The Irish trade unions, the pseudo-left and the Dublin lockout centenary

Jordan Shilton
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Over the past few months, a series of official events in Dublin and across Ireland have marked 100 years since the great lockout of 1913-1914.

The lockout saw 20,000 workers, led by transport workers on Dublin's trams, fight heroically against vicious attacks by company management and the ruling class. It is an event that looms prominently in the history and collective memory of the Irish working class. Lenin called it at the time "a turning-point in the history of the labour movement and of socialism in Ireland."

The official festivities, however, have been designed to conceal or falsify the political and historical issues raised by the lockout. The events began with a state celebration, held on August 31, 2013, to mark the beginning of the struggle a century ago. Irish president and Labour Party member Michael D. Higgins led the proceedings, laying a wreath at the statue of trade union leader and socialist James Larkin (1876-1947) in the centre of Dublin.

This and the other events that followed were organised and financed by local and national government, with Dublin City Council playing a prominent role. A commemorative stamp was produced for the anniversary, and many buildings, such as the headquarters of the SIPTU (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union), Liberty Hall, have had lockout banners on display.

The large crowd attending the opening event, estimated at around 20,000, demonstrated that, despite all efforts to confine the commemoration to a mere historical remembrance and a display of national unity, working people could not help drawing a parallel between the current conditions facing the Irish population and those that existed in 1913.

As one audience member commented to the *Irish Independent*, "It's nice to be reminded of the way they did it back then. We are not doing enough, getting out there and protesting. Why are we bailing out the banks and the bondholders and then facing cuts to our salaries and cutbacks when we haven't caused this mess when the people in power haven't suffered? The way things are going, people don't have much left in their pockets."

Social conditions for broad sections of the population bear an increasing resemblance to those a century ago. After more than five years of vicious austerity, over three quarters of a million people are at risk of poverty out of a population of just 4.5 million. On the other side of the social divide, the number of billionaires has doubled since 2008. Thousands are emigrating to escape a future that increasingly offers nothing but unemployment and poverty.

Dublin 1913

Early twentieth century Dublin was one of the most impoverished cities in western Europe. The mortality rate was even higher than in London, and the majority of working people laboured in casual jobs for starvation wages. More than one in ten babies died at birth.

Such miserable conditions of life produced increasing militancy within the working class, expressed in the founding of trade unions and a number of smaller disputes in the years prior to 1913. The strongest of the new unions was the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU), founded by Larkin.

When the management of Dublin's United Tramway Company, led by businessman William Martin Murphy, threatened workers who had joined the ITGWU with the sack, it triggered one of the longest and most bitter working class struggles in Irish history.

Murphy, who also owned the notoriously right-wing *Independent* newspaper group, warned workers at a meeting in July 1913 that the full force of the company and employers across the city would be used against resisting workers. At the same time, he was given assurances by the government in London that he could rely on the authorities to deal with any opposition.

In response, tram workers began a strike on August 26, 1913, demanding union recognition and a pay increase from the poverty wages they were earning—abandoning their vehicles at 10 a.m. on Tuesday morning wherever they happened to be. The move was supported by dockworkers, among others. By the following Saturday, all tram workers were on strike.

The authorities reacted with extreme brutality. Workers' demonstrations were violently dispersed. Within the first five days of the strike, two workers had been clubbed to death by groups of police and company thugs. Larkin, as the recognised strike leader, was arrested on August 28, but released on bail shortly afterward. Over the subsequent months, the company and authorities drove workers and their families to starvation, refusing them any assistance with food or other living costs.

The militancy and determination of the workers grew with the savage repression meted out by the authorities, strengthened further by broad solidarity with their struggle from sections of workers across Britain. Shipments of food and clothing were sent to Dublin donated from working people, although they were prevented from taking action in support of the Irish transport workers by the leadership of the British unions.

A plan was developed by working class families in Britain to allow the children of Dublin strikers to be housed with them so that they could be taken care of and avoid the conditions of starvation spreading among the strikers. A vicious campaign led by the Catholic Church, however, asserted that the proposed action was an attempt by left-wing radicals to indoctrinate young Irish children with atheist conceptions. As a result, the plan was abandoned.

To defend themselves against the attacks of the authorities, the Irish Citizens Army was formed under the leadership of socialist James Connolly. This organisation was later to play a leading role in the Easter

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rising in 1916, in which Connolly was executed by the British state.

Defeat and its bureaucratic authors

Militancy alone, however, proved insufficient in the absence of a revolutionary party with a perspective to guide the struggle, which posed the question of the working class taking power. Five months after the strike had begun, the demands for union recognition and an improvement in pay and working conditions had not been achieved. Following the refusal of the British trade union leadership to sanction any solidarity action, the ITGWU told its members on January 18, 1914, to return to work, and by February the strike was over.

The stance taken by the British trade unions ensured the defeat of the struggle. Fearing that it could develop into a broader mass movement given the widespread rank-and-file support for the Dublin workers, an emergency conference was called by the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) on December 9, 1913, the first of its character to that point in the history of the trade union movement.

Appointing delegates on the basis of their loyalty to the line of the opportunist union leaders, it was possible for the TUC bureaucracy to rig the voting to reject any form of practical solidarity from workers in Britain. Moreover, the conference was the occasion for the rail union to finalise a plan to force striking workers in parts of Britain back to work, with the threat of the removal of strike pay and without even taking a vote.

These decisions were critical to the ability of Dublin-based businesses to continue their offensive against locked-out workers, allowing them to transport goods across Britain and maintain their operations.

James Connolly wrote pointedly in an article published in February 1914:

"We asked for no more than the logical development of that idea of working class unity, that the working class of Britain should help us to prevent the Dublin capitalists carrying on their business without us. We asked for the isolation of the capitalists of Dublin, and for answer the leaders of the British labour movement proceeded calmly to isolate the working class of Dublin. As an answer to those who supported our request for the isolation of Dublin we were told that a much better plan would be to increase the subsidies to enable us to increase strike pay. As soon as this argument had served its purpose, the subsidies fell off, and the 'Dublin Fund' grew smaller and smaller as if by a pre-arranged plan. We had rejected the last terms offered by the employers on the strength of this talk of increased supplies, and as soon as that last attempt at settlement thus fell through, the supplies gradually froze up instead of being increased as we had been promised." ("The Isolation of Dublin," February 9, 1914)

Notwithstanding their unquestionable bravery and determination, Larkin and the strike leaders promoted the conception that a broad sympathy strike in the working class, under the leadership of the trade unions, would be sufficient to force concessions from the ruling elite **.** In reality, while it remained possible for workers to win certain limited concessions through the trade unions at that time, they remained essentially conservative organisations hostile to the emergence of a mass movement within the working class that would call into question the existing social and political set-up.

Connolly and Larkin were founding members of the Labour Party one year earlier, which they conceived of as the political wing of the trade union movement and a broad-based party that need not be specifically socialist—modelled very much on the Labour Party in Britain. This was a mistake. What was needed above all, whatever its size, was an explicitly revolutionary party, guided by Marxism to provide the working class vanguard with a voice. Militant syndicalism that was aimed only at pushing the trade unions to fight was no substitute.

Ireland's Labour Party, founded to contest elections that were to have taken place in 1914 under the British government's recently proposed Home Rule Bill, played virtually no part in the strike movement. Larkin resigned as Labour Party leader in 1913, and Connolly refused an invitation to replace him. The party became a rubber stamp for the right-wing Irish trade union leaders, rather than a political vehicle for developing the political and organisational independence of the working class.

The Labour Party's support for Ireland's liberation from the imperial domination of Britain took on an ever more explicitly national character, to be conducted in a political alliance with representatives of bourgeois-nationalist currents like Sinn Fein, rather than as part of an international offensive by the working class for the overthrow of capitalism.

This reflected growing opportunist tendencies that were developing internationally within the workers' movement, the most graphic of which came less than a year after the Dublin lockout with the support of the German Social Democrats for its own ruling class with a vote in favour of war credits at the outbreak of the First World War.

In Ireland, the absence of a revolutionary party permitted the ascendancy of nationalist tendencies over the subsequent period, who claimed that the establishment of an independent capitalist Ireland offered a progressive solution to the grinding poverty and social misery confronting the working class.

The lockout's use today

The politicians who are hailing the legacy of the lockout today are acknowledging the indispensable role that the Irish trade unions and Labour Party would come to play in the development of the Irish capitalist state in the decades that followed the 1913-1914 events.

Eamon Gilmore, Labour Party leader and deputy prime minister, for example, asserted that the 1913 struggle marked the beginning of a steady improvement for workers that continues to this day. "The hundred years since has seen huge progress in the way we organise the workplace and huge strides in the conditions of workers. I am immensely proud of the progress that has been made and the important part played by the Labour movement in bringing about that progress."

Gilmore is a leading figure in a government that has done more than any other in living memory to destroy the working conditions and social benefits of working people. He conveniently ignores the fact that the working class of Dublin was driven to struggle in 1913 not by a commitment to establish an independent capitalist Ireland, but by a global crisis of the profit system and the desire to do away with terrible social conditions and reorganise society in their own interests.

The trade unions and pseudo-left groups have made it their job to provide a "left" cover for the official campaign, which has blocked any examination of the lessons of the events of 1913-1914 and their political implications. They have used the courageous determination shown by the workers in the lockout to promote their own right-wing agenda, which has been crucial to the ruling elite as it has forced through a devastating programme of austerity measures in the face of widespread opposition.

SIPTU president Jack O'Connor made use of a recent commemoration event for one of the last victims of the lockout on January 4 to deliver a speech justifying the sharp shift to the right by the unions and "lefts" with reference to the lockout. "It is time now to abandon the failed strategy of basing public policy on individual greed and to revisit the task of building a New Republic informed by the ideals of collective solidarity which were

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so brutally suppressed in this city in 1913," he stated.

A requirement for this was to "face up to the challenge of developing a coherent vision of an alternative paradigm informed by an egalitarian outlook based on equality and the primacy of the common good. We must also demonstrate that we have the capacity to bring it about and outline a strategy as to how it would work in the context of today's globalised economy."

After this convoluted and essentially meaningless double-talk, he got to the meat of his argument, insisting that those seeking to fight for the ideals of 1913 had to abandon their "sectarianism," and "offer more than protest and caustic commentary."

O'Connor claimed, "The left must be sufficiently flexible to recognise that until we command a majority it is entirely legitimate, indeed essential, for parties and individuals to participate in government with those on the centre right either in Dublin or in Belfast."

Not only do O'Connor's comments legitimise cooperation with the most aggressive defenders of finance capital, the heirs of Murphy et al, who have robbed billions from the workers to protect the criminals of the financial elite. His reference to governments "in Dublin or in Belfast" is an explicit defence of the existing state structures in Ireland, which have produced decades of bitter sectarian strife.

Representatives of both the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party attended the official events, without criticising the efforts of the authorities to posture as defenders of the traditions of the lockout.

In a book published by the Socialist Party, entitled "Let Us Rise," party leader Joe Higgins wrote in the conclusion, arguing against a speech by O'Connor: "I reject O'Connor's estimation that the trade union movement of today is incapable of waging a serious struggle that could win out over the forces of austerity. The ICTU (Irish Congress of Trade Unions) website claims that over 830,000 workers are in ICTU-affiliated unions, more than 600,000 of them in the South. Those members plus their families mean that the trade union movement has enormous potential power, the like of which Jim Larkin could only have dreamt of."

Summing up what this meant for the current situation, Higgins added, "Just as the working class has the potential to be the greatest force in society, if organised, it also has the power to take the trade unions back, and this must be taken up immediately."

This is an attempt by Higgins to promote illusions in organisations that have become implacably hostile to the interests of the working class and are widely discredited. The unions today are instruments of the ruling elite, which, in Ireland and internationally, have played a decisive role in the assault on the living standards of the working class and the return of social conditions not seen since the early twentieth century.

The real lesson that must be drawn from the heroic, bitter experience of the lockout is the inadequacy of a nationally based trade union programme to realise the interests of the working class. These bureaucratic organisations have been transformed into open defenders of the interests of the bourgeoisie. The attempts by the pseudo-left to revive this perspective illustrate their mounting fear at the sharpening class tensions in Ireland and confirm their own rapid shift to the right and integration into official politics.

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