

The Agony of Dublin by T.M Kettle

The Irish Review (Dublin), Vol. 3, No. 33 (Nov, 1913) pp. 441-449

AS a member of the Industrial Peace Committee, I desire to analyse the present posture of events in a spirit of rigorous and even frozen impartiality. That, indeed, is an attitude of mind forced on us all by experience. In the history of class conflict there has never yet been a contending party that was wholly wrong, a mere rotten apple without even a speck of soundness. Wherever Hegelianism may fail, in this field at least it triumphs. There is always a "Yes!" for which something can be said; there is always a "No!" for which something can be said. And the task of humanity – achieved sometimes at a sudden stroke, something after long groping and stumbling and jostling and bludgeoning – is always to find a "Both together!" in which the rational essence of the one shall blend with that of the other.

In economic life these considerations possess a special force and urgency. Labour and capital are ultimates in production. You may, by social arrangements, control the process of distribution; but, if you are to have anything to distribute, you must establish some sort of continuous harmony between your ultimates. Every breach of that relationship impoverishes humanity. Proudhon's definition of property applies exactly to industrial war. Every industrial war is a theft, a theft from society, but especially from the nation in which it is permitted to arise. The modern conscience is not so obtuse as to condemn such warfare as immoral: it merely despises it as too expensive. It is a turbulent monster, humiliating to the intellect, combining the maximum of waste with the maximum of suffering.

Take that to be the social philosophy of the ordinary, prudent man, and compare it with the actual position in Dublin. It is not necessary to draw the picture in minute detail: the picture is there in all its drab tragedy, and no journey need be made to any gallery in order to see it. It is a fine study in Post-Realism. "The Agony of Dublin" is not a phrase of rhetoric; it is merely an under-statement of actual fact.

For eight weeks we, the citizens, of Dublin, have been compelled to be spectators of a very apocalypse of waste, impoverishment, and social disorganisation. And, apparently, the end is not yet. It is very difficult to put a figure even upon the money-loss involved. The Peace Committee has estimated it to be not less than £80,000 to £100,000 a week. Twelve to fifteen thousand pounds a day have been exacted as a tribute of industrial war from a city which, while by no means the poorest, is in point of economic structure the weakest in the Three Kingdoms. For the seven weeks an army of workers, varying from about 12,000 to about 20,000, have been wandering in enforced unproductiveness about the streets. Every branch of transportation – local, Irish, and cross-Channel – has been injuriously affected. The building trade, which counts for so much in a city of few manufacturing industries, has been held up. Manufacturing firms have been forced to discontinue work in part or wholly, either because, like Jacob's, they were themselves storm-centres, or because, as in the case of many small concerns, they were left without raw materials. Commerce, which ordinarily enters Ireland through the port of

Dublin, has been diverted to Rosslare or Greenore, or even further North or South, and there is no assurance that it will ever return. Since 1900 we have been endeavouring, through our Industrial Development Associations, to re-build the business of Ireland. It is the current opinion that in seven weeks Dublin has lost the gains of those thirteen years, and that it will take another thirteen to liquidate her losses.

But it is, above all, the moral deterioration that fills one with sadness and apprehension. Idleness, even on terms of war, is not good for any of us; idleness, shot through with anger, is even worse. There has been, let me say, astonishingly little violence on the part of the workers. There has been practically no drinking. Certain writers upon the subject have commented upon the fact that the workhouses are not only fuller, but are actually less full than before the strike, that outdoor relief has not increased in any notable degree, and that associations of private charity have experienced no unusual strain. They have drawn the conclusion that the workers have, so far, suffered very little. As one who has spent a good deal of the last month tramping through the slums, I am sorry to say that this is not the case. The suffering has been great, but the spirit has been greater. Brush aside all the deplorable personal abuse, all the gutter-journalism with which this struggle has been muddled, and there flashes out, clean and hard as steel, the courage of the workers. But it may well be that the critical moment has come. There is a limit to human endurance, and a point beyond which the belt cannot be tightened.

The whole gamut of melodrama seemed to have been exhausted, but the removal of the children to England struck a new note which is still vibrating through the community. It is very well to talk of the solidarity of labour. It is well to recognise in it a phenomenon of a new order which may, even in our time, shatter and re-integrate on another basis the whole fabric of international politics. But to anyone, who knows the inner lives of the Dublin workers, the willingness of even one Catholic mother to send her child to England, with all the attendant perils to religion, domestic affection, and national feeling is a tremendous fact. It speaks desperation. To me, at any rate, it suggests that if this struggle cannot be composed, and composed very soon, we may find ourselves plunged into a tempest of violence compared with which everything that we have experienced will come to seem like a suave breeze in June. It is not safe to press human nature too far. The man beaten into a corner may, of course, grovel. But he may also act upon the other impulse of despair: he may kill. One need not be an alarmist to tremble at the possible unleashing of madness that may follow upon a continuance of the present state of war.

The employers, on their part, do not delude themselves into the belief that war improves their position or *morale*. Bank overdrafts, however profitable to the banks, do not develop that faculty of courageous enterprise which is the mainspring of business success. An atmosphere in which it is impossible to reason about anything, in which it is possible only to quarrel about everything, does not make for an increase of productivity or of profits. A victory on the "fight to a finish" programme will not cure these evils, for it has got to be remembered that beaten workmen are bad workmen. Guarantees for peace are asked for. If the employers were looking for a guarantee for the early outbreak of a new war, they well know that they could not

find any so infallible and indefeasible as the peace of starvation. It is only the peace of reason, the peace of honour, that can restore stability to the shaken fabric of industrial Dublin.

Let me disclaim all belief in Æ's economic mythology. The ordinary Dublin employer is neither so big nor so bad as he appears in Æ's stormy vision. That devil's aureole sits ludicrously on him: his chief acquaintance with the devil has been established through the medium of the latter's tail, which he is constantly pulling. The pageant of luxury, such as we have it in Dublin, is provided mainly by the professional and annuitant classes; your ordinary, Dublin employer is not a man of very luxurious or Capuan habits of life. He is not a Napoleon, nor even a captain of industry: he is, as a rule, a hard-working, easy-humoured lieutenant. An illness, which withdraws his personal direction from his business for any considerable time, may very well plunge him into bankruptcy. He has been harried and worried to exasperation – very unjustly, as he thinks – for the last two years by a series of what I have ventured to call strikes-by-telephone. He knows, as everybody knows, that he and his class are the backbone of industrial Dublin. He experiences, if a manufacturer, the acute reality of foreign competition. Despite that, his customers denounce him, his workers denounce him; and so, with his nerves all on edge, full of bewilderment and irritation, finding himself vulnerable at every point, he enlists under the leadership of the invulnerable Chairman of the Tramway Company.

Are we to be told that out of such an imbroglio there is no way except that forked road, one limb of which leads to the Bankruptcy Court, and the other to the workhouses?

Certain citizens of Dublin, who declined to accept any such abdication of reason and enthronement of blind violence, met together and formed the Peace Committee. They were told that the time was not ripe. If they put their noses in – to employ a historic phrase – the noses would be chopped off. At any rate, who were they but a set of academic busybodies? When I myself, on one occasion, mildly suggested that there was such a thing as public opinion, the combatant to whom I made the suggestion merely said: "Damn public opinion !"

The time is always ripe for peace. It was ripe when the tramway-men were locked out, and riper still when the first strike was proclaimed. Opportunity has passed long since into the phase that follows ripeness, but, rotten and moulded as it is, it has got to be eaten. The sooner the better, or rather, to be more accurate, the sooner the less disastrous. For it is no longer a question of achieving positive good so much as one of averting evils still more desperate.

The Peace Committee asked for a truce, on terms to be fixed by a conference, which would then proceed to formulate a scheme of final settlement. We never touched upon the merits of the dispute. So far from meddling with business details, we said deliberately that the adjustment of these must lie with the representatives of the two parties to the dispute. This programme was greeted in some quarters with ill-concealed hostility and unconcealed derision. Why it should be so greeted by the average employer of the type I have described must remain to me an insoluble mystery. The ordinary man does not usually prefer ruin to reason. But new and

powerful forces have entered the field, forces too powerful to be sneered out of it. Is sanity at last to triumph? There must be a conference: when is that conference to come?

I have said that I did not propose to discuss the merits of the dispute or the details of settlement. But to leave undiscussed the attitude of the parties towards a Peace Conference would deprive this paper of all candour and reality. The story is very short. The workers have talked wildly, and acted calmly; the employers have talked calmly, and acted wildly. The workers have, during the dispute, expressed their willingness to enter into conference on the basis of the Askwith Report, or on that of the Peace Committee programme, or on that of the Lord Mayor's memorandum. The employers broke off the Shelbourne Conference, and have declined to take part in any since proposed. (Their reply, should there be any, to the public invitation of His Grace Archbishop Walsh is not, so far, available).

The best case in the world must appear ambiguous if so handled. And the ambiguities do not end there. I confess myself to having shared the general surprise at the procedure pursued in the Court of Inquiry. But the employers were a party to it. To participate in such a court, to raise no objection to its procedure before the verdict, and to go almost together on a condemnation of that procedure after it, is a very ambiguous line of action. Mr. Healy could have called additional evidence regarding Jacob's; he abstained from doing so. He could have invited Mr. Larkin to submit himself for cross-examination, and have enjoyed the alternative advantage of acceptance or refusal. He merely sat there, and held his tongue. This whole policy is, in fact, explicable only on one of three hypothesis. I dismiss as too wicked and too absurd the suggestion that it was motivated by a desire for war, and a starvation-settlement, at any price. But it indicates plainly either (1) a thorough contempt for public opinion which, however sincere, suits ill with these democratic days; or (2) a sad lack of acquaintance with the methods of industrial peace.

One inclines to the last hypothesis. It is borne out by Mr. Murphy's remarkable statement to the effect that the employers of Dublin found themselves suddenly confronted with a situation of which they had no previous experience. I know myself, and everybody knows, that when the employers disclaim all desire to suppress Trade Unionism, they are speaking *ex corde*, and are speaking the plain and obvious truth. But in industrial politics, truth must not only *be* true, it must also *look* true. Had the employers gone to anybody of one-tenth their ability, but with special experience in these matters, he would have given them counsel in something like the following terms:

"No body of employers in England would dream of attempting to proscribe any particular Trade Union. They would know that such a proscription would be instantly interpreted by the labour world as a challenge to the whole principle of Trade Unionism. It would be bound to have on organised labour the same effect of amazement and anger that an attempt by an Irish landlord to clear his estate by eviction would now have on us. For we Irish learned our lesson in agrarian, the English in industrial economics.

"The Trade Union is properly intelligible only on historical, not on logical grounds. You can prove that in theory it is an organised tyranny, an outrage on individual freedom, a privileged corporation. The answer is that, in fact, it has been found to be indispensable, and beneficent. In even seeming to challenge the principle of Trade Unionism you are entrenching yourselves in a position long since abandoned in England as hopeless."

But if the employers have, as it seems to me, been careful to put themselves wrong in all these respects with public opinion, that in no way touches the merits of the case. One note there was in some of their utterances, absent or all but absent, from those on the other side, a sincere warmth of civic patriotism, a pride in and a care for Dublin the city, Dublin the capital. And as Mr. Larkin has, in his later phase, been at some pains to estrange public opinion from the side of which he is spokesman, the parties meet on an equality. The necessary Conference becomes all the easier.

The last objection is, that the Conference would be bound to be fruitless. It would go to pieces on one of three rocks – (1) guarantees; (2) reinstatement; (3) Mr. Larkin.

I dismiss (2) at once. It is the sort of mess that has to be tidied up after every industrial war, and it can be tidied up only by negotiation.

As to guarantees, the position is not clearly understood. You cannot in these days exchange hostages, to be hanged in the event of a breach. Nor can you, as the employers suppose, repeal the Trades Disputes' Act, and get back to the Taff Vale decision. These things are cryingly impossible. But you can, if you hammer out a treaty of peace, get that treaty signed by the responsible heads of the Trade Union movement in England. That means that, if the Dublin workers should violate the treaty, there would, in future strikes, be no food-ships and no strike-levies from England to help them.

As to (3) it is complained that Mr. Larkin is at present a dictator, untrammelled by any constitution. The Askwith Report trammels him with a constitution.

Since that Report seems to have been flung unread into the waste-paper basket, or, if read, then read in a temper and misunderstood, let me recapitulate the rubrics of agreement contained in it either explicitly or by implication.

1. It provides for the recognition of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. Upon this might be grafted a constitution ensuring to each member his due voice in the appointment of officials.
2. It provides for, what I have called, the inner departmentalisation of the Union. Disputes, instead of remaining as they are, general, are to be isolated by the classification of the industries into groups, each group having its own Conciliation Committee. This doctrine of *isolation* is now accepted everywhere as the true specific against disturbance of the whole life of the community.
3. It provides for a delay of at least a month before either a strike or a lock-out can be proclaimed in any group. If there be grafted on this a provision

that no strike or lock-out shall take place, except as determined by a ballot of those affected, a further delay of a fortnight would be secured. And, obviously, the declaration of industrial war is the one department of industrial life in which delay always yields a dividend. The ballot would further remove every lightest suggestion of dictatorship.

4. It sets up an impartial tribunal for the investigation of alleged breaches of agreement. Should either side be held guilty of such breach, it is to be a term of the treaty that "no support whatever be given by the respective Association, or by any affiliated Associations, to the parties responsible for the breach."

Some critics have treated the Askwith Report as if it were a unique thing that had suddenly fallen out of the moon. It outlines, on the contrary, the sort of *modus vivendi*, hammered out by long and bitter experience, by which the relations of labour and capital, in nearly all the great industries in England, **are regulated**.

To say that such a programme offers no basis of discussion in Dublin is to proclaim the bankruptcy of Dublin in the two great economic requisites, commonsense and good-will. It has been observed that Trade Unionism in England wears a complexion different from that which it manifests in Ireland. That is because in England both parties recognise a third party to their quarrels – namely, the Public. Public opinion is with them the ultimate tribunal which decides the issue of industrial wars, and they are anxious to keep right with it.

Since in Ireland, as a result of political calamities, public opinion hardly exists, let us create it!