



## Unit 3:

The Growth of the Labour  
Movement and the 1913 Strike and  
Lockout

*A Short History*

## UNIT 3: THE GROWTH OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

As a mainly agricultural country, the idea of organised labour came to Ireland at a relatively late stage. Nationalist leaders focused on Home Rule and the land issue, largely neglecting the deplorable conditions of the working class. In 1911, three-quarters of Dublin's workforce were unskilled and unorganised and one third occupied one-room accommodation in decaying tenements; disease and death rates were high as were rates of alcoholism and crime in the city's poorer areas. Those Irish trade unions that did exist were branches of English unions and represented skilled artisans and craftsmen. Despite opposition from the British-based unions, James Larkin and James Connolly, believed that Irish workers should be represented by Irish unions.

### JAMES LARKIN (1876-1947) AND JAMES CONNOLLY (1868-1916)

James Larkin was born to poor Irish-immigrant parents in a Liverpool slum. He started working on the docks at the age of eleven and quickly became a committed trade unionist. A charismatic and extremely enthusiastic speaker, it was not long before 'Big Jim' Larkin attracted attention as an effective organiser and an articulate spokesman for the workers in Liverpool. In 1906 he was employed as a full-time organiser for the National Union of Dock Labourers (NUDL) in Liverpool. In the following year, James Sexton, the general secretary of the NDUL, sent Larkin to Belfast to organise the dockers there. In his first three weeks in the city, Larkin recruited over 400 members for the NDUL. Before long, Larkin came into conflict with Sexton who believed that the survival of his union depended on avoiding strikes. Larkin, on the other hand, was in favour of a militant response to the unfair pay and conditions for workers.

When a long and bitter dockers' strike in Belfast ended in defeat for the workers, Larkin blamed the inaction of the union leaders in England.

Soon afterwards, Larkin moved to Dublin where he organised three successful strikes among the dockers, carters and labourers. In January 1909, after a final disagreement with Sexton, Larkin broke with the British based NDUL and set up the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) to cater for Dublin's unskilled workers. Many founding members of the ITGWU were influenced by syndicalism: the idea that all workers should unite in one great union and use the 'sympathetic strike' to get better conditions.

JIM LARKIN ARRIVED IN BELFAST IN 1907 AND ORGANISED A LABOUR MOVEMENT IN WHICH FOR THE FIRST TIME, CATHOLIC AND NON-CATHOLIC WORKERS UNITED ... SO SUCCESSFUL WAS HE THAT EVEN THE R.I.C. WERE INDUCED TO GO ON STRIKE.

*-Liam Gaynor, I.R.B. Member, Belfast, 1907 -*

By mid 1913, ITGWU membership had grown to more than 10,000. It had founded its own weekly newspaper *The Irish Worker*, and secured Liberty Hall at Beresford Place as its headquarters. The popularity of the union was fuelled by a series of well-publicised strikes in Belfast, Cork and Wexford and Larkin's charisma, drive and obvious compassion for the working class. Despite his famous volatility and arrogance, the labour leader was admired and respected by colleagues such as William Partridge and James Connolly, who worked diligently to help build the Union.

In 1896, Edinburgh-born socialist, James Connolly and his wife Lillie Reynolds arrived in Dublin where he established the Irish Socialist Republican Party (ISRP). Two years later Connolly founded *The Workers' Republic* and used the newspaper to emphasise the role of labour in Irish history in order to forge alliances with republicans. By 1903, the party had failed and Connolly and his family emigrated to the USA where he joined the Socialist Labour Party. A founder member of the Irish Socialist Federation (1907) in America, he also became an organiser with the Industrial Workers of the World, the so-called 'Wobblies'. During this period, he converted to the idea of syndicalism.

“SOCIALISM REPRESENTS THE DOMINANT AND CONQUERING FORCE OF OUR AGE, THE HOPE OF THE WORKER, THE TERROR OF THE OPPRESSOR, THE LIGHT OF THE FUTURE. WORKERS OF IRELAND SALUTE THAT LIGHT, WHEN ONCE IT SHINES FULL ON YOUR VISION THE SHACKLES OF AGES WILL FALL FROM YOUR LIMBS.”

– James Connolly, c. 1891, in Donal Nevin, “James Connolly: A Full Life”–

On his return to Dublin in 1910, Connolly joined the newly formed Socialist Party of Ireland and published his book, *Labour in the Irish History*. In the following year was appointed the Belfast organiser for Larkin's ITGWU and in 1912 the two men founded the Irish Labour Party. Connolly was a capable – if more moderate – second-in-command to Larkin during the 1913 strike and lockout during which he helped to establish the Irish Citizen Army to protect striking workers against police repression. After the defeat of the lockout and Larkin's departure for America in 1914, Connolly became acting General Secretary of the ITGWU and increasingly involved in the revolutionary nationalist struggle.



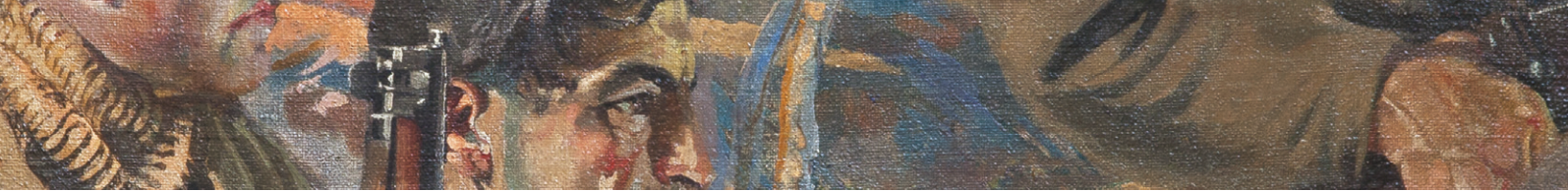
## THE 1913 STRIKE AND LOCKOUT

The 1913 Strike and Lockout is often seen as a conflict between two influential men: 'Big Jim' Larkin and William Martin Murphy, a successful Irish Catholic businessman and chairman of the Dublin United Tramway Company (DUTC). A conservative nationalist and ex-MP, Murphy was also the proprietor of country's best-selling newspaper, the *Irish Independent*, as well as Eason's, Clery's Department Store and the Imperial Hotel. Determined to resist the advance of Larkin's new brand of unionism, and intolerant of any outside interference in his business affairs, the Bantry-born entrepreneur founded the Dublin Employers' Federation in 1912 to unite the city's employers in battle against 'Larkinism'.

On 19 July 1913, when Murphy realised that Larkin was attempting to organise the tramway workers, he called a meeting of his employees to warn them against strike action. Murphy said that he had no objection to men forming a 'legitimate union', but demanded that all DUTC employees withdraw from membership of the ITGWU or face dismissal. On 21 August approximately 100 employees in the parcel service of the tramway company received a dismissal notice: 'As the Directors of the Tramways Company understand that you are a member of the ITGWU whose methods are disorganising the trade and business of the city, they do not further require your service'.

Larkin responded by calling the tramway-men in his union out on strike. Their demands were 'the reinstatement of the dismissed men, unconditionally, more wages [and] shorter hours'. On Tuesday, 26th August 1913 – the first day of the busy Dublin Horse Show – some 200 drivers and conductors pinned their 'red hand' union badges to their lapels and abandoned their trams without warning. Murphy quickly cleared the congested streets and replaced the striking workers with strike-breakers – known colloquially as 'scabs'.





The city was filled with tension as fights broke out between strikers and the workers who continued to operate the trams. On 30th August, members of the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) used batons to charge rioting strikers during which transport union member James Nolan was fatally injured.

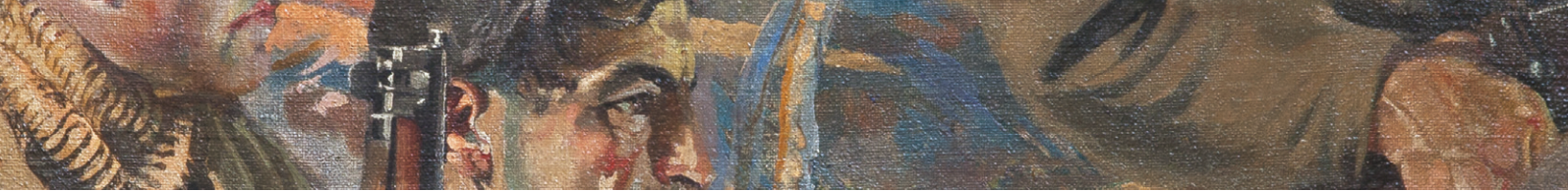
Larkin ignored a police order banning his proposed meeting in support of the striking workers in O'Connell Street on Sunday 31st August. Disguised with a false beard, he entered Murphy's Imperial Hotel and appeared on a balcony on the first floor. He spoke briefly to the crowd before his arrest prompted a riot among supporters. The DMP baton-charged the crowd resulting in two deaths and up to 600 civilian and police injuries. Public criticism of police brutality led to an inquiry, but the committee concluded that 'the officers and men of the Dublin Metropolitan Police and the Royal Irish Constabulary as a whole, discharged their duties throughout this trying period with conspicuous courage and patience. They were exposed to many dangers and treated with great brutality'. Two days after Bloody Sunday, a tenement in Church Street collapsed killing seven and injuring many more. The effect of both these events and financial support from British trade unions, served to strengthen labour solidarity.

In the first week of September, the Dublin Employers' Federation agreed to support the DUTC by locking out any employee who refused to sign a pledge swearing that they would not join the ITGWU. Larkin promptly orchestrated a wave of 'sympathetic strikes', affecting other parts of Murphy's business empire. *The Independent*, was 'blackened' and dockers refused to handle 'tainted goods' destined for Eason's. By the end of the month, the labour dispute involved 20,000 employees across the city along with their 80,000

dependents.

The ITGWU strike wages were insufficient to support workers who were already deeply impoverished before the strike began, and starvation was widespread in the tenements. There was brief alleviation in suffering and a boost in morale in late September when the British Trades Union Congress sent a ship carrying food for the starving families of the Dublin workers. Thousands lined up at Liberty Hall, holding food vouchers. When the British aid was exhausted, many starving workers and their families relied on the bread and soup served at the food centres set up by James Larkin's sister, Delia, and Countess Markievicz.

Upon his release from Mountjoy Prison in September, Larkin travelled to England in an attempt to persuade the British trade unions to call a general work stoppage in support of the Dublin workers. Their refusal was a bitter disappointment for the Dublin labour leaders. In October, English suffragist and social worker, Dora Montefiore proposed that children of strikers could be housed in England during the strike. The unconventional idea appealed to Larkin who decided to send the children of the worst affected families to sympathetic homes in England until the strike was over. Already suspicious of socialism, the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, William J. Walsh, was strongly opposed to the idea, believing that the faith of the Catholic children would be endangered by contact with Protestant proselytisers (people who attempt to convert others to their own faith). Pickets and angry clashes at the docks forced the labour leaders to abandon the idea and the children remained in Dublin, many in dire circumstances. The 'save the kiddies' campaign and Larkin's intemperate language alienated a great many sympathisers to the cause.



There were few supporters of Larkin among the Irish Parliamentary Party, whose mostly middle-class members feared that the strike and lockout would distract attention from their struggle with the Ulster Unionists. Larkin found another opponent in Arthur Griffith, founder of Sinn Féin, who considered socialism to be essentially an English phenomenon and the food ships from England, a dangerous bribe. As the strike worsened, Larkin called on the English unions to prevent English dockers from coming to Ireland to work. When the English unions refused, Larkin denounced them in the strongest terms. As a result, the British unions sent no further aid to Ireland.

Many attempts were made to solve the dispute. In late September, a Board of Trade Inquiry under the chairmanship of Sir George Asquith met representatives of employers and of workers in an attempt to understand and resolve their differences. The employers emphasised that they were not opposed to unions in principle, but the ITGWU threatened the industrial freedom of the city. The recommendations of the Inquiry were that employers should withdraw Murphy's pledge against the union and reinstate the workers in return for the workers' promise not to strike for two years. The employers rejected the proposal as their aim, they said, was to destroy Larkin's union entirely. Furthermore, they were not prepared to reinstate all workers, as it would necessitate dismissing those who had taken their places. The dispute continued.

On 13 November, Larkin left on another tour of England to rally support for the suffering workers. He spoke passionately at a series of torch-lit meetings - known as 'The Fiery Cross' campaign - but failed to bring about a general stoppage in Britain. In the same month, Connolly established the Irish Citizen Army, adopted the 'plough in the stars' as its distinctive flag and soon boasted a membership 500 men. The workers suffered terribly through a bleak Christmas in 1913 during which most strikers lost all hope.

The food ships from England could no longer be depended on, and the cause was doomed when the British trade unions failed to come out in sympathetic strike. The choice was becoming clear — surrender or starve.

The ITGWU leadership met secretly on 18th January and decided to end the strike. Even Larkin conceded, "We are beaten. We make no bones about it". They advised members to return to work but not to sign the employers' document, if possible. In early February, the Builders Labourers Union (about 3,000 men) agreed to sign the document and returned to work. Other workers including the tram workers gradually followed. Within weeks, Murphy and the Employers' Federation claimed victory and declared that 'Larkinism' was completely defeated. Nonetheless, he had succeeded in mobilising the power of the Dublin labour force for the first time and employers would never again treat their employees with casual indifference.

Worn out and frustrated, Larkin left Ireland for America in October 1914 and Connolly took over as General Secretary of the ITGWU and leader of the Irish Citizen Army.

**“ AN ARMED ORGANISATION OF THE IRISH WORKING CLASS IS A PHENOMENON IN IRELAND. HITHERTO THE WORKERS OF IRELAND HAVE FOUGHT AS PARTS OF THE ARMIES LED BY THEIR MASTERS, NEVER AS A MEMBER OF ANY ARMY OFFICERED, TRAINED AND INSPIRED BY MEN OF THEIR OWN CLASS. NOW, WITH ARMS IN THEIR HANDS, THEY PROPOSE TO STEER THEIR OWN COURSE, TO CARVE THEIR OWN FUTURE. ”**

—James Connolly, *Workers' Republic*, 30 October 1915 -