

Labour in Dublin by James Connolly

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HAVING been asked by the Editor of the *Irish Review* to contribute for this month's issue a statement of the position of Labour in the present crisis in Dublin, and having gladly consented, I now find myself to be in somewhat of a difficulty in setting the limits and scope of my article. I know not whether to restrict myself to a simple setting forth of the merits or demerits of the present dispute, or to carry my history further afield, and outline our general ideas and our general view of the history and prospects of that section of the population of Ireland to which we belong, to wit, the Working Class. I would like to do both, but to do either would require not merely an article but a volume in itself. Hence, in whatever there may be of scrappiness or indefiniteness of purpose in the writing of this article, the reader may detect the influence of that doubt as to how much I should attempt, and how much I should leave to other occasions, and perhaps to other pens.

Ireland is a country of wonderful charity and singularly little justice. And Dublin being an epitome of Ireland, it is not strange to find that Dublin, a city famous for its charitable institutions and its charitable citizens, should also be infamous for the perfectly hellish conditions under which its people are housed, and under which its men, women and children labour for a living. No need for me to repeat here the tale of the vast proportion of the total families of Dublin who live in homes of one room per family, nor yet to tell of the figures given us year by year by Sir Charles Cameron – figures which drive home the fact that the high death rate of Dublin is in exact proportion to the class to which the victims belong, a death rate falling with the wealth of the people and rising with their poverty. All these things ought to be familiar to every true patriot; if they are not, it is a sure sign that their patriotism takes no stock of those things which make for or against the well-being and the greatness of peoples.

But whilst there have been long available statistics of the high rents and poor housing of the Dublin working class, there have not been, and are not even now available, statistics of the *wages* and *labour conditions* of *Dublin*.

The information which might be supplied to the general public by such statistics has for the most part been left to be gathered piecemeal by the workers themselves, and to be applied piecemeal in an unconnected fashion as it became necessary to use it for purposes of organisation and agitation. Used in such fashion, it was never collected into one co-ordinated whole, as for instance, Mr. Rowntree has given us in his study of the conditions of York, or Mr. Booth in his study of the East End of London. One reason for this neglect of the social conditions of Dublin has been that in Ireland everything connected with the question of poverty insensibly became identified with one side or the other in the political fight over the question of national government. The reform temperament, if I may use such a phrase, could not escape being drawn into the fight for political reform, and the Conservative temperament quite as naturally became a pawn in the game of political reaction.

Now it is well to remember that a conservative temperament is not naturally allied to social abuses or industrial sweating, but may be, very often is, the most painstaking of all the elements making for the correction of such abuses within certain limits; it is also well to be clear upon the fact that a readiness to fight or even to die for national freedom might co-exist in the same person with a vehement support of industrial despotism or landlord tyranny. Thus it has happened that all the literary elements of society, those who might have been, under happier political circumstances, the champions of the downtrodden Irish wage labourer, or the painstaking investigators of social conditions, were absorbed in other fields, and the working class left without any means of influencing outside public opinion. As a result, outside public opinion in Dublin gradually came to believe that poverty and its attendant miseries in a city were things outside of public interest, and not in the remotest degree connected with public duties, or civic patriotism. Poverty and misery were, in short, looked upon as evils which might call for the exercise of private benevolence, but their causes were to be looked for solely in the lapses or weaknesses of individual men and women, and not in the temporary social arrangements of an ever-changing industrial order.

In this Dublin, with all this welter of high political ideals and low industrial practices, vaulting Imperialism and grovelling sweating, there arose the working class agitator. First as the Socialist, analysing and dissecting the difference between the principles and practices of the local bosses of the political parties, drawing attention to the fact that wages were lower and rents higher in Dublin than in England, that railwaymen received in Ireland from five shillings to ten shillings per week less for the same work than they did in England, that municipal employees were similarly relatively under-paid, that in private employment the same thing was true, and that the Irish worker had fought everybody's battles but his own. That there was no law upon the Statute Book, no order of the Privy Council, and no proclamation of the Lord Lieutenant which compelled, or sought to compel, Irish employers to pay lower wages than were paid for similar work in England, or Irish house-owners to charge higher rents. That the argument about struggling Irish industries as opposed to wealthy English ones was being used to bolster up firms which had been so long established that their position was as secure as that of any English firm; and yet, sheltering behind this argument, they continued to pay sweating wages of the worst kind.

It was further insisted that as the Irish farmer had only succeeded in breaking the back of Irish landlordism by creating a public opinion which made allegiance to the farmer synonymous with allegiance to Ireland, which treated as a traitor to Ireland all those who acted against the interests of the farmer, so the Irish Working Class could in its turn only emancipate itself by acting resolutely upon the principle that the cause of Labour was the cause of Ireland, and that they who sought to perpetuate the enslavement and degradation of Labour were enemies of Ireland, and hence part and parcel of the system of oppression. That the conquest of Ireland had meant the social and political servitude of the Irish masses, and therefore the re-conquest of Ireland must mean the social as well as the political independence from servitude of every man, woman and child in Ireland. In other words, the common ownership of all Ireland by *all* the Irish.

Into the soil thus prepared there came at a lucky moment the organisation of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. This Union has from its inception fought shy of all theorising or philosophising about history or tradition, but, addressing itself directly to the work nearest its hand, has fought to raise the standard of labour conditions in Dublin to at least an approximation to decent human conditions. To do this it has used as its inspiring battle-cry, as the watchword of its members, as the key-word of its message, the affirmation that "An injury to one is the concern of all" – an affirmation which we all admire when we read of it as the enunciation of some Greek or Roman philosopher, but which we are now being asked to abhor when, translated into action, it appears in our midst as "The Sympathetic Strike." I am writing without time to consult my books, but I remember that one of the Wise Men of old, when asked "What was the most Perfect State," answered "That in which an injury to the meanest citizen was considered as an outrage upon the whole body." And the reply has come down the ages to us as the embodiment of wisdom. Is it an illustration of the conflict between our theories and our conduct that the lowest paid, least educated body of workers are the only people in Ireland who try to live up to this ideal, and that this attempt of theirs should lead to their being branded as outlaws?

What is the Sympathetic Strike? It is the recognition by the Working Class of their essential unity, the manifestation in our daily industrial relations that our brother's fight is our fight, our sister's troubles are our troubles, that we are all members one of another. In practical operation, it means that when any body of workers are in conflict with their employers, that all other workers should co-operate with them in attempting to bring that particular employer to reason by refusing to handle his goods. That in fact every employer who does not consent to treat his workpeople upon a civilised basis should be treated as an enemy of civilisation, and placed and kept outside the amenities and facilities offered by civilised communities. In other words, that he and his should be made "tabu," treated as unclean, as "tainted," and therefore likely to contaminate all others. The idea is not new. It is as old as humanity. Several historical examples will readily occur to the mind of the thoughtful reader. The Vehmgerichte of Germany of the Middle Ages, where the offending person had a stake driven into the ground opposite his door by orders of the secret tribunal, and from that moment was as completely cut off from his fellows as if he were on a raft in mid-ocean, is one instance. The boycott of Land League days is another. In that boycott the very journals and politicians who are denouncing the Irish Transport Union used a weapon which in its actual operations was more merciless, cruel and repulsive than any Sympathetic Strike has ever yet been. And even the Church, in its strength and struggles when it was able to command obedience to its decrees of excommunication, supplied history with a stern application of the same principle which, for thoroughness, we could never hope to equal. Such instances could be almost indefinitely multiplied. When the peasants of France rose in the Jacquerie against their feudal barons, did not the English nobles join in sympathetic action with those French barons against the peasantry, although at that moment the English were in France as invaders and despoilers of the territory of those same French feudal barons? When the English peasantry revolted against their masters, did not all English aristocrats join in sympathetic action to crush

them? When the German peasantry rose during the Reformation, did not Catholic and Protestant aristocrats cease exterminating each other to join in a sympathetic attempt to exterminate the insurgents? When, during the French Revolution, the French people overthrew kings and aristocrats, did not all the feudal lords and rulers of Europe take sympathetic action to restore the French monarchy, even although doing it involved throwing all industrial life in Europe into chaos and drenching a Continent with blood?

Historically, the sympathetic strike can find ample justification. But, and this point must be emphasised, it was not mere cool reasoning that gave it birth in Dublin. In this city it was born out of our desperate necessity. Seeing all classes of semi-skilled labour in Dublin so wretchedly underpaid and so atrociously sweated, the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union taught them to stand together and help one another, and out of this advice the more perfect weapon has grown. That the Labour movement here has utilised it before elsewhere is due to the fact that in this city what is known as general or unskilled labour bears a greater proportion to the whole body of workers than elsewhere. And hence the workers are a more moveable, fluctuating body, are more often as individuals engaged in totally dissimilar industries than in the English cities, where skilled trades absorb so great a proportion, and keep them so long in the one class of industry.

Out of all this turmoil and fighting the Union has evolved, is evolving, among its members a higher conception of mutual life, a realisation of their duties to each other and to society at large, and are thus building for the future in a way that ought to gladden the hearts of all lovers of the race. In contrast to the narrow, restricted outlook of the capitalist class, and even of certain old-fashioned trade-unionism, with their perpetual insistence upon "rights," this union insists, almost fiercely, that there are no rights without duties, and the first duty is to help one another. This is indeed revolutionary and disturbing, but not half as much as would be a practical following out of the moral precepts of Christianity.

For the immediate present, the way out of this deadlock is for all sides to consent to the formation of a Conciliation Board, before which all disputes must be brought. Let the employers insist upon levelling up the conditions of employment to one high standard; treat as an Ishmael any employer who refuses to conform, and leave him unassisted to fight the battle with the Union; let the Union proceed to organise all the workers possible, place all disputes as to wages before the Board for discussion, and only resort to a strike when agreement cannot be reached by the Board; and as all employers would be interested in bringing the more obdurate and greedy to reason, strikes would be rare. And when strikes were rare, the necessity for sympathetic strikes would also seldom develop.

Thus we will develop a social conscience, and lay the foundation for an orderly transformation of society in the future into a more perfect and a juster social order.