

The Limerick Soviet project – John Lonergan

A Soviet is a socialist elected workers committee functioning as a political and military organisation. The Limerick Soviet was the first and only self-declared Soviet in Ireland and the British Isles, existing from the 14th to 27th April 1919.¹ The Limerick Soviet's formation was the result of a strike declared by the Limerick United Trades and Labour Council, protesting Limerick City being proclaimed a Special Military Area under the Defence of the Realm Act. The Special Military area meant that the British Military had the power to issue entrance and exit permits, restricting access to areas of the city and enabling them to apprehend spies by close checking of passes. One key moment leading to the establishment of the Limerick Soviet was the British Military's response to Robert Byrne's death and funeral. Byrne was active in his local union, the Irish Post Office Clerks Association and was Chairman of the Limerick Branch.² In addition, just before Christmas 1918, he had been appointed Adjutant of the 2nd battalion, Limerick Brigade, Irish Republican Army (IRA). He was dismissed from his job due to his attendance at the funeral of Limerick Fenian John Daly. A week after Daly's funeral, Byrne was charged with possession of a firearm and ammunition and sentenced to two years in prison, and subsequently went on hunger strike. On 12th March 1919, Byrne was removed to the City Infirmary. On the 6th of April 1919, the IRA launched a rescue operation, but it went awry, with Byrne being shot and dying later that day. Byrne's funeral was subject to a military order designed to suppress the number of people at the funeral, with British military in armoured cars and soldiers with fixed bayonets taking up positions along the funeral route. Two military airplanes also circled above the procession for part of the way, however 15,000 people attended the funeral.

As a result of the significant show of support for Byrne, and by extension the Finian movement, the British Military issued a heavy-handed proclamation, which made the city of Limerick a Special Military District. On Wednesday, 8 April 1919, the Commander in Chief of the British Military in Ireland, Lieutenant-General Sir Fredrick Shaw appointed Brigadier General Christopher Griffin as the Commander of this district. Workers were forced to apply for cards from the military to pass in or out of Limerick City, in order to go to and from work, which caused a great deal of inconvenience and aggravation.³ People suspected of crimes could now be isolated and taken into custody.⁴ The Military's cards held the applicant's personal characteristics, and they were stamped and dated by the military when passing through the military cordon.⁵

¹ <https://www.rte.ie/radio/doconone/647122-documentary-podcast-limerick-soviet-workers>

² The Limerick Soviet(Framework Films)

³ The Limerick Soviet(Framework Films)

⁴ Forgotten Revolution, The Limerick Soviet 1919, Liam Cahill

⁵ Forgotten Revolution, The Limerick Soviet 1919, Liam Cahill

The restrictive measures ordered by the British caused a significant reaction, when on Monday, the 14th of April, workers in Cleeve's Condensed Milk and Butter Factory went on strike. As the strike action spread throughout the city, the Trades Council felt compelled to act and following twelve hours of discussion, called a general strike throughout the city in which all Limerick workers would protest the proclamation of the city as a Special Military District. Soon 15,000 workers in Limerick City were now on strike, which the *Evening Herald* said was a "*Fierce struggle between organized labour and government.*"^{6 7} The Trades Council transitioned into the Strike Committee with two key players, John Cronin, and James Casey. Cronin was Chairman of the Strike Committee, who would turn out to be highly influential in the Soviet.⁸ Casey, a printer, was Treasurer of the Soviet and would later coordinate the creation of the soviet's currency. The Limerick Soviet was officially declared on Monday, 15 April 1919 with the Strike Committee stating that it was "*a protest against the decision of the British Government in compelling them to procure permits in order to earn their bread.*"⁹

Sinn Féin and the Catholic Church were faced with a dilemma of supporting or condemning the strike. However, as the strike was overwhelmingly popular with workers, condemning the strike would result in Sinn Féin and the Catholic Church conceding its working-class support. Therefore, they decided to condemn the military cordon and called for the British Military to withdraw from the city. The Catholic Church was a significant supporter in the initial stages of the Soviet. "*At the various masses in the Diocese of Killaloe on Sunday the clergy appealed to the people to aid Limerick with food supplies and announced that they did so with the sanction and good will of Most Rev. Dr Fogerty, Bishop of Killaloe. There was a generous response to the appeal, including the gift of twenty tonnes of potatoes.*"¹⁰ Throughout the country, food was collected by clergymen and sent to Limerick, becoming invaluable in keeping the populace fed. There is divided opinion on whether the IRA was involved in the Limerick Soviet. Historian Liam Cahill argues that the IRA was, saying, "The speed and efficient way that the Trades Council was organised would seem to underline a degree of Sinn Fein influence and support."¹¹ D.R.O'Connor Lysaght, supports this view saying "*Naturally, the Unionist press regarded the Soviet as no more than a front for Sinn Féin.*"¹² This was echoed in the Irish press. "*There is something about the methods of the Limerick Strike that smacks strongly of the Sinn Féin organiser. The voice is the*

⁶ Saturday, April 19, 1919 The Irish Times

⁷ Forgotten Revolution, The Limerick Soviet 1919, Liam Cahill

⁸ Forgotten Revolution, The Limerick Soviet 1919, Liam Cahill

⁹ Forgotten Revolution, The Limerick Soviet 1919, Liam Cahill

¹⁰ Sunday, April 20, 1919 The Irish Times

¹¹ Forgotten Revolution, The Limerick Soviet 1919, Liam Cahill

¹²The Story of the Limerick Soviet, D.R O'Connor Lysaght, 2003

voice of the worker, but the hand is the hand of Harcourt Street."¹³ In contrast Dominic Haugh, in his book *Limerick Soviet 1919, The Revolt of the Bottom Dog* disagrees. His view is that this was a working man's revolt, with I.T.G.W.U and the labour movement completely in control, actively seeking to better and protect the working conditions of the city's population. This is supported by the nonviolent nature of the strike, and the huge emphasis of the Strike Committee of making life easier for the poorer, working classes. The visible IRA exception was Michael Brennan, Commandant of the East Clare Brigade of the Irish Volunteers. Brennan was drafted onto the strike committee so the Soviet would have the assistance of armed men if needed and to ensure that the considerable presence of IRA in the city would not become outwardly hostile to the Limerick Soviet. While IRA members were without a doubt involved in the Strike, it is clear the organisation was not officially involved.

At the beginning, the strike took the city and its 15,000 workers by surprise. Most industries followed the Strike Committee's instructions to close, except the Post Office and the banks. The Strike committee-maintained water, gas and electricity supplies but switched off public lighting to conserve supplies. Ensuring constant food supplies was a problem for the Soviet due to a lack of coal and flour. Bakery ovens were fired by coal, but coal merchants frequently refused to open their yards, seen on the 16th, Wednesday morning, where six of the coal yards refused to open their gates to the Strike Committee and comply with their instructions. The coal yards received police protection shortly before noon.¹⁴ ¹⁵However, the strike committee's efforts to secure supplies remaining constant were commended by the *Irish Examiner*, who said *"The Strike committee's efforts to cater for the wants of the people....are certainly most commendable, and their food deposits.... are working to the most satisfactory manner. From the farmers in Clare and the adjoining counties...practical support is being received, and each succeeding day large quantities of potatoes, milk, butter, and flour reach these deposits and are retailed to customers at very reasonable prices. These measure help in a large measure to stem the food shortage."* ¹⁶ Restaurants, hotels, and pubs were shut in order to conserve supplies. Prices of goods were fixed by a subcommittee, with flying pickets enforcing the price controls and order in the queues. Transport and communication were an area that the Limerick Soviet put emphasis on. The Soviet created a permits committee, with four city councillors in charge. It issued permits to merchants so that they could acquire and transport goods such as coal, butter and flour from Limerick Railway Station to shops. Only vehicles owned by those who appeared before the

¹³ **Sunday, April 20, 1919 Sunday Independent**

¹⁴Limerick Soviet 1919, The Revolt of the Bottom Dog, Dominic Haugh, 2019

¹⁵ The Story of the Limerick Soviet, D.R O'Connor Lusaght, 2003

¹⁶Thursday, April 24, 1919 Irish Examiner

permits committee were allowed movement throughout the city – all other people were forced off the street by the workers patrols.¹⁷

The British Military were extremely surprised at the declaration of the strike. Martial law was in no way uncommon during the War of Independence. For example, the previous week, Westport had martial law withdrawn. Within a half hour of the strike proclamation, local police chiefs were communicating with Dublin Castle asking for 300 more police to be dispatched to Limerick with 50 police sent.¹⁸ Police and military were confined to barracks for safety while their commanders decided what actions to take.¹⁹ General Griffith, as commander of the military district, was front and centre of all British Military and diplomatic responses, targeting the Chamber of Commerce as allies. He set out a compromise that employers in the city would be able to issue permits to their employees, instead of the military. This would make it easier and quicker to obtain a permit to enter and leave the city, a significant concession. Griffith was quite diplomatic and level-headed in his dealings in the city, making no attempt to break the strike by military intervention, not desiring to escalate the situation or turn any strikers into martyrs. Griffith did not send the military into the city centre, focusing instead on manning checkpoints on the boundaries of the military area.²⁰ On the 17th of April, the Bishop of Limerick Dr Hallinan, and the Mayor of Limerick, Alphonsus O'Mara, met secretly with Griffith. In this meeting, Griffith gave an offer that after a week of no trouble in the proclaimed area, he would withdraw the military permit order.²¹ The Bishop and Mayor were opening lines of communication with the British Military and seeking to undermine the Soviet.²²

¹⁷The Forgotten Revolution [The Centenary Edition], Liam Cahill, 1919

¹⁸<https://www.rte.ie/radio/doconone/647122-documentary-podcast-limerick-soviet-workers>

¹⁹Limerick Soviet 1919, The Revolt of the Bottom Dog, Dominic Haugh, 2019

²⁰Thursday, April 24, 1919 Irish Examiner

²¹The Forgotten Revolution [The Centenary Edition], Liam Cahill, 1919

²² Irish Examiner 1841-current, Friday, April 18, 1919

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.
This Pass is Granted to :-

Style or Title (Mr., Mrs., or Miss) } *W*

SURNAME in Capitals } *O'CALLAGHAN*

Christian Names } *Michael*

Age } *39* Occupation } *Tanner / Magistrate*

Postal Address } *St Margaret Limerick*

Signature of Holder } *M O'Callaghan*

Date of Arrival in Area } *Resident*

Issued by } *E O'Callaghan & Son Ltd*

Rank } *Yeomanry Cavalry*

Station } *LIMERICK*

Date } *26/4/19* 191

CONDITIONS.

This Pass must be produced for inspection at any time, if required to do so by any Naval or Military Officer, Sailor or Soldier on duty, or Police Officer, or Constable, or any other authorised Person.

This Pass can only be used by a British Subject ordinarily resident in *LIMERICK*

This Pass may at any time be revoked.

OFFICIAL STAMP. PHOTOGRAPH or DESCRIPTION.

Height } *5 ft 3 ins.*

Build } *Medium*

Hair, Colour } *Black*

Eyes, Colour } *Hazel*

A local pass issued by the Limerick Soviet Strike Committee



The members of the Strike Committee pose

The strike committee looked towards the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (ILPTUC) for help and support with the strike. On Wednesday, 16th April, the ILPTUC sent Tom Johnson to Limerick. Johnson was regarded as one of the most influential members of the Labour Movement,²³ and was Treasurer of the ILPTUC. Johnson and the ILPTUC gave indications of supporting the strike, however he really was sent to diffuse the Strike. Johnson made vague promises to the Strike Committee while shutting off any attempts at sympathetic strikes by any other trade unions in support of the Soviet.²⁴ The ILPTUC did not have revolutionary tendencies, and no interest in supporting the strike with any

²³ <https://www.dib.ie/biography/johnson-thomas-ryder-a4299>

²⁴ Limerick Soviet 1919, The Revolt of the Bottom Dog, Dominic Haugh, 2019

substantial show of support. In addition, it had neither the physical means nor the political conscience among its members to pursue such a strategy. The National Executive of the ILPTUC was extremely slow to act, with an unwieldy nature, with members from all around the country. The President, Thomas Cassidy, was based in Derry and at the time of the Limerick Soviet, organising the Easter Conference of the ILPTUC and was traveling throughout the country. The ILPTUC delegation then proposed that the strikers leave the city and leave it as an empty shell. This would be a symbolic move that avoided bloodshed and would make for extremely effective propaganda in Britain, Europe, and the United States.

To illustrate the Soviet's new dependent relationship to the ILPTUC, on Saturday, 19th of April, Cronin made a statement that the National Executive of the LLPTUC supported the efforts of the Strike Committee. That night, a public meeting was held in City Hall, chaired by Alphonsus O'Mara where he attempted to cool tensions by saying an independent mediator would be of advantage to resolve the strike. O'Mara proposed that someone of "*good standing*" ²⁵like the Mayor of Dublin could mediate between the British Military and the Strike Committee, supporting the theory that Sinn Féin did not desire the strike continuation. John Cronin addressed the meeting, saying that the ILPTUC National Executive would be relocating from Dublin to Limerick, to show their support for the strike. Cronin said that he expected that the Executive would take over organisation of the strike. Cronin made a powerful insinuation, that the ILPTUC delegates would have the possibility of calling a national general strike. Johnson avoided any similar commitments, saying that the delegates would arrive at the earliest on the Tuesday, 22nd April, later than originally expected. The delaying tactics of the ITPTUC were working because money was dwindling for the Soviet, and the viability of the strike limited.

Members of the National Executive of the ILPTUC gave the false perception that they would support the strike wholeheartedly. They insinuated that a national strike would be called, with one such occasion being when William O'Brien made it clear to the Soviet that they were not to call the railway workers on strike, telling them that "*National Action would soon be taken,*"²⁶ and used the argument that a railway strike would hurt the working class and not the British military. O'Brien was Chairman of the ILPTUC, and supposedly in support of the strike. However, during the Limerick Soviet, O'Brien actively tried to undermine the progress of the Soviet and had no such intention of calling such a strike. This is illustrated by the fact that he met with the Sinn Féin leadership to discuss the Limerick Soviet. Sinn Féin certainly did not want the Limerick Soviet to escalate and most probably instructed O'Brien to stop the Soviet from spreading into other parts of the country. Sinn Féin's attitude can be seen in

²⁵ Limerick Soviet 1919, The Revolt of the Bottom Dog, Dominic Haugh, 2019

²⁶ Limerick Soviet 1919, The Revolt of the Bottom Dog, Dominic Haugh, 2019

an interview De Valera did around the same time where he said, “that there was no support for a ‘Worker’s republic’ in Ireland,”²⁷ and downplaying the impact, influence, and support levels of the Soviet. As a result, the ILPTUC can be seen clearly trying to delay assistance for the Soviet, making excuses and banning solidarity striking.

Still, despite the confusion, the Strike Committee maintained control. The Sunday Independent stated that “Perfect order still prevails in Limerick.”²⁸ When it was rumoured that some business owners would defy the Soviet and open their shops, the Soviet made it clear that flying pickets would ensure they follow the Soviets line and closed the shops down forcibly. The act of defiance by the Chamber of Commerce was squashed. At the beginning of the 2nd week, the Strike Committee was under financial pressure, relying completely on gifts. The IGTWU gave £1000, the G.A.A gave money, as did the Bishop of Limerick Michael Fogarty and the clergy of the Killaloe Parish. The clergy supported the strike to keep in favour of the working classes.²⁹ The Soviet had a dependence on donations, as it had no infrastructure for collection of taxes or other consistent income. In any case, it would be hard to envision the Soviet being very keen to tax the workers on which it depended for support. As a result, the Soviet decided to issue a currency to help alleviate these financial problems, with a sub-committee created to deal with it, accountants, and workers from the finance departments from many major firms in the city drafted in to help. Notes were printed in 2s, 3s, 4s, 5s and 10s (S meaning shillings). Casey and Cronin signed the notes as Treasurer and Chairman of the Strike Committee. As the working class and the local shopkeepers had to agree to use it as a form of credit, the Committee drew up a list of shopkeepers who would provide credit based on the value of these treasury notes. They were “issued and accepted by shopkeepers.”³⁰ The treasury notes were printed at the Record Printing Works and were the same size as regular treasury notes. On the back they had “General Strike against British Militarism 1919” and on the face it had the words “The Workers of Limerick promise to pay the bearer the sum of _____ shillings”.³¹ These notes were in the form of promissory notes, where strikers could purchase necessities, exchange a note and the Soviet promised to redeem the notes when the strike was over. The notes were issued, with some kept as souvenirs and some redeemed.

On Wednesday, 23rd April, IGTWU representatives arrived in Limerick, including Johnson, Thomas Farren (Vice Chairman of IGTWU), and members from the Irish National Teacher’s Organisation, Railway Clerks, National Union of Railwaymen, Coachmen’s Union in Cork, and the Drapers Assistants

²⁷ Limerick Soviet 1919, The Revolt of the Bottom Dog, Dominic Haugh, 2019

²⁸ Sunday, April 20, 1919 Sunday Independent

²⁹ The Story of the Limerick Soviet, D.R O’Connor Lysaght, 2003

³⁰ Irish Independent, Saturday April 17 1919

³¹ Saturday, April 26, 1919, Killarney Echo and South Kerry Chronicle

Union. The IGTWU's offer that the Limerick workers evacuate the city was revisited and it was swiftly rejected by the Strike Committee. After this, a considerable amount of time was spent by the ILPTUC's delegation convincing the Strike Committee to abandon the strike in Limerick, wishing to end something which they did not support. Several thousand workers staged a protest outside the Mechanics Institute while the Executive and Soviet met inside, to make it clear that the workers in the city still supported the strike and its continuation. On Thursday, 24th April, Dr Hallinan, and O'Mara sent a joint letter urging the Soviet to end the strike. With Sinn Féin, the Chamber of Commerce, the Church and the ILPTUC all opposed, and the change in attitude by the Catholic Church decisive - the Soviet had run out of options. Cronin and Johnson announced that the strike was finished. Johnson called on all workers to resume work as soon as possible. The Irish Independent said that the crowd of protestors went quiet. An element of anger persisted in the air. There were rumours that the protestors would "*supplant the strike committee.*"³² Later, at Sarsfield Bridge on Saturday 26th April, demonstrators supportive of the Soviet's continuation stopped permit holders from crossing until they were forcibly moved by the police.³³ On Friday, 25 April, about half of the workers in the city went back to work under instruction from the Strike Committee. All 600 women workers in the Limerick Clothing Factory walked back together. The 690 mostly women workers of the Condensed Milk Factory did likewise on Monday. The reactions from trade unions in Britain was overwhelmingly negative, regarding the strike as "political" as opposed to a genuine industrial relations issue and "*will [sic] put forward any excuse to escape duty when a crisis occurs in Ireland.*"³⁴ There was a national media campaign attacking the left and the Soviet. Some newspapers had always thought that the Soviet would fail, with the Irish Times stating, "*We think that the experiment will fail,*"³⁵ They stated that "*the people and indeed every section of the community are greatly elated that the strike is over and that peace and good order that prevailed all through the continuance has remained undisturbed to the end.*" The British Chief Secretary, Ian McPherson, stated that "*Happily the crisis that might have developed if the authors had their way, is now over*" and that "[the British] *was glad that the wiser and more experienced leader of labour had been among the first to condemn such a reckless, arbitrary, and reprehensible manipulation of industrial means for political ends.*" The ILTUC had sold out the strike and the head of the British Imperialist presence in Ireland thanked them for their help in ending the Strike.³⁶ Some other reactions after the strike included the Limerick Chamber of Commerce, which was extremely critical of the strike, estimating it to have caused losses of £42,000 in wages and

³² Limerick Soviet 1919, The Revolt of the Bottom Dog, Dominic Haugh, 2019

³³ The Story of the Limerick Soviet, D.R O'Connor Lysaght, 2003

³⁴ Limerick Soviet 1919, The Revolt of the Bottom Dog, Dominic Haugh, 2019

³⁵ Saturday, April 26, 1919 - The Irish Times

³⁶ Limerick Soviet 1919, The Revolt of the Bottom Dog, Dominic Haugh, 2019

£250,000 in turnover. They also denounced the Strike Committee for the lack of consultation and notice for the strike, suggesting that the chamber would have assisted them in their efforts.³⁷ The element of money was another crucial factor in the brevity of the strike. After the strike, the Labour Party and T.U.C estimated, that £7,000-8000 per week was needed per week to fund the Soviet. Unfortunately, only £1,500 had been collected by the end of the strike.³⁸ The other big problem was the lack of food. The city was beginning to feel the " Food *pinch*", with cases of backdoor trading" keeping *the strike pickets extremely busy*".³⁹

One possible assessment of the Limerick Soviet would suggest that it had a limited impact on the public conscience and Irish history, only existing for ten days. In my opinion the reasons for its downfall are twofold. Firstly, the Strike Committee accepted the leadership of the ILPTUC, unconditionally and folded very quickly after the ILPTUC expressed an opinion contrary to the Strike Committee. The Soviet lacked widespread national trade union support of the ILPTUC. Secondly, the ILPTUC was not willing to fight for the cause or put itself at the forefront of the struggle for political, social, and economic emancipation for the working class. An interesting way of looking at it is the potential it could have had. If the Limerick Soviet had achieved a more sustained success against the British Government and Military, Sinn Féin and the IRA would have been forced to pay more attention to the Labour movements economic demands. The Labour movement may have found itself in a far more powerful position to influence the Irish Free State. The ILPTUC later argued that they had no power to call a nationwide strike. This was an excuse, being disproved, when, in the following April the ILPTUC called a general nationwide strike for two days to force the British Authorities to release hunger striking prisoners from jail.⁴⁰

³⁷ The Story of the Limerick Soviet, D.R O'Connor Lusaght, 2003

³⁸ The Forgotten Revolution [The Centenary Edition], Liam Cahill, 1919

³⁹ Kerry Weekly Reporter 1883-1920, Saturday, April 26, 1919

⁴⁰ The Forgotten Revolution [The Centenary Edition], Liam Cahill, 1919

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