

Strike & Lockout | Topic Notes

The start of Irish socialism

The industrial revolution produced great wealth but it was not distributed evenly.

Socialists believed this was unfair and they wanted to redistribute the wealth of the rich.

Gradualists believed in slow change by peaceful agitation.

They got laws passed to improve factory conditions, reduce length of working day and to stop employment of children. The Labour Party was set up and they persuaded the Liberal government into old age pensions and unemployment pay.

Other socialists believed in violent revolution – Marxists.

Others believed in one big trade union that would organise a general strike.

Problems with socialism in Ireland:

Most workers in Ireland were farmers – self-employed, and all they wanted was low taxes. Old age pensions etc would lead to increased taxation.

There were only enough industrial workers in Belfast, where the divisions were too strong to allow cooperation.

Most workers were unskilled and so in a bad bargaining position. So they didn't want to risk losing their jobs.

People were focussing on Home Rule and didn't want the distraction.

Skilled workers (eg bricklayers) began to form trade unions.

ITUC (Irish Trade Union Congress) was set up because workers felt ignored by the British TUC. It represented 60,000 skilled workers, but lacked money and power.

Unskilled workers unite in Britain because of a long depression forcing wages down.

James Connolly:

He started as a dustman, stood for election as a socialist, lost, then lost his job.

He considered going to South America, but stayed when he was offered a job by the Dublin Socialist Society.

He reorganised the society into the Irish Republican Socialist Party.

Unlike other socialists, he argued that nationalism was important because the British Empire needed to be overthrown before socialism could succeed.

He earned an international reputation as a socialist, but he was unsuccessful in Ireland.

James Larkin and the development of Irish Trade

Unionism

Increase in militant trade unionism and striking., because:

Conditions got worse (mainly due to inflation).

The law changed, making it easier to organise strikes.

Belfast Strike led by James Larkin (it included dockers and transport workers):

Employers retaliated – other workers struck in sympathy (including the police).

Britain came to a standstill, and eventually the transport workers got a rise.

Larkin founded the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU).

He was shocked at conditions in Dublin and wanted to bring unity and strength.

He led the Dockers' Union and led successful strikes, but left and set up the new union because they were unhappy that he led so many strikes.

At first, it was unsuccessful.

Then Larkin was accused of misusing funds and arrested. This gained him sympathy and support. The ITGWU grew rapidly.

The lead up to the Strike and Lockout

Larkin's strengths and weaknesses:

Inspired people to follow him. A powerful speaker, with enormous energy.

He was arrogant and dictatorial, refused to listen to other opinions or to compromise.

He successful in getting wage increases by using the sympathetic strike.

This made it difficult for employers to bring in other workers.

William Martin Murphy persuaded employers to unite.

He owned: the Dublin Tramway Company, Clery's department store, several newspapers (including the Irish Independent).

He had great influence over public opinion.

He considered himself a good employer, and expected loyalty. So he was opposed to trade unions.

He persuaded employers to form an Employers' Federation to resist.

Tramway workers were the first clash between Larkin and Murphy.

They earned above average wage, Murphy provided housing to some.

But most worked part time (they had to for 6 years before being full-time) – they had to be constantly available but were paid little. They could be demoted to part time for any reason.

They were likely to be fined for lateness, passenger complaints etc.

Murphy sacked anyone who joined the ITGWU (both in Tramway and in newspapers).

Eason's and newsboys refused to handle the newspapers in sympathy. When Tramway workers did the same, Murphy sacked 200.

Larkin called the Tramway Strike.

Planned for the start of the Dublin Horse Show, Tramway's busiest time. He hoped to get Ringsend electricity station to strike too, which would have stopped the trams.

Murphy won – he got the police to surround the station, so the ITGWU couldn't reach them and they couldn't strike. Only some Tramway employees struck, and Murphy kept a daytime service running.

When violence began, Larkin and other strike leaders were arrested.

Results of Tramway strike.

The arrests and the ban of a big ITGWU meeting won sympathy and support for the unions.

Larkin insisted that the meeting would go ahead, pointing out that the Ulster Unionists were allowed to protest.

A protest was held outside the ITGWU headquarters. It developed into a riot, in which the police used excessive violence.

William O'Brien (worked closely with Larkin), fearing further violence, organised a different venue for the meeting.

Larkin stubbornly kept his promise to speak in Sackville Street. He snuck past the police who were expecting him by dressing up like an elderly man. He then spoke from a 1st floor window.

The police stormed the hotel, injuring 500 people.

Larkin was arrested.

Violence erupted throughout the city (O'Brien's group attacked on their way back).

Police invaded a tenement building after abuse was shouted at them, beating innocents.

Everyone was outraged, it won support for the trade unionists.

Tenement houses collapsed that had been deemed 'fit' – this publicised the conditions of the tenements.

This forced the government to set up an enquiry to investigate conditions.

Murphy organises a sympathetic lockout in a stand against the ITGWU.

Any employee who did not sign an oath (which said that they would obey their employers and not be a part of any trade union) would be locked out.

This drew other unions into the dispute.

The strike and lockout spread – sympathetic strikes led to sympathetic lockouts, and so on.

One of the first companies to lock out workers was Jacobs – locked out over 2000.

They said that traditional trade unions (for skilled workers) were ok, but they would not hire anyone from the ITGWU.

The Lockout and its results

The strike and lockout was engulfing Dublin to the point of crisis.

Up to 20,000 were locked out.

Supplies of food and fuel were disrupted, prices went up.

ITGWU members and sympathisers provided a soup kitchen for women and children.

Some schools gave free breakfast to the children of strikers.

British trade unionists were shocked by Murphy's attack on the rights of trade unionists and by conditions in Ireland.

They rallied behind the Irish workers, providing aid (food, clothes, money).

About £100,000 worth overall.

People used Larkin's reliance on British charity against him.

TUC tried to make peace, as they wanted to end the strike (they were gradualists).

Murphy refused to talk to Larkin or ITGWU, cementing the TUC's support for Larkin.

The British government also wanted to end the strike and lockout.

Most Home Rulers supported Murphy, as they were well-off, knew little about conditions for workers, and read in the papers that Larkinism was a danger to their property.

The HR leaders didn't support Larkin, but they hated Murphy (Murphy attacked them in his newspapers).

They avoided getting involved and focussed on the Home Rule Bill.

Government intervenes:

Englishmen sent to investigate the rights and wrongs of the crisis with Sir George Askwith as head.

It was held in public, with each side cross-examining the other.

Workers showed that conditions were worse in Ireland, and kept their demands moderate.

Larkin offered to end sympathetic strikes if sacked workers were reinstated, the ITGWU was recognised, and further disputes would be submitted to a conciliation board.

Askwith condemned both sympathetic strikes and the employers' reaction. He proposed conciliation boards to deal with disputes.

Trade unionists agreed, but the Employers' Federation refused (which lost them support).

'Dublin Kiddies Scheme'

The Lord Mayor's wife and the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin were helping to feed the children of the strikers who were being left hungry.

A scheme was set up for British families to take these children until the situation improved.

Larkin agreed, hundreds of British families offered, Irish parents volunteered.

The Archbishop was vehemently opposed, due to fears that children would be converted.

This aroused deep suspicions, despite there being no intentions to do this.

Priests intimidated parents into withdrawing their consent.

Hysterical mobs protested the 'export' of children.

The scheme had to be abandoned.

This situation lost support for the trade unionists and drew attention away from the Employers' Federation's refusal to cooperate.

Employers fight back.

They used lorries for transport instead of carts – so much more efficient that they kept them after the strike and didn't hire many of their employees back.

They used 'free labourers' (those not in a union). Union members despised them, and many were badly beaten.

In some industries, workers went back rather than see their jobs go for good.

Murphy got help from the Shipping Federation, who sent many free labourers to employers.

In response, Connolly shut down Dublin port.

Larkin tried to get the British to boycott goods coming from Ireland.

They disagreed, and tried to persuade him to talk to the employers. He refused.

Larkin demanded a meeting of the TUC to debate, but lost their support by abusing leading members of the TUC in speeches.

The workers at Dublin Port were ordered to go back to work.

The collapse of the strike.

The TUC tried to start negotiations again, but Murphy refused (he knew he was going to succeed).

Groups of workers began to negotiate with employers. No one got pay rises, and many didn't get their jobs back. Many of those emigrated or joined the British army.

The results of the strike.

Larkin went to America, leaving Connolly in charge of the ITGWU.

Connolly became the leader of the Irish Citizen Army, which defended workers against police brutality.

Connolly was opposed to World War I, but saw it as an opportunity to strike at the capitalists.

He led the Citizen Army to fight alongside the IRB and Irish Volunteers in the Rising.

Connolly was executed, leaving William O'Brien in charge of the ITGWU. He built it into the most powerful union in Ireland.

Assessment of the strike and lockout:

Triumph for Murphy, but he became one of the most hated figures in Irish history.

The workers lost this battle, but now no future employer would be as brutal as Murphy.

The right of workers to a trade union was established.