraged the emergence of unions of a national rather than local character with a head office, elected officers and a national executive governed by a formal rule-book with centralised funds and benefits. This 'new unionism' came into Ireland from Great Britain.¹³ The British-based Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS), fore-runner of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR), considered to be amongst the most radical sections of the Irish trade union movement, began to organise in Ireland in 1885 and by 1890 had branches in Dundalk and Drogheda.¹⁴ The long established, locally based, Drogheda Operative Painters Trade Union Society became the Drogheda branch of the Manchester-based Amalgamated Society of Operative House and Ship Painters and Decorators.¹⁵ A significant innovation of the new unions was the organisation of the unskilled labourers in transport. These workers on ships, docks and on the railways, were highly casualised, often unemployed and badly paid. The most successful of these unions, initially, was the National Union of Dock Labourers (NUDL), founded in Glasgow in 1889 by Irish dock workers. One of the founders was Michael McKeown, a Newry man, who became the NUDL organiser in Ireland. By 1891, it had 2,000 members in Ireland and organised in fifteen ports, including Dundalk and Drogheda. The railway and shipping companies retaliated, breaking NUDL strikes in Dundalk and other ports in 1891. By 1905, it was a feeble union in Ireland with a diminished base in Derry and Drogheda.¹⁶

In that same year, in a NUDL strike on Liverpool docks, it was recognised that a new powerful and inspiring leader had emerged in the figure of James Larkin. Dismissed by his employers he was recruited by the NUDL's general secretary, James Sexton, as an organiser and was sent to Belfast in 1907 to revitalise the Union there. Playing a key role in

¹⁰ Bradley, *Farm Labourers*, Table 4 (a) p. 22; Enda McKay, 'The housing of the rural labourers 1883–1916' *Saathar Journal of the Irish Labour History Society*, 17 (1992) pp. 27–38.

¹¹ Frank Gallagher, 'Drogheda's early trade unions' in *Journal of the Old Drogheda Society*, no. 13, (2001), pp. 7–22; Moira Corcoran and Peter Durnin, *The Drogheda Banners: Aspects of the History of Drogheda* (Drogheda: Old Drogheda Society, 2001).

¹² Frank Gallagher, 'Founding of the Drogheda Council of Trade Unions - new research' in *Journal of the Old Drogheda Society*, no. 18, (2011), pp. 61–70.

¹³ Francis Devine, *Organising History A Centenary of SIPTU 1909-2009* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1–2.

¹⁴ Conor McCabe, 'The Amalgamated Society of Railwaymen and the National Union of Railwaymen in Ireland 1911-1923' PhD Thesis 2006, University of Ulster.

¹⁵ Charles Callan, 'The Painters of Drogheda and Co Louth 1860-1920' in *Journal of the Old Drogheda Society*, no.13 (2001), pp. 149–166.

¹⁶ Laurence Marley, 'Michael McKeown' in Emmet O'Connor and John Cunningham (eds) *Studies in Irish Radical Leadership: Lives on the Left* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016) pp. 71–84.

reorganising Co Louth was James Fearon from Newry, secretary of the Newry and Dundalk branch of the NUDL. The NUDL was then carried into the Drogheda docks. Fearon used the weapon of sympathetic action in Newry and Warrenpoint in support of Belfast workers in the 1907 strike. Crushed in Newry, the NUDL branch in Dundalk was more successful, winning increases in wages, shorter hours and better conditions.¹⁷ Larkin brought Belfast city to a halt in a general strike. Sidelined by Sexton, who quickly secured a weak settlement in Belfast, he was sent to organise in Waterford, Cork and then Dublin. His progress was marked by a series of strikes, which strained his relationship with the conservative and cautious Sexton, until in early December 1908 he was suspended as organiser of the NUDL. Larkin's response revolutionised Irish trade unionism. On 28 December, at a meeting in the Trades Hall, Capel Street, Dublin, of trade unionists and socialists, attended by Micheal Mckeown and Patrick Dobbins from Dundalk, the ITGWU was launched. The ITGWU was a break with the established development of trade unionism in Ireland through the introduction and spread of British-based unions. This had helped foster a culture of cross-channel solidarity but Ireland was always marginal to British trade unionism. From its foundation in 1868 to 1918, the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) did not once consider a motion on the 'Irish question' that dominated parliamentary politics. The formation of an Irish Trade Union Congress in 1894 had been an attempt to address this problem but the reality was that Ireland would always be low on the agenda of British-based unions. The ITGWU was an avowedly Irish union with a strongly republican and socialist identity. It was also, as its name signalled, an industrial and not a sectional union, looking to organise the whole of the working class in a single 'One Big Union' (OBU). The ITGWU was also syndicalist in its ideology, emphasising industrial conflict as the truest form of class struggle. The working class discovered itself as a class in workplace struggle rather than in parliamentary struggle. The union should be a moral community of the whole working class united by a conviction that 'an injury to one is an injury to all'. The most powerful weapon available to the working class was the sympathetic strike that would expand industrial conflict in a widening battlefield. The basis of the union was the belief that worker solidarity was not simply a tactic but was a code of honour.¹⁸ The priority would be industrial struggle but the ITGWU rulebook also included a call for an Irish Labour Party to advance the political progress of the working class. The reality was that the greatest improvements in the condition of the working class were achieved through parliamentary action rather than strikes. Larkin well understood that state imposed arbitration courts and laws governing improved working conditions were real and significant advances. The ITGWU rulebook looked for compulsory arbitration courts. The 1896 Conciliation Act encouraged voluntary industrial arbitration and the Board of Trade Conciliation Boards could be more effective, and less painful, in winning gains for workers than strikes. The difficulty for Irish workers was that these measures were often simply not applied in Ireland. The National Insurance scheme, the centrepiece of the Asquith government's social reform programme, excited great interest amongst workers and lectures explaining the 1912 scheme of insurance attracted large attendances in Dundalk and Drogheda.¹⁹ Despite its popularity the scheme was opposed by the *Irish Independent* newspaper, the Catholic hierarchy, the Irish medical profession and some of the Irish Parliamentary Party, leading to Ireland's inclusion in the unemployment benefits but exclusion from the medical benefits, with consequences for the Irish health service that are still evident today.

¹⁷ Bill McCamley, *The Third James-James Fearon 1874-1924 An Unsung Hero of Our Struggle. Studies in Irish Labour History 4* (Dublin: SIPTU and ILHS, 2000).

¹⁸ Emmet O'Connor, *Big Jim Larkin Hero or Wrecker?* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2015) pp. 52-72.

¹⁹ The National Archives, Kew (TNA) Colonial Office (CO) 904, Chief Inspector's Confidential Monthly Report (CICMR), County Louth, 1 Jun. 1912.

Fearon, McKeown and Dobbins immediately began a drive to recruit members for the ITGWU in Louth, mainly from the NUDL. Drogheda remained loyal to the NUDL, Dundalk No.5 branch became one of the founding branches of the new union. This was an interesting reversal of the established pattern in which Dundalk looked to Belfast and Drogheda to Dublin. The ITGWU was announced in Dundalk as the 'Late Dockers' Union' and a handbill called on all unskilled workers on the railways, malt houses, breweries, distilleries, mills, stores and yards to 'join an Irish union'.²⁰ By Christmas 1911, McKeown claimed that 1,000 members had been recruited and to have organised in the breweries, the timber and coal merchants, and the brickworks in Dundalk. A comprehensive agreement on wages and conditions was negotiated with the McArdle Moore brewery.²¹ Dundalk distillery also agreed on new wages and conditions, and labourers in the GNR won advances. Less successful was the attempt to organise the women in Carrolls cigarette factory. McKeown organised the women, bringing them out on strike in February 1912 in a demand for better conditions, but the strike was broken by Carrolls intransigence.²²

Despite the strong opposition of the Drogheda NUDL delegates, the ITGWU was admitted to the ITUC annual meeting held in Dundalk in May 1910. This was the turning point for the ITGWU and for Irish labour as the traditional dominance of the craft and British-based unions was swept aside. On the motion of the ITGWU, the 1912 Congress agreed to the formation of an Irish Labour Party. The new title – Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party (ITUC&LP), or Congress Party – reflected both the priority of the trade unions in the mobilisation of labour and the determination that labour would be a political force in a future Home Rule parliament.²³

By the time of the 1913 Lockout the limits of sympathetic action were becoming evident as the leaders of capital mobilised against the new militancy. The NUR had suffered a severe defeat at the hands of William Goulding, Director of the GSWR, after taking sympathetic action in 1911. The British-based Shipping Federation organised ship owners in recruiting strike-breaking scabs to defeat the dock and transport trade unions.²⁴ In Dundalk port, an attempt to prevent the dismissal of a ship's mate by strike action was defeated. A strike for higher wages at Annagassan by workmen constructing a pier also failed, and a strike in a building yard in Drogheda led to the dismissal of the men and their instant replacement by willing strike breakers.²⁵ The outbreak of 'foot and mouth' disease also hit hard, severely disrupted farming, agricultural labour and transport, as cattle and pig exports were cut by half. Ironically the Dublin 1913 Lockout led to a significant increase in work in Drogheda, Dundalk and Greenore ports as shipping was diverted away from Dublin to the Louth ports. P.T. Daly of the ITGWU visited Dundalk and Drogheda in November and tried to get the men to take sympathetic action. The men, having used the Dublin dispute to extract an increase in wages from the employer, refused to come out.²⁶ The 1913 Lockout revealed the difference within Irish nationalism on class and the social question. Generally, the republicans, cultural activists and advanced nationalists sided with the ITGWU, whilst the

²⁰ Louth County Archives, PP240/6/2 'ITGWU Handbill'.

²¹ Louth County Archive, PP240/6/2 'ITGWU to McArdle Moore & Co.', 21 Sept. 1911.

²² Devine, *Organising History*, pp. 28–9.

²³ The title of the organisation changed to reflect the shifting emphasis between political and industrial. In 1912 it was the Irish Trade Union Congress & Labour Party (called Congress-Party in this essay) then in 1918 the Irish Labour Party & Trade Union Congress (called Party-Congress in this essay).

²⁴ Conor McCabe, 'The Amalgamated Society of Railwaymen and the National Union of Railwaymen in Ireland 1911-1923' PhD Thesis 2006, University of Ulster. pp 16-54.

²⁵ TNA, CO 904/86 CICMR County Louth, 1 Mar. 1912; 1 Apr. 1913; 1 May 1913.

²⁶ TNA CO 904/86 CICMR County Louth, 1 Dec. 1913.

Catholic church, the Irish Parliamentary Party and Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin were hostile or silent.²⁷

The 1913 Lockout in Dublin can be understood in the context of the 'Great Unrest' of 1911–14 in Great Britain, when trade disputes took on a national character, with large scale mobilisation by both workers and industrial capital, eventually drawing the state into the developing class conflict. Whether the 'Great Unrest' held the possibility of a British social revolution is still debated, but what did happen was the emergence of an independent Labour Party in parliament, based on trade unions, and the beginning of the end for the Liberal Party.²⁸ The nineteenth-century two-party parliament of Conservative and Liberal was being replaced by the twentieth-century Conservative and Labour dominated parliament. In Ireland, the period of the 'Great Unrest' saw not only large-scale industrial strife in Dublin and on the railways, but also the militarisation of Ulster Unionism in the Ulster Volunteer Force, Irish nationalism in the Irish Volunteers, Irish feminism in Cumann na mBan, and Irish labour in the Citizen Army. This period also saw, after the 1916 Rising, the beginnings of a national, if not a social, revolution.

The World War that was confidently expected to be 'over by Christmas' was a severe disruption to the economy. Industry suffered the loss of labour due to the call up and enlistment, whilst 'non-essential' trades suffered. Prices soared due to inflation whilst wages lagged far behind. This triggered waves of strikes. The government responded to labour unrest with increasing control over the economy and the workplace. The government, fearing the impact of strikes on war production, abandoned market forces in labour negotiation and, in the Munitions of War Act 1915, recognised collective bargaining on wages and conditions of employment and imposed an arbitration and conciliation scheme on employers. The 'war bonus' as a compensatory amount to offset inflation established a basic standard for periodic wage increases. State appointed lawyers assessed the award, sweeping away the risk of industrial struggle. Trade unions as a matter of course became the negotiators for labour. As a result, membership of trade unions soared. The war made the trade unions a powerful and well-organised force in Britain as the economic mobilisation for wartime production required their support, thus giving unprecedented bargaining strength to workers' claims. The linen works in Drogheda went onto 'short time'. A Trade Board for the Linen Industry was established to control the linen and cotton industry under the 1909 Trade Board Act, with the power to make obligatory orders on wages and conditions. The Belfast-based Textile Operatives Society of Ireland, organised by Mary Galway and representing the women workers in the mill, made huge progress in recruiting the women in the Drogheda mills.²⁹ Under the legislation the government made an order for a minimum wage for women workers as they began to move into industrial employment.³⁰ In December 1916, after the British government refused to extend a compensatory 'war bonus' to Irish railways, the Irish local branches of the NUR, including Dundalk and Drogheda, threatened a national railway strike. The government in response took control of the entire Irish rail system and conceded the railway men the increase they demanded. The successful local action, taken in defiance of the

²⁷ O'Connor, *Big Jim Larkin*, p. 144.

²⁸ W.S. Adams, 'Lloyd George and the Labour Movement', *Past and Present*, No. 3 *(Feb. 1953), pp. 55–64.

²⁹ William Mulligan, 'Forging a Better World: Socialists and International Politics in the Early Twentieth Century' in Paul Daly, Rónán O'Brien, Paul Rouse (eds), *Making the Difference: Socialists and International Politics in the early Twentieth Century* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012) pp. 54–66; Theresa Moriarty, 'Work, Warfare and Wages: Industrial Controls and Irish Trade Unionism in the First World War', in Adrain Gregory and Senia Pasetta (eds), *Ireland and the Great War: A War to Unite Us All* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) p. 79.

³⁰ County Louth Archives, Dundalk Urban District Council minutes, DUDC/MB/1/3 'LGB letter ref women wages minimum', 11 Jul. 1916.

British executive of the NUR, fuelled the demand for a local Irish railway workers' union.³¹ In the Bourne Mills in Drogheda, the women in the weaving department struck for a higher war bonus and in Manisty & Co Foundry in Dundalk, the moulders came out on strike because the foundry continued to employ a man who refused to join the union.³²

Early in 1917, as agricultural labourers came out on strike in Louth and Meath, the Co. Louth Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) District Inspector reported his unease at the rising level of industrial unrest, especially as he detected the growing influence of Sinn Féin in the labour organisations. In June 1917, the fitters, blacksmiths and turners at the GNR works in Dundalk struck in a demand for the same rate as Belfast. The company argued that Dundalk was traditionally paid the Dublin rate, then 48/- a week, and not the Belfast rate of 55/- a week. The strike lasted six weeks and led to ninety-six of the men being brought to court and charged with 'taking part on a strike in connection with a difference as to the rate of wages affecting employment or in connection with munitions work'. With the high demand for their skills the men knew they could sit it out until, eventually, the Belfast rate was conceded and the strike ended.³³ The Louth County Council workmen, organised in local Labour Leagues at Lurgangreen, Dromiskin, Kilsaran and Stabannon struck for an increase on wages and shorter hours.³⁴

As the German U-Boat war in the Atlantic threatened the convoys bringing food and armaments from the Empire and the USA into Britain, the security of the food supply became a critical issue. The inflation in food prices allied with food shortages and suspicion of profiteering raised social tensions. The Congress Party annual conference in August 1917 approved a motion that food exports from Ireland be halted until a food census established the need and the available supply.³⁵ Sinn Féin, aided by the Irish Republican Army (IRA), led local land seizures, claiming that food exports threatened a new famine. Sinn Féin, working along with labour militants, established local food committees to prevent food exports. From February to March 1918, Drogheda Sinn Féin prohibited food exports from the port until a food census was completed. It seemed that Sinn Féin was being drawn into a social agitation led by labour and especially by the ITGWU.³⁶

In response to the threat of a food shortage, the government imposed an unprecedented level of regulation on agriculture including compulsory tillage, guaranteed prices for grain, price controls on fertilisers and minimum wage orders. Under the Corn Production Act of April 1917, all occupiers of ten or more acres of arable land were required to cultivate 10 per cent more than they had in 1916. This order compelled the large graziers to set aside land for arable and to either employ extra labourers or let the land as conacre. This fuelled the demand for the breaking up of the grazier holdings.³⁷ In December 1917, Louth County Council 'called on the government to break up into economic holdings the lands in their possession and that we further request the government to insist on large graziers tilling a fair proportion of their lands'.³⁸ The implication was of course that only an independent national government could so act.

³¹ McCabe, 'The Irish railway unions', pp. 64.

³² TNA, CO 904/86 CICMR Co. Louth, Jul. 1918.

³³ TNA, CO 904/ CICMR Co. Louth, Mar., Apr., Jun. 1917; *Dundalk Democrat*, 1 & 23 Jun., 21 Jul. 1917.

³⁴ County Louth Archives, Louth County Council minutes, LCC/MB/2/10 'County Council Workmen', 19 Mar. 1917.

³⁵ ILP&TUC, 23rd Annual Congress (Derry) 6–8 Aug. 1917, pp. 273–95.

³⁶ John Borgonovo, "'A Soviet in Embryo' Cork's food crisis and the People's Food Committee 1917-18' in *Saothar Journal of the Irish Labour History Society*, 34 (2009) pp. 21–38.

³⁷ Dooley, 'Land and the People', in Alvin Jackson (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish History* (Oxford: OUP, 2014) pp. 107–125.

³⁸ County Louth Archives, LCC/MB/1/5 'Motion on compulsory tillage', 6 Dec. 1917.

The outcome of these regulations was the creation, by the government, of the Agricultural Wages Board (AWB) to set wage rates. Made up of six representatives of the farmers, six representatives of the labourers and four government nominees, the AWB divided the whole of Great Britain and Ireland into regions and established a schedule of wage rates for each region. The ITGWU was hugely successful in recruiting the Irish agricultural labourers and in representing them on the AWB negotiations. Between its creation in September 1917 and its cessation in September 1921, the AWB for Ireland held forty-seven meetings and made nine orders fixing minimum wages and valuing benefits such as board and lodging. Louth and Meath formed one District Wages Committee. The 1,400 objections lodged by farmer representatives suggest that the agricultural labourer found the protection of the state a most powerful weapon in improving wages and conditions.³⁹

By 1918, labour was showing its strength as mobilisation moved beyond wages and conditions to politics. The high point came in resistance to the threat of conscription in April 1918. Faced with Ludendorff's offensive on the Western Front, the British government extended the existing system of conscription in Britain to older men and formerly exempt groups of workers. Lloyd George also proposed to introduce conscription for the first time to Ireland. Objections to conscription were expressed by all shades of nationalist opinion but it was the labour movement that led effective resistance. On 23 April a general strike, the first in Western Europe, was called and led by the Labour Congress-Party.⁴⁰ Work stopped on the railways, docks, factories and mills across Co. Louth. In Drogheda, the anti-conscription strike was followed by a two-day strike by the building workers who refused to work with men who had not come out on strike on the day.⁴¹ The conscription crisis was used by the ITGWU to establish itself in Drogheda where the NUDL was still dominant. In June 1918, Thomas Foran and William O'Brien led a meeting in Drogheda to form a branch of the Union, both speakers emphasising the role that Labour would have to play in the event of conscription being enforced. William O'Brien also called on the executed James Connolly's (and now no longer Larkin's) idea of the 'one great National Union' to defend the country's interests and the welfare of the democracy. A new branch with 200 members was established and admitted to the Drogheda Trades' Council with Joseph Loughran as president, Tom Behan as secretary and Edward Mullen, Eamonn Rooney and Michael Connor as leading activists.⁴² By November 1918, the Co. Louth RIC District Inspector was reporting with growing concern the confluence of labour and republican activism that fed the strong undercurrent of unrest among labourers partly owing to the cost of living but chiefly owing to political propaganda by Sinn Féin and the Irish Transport Union. Labour shows a tendency to organise and assert itself and Sinn Féin is fostering a spirit of unrest. Labour, particularly the mechanical and artisans is strongly Sinn Féin, efforts are being made to organize the farm labourers and this promises to meet with some success.⁴³

Workers were striking at Drogheda Milling, the Boyne Spinning Mills and Usshers Mills, and the farm labourers were also on strike, all organised by the ITGWU. Strikes were now being used to force or accelerate arbitration and to draw the state in as conciliator between capital and labour. The IRA at this time also saw labour as a key part of the revolutionary struggle advising its Volunteers to prepare for the pending general election by

³⁹ Agricultural Wages Board for Ireland (Corn Production Act, 1917) *Report on the Period September 1917 to September 1921*.

⁴⁰ Arthur Mitchell, *Labour in Irish Politics 1890-1930 the Irish Labour Movement in an Age of Revolution* (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1974), pp. 87-8; Devine, *Organising History*, pp. 117-8.

⁴¹ Moriarty, 'Work Warfare and Wages' in Adrian Gregory, Senia Paseta (eds), *Ireland and the Great War*, pp. 73-93.

⁴² Frank Gallagher, 'Liberty Hall Peter Street: the foundation of the ITGWU in Drogheda' in *Old Drogheda Society*, no.19 (2012) pp. 69-94.

⁴³ TNA, CO 904/90 CICMR Co. Louth, Nov. 1918.

supporting ‘every movement which makes for the building up of a free and prosperous Ireland: the political republican movement, the language movement, the movement for the rights of the working class [my emphasis], and the Irish industrial movement’.⁴⁴ In the eyes of republicans, the status of the ITGWU had been transformed by the 1916 Rising. Exhausted by the 1913 Lockout and the departure of Larkin to the United States, it seemed to be beaten. The leading role in 1916 played by James Connolly and the Irish Citizen Army, the shelling of Liberty Hall and the internment of the leadership, placed the Union at the foundation of the Republic. The Union had now acquired an unassailable legitimacy within revolutionary and republican circles.⁴⁵ However, the Union, dominated by William O’Brien, who saw the ITGWU as an industrial rather than a political organisation, concentrated on building a mass membership rather than build a mass political consciousness as expressed in the Labour Party. In 1914, the ITGWU had 15,000 members. By 1919, it had 102,823 members and was the dominant union in Congress.⁴⁶ The Congress grew its affiliated membership from 100,000 in 1917 to 225,000 in 1920. The number of local Trade Councils had grown in the same period from seven to sixteen.

When the general election was called, the Labour Party-Congress decided to withdraw from the election and leave the field clear for Sinn Féin. The decision of the Party-Congress not to contest the general election in December 1918, has been a subject of debate ever since.⁴⁷ Although Labour did not contest the election, Thomas Johnson (leader of the Labour Party) and William O’Brien (of the ITGWU) did compose a radical ‘Democratic Programme’ for the revolutionary Dáil. But they then allowed Seán T. O’Kelly to purge it of its radicalism and present an anodyne version to the Dáil and the world.⁴⁸ Nor did the Party-Congress at any point recognise the revolutionary Dáil Éireann as the legitimate government of Ireland. The advantages of continuing to work within the apparently ‘worker-friendly’ British state were not to be abandoned as working with the British Wages Board was almost the only way to secure wage increases. The tension between Labour’s industrial and political ambitions were clearly drawn. However, the Irish Labour delegation to the Berne International Conference of the Socialist International in February 1919, pressed successfully for international support for ‘Irish self-determination’ whilst also voting with the more radical pro-Bolshevik faction of the International demand for the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ against the Social-Democratic opinion favouring parliamentary democracy.⁴⁹ Underestimating the popular appetite for change, radicalism within the Party-Congress would be confined to foreign policy whilst domestic policy would be cautious and conservative.⁵⁰ Across Europe, a revolutionary wave seemed to be triumphantly replicating the Russian Bolshevik’s success in creating a new workers’ society. As Ireland entered its national revolution, the working class was well versed in the syndicalist tactics of the sympathetic strike and also the general strike, but now also had a revolutionary model in the Russian ‘Soviet’.⁵¹

⁴⁴ *An tÓglách*, vol.1, no.5, 30 Sept. 1918.

⁴⁵ Niamh Puirseil, *The Labour Party 1922-73* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007) p. 8.

⁴⁶ Devine, *Organising History*, appendix 7.

⁴⁷ Mitchell, *Labour in Irish Politics*, pp. 91–103.

⁴⁸ Military Archives, Cathal Brugha Barracks (MA), Bureau of Military History (BMH), witness statement (WS)1765, part 2, ‘Seán T. O’Kelly’; Emmet O’Connor, ‘Neither Democratic nor a Programme: The Democratic Programme of 1919’ in *Irish Historical Studies* (2016), 40, (157), 92–109.

⁴⁹ ILP&TUC, Report of the twenty-fifth annual meeting, Drogheda, Aug. 1919.

⁵⁰ Emmet O’Connor, ‘Hail Russia! Labour and the Bolshevik Revolution’ in *Saothar Journal of the Irish Labour History Society*, 42, (2017), forthcoming.

⁵¹ Emmet O’Connor, ‘“The Age of the Red Republic”: The Irish Left and Nationalism 1909-36’ in *Saothar Journal of the Irish Labour History Society*, 30 (2005) pp. 73–82.

In Britain, in the aftermath of the war, the government and employers immediately began an aggressive fight back against the trade unions. The Scottish TUC along with the Clyde Workers' Committee went on strike in April 1919 for the 40-hour week but was defeated by the arrest of the strike leaders and the deployment of police and troops in the docks. In 1920, unrest grew on the London docks and amongst the miners and railwaymen. However, the collapse of solidarity amongst the 'Triple Alliance' of transport, railway and mining unions on 'Black Friday', April 1921, when only the miners came out on strike, cleared the way for the decontrol of the mines and railways and a full attack on wages. The government led the way with the 'Geddes Axe' reductions in civil service salaries followed by cuts in the education and housing budget. In Ireland, as the national revolution unfolded, the government was less confident in confronting labour and the trade unions were more successful in resisting cuts.

The first display of defiance made by labour in Co. Louth was on May Day 1919. The British army and the RIC in Drogheda anticipated that May Day would be a display of pro-Russian socialism and warned that it would be immediately proclaimed an illegal assembly if there was any display of the emblems of socialism. There would no 'Red Clydeside' in Drogheda! The Trades Council decided to abandon the procession but the ITGWU, led by Eamonn Rooney, went ahead. Rooney was the Union organiser for the agricultural labourers in Co. Meath. Headed by four bands, the procession passed through the town amidst a sea of red flags and trade union banners with the tri-colour also being flown. Eamonn Rooney addressed the parade saying, in reference to the Wilsonian League of Nations, that a league of peoples and not of governments was wanted. He denounced the Trades Council and went onto say that the workers would never be intimidated by a few policemen and would never allow a policeman to tell them what colour of flag they could fly.⁵² In Dundalk, the GNR railwaymen stayed at work on the trains but the men in the locomotive workshops paraded, led by the Emmet Band, carrying red flags. The RIC did not interfere. The May Day climb-down was then used by the ITGWU, led by Eamonn Rooney, to purge the Trades Council, hitherto dominated by the craft unions. Michael McGowan of the British-based Postmen's Federation, the president of the Trades Council and Mayor of Drogheda, was voted down and a new council dominated by the transport union, 'men not afraid to carry the Red Flag' took control.⁵³ It is worth emphasising that it was the Red Flag and not the 'Sinn Féin' tri-colour that dominated the parade, and Petrograd in 1917 was more significant than Dublin in 1916. McGowan was later a founder member of the Irish Post Office Workers' Union in 1922. Rooney convinced the IRA Volunteers in Meath to engage with the cause of the agricultural labourers, despite the warning from headquarters to the Volunteers not to get involved in labour disputes. Rooney, using his NUR contacts, made the IRA aware that the British military, in response to a request from the Meath Farmers' Union, was bringing in extra soldiers to assist in breaking the strike. The IRA, anxious that an increased military presence might smother IRA activity, agreed to sabotage the rail line and succeeded in derailing the train. The agricultural labourers strike was successfully settled in the aftermath of that operation.⁵⁴

Labour, it seemed, was surging ahead as the Labour Party-Congress and ITGWU held their annual meetings in August 1919 in Drogheda. The address by the Lord Mayor McGowan (the same that had been voted down by the Trades Council) at the welcoming civic reception confidently stated that 'the cry "Long Live the People" will resound above the

⁵² *Drogheda Independent*, 10 May 1919.

⁵³ Frank Gallagher, 'May Day 1919-Drogheda's Red Flag Revolt' in *Journal of the Old Drogheda Society*, vol.21 (2014) pp. 119–134; *Irish Times*, 2 May 1919.

⁵⁴ MA, BMH, WS.901, 'Seamus Finn'.

Babel of capitalist interests'.⁵⁵ The Crown forces response to the republican campaign was to launch an economic war, burning creameries and co-ops and destroying the rural economy. Prominent local members of Sinn Féin were targeted but, initially, labour activists were not. In August 1920, the Dundalk Sinn Féin hall and the licensed premises of the Sinn Féin councillor, John McGuill, were sacked and looted.⁵⁶ In Co. Louth, however, ITGWU officials also came under attack from Crown forces. Charles F. Ridgeway, a Protestant radical republican from Belfast, was a prominent and effective organiser for the Union in the Louth-Monaghan area. A highly-talented writer, under the pen-name Cefar, he wrote for the labour newspaper the *Voice of Labour*. He was detained by the RIC in Monaghan and threatened with being summarily shot as a renegade Protestant, a socialist and an ITGWU activist.⁵⁷ Gilbert Lynch, a Lancashire-born republican and trade unionist who had been in the GPO in 1916, was his fellow ITGWU organiser for Co. Louth.⁵⁸ In Galway city, where he was branch secretary for the ITGWU, Lynch had been badly beaten up by the Black and Tans. The Union had moved him to Louth for his safety along with Denis Houston, who had escaped the attentions of the Auxiliaries. Lynch also acted as a judge in the local Sinn Féin courts. Clearly the Black and Tans and the Auxiliaries now regarded trade union activists as members of the IRA. With the creation of the B-Special constabulary in November 1920, ahead of Partition, Union organising in Newry and Armagh became increasingly hazardous.⁵⁹

The national strikes in support of the political prisoners, called by the ITGWU for 12 April 1920, were strongly supported in Co. Louth. The Dundalk power station staff came out, cutting off the light and power to the town. At the Dundalk railway works columns of strikers moving through the yards and station, enforcing the strike. Paradoxically, this display of worker power culminated in a rally and recital of the Rosary in St Patrick's Church.⁶⁰ Alarmed at the growing mobility of the IRA units, in November 1919, the British army required all motor drivers to apply for a permit from the military authorities. The intent was to ensure only the loyal could have mobility. It led to a strike against the permits led by the ITGWU and the Irish Automobile Drivers & Mechanics Trade Union.⁶¹ Mainly a Dublin strike, it was observed in Dundalk where the strikers held up traffic from Newry and Armagh and forced the drivers to return.⁶² The Belfast boycott, in support for the Catholic workers expelled from the shipyards, was enforced in Dundalk and Drogheda, with the support of the Louth County Council.⁶³ On Dundalk docks the workers boycotted the firm of Wordie and Co., a Belfast-based company that distributed goods from the train station for loading onto ships and into Dundalk town, despite the Trades Council accepting the assurances that the company was a model employer of Catholics.⁶⁴

The main political strike was by the NUR railwaymen in the 'Munitions of War' strike that lasted from June to December 1920. The original inspiration for the Munitions strike was the 'Hands Off Russia' campaign by the London dockers who successfully led a workers' boycott of all munitions destined for the White Russian forces in Poland. The Irish members of the London-based NUR initiated a similar boycott of arms destined for Ireland, without London support. The strike began in May when the Dublin dockers refused to unload

⁵⁵ ILP&TUC report of the twenty-fifth annual meeting, Drogheda, 4–8 Aug. 1919.

⁵⁶ *Irish Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 82, 27 Aug. 1920.

⁵⁷ ILP&TUC, Report of the twenty-eighth annual meeting, Aug. 1922, Dublin.

⁵⁸ Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh (ed), *The Life and Times of Gilbert Lynch by Gilbert Lynch*, studies in Irish Labour History 13. (Dublin: Irish Labour History Society, 2011).

⁵⁹ Ó Cathasaigh (ed), *The Life and Times of Gilbert Lynch*, pp. 39–41.

⁶⁰ *Dundalk Democrat*, 17 Apr. 1920.

⁶¹ ILP&TUC, Report of the twenty-sixth annual meeting, Aug. 1920, Cork.

⁶² *Irish Times*, 18 Dec. 1919.

⁶³ *Dundalk Democrat*, 31 Jul. 1920.

⁶⁴ *Dundalk Democrat*, 11 Sept. 1920.

military supplies from a steamer.⁶⁵ The supplies were unloaded by the military and transferred to trains. NUR drivers then refused to work the train. The cause was taken up by the NUR Irish membership despite the opposition of the Union President J.H. Thomas, who now opposed the use of the strike weapon for political purposes. The strike soon extended to refusing to drive trains that carried armed RIC or British army personnel. The railway companies then dismissed the crew although the men were technically not on strike as they agreed to operate all other traffic. By August, thousands of railway men had been dismissed. The authorities responded by putting pressure on both the railway workmen and the companies. Armed soldiers and RIC men were ordered to board trains up and down the country, leading to the driver and crew to walk off, leaving the train stranded.⁶⁶ The companies were fined for failing to fulfil their public service obligations. Louth County Council strongly supported the railwaymen and pledged to support them. A 'Munitions Strike Fund' in Dundalk raised £240 in July. The government was determined to break the strike by shutting down the system if necessary. By September, the Dundalk-Enniskillen line was closed. The strikers held out until the end of the year, mainly due to the full support of the general public though some intimidation of strike-breakers did occur.⁶⁷ A feature of the strike was the rift that opened up between the railwaymen, north and south.⁶⁸ Despite the *Dundalk Examiner* urging a fight to the finish the government strategy of throttling the whole network, thus isolating towns and stifling trade, worked and the strike ended in December.⁶⁹ The leadership of the strike remained with the trade union and though the IRA welcomed it, very little was done to assist. Strikes were never a part of the republican strategy. Through 1919, a wave of strikes across Co. Louth signalled the developing struggle on wages with industrial employers; in Cahill's printers and in the laundry in Drogheda, in Manisty's foundry and the distillery in Dundalk, and on the docks in both ports.⁷⁰

The end of the First World War also transformed working conditions on the land as the state withdrew from managing the food economy. On the land, farmers began immediately to switch from tillage back to grassland, reducing the opportunity for rural employment. The abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board by the British government in October 1920 freed farmers to attack the agricultural labourers. The Irish Farmers' Union switched from resistance to government regulation to become an anti-Union strike breaking force. At the same time the withdrawal of the RIC from rural areas led to an increase in agrarian land seizures with local IRA units prominent in the initial seizures. The Dáil, anxious that the land question should not obscure the national question, decreed in July 1920 a cessation to all agrarian violence saying 'all our energies must be directed toward clearing out-not the occupier of this or that piece of land-but the foreign invader of our country'.⁷¹ The Dáil established a National Land Bank in direct response to the fear that the land agitation was diverting the mind of the people from the struggle for freedom by a class war.⁷² The decree had limited effect in Co. Louth as a wealthy landowner, R.A. Gradwell, called on the Dáil for protection against land seizures. Protection was granted by the local IRA but then withdrawn when Gradwell refused to recognise the validity of the republican courts

⁶⁵ ILP&TUC, twenty-sixth annual report, Aug. 1920, Cork.

⁶⁶ *Dundalk Democrat*, 31 Jul. 1920.

⁶⁷ Charles Townshend, *The Republic The Fight for Irish Independence* (London: Allen Lane, 2013) pp. 144–8.

⁶⁸ *Dundalk Democrat*, 3 Jul. 1920.

⁶⁹ McCabe, 'Irish railway unions, chapter six'; Co. Louth Archives, LCC/MB/1/5 'Munitions strike motion' 21 Jun. 1920.

⁷⁰ TNA, CO 904/90, CICMR Co. Louth, May 1919 to Aug. 1920.

⁷¹ *Irish Bulletin*, vol.2, no. 56, 21 Jul. 1920.

⁷² Dooley, *Land for the People*, quoting Erskine Childers, 'The Constructive Work of Dáil Éireann, (1921).

examining the agrarian claims.⁷³ In Dundalk cattle were driven off the land of Mr Hearty, a grazier.⁷⁴ By the spring of 1921, the Labour Party-Congress was calling for the reintroduction of compulsory tillage by Dáil Éireann.

Trade unions now found themselves on the defensive and struggling to maintain the gains made under war-time conditions as employers pressed for pay cuts. New white-collar unions, such as the Irish Bank Officials' Association and the Irish Local Government Officers' Trade Union, emerged in the clerical sector and in local government.⁷⁵ In May 1920, a new Irish union for craft workers was launched, the Irish Engineering, Shipbuilding and Foundry Trades Union (IES&FTU), the forerunner to the Technical, Engineering and Electrical Union (TEEU) of today. This was an Irish Republican Brotherhood- (IRB-) inspired Irish breakaway from the British Amalgamated Society of Engineers. This was an exclusively Irish union of craft workers that recruited with some success amongst the craft workers in Dundalk railway works.⁷⁶ Dáil Éireann, as a revolutionary counter state, had taken on the task of developing an arbitration and conciliation system for industrial workers. The expectations may have been that as a revolutionary government the Dáil would be on the side of labour. The limitations of the Dáil's social vision and the inherent conservatism of its members soon became apparent. In the Dáil, de Valera dismissed the Democratic Programme as one that 'contemplated a situation somewhat different from that in which they actually found themselves' and so, 'while the foreigner occupied the country', labour must wait.⁷⁷ The Dáil decreed National Arbitration Courts in June 1919 under Countess Markievicz's Ministry of Labour, notifying each Sinn Féin cumainn of the establishment of a National Conciliation Board for the settlement of industrial disputes.⁷⁸ After the local elections in January and June 1920, Sinn Féin and Labour dominated the local authorities across Ireland. These then declared allegiance to Dáil Éireann and refused to recognise the authority of the British Local Government Board. In Dundalk Urban District, Peter Toner, R. Minogue, James Coburn and Felix McGee were returned as Labour councillors. In Drogheda, the ITGWU members, Eamonn Rooney and Edward Mullen, who were prominent in the 'Red Flag' processions of May Day 1919, were returned to the Corporation as 'Workers' Republic' councillors, a deliberate echo of the title of James Connolly's newspaper *Workers' Republic*.

In the county council election in June 1920, two Trade and Labour candidates were successful as Sinn Féin swept to dominance.⁷⁹ Drogheda Borough Council, Dundalk Urban Council, Dundalk Rural Council and the Drogheda Board of Guardians all declared for Dáil Éireann.⁸⁰ Local authorities were key for labour organisation as they were sensitive to electoral pressure, as well being important in setting local wage rates for the unskilled and in providing work and easing unemployment. It was expected that these Sinn Féin and Labour-dominated local authorities would set a benchmark for wages and for normalising the Dáil conciliation and arbitration scheme. Dundalk Urban District Council had already agreed that claims from the council employees could only be made through a trade union.⁸¹ Drogheda

⁷³ *Irish Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 82, 27 Aug. 1920; Co. Louth Archives, LCC/MB/1/5 "Motion by James mcGuill" 21 Jun. 1920.

⁷⁴ *Dundalk Democrat*, 19 Mar. 1921.

⁷⁵ Martin Maguire, 'Civil service trade unionism in Ireland (part 1) 1801-1922'; Part II) 1922-1990' in *Saothar Irish Labour History Society*, 33 (2008), pp. 7-21 and *Saothar Journal of the Irish Labour History Society*, 34 (2009), pp. 41-60.

⁷⁶ Padraig Yeates, *Irish Craft Workers in a Time of Revolution* (Dublin: TEEU, 2016).

⁷⁷ Dáil Éireann, *Miontuairis an Chéad Dáil 1919-1921*, 11 Apr. 1919, p. 78.

⁷⁸ MA, BMH WS.568 'Eilis Bean Uí Chonail'; WS.979, 'Robert Barton'.

⁷⁹ Harold O'Sullivan, *A History of Local Government in the County of Louth from the earliest times to the present time* (Dublin: IPA, 2000) pp. 50-70.

⁸⁰ *Irish Bulletin*, Vol. 2, no. 34 18 and 29 Jun. 1920.

⁸¹ Co. Louth Archives, DUDC/MB/1/4 'Motion on trade unions' 17 Jun. 1919.

Urban District Council had preferred arbitration to confrontation and had generally referred wage claims to arbitration by the Industrial Department of the British Ministry of Labour.⁸² The decision to refer to the Dáil Éireann conciliation board was therefore simply a relocation of the process, though it may have been expected the Dáil Éireann board would be more pro-labour. In fact, the Dáil Ministry of Labour arbitration board was largely inactive and the Ministry was mainly engaged in finding work for former policemen and for unemployed Volunteers.⁸³

The July 1921 truce between the IRA and the Crown forces brought little relief to workers. The ITGWU had previously been in dispute with Wordie and Co. when the company tried to ignore the Belfast boycott. Wordie and Co. attempted to enforce the reduced Belfast rate on the Dundalk workers in the weeks after the truce was called. The ITGWU called the men out on strike and arranged with local traders that the Union would ensure delivery of supplies. One local merchant, Patrick Moore, had a picket placed on his premises when refused to work with the Union. Moore then called on family connections with the local IRA in an attempt to intimidate the pickets. The intimidation failed, but it signalled a worrying development.⁸⁴

Labour began to demand shorter hours and higher wages in the local authorities. Before the world war, road maintenance work had traditionally been put out to contract with the local farmers on a yearly basis, with details on the length of road and the quantity of stone required. The war economy created prosperity for the farmers and they lost interest in the road works. The local authorities then used direct labour for the work. The ITGWU organised the road workers and negotiated good rates. Drogheda Borough Council agreed to take a claim for a wage increase jointly lodged by the Dockers Union and the ITGWU to the Dáil Éireann conciliation board.⁸⁵ With the end of the war the farmers began to look for the restoration of the pre-war contract scheme.⁸⁶ By the end of 1921, as the slump hit, the ITGWU was urging Louth County Council to relieve distress by employing as many as possible on the direct labour road works scheme.⁸⁷

The Union had in fact already achieved its high point in Co. Louth in 1921. It had an estimated 3,689 members organised in eight branches: Ardee, Drogheda, Dundalk, Greenore, Kilsaran, Knockbridge, Louth and Ravensdale. The distribution of branches suggests that the Union organised most successfully amongst the agricultural labourers in the rural county, along with the unskilled labourers in Dundalk and Drogheda. These were workers who relied on the local authorities for occasional and casual employment on roadworks. In Drogheda, the ITGWU was to remain locked into a competitive struggle with the British-based NUDL, that later merged into the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (ATGWU). This competitive struggle did neither union any good.⁸⁸ The 'Red Flag' militants had a last mobilisation as the Irish Engineers and Industrial Union seized control of Grendon's foundry in Drogheda in September 1921 and declared a 'soviet', but with no support and no strategy for spreading the action it soon fizzled out.⁸⁹

⁸² Co. Louth Archives, Drogheda Minute Book, 21 Apr. 1919, 13 Feb. 2 Mar. 1920.

⁸³ Arthur Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland Dáil Éireann 1919-22* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1995), pp. 161-2.

⁸⁴ Ó Cathasaigh (ed), *The Life and Times of Gilbert Lynch*, pp. 41-3.

⁸⁵ Co. Louth Archives, Drogheda Minute Book 2 Nov. 1920.

⁸⁶ Ó Cathasaigh (ed), *The Life and Times of Gilbert Lynch*, pp. 43-4.

⁸⁷ Co. Louth Archives, LCC/MB/1/6 'Delegation of ITGWU' 15 Dec. 1921.

⁸⁸ Francis Devine, 'The Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in Co Louth, 1909-1930' in *Journal of the Old Drogheda Society* (Forthcoming).

⁸⁹ Yeates, *Irish Craft Workers in a Time of Revolution*, p. 24.

A special meeting of Louth County Council on 2 January 1922 supported the Treaty with all the Labour councillors in agreement.⁹⁰ On 16 January 1922, Dublin Castle was handed over to the Provisional Government, signalling the end of British rule. With the establishing of the Provisional Government the British administration began a hurried departure from Ireland, including the Ministry of Labour's arbitration scheme that was discontinued from 1 April. Though it took some time to be apparent the tide was turning against labour in the new independent Ireland. At a special conference in February 1922, the Party-Congress, the largest labour organisation in Ireland, acted as if the Treaty was a distraction to the central task of establishing the Workers' Republic. Speakers called for the seizure of the land, but for its working to be on a communal basis rather than fragmented small holdings. Gilbert Lynch, for the Dundalk ITGWU, outlined the difficulty that workers in Dundalk found themselves in now as it became a frontier town competing with lower wages and longer hours across the new border. Gilbert also spoke on the need for the Labour Party to contest all elections at parliamentary and local elections if it was going to achieve the Workers' Republic.⁹¹ The Labour Party Congress worked to prevent the descent into civil war over the Treaty. Asserting itself as a political force it called for a general strike 'against militarism' on 24 April 1922. This, the last general strike of the revolutionary period, was fully supported in Co. Louth.

Meanwhile the retreat from the ground won in the years of struggle was unrelenting. In Drogheda, the Dáil arbitrator found for the corporation against the workers in its decision to reduce wages.⁹² In February 1922, when the corporation workers rejected a further reduction in wages, the corporation, confident which side the Dáil would take, insisted the question of the reduction should go to arbitration.⁹³ The request from the Drogheda Trades Council for the corporation to set up an anti-profiteering committee was considered and rejected.⁹⁴ In Dundalk, the county council agreed to a direct labour scheme at the suggestion of the ITGWU, to relieve unemployment, but only if the men agreed a reduction in wages.⁹⁵ On the docks the ITGWU was more successful in briefly holding back wages cuts, but by 1923 were in retreat there as well.⁹⁶ The Labour Party did spectacularly well in the June 1922 general election, suggestive of a continuing appetite for radical change within the working class, with seventeen of its eighteen candidates elected to the Dáil. In the Louth–Meath Constituency Cathal O'Shannon topped the poll, despite being identified as an atheistic pro-Bolshevik and a promoter of soviet-style direct action by the working class, receiving nearly 14,000 first preferences.⁹⁷

The Civil War eased the pressure on wages but also made the Dáil irrelevant as state power moved to the military command of the National Army in Beggars Bush barracks. As the Provisional Government refused to call the elected TDs to assemble, claiming it would be too dangerous, the Labour Party-Congress threatened to resign en masse. The Third Dáil met eventually in early September to debate and approve the Free State Constitution. It was dissolved in August 1923. In the subsequent elections to the Fourth Dáil, Labour's vote collapsed. In the Louth three-seat constituency, Cathal O'Shannon came bottom of the poll. Labour, it would appear, was now identified as an ineffectual protest party rather than a party

⁹⁰ Co. Louth Archives, LCC/MB/1/6 'Special meeting on the Treaty, 2 January 1922'.

⁹¹ ILP&TUC, *Report on the twenty-eight annual meeting, August 1922, Dublin and the Special Congress on election policy Abbey Theatre, 21 Feb. 1922*.

⁹² Co. Louth Archives, Drogheda Minute Book, 2 Jan. 1922.

⁹³ Co. Louth Archives, Drogheda Minute Book 7, 20 Feb. 1922.

⁹⁴ Co. Louth Archives, Drogheda Minute Book 3, 10 Jan. 1922.

⁹⁵ Co. Louth Archives, LCC/MB/1/6, 9 Mar. 1922, 'wages sub-committee'.

⁹⁶ Devine, *Organising History*, p. 116.

⁹⁷ Lawrence William White, 'Cathal O'Shannon' in James McGuire and James Quinn (ed), *Dictionary Irish Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

of radical change, and certainly not the party to win a Workers' Republic. On the land the Special Infantry Corps of the National Army, established specifically to tackle agrarian disorder and dismantle land seizures, ruthlessly suppressed the resurgence of agrarian class war that had emerged in the Civil War.⁹⁸ The employers, organised in the Dublin Employers' Emergency Committee, began a national mobilisation to attack the sympathetic action strike, the only effective weapon of labour.⁹⁹

In October 1921, during the truce, the Socialist Party of Ireland (SPI) was taken over by Roddy Connolly and became the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI). Cathal O'Shannon was purged as a 'reformer'. The CPI attracted the political radicals within the ITGWU. The Comintern encouraged these radicals to move beyond the trade union based tactics of syndicalism and develop a revolutionary political strategy. Within the Labour Party-Congress, the CPI members attempted to take the labour movement leftward and into the Moscow-led Communist International and away from the Social-Democratic Second International. In this attempt, Eamonn Rooney played a leading part. As the Congress executive pleaded that the disorganisation within the socialist parties of the world suggested non-affiliation to either International, Rooney challenged this 'specious neutrality' and urged labour to align with the Comintern.¹⁰⁰ Rooney, a Drogheda-based organiser in the ITGWU, was a member of the CPI and also a member of the Irish Communist Groups on the Comintern with the cover name 'Black'.¹⁰¹ The communists anticipated that the Treaty would split the republican movement into left and right wings creating an opportunity to lead the left faction into a Bolshevik-style anti-imperialist revolution. For Eamonn Rooney, the ITGWU was the key organisation. It seemed possible to take the industrial militancy expressed in syndicalism and direct it toward a Bolshevik-style political vanguardism using the anti-Treaty IRA. When this failed the return of Larkin on 30 April 1923 generated a brief false hope that he could once again resurrect the cause of labour.

With his ambitions now focused on becoming the Irish representative in the Communist International, Larkin now proved as destructive a force as he had been creative in the formative years of the ITGWU. His Irish Worker League was damaging to the political left, organised in the CPI. His struggle to regain control of the ITGWU led to his suspension as General Secretary and then expulsion. Larkin launched a bitter attack on both the ITGWU leadership and the Party-Congress leading eventually to the formation of the breakaway Workers Union of Ireland (WUI). At the time when labour most needed to be united the split was catastrophic.¹⁰² In Co. Louth, the WUI proved hugely damaging to the ITGWU as it organised as a 'Larkinite' Union. M.P. Whittle, branch secretary in Dundalk, went over to the WUI bringing with him the Dundalk, Greenore, Carlingford and Knockbridge membership.¹⁰³ Denis Houston, ITGWU organiser since the foundation of the Union, wrote to Liberty Hall detailing the collapse in branches. Kilsaran was down to twelve members and he was trying, but with little success, to build up numbers through organising the men working on the roads and farms.¹⁰⁴

The period 1912–23 created the most favourable conditions for labour militancy. The first developments of the British welfare state and the demands of the First World War

⁹⁸ Dooley, 'The Land and the People' p 51.

⁹⁹ NLI, ms. 15,679/5/8, Wm O'Brien Papers, 'Kelly, Dublin Employers Emergency Committee, Nov 1924'.

¹⁰⁰ Emmet O'Connor, *'Reds and the Green' Ireland, Russia and the Communist Internationals 1919-43* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2004), p. 40.

¹⁰¹ Russian State Archive for Social and Political History (RGASPI), report on the work of the Irish Communist Groups 1921, 495/89/2–30. My thanks to Emmet O'Connor for a copy of this report.

¹⁰² Gerry Watts, 'The battle for Liberty Hall' in *Saothar Journal of the Labour History Society*, 40, (2015) pp. 31–44.

¹⁰³ NLI, ms. 15,679/5/4 Wm O'Brien papers, 'Letter from Whittle ref WUI' 15 Jul. 1924.

¹⁰⁴ NLI, ms. 15,679/5/5 (1) Wm O'Brien papers, 'Kilsaran branch report' 17 Jul. 1924.

aligned the state with the demands of the working class for higher wages and a better life. The Irish revolution created a republican counter state that also, as it seemed, was prepared to align with the working class. Internationally, the Russian Revolution and the wave of revolutionary movements across Europe created a model that inspired an increasingly radicalised labour. The resurgence of trade unionism, especially the ITGWU, gave an organisational base for direct action and the 'soviet' occupations. However, these were extraordinarily fortuitous and fleeting circumstances. The defence of wages and conditions, which forged unity across the working class of Co. Louth in the period 1912–23, was organised in the broadly democratic and egalitarian trade union movement. Connecting that sort of movement with the elitism of the national revolution, or the vanguardism of the communists, proved an impossible challenge.¹⁰⁵ With the end of the First World War, the state brought its power to bear on forcing down wages. Irish labour soon cooled on the attractions of the Bolshevik model. The Free State army was used to smash the remnants of the soviets. Most telling of all, the republican revolutionaries with whom labour militants had made common cause proved to be very limited in their ambitions and revolutionary vision. In an early debate on industrial policy in the revolutionary Dáil, Minister for Industries Ernest Blythe asserted that the government of the republic 'would of course discourage the exploitation of Irish industries by foreign capitalists by every means in their power'. The implication, which was missed by the labour movement, was the republican government would not have any problem with exploitation by native capitalists.¹⁰⁶

In 1912, it would have seemed probable that Co. Louth was about to experience industrial 'lift off' powered by its location midway between Belfast and Dublin. Dundalk, that had always looked toward Belfast was already an important centre for railway engineering and was developing as a hub for the intersection of the Sligo-Greenore and Dublin-Belfast railway. Drogheda, that looked toward Dublin, was developing as an important port feeding into the railway network. Partition, by locating Dundalk and Drogheda at the periphery of newly independent Ireland, cut off this development, turning Louth from a central to a border county. The WUI declined but the ITGWU survived with strong organisation. The British-based ATGWU grew in both Drogheda and Dundalk, building on local loyalties to the older pre-partition NUDL. County Louth, with a rich working class culture, a long tradition of trade unionism and a complex working class of the rural and urban, skilled and unskilled, was a relatively inactive area for the national revolution, yet proved an area of intense labour struggle. But working class militancy was primarily in defence of existing wages and conditions. As the post-war economic depression led to wage cuts and the erosion of conditions, partition cut the links with the wider labour movement in Belfast, and Dublin and localism prevailed. The difficulty of connecting labour militancy with the revolutionary nationalist objective of overthrowing the state could be overcome, as was shown in working class support within Co. Louth for the general strikes against conscription, and in support of the prisoners on hunger strike as well as the 'Munitions of War' strike. The failure of labour to steer the national revolution or even to insert a social demand is striking. However, that failure does not mean it was not attempted.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Brian Hanley, 'The IRA and Trade Unions, 1922-72' in Francis Devine, Fintan Lane and Niamh Puirseil (eds), *Essays in Irish Labour History a Festschrift for Elizabeth and John W. Boyle*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), pp. 157–77.

¹⁰⁶ *Dáil Éireann Debates*, 18 Jun. 1919.

¹⁰⁷ I would like to thank Lorraine McCann of the County Louth Archives, Eamon Thornton of the Old Drogheda Society and the staff of the National Library Ireland for their expert assistance. Also Padraig Yeates, Francis Devine, Emmet O'Connor, my co-editor Donal Hall, the DkIT Humanities students of the history module, 'Ireland in Revolution and Counter-Revolution' for their arguments and for helpful comments on earlier drafts, and my colleagues in the Department of Humanities at Dundalk Institute of Technology for their support.