

'HAVE YOU IN IRELAND ALL GONE MAD' - the 1918 General Strike Against Conscription

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There are probably few major events in twentieth century Irish history which have received less attention than the general strike against conscription, although it was the most successful demonstration of workers political power in the revolutionary decade and provided the strongest practical demonstration of mass public opposition to British rule during those years, at least in the 26 counties that would constitute the Irish Free State in 1922.

The proposals put forward by the Labour representatives for fighting conscription were also the most comprehensive and innovative of any organisation involved in the campaign. If adopted they would have radically changed the nature of the struggle for independence.

Unfortunately, the very success of the first general strike in Irish history intensified divisions within the Labour movement between a rapidly emerging, nationalist oriented and largely Catholic working class in the 26 counties and its long established Protestant counterpart in Belfast and the hinterland, which identified with Britain and the Empire. The dynamics of the conscription crisis made this breach both inevitable and irreversible when the Catholic Church decided to actively support opposition to the measure and a pan-nationalist front was established that ranged from constitutional to militant nationalists and the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (ILP&TUC).¹

For all these reasons it is an event well worth revisiting.

Strains within the Irish Labour movement before the Conscription Crisis

A breach within Labour's ranks had been avoided in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising by Thomas Johnson's deft balancing act at the ILP&TUC conference in Sligo in August of that year. He used his presidential address to pay tribute to all those 'who gave their lives for what they believed to be the Cause ... of Liberty and Democracy and for Love of their Country'. He reminded delegates of their common opposition to partition and conscription, describing the latter as 'the crowning act of degradation' imposed 'on the British people. Whatever may be

¹ The Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party reversed its title to the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress in 1918 in anticipation of a general election it then decided not to contest. In this essay the ILP&TUC is used throughout.

debited against Militant Nationalism in Ireland, to its credit must be written the freedom of our people from that tyranny!’²

Initially conscription proved an easier issue on which to agree a common policy than partition. As the demands of the front drained manpower reserves in 1917 British public opinion grew increasingly susceptible to press campaigns to extend the draft across the Irish Sea. In early October, the ILP&TUC executive adopted a resolution, forwarded to the government and the British Labour Party, warning them it would call ‘upon all trade unionists to prepare to resist, by every means, the imposition of compulsory military service on the Irish people’. Far from being uneasy at such a policy some Belfast trade union leaders, such as Dawson Gordon of the Belfast Flax Roughers and Yarn Spinners Union, felt it did not go far enough.³ Subsequently a deputation was sent to London to put its’ views before British Labour Party leaders and, in November, the ILP&TUC Executive agreed a draft programme addressed to ‘The Working Men and Women of Ireland’, declaring Congress’s ‘determined antagonism to Conscription’.⁴

The Crisis: Belfast leads the way

It was the German offensive in March 1918 that made the threat of conscription a reality. Recruitment in Ireland had fallen to 80 men a week, and a petition signed by over 100,000 people in Britain, including 46 MPs, had been submitted to parliament demanding conscription on the neighbouring island. With the prospect of raising the call up age from 42 to 48 or 50, and sending teenagers to the front, Lloyd George’s coalition government had to be seen to be doing something to find Irish replacements of prime military age. When T. P. O’Connor, who often acted as a conduit between the Irish Party leadership and the British government, remonstrated that the introduction of conscription could cost a hundred lives in Ireland, the Prime Minister said, ‘the English people who are sending their sons to the war would not care if it cost ten thousand’. John Dillon pleaded with Lloyd George’s predecessor, Herbert Henry Asquith, to support his call for Home Rule to be introduced before conscription. Asquith’s response was as blunt as Lloyd George’s, ‘Conscription first and then self-determination’.⁵ Appeals to Labour members of the War Cabinet such as George Barnes, a supporter of Dublin workers in the 1913 Lockout, fared no better. He called on Irish workers over the heads of the ITUC&LP Executive not to oppose conscription, assuring them that ‘Home Rule is right ahead’.⁶

If conscription pitched the conflicting aims of nationalist Ireland and the British Empire against each other in the starkest terms imaginable, it might still have been possible for Irish labour to have retained its own distinct voice by posing the choice in class terms, as Thomas Johnson and

² Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Annual Report 1916*, pp. 21-2

³ Johnson, T Ms 1,115/3 NLI

⁴ Johnson, T BMH WS 1755 and Ms 17,115/5 (i) NLI

⁵ Correspondence from T P O’Connor to John Dillon, Dillon Papers 6730/176-177, TCD

Philips, A *The Revolution in Ireland, 1906-1923*, Longman’s And Company, London, 1926, p.150

⁶ *Irish Times* April 22nd, 1918

David Campbell attempted to do. Campbell, as Congress Treasurer and a representative of the Belfast Trades and Labour Council on the ITUC&LP executive was, like Johnson, one of the most senior Northern figures in the movement. When the British government introduced the Military Service Bill to the House of Commons on April 9th, 1918, Campbell and Johnson lobbied the TUC in London and organised the first anti-conscription protest in Ireland on Saturday April 14th, at Belfast's Custom House steps.⁷

Posters were distributed in the city warning workers that:

'Once a man is a soldier he may be compelled under pain of being SHOT FOR DISOBEDIENCE to work at his own or any other trade, at soldier's pay with his gaffer an officer over him.

'THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT THE POWER BEHIND THE GOVERNMENT IS AIMING AT. The Capitalists, Bankers and Landlords of England fear social revolution after the War, they fear the rising discontent of the workers, the coming into power of the people, and they mean to save their power and their privileges. THE IRON HEEL HAS BEGUN TO WORK!

'THAT IS THE REAL PURPOSE OF THE BILL!'

They predicted that, 'All active Trade Unionists, branch presidents, secretaries, shop stewards' and young men generally 'would be forced into military service... Now is the time to resist, before the Bill becomes law'.⁸

Johnson and Campbell stressed in their speeches that all occupations were at risk, including skilled trades where Protestant workers predominated. They could expect soldiers' pay of 1s or 1s 6d a day, rather than the 10s to 30s they currently enjoyed. In his speech notes Johnson said Nationalists were being offered the promise of Home Rule if they served in the army, but loyalists faced an uncertain fate. 'Despite your Covenants - when you are all soldiers you will be helpless. If likely to be active in opposition to Home Rule you will be shipped to England, or France or Mesopotamia, or anywhere the Government likes'. Johnson conceded, characteristically, that, 'These are considerations of a somewhat sordid character'. He now appealed to his audience on a 'Higher Plane', telling workers that, 'No Nation has the right to impose on another nation the necessity of choosing between serving in their army or resisting'. This was the 'Breeding of hatred between the democracies'. On a 'Still Higher Plane. No external power has the right to say to a man go and kill', which 'Must be left to one's own conscience.'⁹

Some 10,000 people attended the rally and a second meeting was called three days later at City Hall only to be broken up by loyalist shipyard workers. Johnson received a bad cut on the head from a lump of concrete in the melee. Normally discreet about his

⁷ Johnson T BMH WS 1722

⁸ Ms 17,115/10(i) NLI

⁹ Ms 17,115/9/(2-5) NLI

union activities the unwonted publicity cost him his job as a commercial traveller with Day and Company for this display of 'disloyalty' to the Crown. He would soon find a new occupation as secretary of the Mansion House Committee, which was established in Dublin on April 18th to campaign against conscription. Meanwhile Johnson's fears about the Bill rapidly becoming law were confirmed when it received the Royal Assent on the same day.¹⁰

Bill O'Brien - Southern Labour follows Sinn Fein's lead

The Irish Party had already withdrawn from Westminster on April 16th, when the Bill passed all stages in the House of Commons. These events, compressed into less than a week, not alone marked a rapid escalation in the conscription crisis but in its effects on the labour movement. The prospects for a united front across the island had always been slim and the Easter Rising had crystallised conflicting loyalties within Labour ranks. Many leading activists in Dublin had been active participants in the Rising and many others were interned afterwards. Meanwhile in Belfast loyalist workers would have been among the Ulster Volunteer Force members deployed to protect locations such as the shipyards and docks so that troops could be despatched to suppress the insurrection in Dublin. If the Rising consolidated the primacy of the separatist tradition in the capital it posed new problems of class and national identity in its northern counterpart.

The key figure in the strategic realignment in the South, as was so often the case in these years, was Bill O'Brien, Johnson's successor in 1917 as president of the ILP&TUC. He had already blocked an attempt by Johnson to seek an invitation to the Irish Convention for Congress. This had been the British Government's last ditch attempt to bring constitutional nationalists and Unionists together in search of a mutually acceptable resolution to the Home Rule crisis.¹¹

By early 1918 O'Brien enjoyed a prominence within militant nationalism unequalled among labour leaders. A veteran of the 1913 Lockout, confidante of the 1916 martyr, James Connolly, and a post-Rising internee, on his release O'Brien played a leading role in establishing the Prisoners Dependents Fund and, subsequently, in the North Roscommon and South Longford by-elections. He attended Count Plunkett's conference to explore the possibility of building a pan nationalist front in 1917 and his name headed the list of signatories on the declaration seeking 'complete independence' for Ireland issued afterwards, ahead of Arthur Griffith, Cathal Brugha, Fr Michael O'Flanagan and Count Plunkett himself. O'Brien resigned from the committee because of concerns within the labour movement that he was growing too close to

¹⁰ Morgan, *A Labour and Partition*, Pluto Press, London, 1991, Pages 195, Gaughan, *J A Thomas Johnson*, Kingdom Books, Naas, 1980, p. 88

¹¹ Significantly, a handful of Belfast trade unionists attended the Irish Convention, along with James McCarron from Derry, who was a former ILP&TUC President with Irish Party affiliations

Sinn Fein. Nevertheless, he remained a member of the Prisoners' Dependents Fund, keeping a foot in both the revolutionary nationalist and labour camps.¹²

On April 8th 1918 that ever-reliable political weathervane, Alderman Alfie Byrne, MP for the Harbour Division of Dublin, proposed at Dublin Corporation:

'That this Council, representing all sections of the City of Dublin, hereby warns the Government against any attempt to force Conscription on Ireland, and we earnestly request them not to be driven by a hostile, anti-Irish Press campaign into seriously considering any such insane proposal which, if put into operation, would be resisted violently in every town and village in the country.'

Lorcan Sherlock, who had been Dublin's Lord Mayor during the 1913 Lockout, then put an amendment accepted by Byrne that the Lord Mayor invite 'Mr John Dillon, Mr de Valera, Mr Joseph Devlin, Mr Arthur Griffith and the Irish Trade Union Congress' to 'meet him in conference to arrange for united opposition to conscription, and to consider the advisability of establishing an all-Ireland covenant on the subject'. To O'Brien's naturally suspicious mind this sounded highly choreographed.

Only three members voted against: Aldermen David Quaid and William Dinnage, and Councillor William Coulter. Dinnage and Coulter were Unionists and Quaid was a former Unionist who sat as an Independent.¹³

O'Brien immediately put out feelers to Sinn Fein through ITGWU organiser Cathal O'Shannon, to establish if a common front was possible between militant nationalism, labour and the Irish Party against conscription. O'Shannon was an obvious choice. As well as editing the union's *Voice of Labour* newspaper, he was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, as O'Brien probably was at this time. 'We feared they mightn't favour the idea of working with the Irish Party', O'Brien recalled later of Sinn Fein. 'But still, if they did, they could get away with it'. The implication was that the ILP&TUC could not 'get away with it'. It was a very different strategy to that adopted by Johnson and Campbell in Belfast. O'Brien was willing to sink Labour's political identity into a common venture with Sinn Fein, the Irish Volunteers and Irish Party. Whether he realised at the time that the Catholic Church would become the senior partner in this enterprise is unclear, but it would have enormous implications for the Labour movement.¹⁴

For the Irish Party it was a last desperate attempt to save itself. It's recently deceased leader John Redmond had pinned his hopes on the failed Irish Convention. His successor, John Dillon realised it had no recourse but to adopt Sinn Fein's policy of boycotting Westminster and joining the campaign against conscription on the ground. As one confidante of Joe Devlin put it:

'If Sinn Fein appears to occupy or arrogates to itself the position of expressing the united will, the political consequences will be bad.... The idea that the

¹² O'Brien, W BMH WS 1766, Morrissey, *William O'Brien 1881-1968: Socialist, Republican, Dail Deputy, Editor and Trade Union Leader*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2007, Pages 146-7, O'Brien, *Forth the Banners Go*, Three Candles Press, Dublin, 1969, pp. 137-153

¹³ *Dublin Corporation Minutes*, April 8th, 1918

¹⁴ O'Brien, W *Forth the Banners Go*, pp. 163-4

alternative to resistance is death or mutilation under incompetent generalship in Flanders, for no result, is universal... and will stiffen the resistance of the slackest.’¹⁵

Catholic Hierarchy opposes Conscription

Dr William Walsh, Archbishop of Dublin, also anticipated events and ensured the Catholic Church would be strategically placed at the centre of a pan Catholic nationalist front to oppose Conscription. This not alone involved drawing the various, previously warring factions of nationalist Ireland together, but neutralising the influence of Cardinal Logue, who was opposed to any direct confrontation with the British authorities. Much of the choreography was arranged through close associates such as his secretary, Fr Michael Curran and political allies such as the current Lord Mayor of Dublin, Lawrence O’Neill.

The Mansion House Conference met in Dublin on April 18th, the same day as the Military Service Bill received the Royal Assent and the Catholic Hierarchy gathered in Maynooth. The national committee selected that day in Dublin consisted of John Dillon, Joe Devlin and William O’Brien MP, from the All for Ireland League, all veterans of constitutional nationalism; Eamon de Valera and Arthur Griffith from the Irish Volunteers and Sinn Fein, and no less than three Labour representatives, Thomas Johnson from Belfast, Michael Egan from Cork and, of course, Bill O’Brien. Johnson, the only Protestant present, and English to boot, was now acting as secretary to the Committee. Its members adjourned to Maynooth to receive the bishops’ blessing to pursue all means of resisting conscription ‘consonant with the laws of God’.

Equally significant was the decision to adopt the local parish as the basic organisational unit through which affiliates to the anti-conscription campaign would co-ordinate their activities. Almost invariably this meant that the parish priest would chair the local committee and retain control of funds. Only ten per cent of all monies raised would be remitted to the Mansion House Committee.¹⁶

Meanwhile the ITUC&LP organised a special delegate conference in the Mansion House on April 20th to call a general strike for the following Tuesday, April 23rd. Dublin’s Lord Mayor Laurence O’Neill opened the proceedings by telling delegates, ‘Ireland to-day stands united (cheers). Her priests are with her people and her people are with her priests (cheers)’.¹⁷ It was so respectable that even William Martin Murphy’s *Irish Independent* supported it, although the newspaper insisted on referring to the strike as a ‘national holiday’ against conscription, as did the *Cork Examiner*. Government offices, the Courts, the Dublin Stock Exchange and post offices remained open but most businesses closed, as well as the railway companies, except for the Great Northern Railway (GNR). Even the latter had no branch line services out of Newry and Dundalk. The British military provided some emergency transport and brought Mail Boat passengers

¹⁵ Letter to Joe Devlin from P Donovan April 15th, 1918. Dillon Papers, 6730/193 TDC

¹⁶ When the conscription threat ended most of the funds were spent locally on ‘ecclesiastical charities’. Mitchell, A *Revolutionary Government in Ireland: Dail Eireann, 1919-1922*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1995, p. 58

¹⁷ Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party, *Annual Report 1918*, p. 39

stranded at Dun Laoghaire into Dublin. Schools run by religious orders and most National Schools closed, and in the few schools where teachers did turn up the pupils didn't. Hotels in Dublin were 'visited' in the morning. Waiters, cooks and other service staff were called out, leaving guests to fend for themselves. Jarveys were called off the hazards at 10 am and vehicles en route to Punchestown races were turned back.¹⁸

On the day itself, Dr Walsh called a meeting of his senior clergy to consider how best to combat the threat posed by the spread of 'Bolshevism, anarchy and republicanism', but it does not appear to have taken place because the churches were as packed as on Sundays with 'large numbers of communicants' to be serviced among the trade union congregations.¹⁹ Instead of a central demonstration, unions in Dublin gathered at their respective halls and marched in a body to mass at designated churches. Alfie Byrne presided at the Dublin Boilermakers gathering. Elsewhere, the national and provincial press reported rallies in at least 59 centres, with clergymen presiding at 29 of those for which details of platform speakers are given. Catholic clerics administered the Anti-Conscription pledge and comprised the majority of speakers mentioned by name. They included three Bishops. Elsewhere letters were read out to applause from members of the Hierarchy.²⁰

Cork was one of the few places where the speeches of trade union representatives were reported. Possibly because they were the only speakers on the platform at the National Monument on Grand Parade, but most probably because the principle address was made by Fr Thomas OFSC, the Honorary President of the Cork and District Trades and Labour Council. The *Examiner* estimated that at least 30,000 attended and the crowd, 'if not over demonstrative was the more earnest in its quietness and showed, in the words of the The Very Rev Fr Thomas, OFSC, "grim determination to resist the enforcement of such a travesty on human liberty" as are the proposals of the British Government for the Irish people'. The newspaper reported that the Franciscan had been unanimously elected to chair the meeting and that cheers 'prevented Fr Thomas from speaking for a considerable time'. When he was eventually able to speak, Fr Thomas told the crowd, they were facing

'A crisis unexampled in the history of our country... and to meet it there has leaped into the arena all that is best, all that is highest, and all that's noblest, from North to South, from East to West in Ireland'. He assured the crowd that, 'The Hierarchy have voiced their indignant protests against the ruthless wrong sought to be imposed on our nation by the iniquitous imposition upon us of a tyranny that would drench our land in blood and tears. The leaders of every political school of thought have fused their differences in a determined stand to resist this unjust aggression on a nation's liberty. All honour to those who have done yeoman service in the sacred cause of the Fatherland; but there is a power that controls the destinies of a nation that has to be reckoned with when such grave injustice is attempted. That is the power of the workers. (Cheers)... The workers

¹⁸ *Cork Examiner, Freeman's Journal, Irish Independent, Irish Times*, April 22nd to 24th, 1918

¹⁹ Walsh Laity Files, 1918. Other than the note summoning the meeting there is no record of it having taken place

Irish Independent, April 23rd and 24th, 1918

²⁰ Details from survey of *Cork Examiner, Freeman's Journal, Irish Independent, Irish Times* and provincial papers on the Irish Newspaper Archives website – <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>

are the final and determining power on which rests the decision of any government in enforcing laws, and your presence workers, in such thousands – when you have for the moment paralysed the nation’s work – is eloquent proof of your determination to resist the imposition upon you of a serfdom which the guides of your consciences, the Bishops, have declared to be an oppressive and inhuman law, which the Irish people have the right to resist by every means that are consonant with the laws of God’.

The motion was seconded by Labour Alderman Jeremiah Kelleher who ‘thanked God that the people of Ireland were not under the heel of capitalism’ but ‘were united in Ireland behind their bishops and priests and political leaders all moving as one man, no power on earth would rob them of their rights.’ D Kiely, the Trades Council Vice President, and only other speaker, reiterated Labour’s unity with ‘the Bishops’ and the nation’s ‘political leaders’.²¹ When four local Unionist representatives expressed support for conscription, they were denounced vehemently by Labour activists such as Kelleher, while constitutional nationalists were more restrained in their comments.²² Cork was also unusual in that a women’s rally was held in the City Hall, which was addressed by the Lady Mayoress.

The Most Rev Dr Gilmartin, Bishop of Clonfert, speaking at Ballinasloe was more typical of clerical speakers than Fr Thomas in putting Faith and Fatherland first:

‘Ireland was a distinct nation from England. Her Parliament – a Protestant Parliament – had been extinguished by corruption... which Catholics had no power to resist, and if they had in a sense accepted the fact of a Union it was to avert the evils of anarchy. This country had never accepted identity with England... Under the Union Ireland had decayed, her population had in half a century decreased, her trade had been systematically destroyed and until recent times she was denied freedom of religion and of intellectual development on higher lines.’

He denounced the ‘small minority’ of the population opposed to Home Rule. In case any of his audience was in doubt about why they were out that day he stressed that:

‘The denial of Irish liberty was the basis of the pledge against conscription. They had not only a right to resist; it was a duty to do so, in the case of what the Hierarchy called an “oppressive and inhuman law”, which would leave their fields without workers, their colleges without students, and which would perhaps complete the decay which the past few years had partially arrested.... No one denied the bravery and heroism of those who gave their lives for what they believed was the cause of liberty; but it was one thing to give freely and another and ignoble thing to be forced to die as slaves and no power on earth could conscript a united nation against its will.’²³

²¹ *Cork Examiner*, April 24th, 1918

²² Borgonovo, J *The Dynamics of War and Revolution: Cork City, 1916-1918*, Cork University Press, 2013, page 191

²³ *Irish Independent*, April 24th, 1918

The largest contingent of secular speakers listed were Irish Party MPs and county councillors, followed by a thin smattering of Sinn Fein and Volunteer representatives. Only four Labour speakers are mentioned - Harry Broderick, chair of Athlone Trades Council and Jonathan Cronin, chair of the Limerick Trades Council, who both presided at local anti-conscription rallies, and M Doyle (NUR) and B Lindop of Bray Trades Council who spoke outside the Town Hall. Given the political and commercial interests represented by the national newspapers the emphasis on Irish Party and business representatives was predictable. The Unionist press highlighted the failure of the strike in Belfast and characterised its impact in Derry as no more than a heightened incidence of absenteeism. The nationalist press explained the lack of strike activity in the north by putting it down to warnings issued to Catholic workers that they would lose their jobs if they did not report for work. A detailed study of local newspapers would doubtless reveal more detail about the situation on the ground, but it seems unlikely to change the overall picture of trade union power being overshadowed by the Catholic Church across much of the South and not even extending across the factory floor in much of the North. The administration of the anti-conscription pledge by priests at rallies further emphasised the sacramental nature of the day, cementing the link between secular organisations and the Catholic Church.²⁴

It was left to Cathal O'Shannon, as editor of the *Voice of Labour*, to put a red gloss on the strike. 'In numbers, in spirit, in determination, in resolve, in decision, Labour in Ireland has done nothing in its history to equal this', he declared. Of the ILP&TUC gathering in the Mansion House that endorsed the general strike, he said it was, 'The greatest and most important conference of representatives of Labour ever held in Ireland'. It not alone sent out 'a clarion call' to workers around the country but throughout Great Britain, Europe and the World'. It had 'no parallel outside Russia.... If only Saturday's had been a Congress of Soviets and not of Unions! But, as it is, the Unions have done the next best thing.'²⁵

British Labour reaction to the general strike against Conscription

Men such as O'Shannon and O'Brien were understandably proud of the stand Irish workers were taking against conscription in a continent engulfed by war. Inspired by the Bolshevik revolution, they hoped their example would be taken up elsewhere. However, rhetoric could not disguise the fact that the All-Russian Congress of Soviets did not demonstrate its revolutionary intent by marching in a body to hear mass in the nearest church.

Nor did the call to action reverberate well among the nearest proletarian audiences available in Belfast and Britain. Reactions by senior Labour politicians such as George Barnes, referred to above, were far from the most hostile. A Beech, the secretary of the local Leather Workers Union in Walsall told Bill O'Brien he was 'grieved to receive' his letter seeking support for the anti-conscription campaign. He told him that of his members,:

²⁴ Although two million signatures were reputedly collected for the anti-conscription pledge very few lists have survived. The vast majority were collected by local clergy at parish level and presumably thrown out afterwards.

²⁵ *Voice of Labour*, April 24th, 1918

'Forty-two of a total of 123... are fighting at the Front, some have been wounded, three have paid the sacrifice; and you ask the remainder to pass a resolution condemning the action of conscripting you. I should not like to get you insulted by putting your proposition to them.

'HAVE YOU IN IRELAND ALL GONE MAD'?

'If we do not win, in this terrific struggle, you no more than any of the rest of us will have any rights... Some of Ireland's best sons are fighting with ours, are you going to support them? Or are you going to betray them to the Hun murderers. It is a clear cut issue and unless you are Bolsheviks there is only one answer.'²⁶

Jabez Chaplin, secretary the Amalgamated Hosiery Union in Leicester, told O'Brien:

'I have been all my life and still am a supporter of Home Rule for Ireland. But I take an opposite view altogether from you about Conscription, while you need the assistance – and you do - of British people to protect your Country – while our lads have to go, yours ought too – without Conscription. England before now would have been overrun by the German Devils, and Ireland would have suffered the same. It is most childish to compare your country with Belgium... What I think ought to be done is to give Ireland Home Rule... and I think you should fight it out among yourselves.'²⁷

Writing from London Jim Connell, author of the 'Red Flag', told O'Brien that even Independent Labour Party audiences were reacting with hostility. After one ILP meeting in Dulwich he told O'Brien, 'If you hear one of these days that I have been lynched you must not feel surprised.'²⁸

The hostility was reciprocal. The front page of the next *Voice* carried an 'Open Letter to the English Labour Party' bemoaning 'the malign fate that links our nations'. It accused 'the leaders of the English working class' of 'indifference... to Irish Labour, whose very existence you have ignored.... Before the [Socialist] International we denounce you, traitors to our common class, false to your own people. Accomplices in oppression of the Irish race.'²⁹

However, even as O'Shannon was denouncing the 'English Labour Party' the ILP&TUC executive was writing to the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC and the British Labour Party executive seeking their support to avert the 'massacre and rapine' that would inevitably follow conscription. Both bodies responded with a joint statement recognising that:

'...the passing of the Conscription Act has done more to cement [Irish] ...national unity than any other act could have done. It must be clearly evident to the Government that the attempt to enforce conscription will mean not merely the shedding of the blood of thousands of Irishmen, and Englishmen and Scotsmen

²⁶ O'Brien W Papers, Ms 15,632/3/2 NLI Capitals in the original

²⁷ O'Brien W Papers, Ms 15,653/3/4

²⁸ O'Brien W Papers, Ms 13,961/1/40

²⁹ *Voice of Labour*, May 4th, 1918

too; but also the maintenance of a huge permanent army of occupation in Ireland. To-day every soldier is needed at the western front.'

Acknowledging that Irish agricultural production was vital to the war effort, both bodies appealed to the Government 'on grounds of principle and of expediency alike not to violate the national conscience, and not to jeopardise the whole future of this country ... [by] imposing conscription upon a nation without its own consent, and in face of ... the most determined and united opposition.'³⁰

While it was not exactly a ringing endorsement of the Irish position it was quickly followed by a much stronger resolution from the secretary of the Executive Committee of the London Labour Party on behalf of its 220,000 members, which condemned the extension of conscription to Ireland 'as an outrage against the principles of liberty of small nations and self-determination of peoples and calculated to lead to serious loss of life in Ireland'.³¹ Soon other local Labour Party branches, trade unions such as the 42,000 strong General Union of Textile Workers and trades councils across England, Scotland and Wales were passing similar motions, emphasising the fact that the extension of conscription to Ireland would violate Britain's purported war aims. There was a similar weather change in ILP branches. In many instances this appears to have been prompted by the German Plot arrests of Sinn Fein leaders on May 17th and 18th, 1917, as the following resolution from the Aberdeen branch shows.

It condemned conscription as:

the final and culminating act in the long series of injustices and wrongs suffered by the Irish people at our hands. We further, strongly protest against the folly and iniquity of the policy of arresting and interning Sinn Fein leaders without bringing them to trial and preferring a charge against them.³²

Some British trade union bodies gave more qualified support to the anti-conscription campaign, such as Porth Trades and Labour Council, not far from Tonypandy in the South Wales coalfields, which had witnessed violent clashes between miners, police and military in the 1910-1911 strikes. Its' secretary, Dan Thomas, sent the following resolution to Lloyd George on June 15th, 1918:

- a) 'That this Council strongly protests against the imposition of Conscription on Ireland, till such time as a measure of Home Rule has been definitely decided upon and put in operation in that country.
- b) Re Arrest Sinn Fein Leaders – We demand in the interests and good name of this country, as well as the interests of Ireland, that a definite Charge should be prepared against those arrested, that they should be given a fair trial immediately in their own

³⁰ Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Annual Report 1918*. Pp. 44-5

³¹ CSO/RP/1918/27416 and 14808, NAI, Copy of resolution passed on May 30th, 1918, sent to Edward Shortt, Chief Secretary for Ireland. The secretary of the executive committee of the London Labour Party was the future chairman of the London County Council and senior Cabinet Minister in both Churchill's and Attlee's governments, Herbert Morrison.

³² CSO/RP/1918/27416/ 13692, 16194, NAI

country and by their own countrymen. Further, that they should for the purpose of Defence be allowed to at once see their friends and Solicitor.’³³

A number of Irish branches of ‘amalgamated’ or British based unions based in Ireland passed resolutions that were sent to Shortt, condemning the arrests and opposing conscription, but there were none from the north of Ireland.

Differences between Irish and British trade unionists

The complex divisions within the ILP&TUC re-surfaced at the 1918 annual conference in Waterford, when a Dublin delegate of the British based Railway Clerks Association, William Davin, from the militantly nationalist Inchicore works in Dublin, wanted to know why David Campbell and another Belfast delegate on the Congress executive, J. H. Bennett of the Seamen’s and Firemen’s Union, refused to sign the circular calling for opposition to conscription. Davin asked ‘if they wanted conscription’.

Both men were unapologetic. Campbell, who did not bother mentioning that he had organised the first anti-conscription protest in Belfast, said he refused to sign the Congress circular because:

There is no fear of conscription. My opinion is that it is less likely to come now than ever. Therefore, I requested the secretary not to put my name to it. I thought the circular was of an unduly alarmist character and saw no indication of what the Executive seemed to fear and, in the circumstances, I thought I was not justified in signing.

Bennett not alone defended his position but questioned the judgement, if not the motives of his critics. He faced a hostile audience for several reasons, not least a poisonous legacy dating back to the Dublin Lockout and before, when the NSFU leader Havelock Wilson had ordered his members back to work and shown a general antipathy towards champions of syndicalism in the Irish labour movement, and to Jim Larkin in particular. This bad feeling had flared up again in 1918 when Wilson instructed his members not to carry British, Irish or other delegates to the Peace Conference organised in Stockholm by the Socialist International to seek an end to the war. When attacked at an earlier session of the Waterford conference over this, Bennett had not alone defended the union’s action but told delegates, ‘I don’t beg of this Congress to keep us in it’.

He was equally unapologetic about refusing to sign the anti-conscription circular. ‘I did not refuse to sign the statement because I was for conscription: I am against conscription, and I am a Trade Unionist. I refused to sign because I thought the Executive were allowing themselves to be used for political purposes, and there should not be any politics in the Trade Union movement.’ The issue rankled enough for the main debate on conscription to be held behind closed doors.³⁴

³³ CSO/RP/1918/27416, 16755, NAI

³⁴ Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Annual Report 1918*, p. 54

Ironically, Campbell had not alone been one of the first trade union leaders to organise protests against conscription in Ireland but had been a delegate, along with Bill O'Brien, to the abortive Stockholm peace conference. He had spoken against Bennett and the NSFU action during the earlier debate that day about disrupting travel arrangements to Sweden.

A British delegate who, unlike the Irish, succeeded in reaching the Stockholm, was former British Labour Party leader, Arthur Henderson. He had resigned from the War Cabinet to participate in the peace conference. Like most of the British labour leadership Henderson's lack of sympathy for Irish labour during this period was in large part because he relied on Irish Party MPs for information on developments in Ireland.

But there were deeper divisions at work based on the essentially different agendas of British and Irish labour leaders. The majority of British labour leaders supported the main war objective of the British government in defeating Germany and saw their main role as ensuring that war measures such as rationing, taxation or conscription were applied as equitably as possible. Pacifism may have become increasingly influential within their ranks and patriotic outbursts evaporated but for the vast majority there was no question of challenging the state's legitimacy.

By contrast Irish labour did question the right of the British government to rule in Ireland and was increasingly allied with militant nationalism, as manifested by the involvement of many trade union activists in the Irish Volunteers and Sinn Fein, not to mention the remnants of Connolly's Irish Citizen Army. Meanwhile northern trade unionists were coming under increasing pressure from militant loyalism in the work place and from heightened sectarian tensions within the communities where they lived to choose a side. Outside the north-east, the vast majority of Irish workers not alone saw the involvement of the Catholic Church in the anti-conscription campaign as a natural and an essential development if they were to succeed, but welcomed spiritual endorsement for the legitimacy of their actions. Nor did they feel any unease at seeing the general strike being subsumed in the larger cause of national freedom, whatever form that might take. Rather, as Cathal O'Shannon had shown in the 'Open Letter to the English Labour Party' published at the height of the anti-conscription campaign, it demonstrated the widening gap in comprehension between British and Irish labour at every level.

The long term consequences for the labour movement in Ireland of these developments were primarily both negative in the long term. No doubt strategists such as Bill O'Brien relished the *Irish Times* leader after the general strike fretting that:

'The Roman Catholic Church and Nationalist leaders ... have given organised Labour the chance it has been seeking since the time when James Larkin bequeathed his mantle to James Connolly... . It may choose to employ that strength on another occasion... even, perhaps, at the expense of some of its present partners'.³⁵

But the reality was that the movement had been gravely weakened by the Conscription Crisis. The north-south divide emerged once more at the Special Delegate Conference of the ILP&TUC called on November 1st, 1918, to discuss contesting the general

³⁵ *Irish Times*, April 24th, 1918

election. Bennet and the NUS delegation had been expelled before the debate could get under way over the long running controversy centred on the refusal of his members to carry delegates to the Stockholm Peace Conference. This set the scene for an acrimonious debate on the general election. Defeated in their effort to ensure ILP&TUC participation, the Belfast Labour Party contested the Shankill and Victoria constituencies regardless, further deepening the divide sparked by the anti-conscription crisis and leaving the movement weakened in the critical years ahead.³⁶

Irish Labour's blueprint for opposing conscription

Although the British government abandoned its attempts to introduce conscription, ILP&TUC documents provide useful information on how nationalist Ireland might have resisted such a measure. Armed resistance was not a viable option. Membership of the Irish Volunteers may have soared during this period but weapons were pitifully few because the British had confiscated most of them in the aftermath of the Rising. Traditionally attention has focussed on dramatic plans by Cathal Brugha to bring a group of Volunteers to London to assassinate members of the British Cabinet if conscription was introduced. There were also plans to develop a 'block' system in Dublin, converting tenements into fortresses that would allow Volunteers to defend themselves with the use of home-made bombs and hand grenades. If weapons were few, explosives remained surprisingly plentiful because of munitions plants, quarrying and civil engineering projects, including ironically military aerodromes. Such activities certainly gave Volunteers a sense of purpose; it is doubtful if they would have had any positive practical value³⁷

The ILP&TUC came up with more practical proposals to resist conscription, which prefigured the munitions strike during the War of Independence. In an undated 'Plan of Action' the Labour representatives on the Mansion House Committee advised that as the British authorities would probably retain existing recruiting areas with inhabitants 'divided into Classes and Grades as in Great Britain... Within those areas certain trades or occupations will be exempted, unmarried men only will be called upon, and of these possibly none over a certain age.' The aim would be to isolate and divide the population. To counter this strategy, Labour proposed that if any one area or group was targeted every other area must respond as if it was under attack. The ILP&TUC was particularly exercised about Dublin being proclaimed initially as it was considered the most vulnerable area.

Labour called for a director or small executive committee to be established in every area coterminous with the British military districts. These would maintain contact with the Mansion House Committee. The committees should have 'full power to act'

³⁶ Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Annual Report 1918*. Pp. 95-9 and p. 117. The two Labour candidates were James Freeland of the ASE in Cromac (South Belfast) and Robert Waugh of the ASJC in Victoria (East Belfast), two ILP candidates also ran unsuccessfully. Sam Kyle of the amalgamated Workers Union in Shankill (North Belfast) and the barrister S C Porter in Mountpottinger (East Belfast)

³⁷ See for instance Michael Lynch BMH WS 0511 and William Whelan, BMH WS 0369

locally and be responsible for communications with other areas. In their 'Plan of Action' the Labour representatives proposed:

1. Withdrawal of Bank deposits by 'Merchants, farmers, shopkeepers, clergy and all classes'. This was intended to stimulate banks into putting 'pressure on the Government to withhold the [Conscription] Proclamation'.
2. Rail workers to stop for proscribed periods – 'a week or fortnight' – forcing the military to take over railways. 'Steps should be taken to make the efficient working [of the railways] by military very difficult'.
3. General stoppage of work: 'All postal officials, civil service clerks, police and all city and town workers to "down tools"' and appeal to soldiers 'with a view to "sympathetic action"'. This would ensure no area was left isolated to bear the brunt of military attention, and 'to demonstrate to the world that the nation was united in its resolve to resist at any cost'. The Mansion House Conference should 'act strongly in the hope that a sympathetic reaction will take place among the Irish population in Industrial Britain.'

All of these measures were adopted in principle, except, predictably, withdrawal of bank deposits. Unfortunately, there was probably nothing nearer to the hearts of members of the national bourgeoisie than their wallets.

Unlike the subsequent Sinn Fein policy of using the boycott tactic to isolate the RIC, Labour suggested that, 'If police and civil servants can be persuaded to act with the people the battle can be won', because the country would become ungovernable. 'On behalf of the people, the [Mansion House] Conference should promise that all the force of the nation will be used to ensure re-instatement without penalties of all civil servants after the struggle.'

Under the heading of 'Food Harvest', the Labour memorandum advised that:

'Farmers and dealers should be warned against sending any grain, roots, pork or live stock to market for shipment out of the country. Grain be kept in stack as long as possible so as to render Commandeering more difficult. The country must aim at supplying home needs, not to ship food while the crisis lasts. We do not suggest this as a permanent policy – but we must use the most effective economic weapons we have'.

It further proposed that the local Conference 'should consider issuing licences to dealers who will guarantee to trade only for home consumption'. As mentioned earlier, the ILP&TUC was particularly concerned about Dublin and plans by the Irish Volunteers to create a 'block' system there. It predicted that:

'If Dublin were proclaimed a conscripted area and their (sic) ensued armed opposition, a ruthless example would be made of the city by the military. A state of siege set up and the opposition overborne by force and starvation. No prolonged opposition can be made by armed action in the city.

The alternative is: - a united passive resistance. For a week no work to be done except the conveyance of food. Men of military age to remain indoors – men who

are “taken” to be taken singly – not to allow themselves to be rounded up in groups as would happen if they gathered together in public places.

Passive resistance imposes on the Government the responsibility of keeping up food supplies. They dare not starve the city in these circumstances.’

Acknowledging that the Great Northern Railway would probably continue to operate, as it did during the general strike, due to the antipathy of many loyalist NUR members, the memorandum said this should be taken advantage of to bring food supplies into the city, along with seaborne traffic. County Dublin farmers also had a role to play and a rationing system should be established to ensure equity of sacrifice. In a pre-figuration of the Dáil loans launched during the War of Independence, it was proposed that payment for food supplies should be guaranteed by ‘the Nation... when the battle is over’. Arrangements for ‘Cork, Limerick, Waterford, Derry and the larger towns may follow on similar lines’, but, they would have to rely on road transport as ‘rail traffic will be interrupted’.

As for the men arrested and ‘shipped across to England’, the ILP&TUC document said seamen should be called upon to block these ships and, if military vessels were used, it accepted that an appeal to world opinion would probably be the most viable recourse.³⁸

While none of these measures were tried out because conscription itself failed to materialise, it does provide a glimpse of alternative strategies to those adopted during the War of Independence that might have proven at least as effective as the military activity that took place. The speed and comprehensive success of the general strike suggests that such a policy of organised resistance could well have left us with a more benign historical legacy, both in terms of relations with Britain and between North and South, from the struggle for independence.

Chronology

³⁸ Ms 17,115/11, NLI

March 21st, 1918: Germany begins last great offensive on Western Front.

March 24th, 1918, Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, CIGS and a Southern Unionist, tells the British Government he needs to include Ireland in new conscription sweep to make up for losses on the Western Front.

April 9th, 1918: Lloyd George introduces the Military Service Bill in the House of Commons.

April 10th, 1918: An initial statement by the Episcopal Standing Committee of the Catholic Church (Cardinal Logue) warns the British Government of the dangers of introducing such a measure.

April 14th, 1918: Anti-Conscription Rally organised by Belfast Trades Council at the Custom House steps, 10,000 attend.

April 16th, 1918: Conscription Bill passed by the House of Commons by 301 votes to 103. Irish Party withdraws from Westminster.

April 17th, 1918: Rally at Belfast City Hall broken up by shipyard workers. Tom Johnson injured and sacked by his employer for promoting disloyalty amongst the King's subjects.

April 18th, 1918: Military Service Act receives the Royal Assent and becomes law. Ireland is included for the first time and the upper age limit on military service is raised from 42 to 48. Mansion House conference held at which the Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party, Sinn Fein, Irish Volunteers and All-for-Ireland League are represented, but not Cumann na mBan or other women's organisations. Having accepted de Valera's wording (approved in advance by Dr Walsh, Archbishop of Dublin) a delegation goes to Maynooth to receive the blessing of the Catholic Hierarchy. The Hierarchy approves of the Anti-Conscription Pledge adopted by the Mansion House Committee to oppose Conscription 'by the most effective means at our disposal'.

April 20th, 1918: ITUC&LP special delegate conference approves general strike to oppose conscription .

April 21st, 1918: Almost two million people sign the pledge 'to resist conscription by the most effective means at our disposal', usually after mass at church gate stalls. Dr Bernard, Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, appeals for people to not alone support conscription but to volunteer ahead of being conscripted. George Barnes, a Labour member of British government and a strong supporter of locked out workers in 1913 appeals to rank and file Irish trade unionists over the heads of ITUC&LP leadership to support the British war effort.

April 23rd, 1918: ITUC&LP holds first general strike in Irish history. Successful everywhere outside Belfast. Local defence committees are set up in many parts of the country in which trades councils and local formations of the Irish Volunteers form the most important components .

May 3rd, 1918: National Novena in Honour of Our Lady of Lourdes 'to secure a general and domestic peace'.

May 4th: Clan na Gael organises anti-conscription rally in New York. New hard line administration appointed by the British government headed by Field Marshal French as Lord Lieutenant with Edward Shortt as Chief Secretary.

May 8th: The 'German Plot' story published by *The Times* claims to have evidence of a secret alliance between Sinn Fein and the German Imperial government.

May 17th-18th: Most of the Sinn Fein leadership arrested.

June 9th: Lá na mBan – in Dublin the largest contingent is from the Irish Women Workers Union, led by Louie Bennet, Helen Chenevix and Helena Molony. Approximately 2,400 women assemble outside the union headquarters in Great Denmark Street and march to City Hall to sign the women's pledge not to take the jobs of men conscripted into the British army. Other contingents include 400 members of Cumann na mBan and many women's sodalities. The IWWU is the only known contingent in Dublin that did not attend mass as a body beforehand.

June 20th: Field Marshal French threatens to enforce the Military Service Act unless 50,000 Irishmen join the colours but no attempt is made to carry out the threat when the volunteers fail to materialise.

July 3rd: Sinn Fein, Irish Volunteers and Gaelic League banned.

November 11th, 1918: Armistice on the Western Front and the end of the threat to conscript Irish.

| Place | Speakers | Numbers in Attendance |
|-------------|--|-----------------------|
| Dublin | Alfie Byrne MP - Boilermakers | |
| Cork | Fr Thomas Presided | |
| Cork | City Hall – Lady Mayoress | |
| Athlone | H Broderick Presided | |
| Limerick | Mr Cronin President of Trades Council and VRF Hennessy OSA | |
| Derry | Not clear if there was demo | |
| Waterford | Lord Mayor presided and read out letter from Dean Hackett. Rev P F Fitzgerald, Administrator, J Gallagher of the Irish Volunteers, T D Connolly, Gaelic League, P Brett AOH, T Whittle Co Co also spoke and Canon Furlong administered the pledge. | 500 |
| Fermoy | Rev P Casey 'and others' | |
| Nenagh | | |
| Ballyhaunis | | |
| Greenore | | |
| Ennis | | |
| Tipperary | | 5000 |
| Ballinsloe | Most Rev Dr Gilmartin Bishop | |
| Galway | J McDonnell Chair of Co Co and other councillors spoke plus Captain | |

| | | |
|--------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| | Gwynn, W O'Malley, W Doris, W Cosgrave | |
| Mountbellew | Canon Fallon PP Presided. Sir Henry Grattan Bellew and J Haverly SF | |
| Mountbellew II | Very Rev Dr Kielty PP presided and Capt Cleevers | |
| Ballinrobe | Canon D'Alton Presided | |
| Carrigallon | Rev M Kelly | 2000 |
| Ballaghaderreen | Fr O'Donnell | |
| Killtullaght | J Fitzgibbon MP Rev M O'Flanagan | 6000 |
| Claremorris | Mgr Kilkenny DD VG | |
| Castlerea | Canon Harte PP | 2000 |
| Carrick on Shannon | Canon O'Reilly | 1000 |
| Collooney | Most Rev Dr Morrisroe telegraphed meeting signing his name in absentia | |
| Boyle | | 2000 |
| Elphin | | 2000 |
| Fenagh Leitrim | | 500 |
| Gurteen | | 6000 |
| Killina | | 1000 |
| Manorhamilton | Meehan MP | |
| Roscommon | | Several thousand |
| Strokestown | | 3000 |
| Lower Achill | | Every adult in the District |
| Tulsk | | 2000 |
| Roundstone | Fr Donnellan PP | |
| Toomebridge | V Rev J Nolan PP FV Moneyglass presided, Joe Devlin, SFers and Labour speakers | |
| Lurgan | Richard McGhee MP, V Rev M B McConville Presided | |
| Ballymoney | Rev Fr O'Boyle and P O'Boyle solicitor | |
| Omagh | | 1000 |
| Kiltyclogher | Mgr O'Doherty PP VF Presided | 500 |
| Donegal Town | Archdeacon Walker Presided, SF, Hibs and UIL 'have sunk their differences | |
| Newry | | 5000 |
| Killorglin | Rev J Nolan, O'Donnell MP, Rev T Jones, Rev M O'Donoghue, T Foley Co Co and William O'Brien AFI | |
| Killarney | V Rev P J Fitzgerald presided and delivered message from Most Rev Dr O'Sullivan, Rev F Dominic OFM, Rev D F O'Sullivan CC, Rev J Quinlan, Liverpool, Messrs T Sullivan MP, J O'Shea Ch RDC, J T O'Connor JP, J Murphy JP and D Cronin spoke | |
| Buttevant | Philip Harold-Barry High Sheriff or Cork and several clergy | |
| Nenagh | | Hardly six refusals |
| Macroom | V Rev M Higgins PP VF administered | 2000 |

| | | |
|-------------|--|----------------|
| | pledge | |
| Youghal | Rev M Aherne CC presided, Rev M Fitzgibbon CC spoke and Dean's letter read out | 1000 |
| Clonakilty | | |
| Darrara | | |
| Midleton | | |
| Dungarvan | Rt Rev Power | |
| Abbeyfeale | Very Rev P Canon Lee presided, advising resistance but not physical force. | 600 Volunteers |
| Wexford | Most Rev D Codd, Lord Mayor presided, Rev Fr Hone, Administrator spoke | |
| Enniscorthy | Rev J Rossiter Admin, administered pledge, Ver Rev J J Rossiter Superior at House of Missions spoke | |
| Carlow | Rev A Lynam. Admin presided. Rev Fathers Donnelly and Killian, Rev P J Doyle and Molloy MP spoke and M Governey Co Co donated £100. Priests donated £20 each | |
| Bray | Assembled outside Bray Town Hall, Very Rev R F Colahan PP administered Pledge and J M Magee JP, Chair of UDC presided. Captain Donelan MP, Desmond Fitzgerald SF, M Doyle (NUR) and B Lindop, Trades Council also spoke. | |

59 Meetings

21 No details of speakers

TU Speakers Limerick, Athlone and Toomebridge

One woman – Lady Mayoress in Cork, at a separate meeting for women

30 Meetings where Clergy presided and, or spoke and often administered the Pledge – sometimes several of them

Details from survey of *Cork Examiner*, *Freeman's Journal*, *Irish Independent*, *Irish Times* and provincial papers on the Irish Newspaper Archives website –

<https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>