

THE LIMERICK SOVIET

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IT SEEMS HISTORY IS TO BLAME

Ireland 1913-1923

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Robert 'Bobby' Byrne lost his job as a telegraph operator for his part in organising his colleagues in his union. He was arrested on 13 January 1919 at his mother's house for possession of a revolver and ammunition. On 21 January he was sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment with hard labour.



Robert 'Bobby' Byrne

On 8 April over 10,000 people attended the removal of Byrne's body to Saint John's Cathedral in Limerick. The British Authorities saw this as an act of defiance and so on Friday 11 April a large area of Limerick was placed under martial law.



Bobby Byrne's funeral

Citing the death of Constable Martin O'Brien as the reason, a Special Military Area was declared under the provisions

of the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA). These provisions were intended to flush out IRA men concealed in the midst of local populations.

As a result, very tight restrictions were placed on getting in and out of the city – with strict curfews and permits being enforced. The army were given the power to seize vehicles and could disperse gatherings at will.

Byrne was Captain, 2nd Battalion, Limerick City Brigade, Óglaigh na hÉireann and as the Senior Officer of the Volunteers in Limerick jail he led an agitation to obtain political status. This was backed by the 35 unions affiliated to the Limerick United Trades and Labour Council (LUTLC).

On 1 February it passed a motion of protest against the treatment of the political prisoners and called on local Deputies and Councillors to ensure political status for the prisoners.



Image of the strike from the Haselbeck collection

The people of Limerick became increasingly frustrated by the harshness of martial law which demanded that citizens carry military permits to enter and leave the city. The Limerick Trades Council called a general strike and announced their plans on posters that were distributed all over the city. It is said that almost every working man in the city went on strike – the pubs all shut their doors.

"We, as organised workers, refuse to ask them for permits to earn our daily bread..." John Cronin, leader of the strike committee

The Limerick Soviet was a localised general strike against British militarism which took over that city for almost a fortnight in 1919.

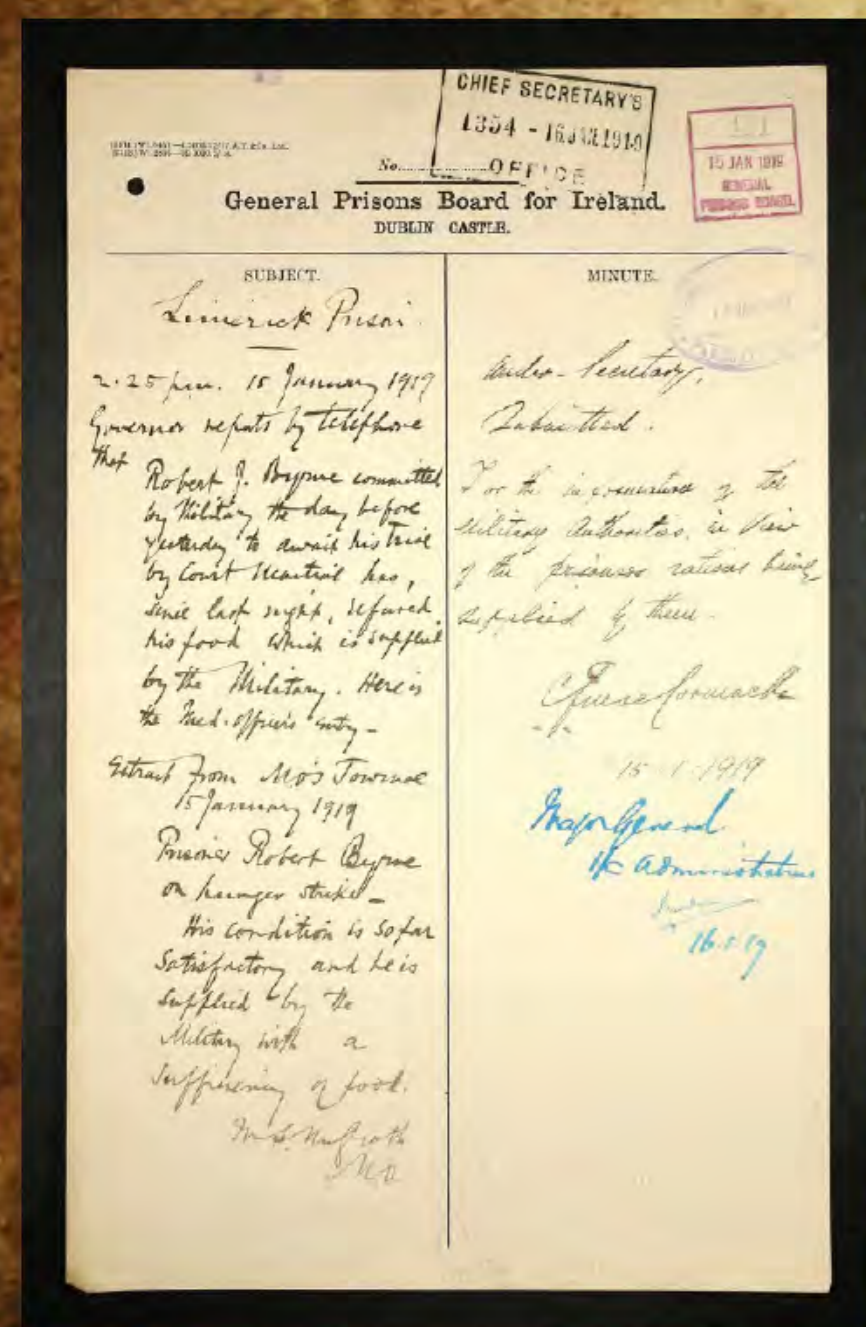
In the end the soviet was basically an emotional and spontaneous protest on essentially nationalist and humanitarian grounds, rather than anything based on socialist or even trade union aims.

- Liam Cahill

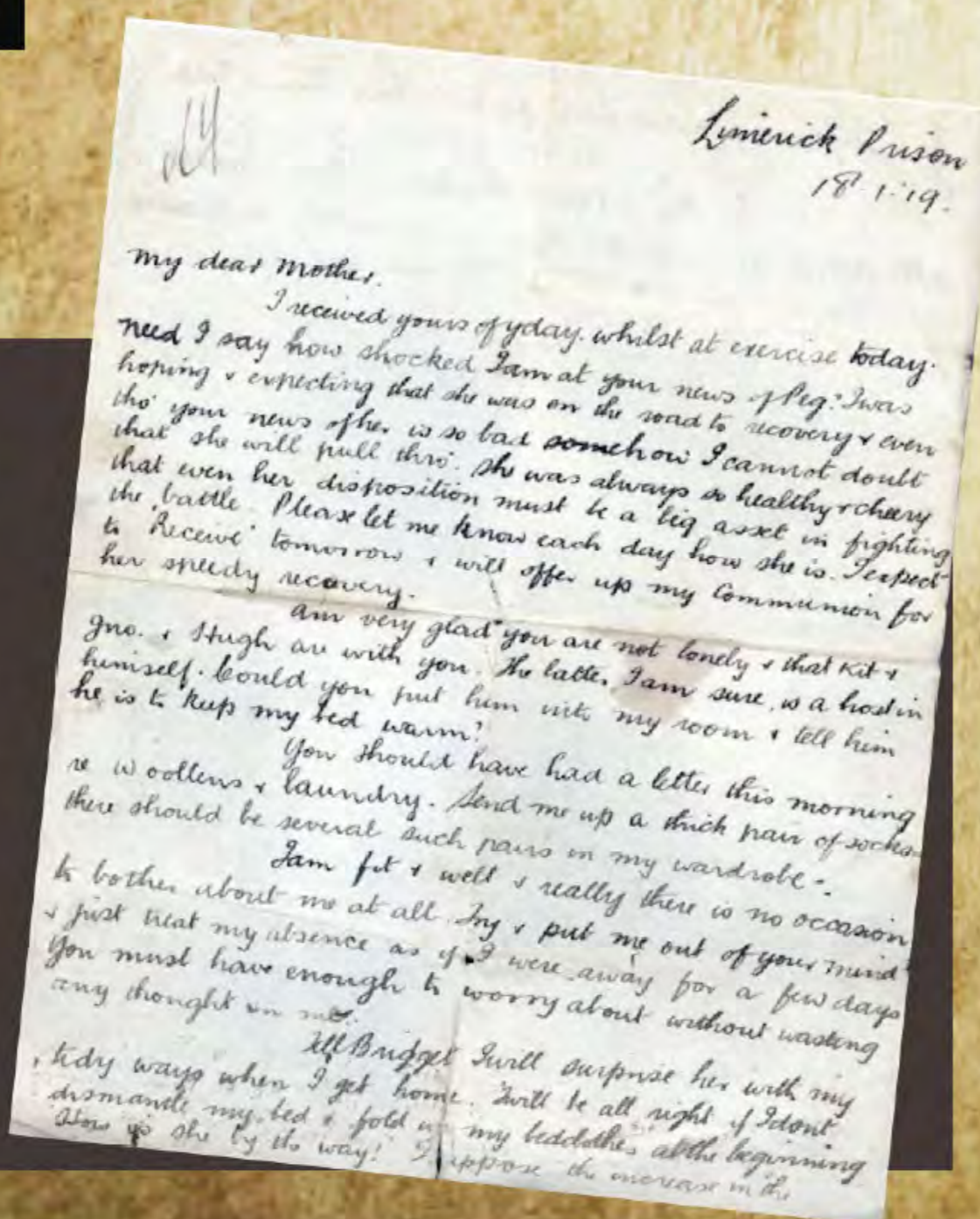


O'Connell Street, Limerick

The initial strength of the strikers and the early support of Sinn Féin may have prevented a violent employers' response as had occurred in Dublin and Belfast in 1913.



On 6 April there was a rescue attempt which resulted in the shooting of two guards (one fatally) and the wounding of Byrne, who was extricated from custody but subsequently died at the house of John Ryan of Meelick, Co. Clare. It is almost certain that he received his fatal wound from Volunteer Michael "Batty" Stack.



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“On Monday, April 14, there began in Limerick city a strike protest against military tyranny, which because of its dramatic suddenness, its completeness and the proof it offered that workers’ control signifies perfect order, excited worldwide attention.”

Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, annual report, 1919

Limerick United Trades and Labour Council Proclamation

The workers of Limerick, assembled in Council, hereby declare cessation of all work from 5 am on Monday April 14, 1919, as a protest against the decision of the British Government in compelling them to procure permits in order to earn their bread.

By order of the Strike Committee

The strike started on Monday 14 April 1919. 14,000 workers had joined the strike by that evening.

The Strike Committee took over a printing press, preparing placards explaining the strike and posting them all over Limerick. Permits, food price lists, proclamations and a Strike bulletin were also published.



Martial law enabled the military to issue exit and entry permits and made the population subject to police inspections at any time. Dispensation was given to some workers at bacon and condensed milk factories.



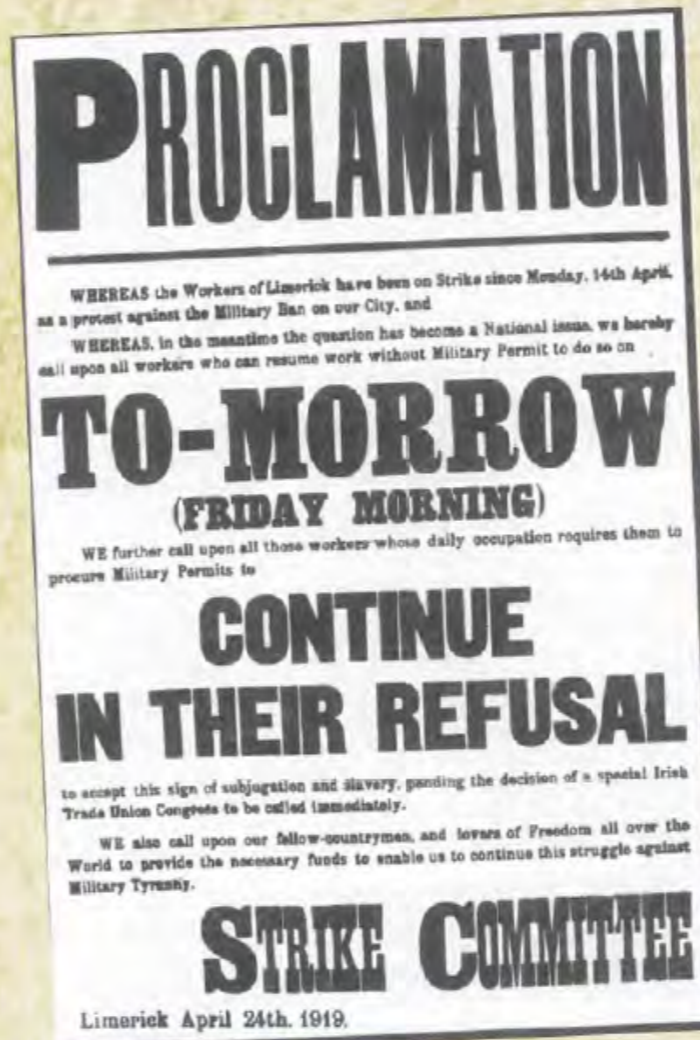
On Saturday, 12 April, 600 workers in the Cleeve's Condensed Milk Company's Lansdowne factory, most of whom were affected by the permit order, went on strike. The next day a meeting of the Limerick United Trade and Labour Council (LUTLC) called a general strike against the requirements to carry permits

The *Manchester Guardian* was severely critical of the Government's use of DORA regulations against Limerick saying,

“It was certainly never contemplated as an instrument for the punishment of Irish districts in which casual outrages had been committed.”



The LUTLC was an umbrella organisation of 35 trade unions. Its president was John Cronin of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters. At a meeting on Palm Sunday 13 April the LUTLC called a general strike in Limerick.



Almost all workers went on strike with the exception of the banks and the post office.

The general secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen, Jimmy Thomas MP advised members they “must not take any official part in what appears to be an industrial move against political action, without the authority from the executive committee”.

In the beginning of the strike some panic buying occurred. The Strike Committee organised for food to be smuggled from the surrounding countryside by boat across the Shannon. It also ordered butchers' and bakers' assistants to return to work. They ensured the continuity of food supplies and the distribution of food and prices were controlled and regulated to avoid shortages or profiteering



... the bells of the nearby St. Munchin's Church tolled the Angelus and all the red-badged guards rose and blessed themselves.

Ruth Russell



The 6 largest coal merchants refused to open and the Strike Committee commandeered some of their coal.

By Good Friday, the cinema was permitted to open posting signs: “Working under authority of the strike committee.”

The strike committee took over the administration of Limerick, a city with a population of 38,000.



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Brigadier General Griffin, commander of the British troops in the city, attempted to reach a compromise with the workers after four days. He proposed that the employers of the city rather than the military authorities issue the permits to the city's workers at a meeting with Limerick Chamber of Commerce. This compromise was dismissed by the Strike Committee.



During the month of April a large number of foreign reporters were in Limerick reporting on an attempted transatlantic flight from Ireland to the USA by Major J.C.P. Wood and Captain C.C. Wylie flying a Short Shirl seaplane called *The Shamrock* from Bawnmore. This is why the Limerick Soviet came to international attention.

Among the foreign journalists in Limerick were Mr Morris (Associated Press), syndicated to 750 US newspapers, Ruth Russell of the *Chicago Tribune*, who wrote a book, *What's the Matter with Ireland?* and Mr Philmore of *Le Matin*.

In its April 15 edition *Le Matin* carried a short report on "A Political Strike at Limerick".

Some unions, like the National Union of Railwaymen, decided not to issue strike pay to their striking members inside the Soviet.

Sizable quantities of food were sent in from the outside, however, the shortage of money in circulation led the Soviet to issue its own currency in the form of banknotes which were backed by the LUTLC and by the approved shops which agreed to accept them.



Limerick Soviet Committee

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The banknotes held their value and all notes presented were redeemed after the end of the issue. A small surplus of unredeemed banknotes may have been kept as souvenirs. This banknote issue is a unique event in the history of Irish paper money.

By end of the first week the workers were in complete control of the city.

No vehicles were allowed travel without expressed permission of the Strike Committee.

Gas, electricity, water and food supplies were organised by sub committees under the guidance of the Strike Committee.

The Strike Committee met almost in constant session and meetings of workers in different economic sectors occurred regularly to help ensure the smooth running of the strike.



The soviet attitude to private property was essentially pragmatic. So long as shopkeepers were willing to act under the soviet's dictates, there was no practical reason to commandeer their premises.

Liam Cahill

Bakers and food suppliers sold food from 2 to 5 o'clock everyday and milk was sold at half the regular price.

The Strike Committee appropriated 7,000 tons of grain from a Canadian ship that was in the harbour. The workers of Limerick enjoyed a greater calorific intake under the Soviet than they had experienced since before the Great War.

Despite the fact that British rule was effectively suspended, law and order were maintained and there was no chaos or looting. Public houses remained closed throughout the existence of the Soviet (perhaps contributing to the lack of crime).



We have, by the way, got the sympathy of the union men in the army sent to guard us. A whole Scotch regiment had to be sent home because it was letting workers go back and forth without passes

John Cronin



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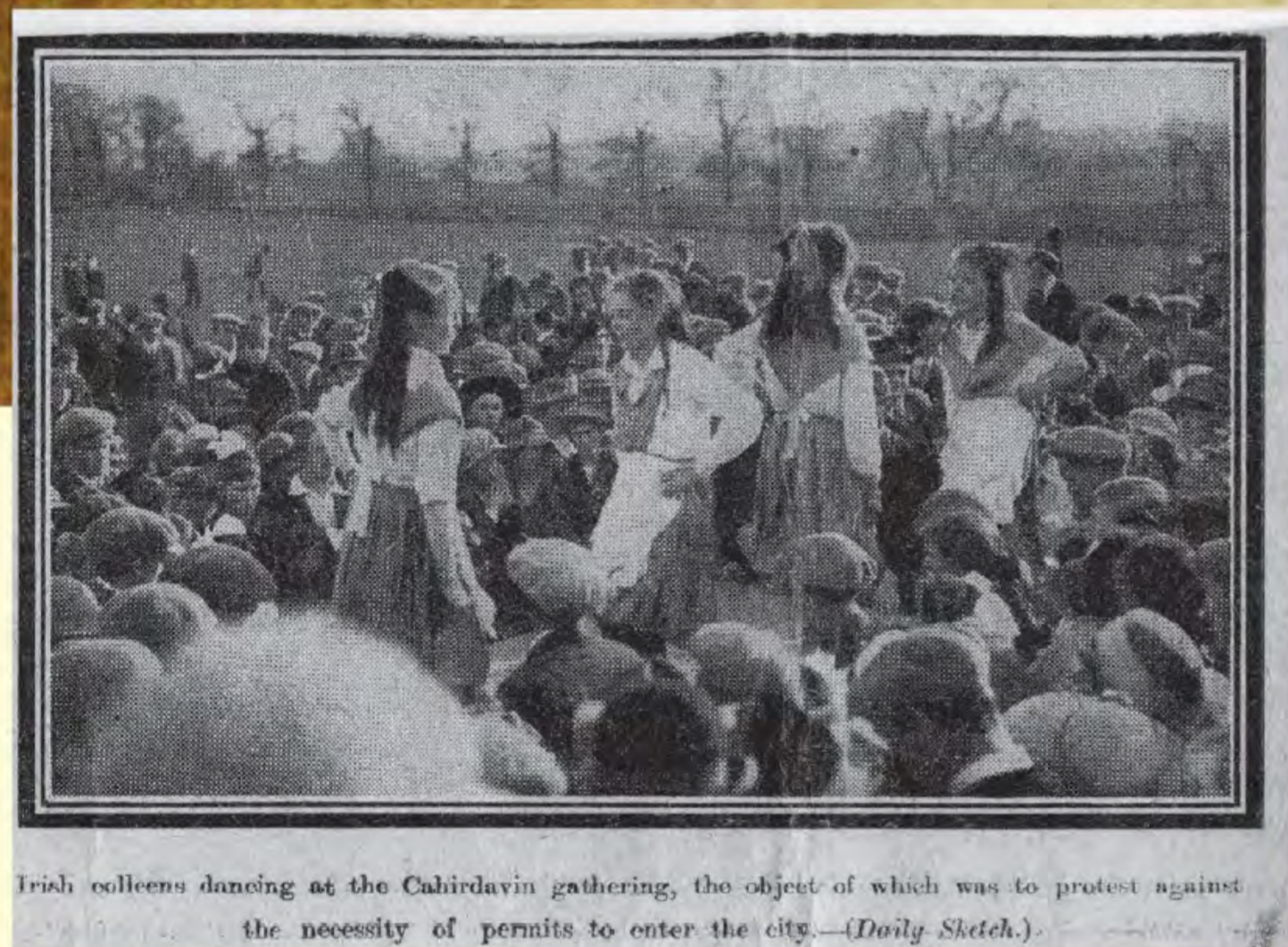
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On Saturday 19 April a sentry had to disperse a crowd of boys.



On Easter Monday, an Easter hurling match was held at Caherdavin, on the Clare side of the Shannon, outside the Special Military Area. On returning to the city that evening, some 300 individuals refused to show their permits at Sarsfield Bridge check-point.

The sentries there were reinforced by 50 constables, a tank and an armoured car. The protesters stopped at the check-point only for each to deny possession of a permit. Later some crossed the river by boat. Some stayed the night with sympathisers in the surrounding Thomondgate. The majority, including Tom Johnson, organised a midnight concert, dance and supper at a nearby temperance hall, and slept there or camped out. The next day, they boarded a train for Limerick at Longpavement station and avoided the military cordon at the city terminus by getting out at the opposite side of the platform to the troops.



The garrison was reinforced to prevent a repetition of this incident. The next day shots were fired by troops at the Munster Fair Green when people avoided showing permits, but no-one was hit.

At Sarsfield Bridge on Saturday 26 April, demonstrators stopped permit holders from crossing until they were themselves dispersed by the constabulary.

The Strike Committee appealed to the ILPTUC for support. Tom Johnson, was sent from Dublin by the ILPTUC executive and gave the clear impression that a nationwide general strike would be called. The Strike Committee newspaper, The Workers Bulletin, which was distributed throughout the city publicised the fact that a major escalation was imminent. However, the ILPTUC proposed the evacuation of Limerick by the workers and their families.

With the failure of the ILPTUC to call a general strike workers in Limerick realised that they couldn't sustain the Soviet indefinitely. The Sinn Féin Lord Mayor of Limerick, Alphonsus O'Mara, and Bishop Denis Hallinan called for the strike to end. At a meeting on 25 April the Strike Committee called off the strike and instructed anyone who did not need a permit to return to work immediately. Many workers particularly members of the ITGWU opposed the calling off of the strike and went around the city ripping down posters that called for the immediate return to work.



The Strike Committee proclamation said,

Whereas for the past fortnight the workers of Limerick have entered an emphatic and dignified protest against military tyranny, and have loyally obeyed the orders of the Strike Committee, we, at a special meeting assembled, after carefully considering the circumstances, have decided to call upon the workers to resume work on Monday morning. We take this opportunity of returning our thanks to every class of the community for the help tendered during the period of the strike.

Republicans criticised the Strike Committee for calling off the strike. Religious leaders in Limerick criticised the imposition of permits and the introduction of martial law without giving direct support to the strike. After the strike they criticised the Strike Committee for calling the strike without consulting them.

The Bishop of Killaloe, Reverend Michael Fogerty, said,

'if the people desired a communistic government, there is no essential opposition to the Catholic Church. In the past the Church in Ireland thrived under common ownership.'



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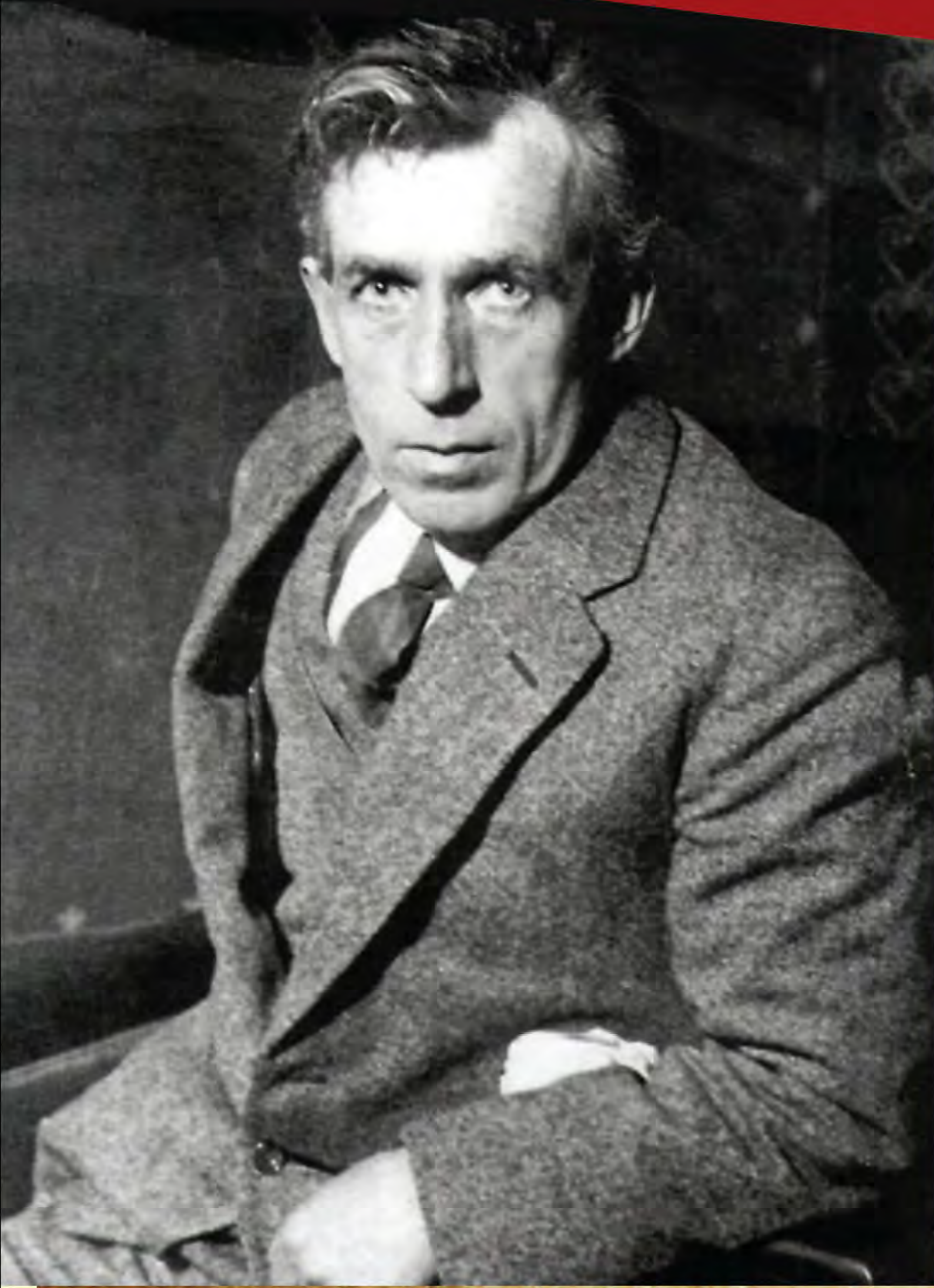
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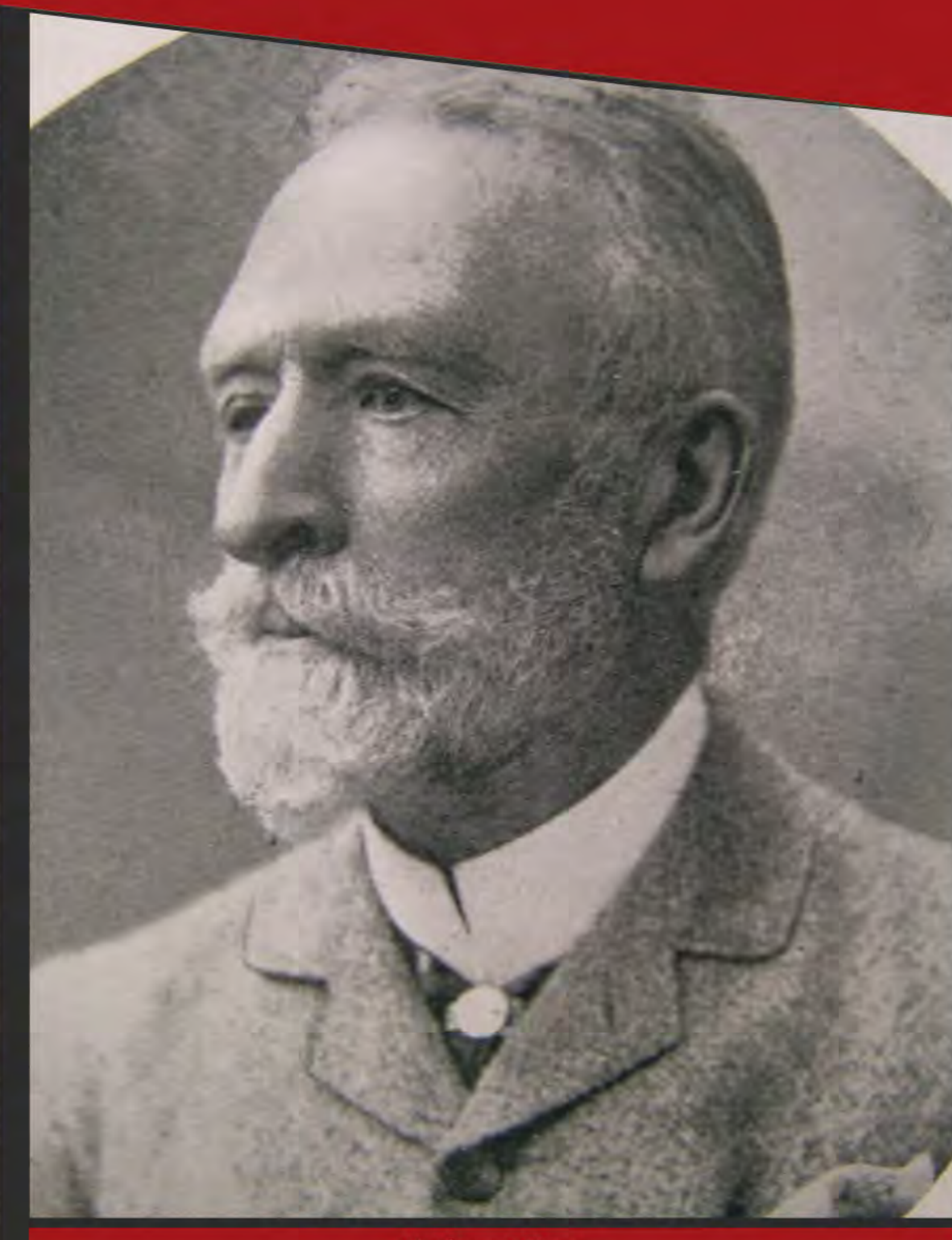


Peadar O'Donnell

The first Irish soviet was declared in February 1919 by Donegal union organiser and IRA Commander Peadar O'Donnell during a strike at what was known as Monaghan Lunatic Asylum. The workers' complaints included their 93 hour work week and being confined to the premises between shifts. Upon declaration of the Soviet, a red flag was flown over the building. Armed police were sent to remove the workers who had barricaded themselves inside. The operators of the Asylum were forced to negotiate and the workers won a 56-hour week and a pay rise for both male and female staff. Also, a concession was made that allowed married staff to go home after their shifts ended.

The *Irish Times* first referred to the strike in Limerick as a Soviet warning that it was a "very bold and candid experiment in Irish Syndicalism."

In November 1919 an incident took place in Waterford known as the "Battle of Fenor". Farm labourers were locked out by local farmers who tried to bring in strike breakers under police protection. According to the newspaper report, "revolver shots, batons, and bayonets were freely used" in the melee between striking labourers and police and several fires were set on local farms.



Robert Day

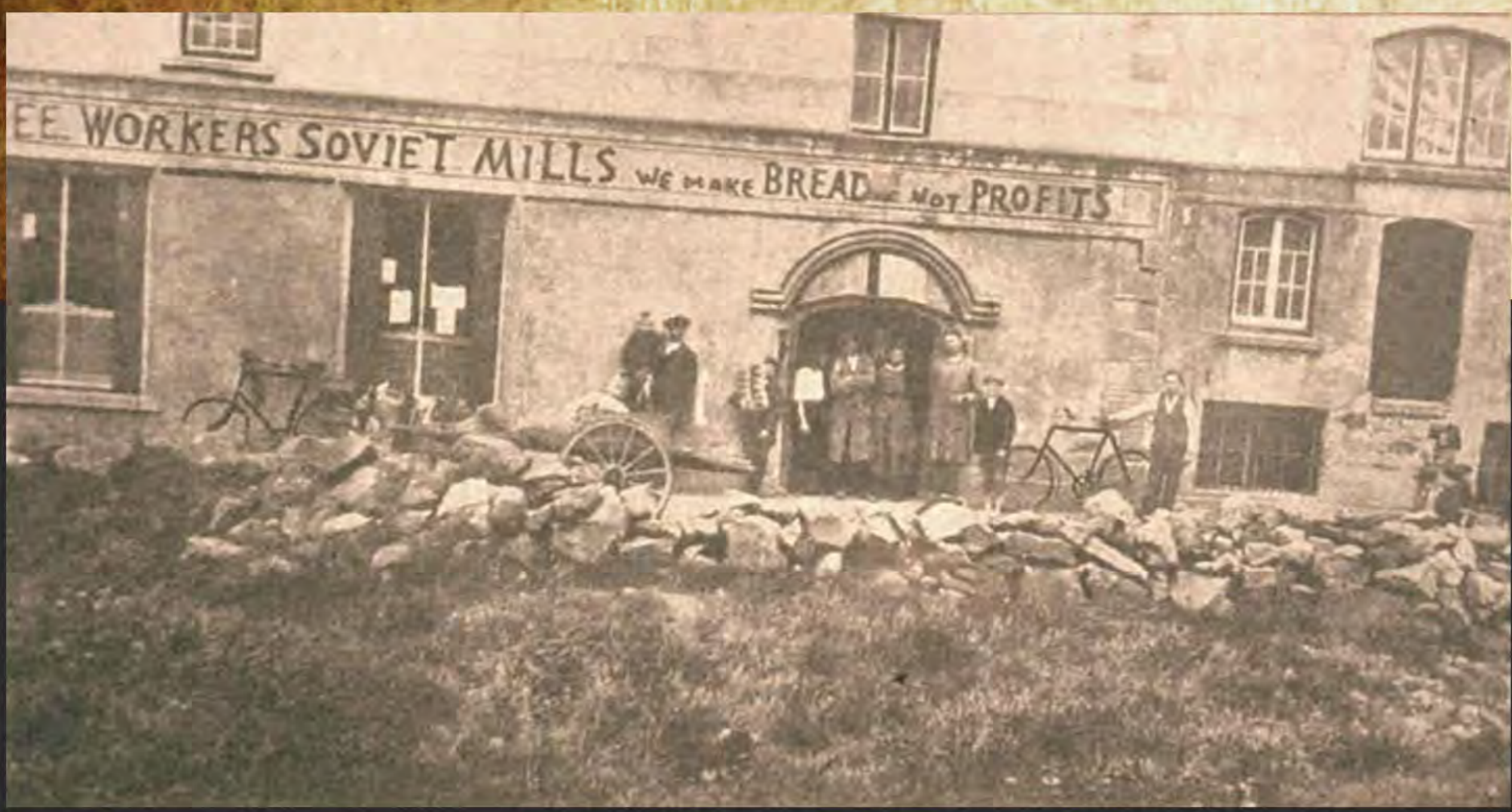
Cork harbour workers went on strike and shut down the harbour. The Harbour offices were seized and the red flag was raised over them. The head of union, Robert Day, was made "Chief Commissioner of the Port".

700 engineers from Dublin and Drogheda took over their foundry and run it as a Soviet for six weeks before the RIC moved in.

In January 1922 two flour mills in Cork were seized by their employees.

A gasworks in Waterford was seized and run under worker control for six weeks inspiring Tipperary workers to have their own Soviet.

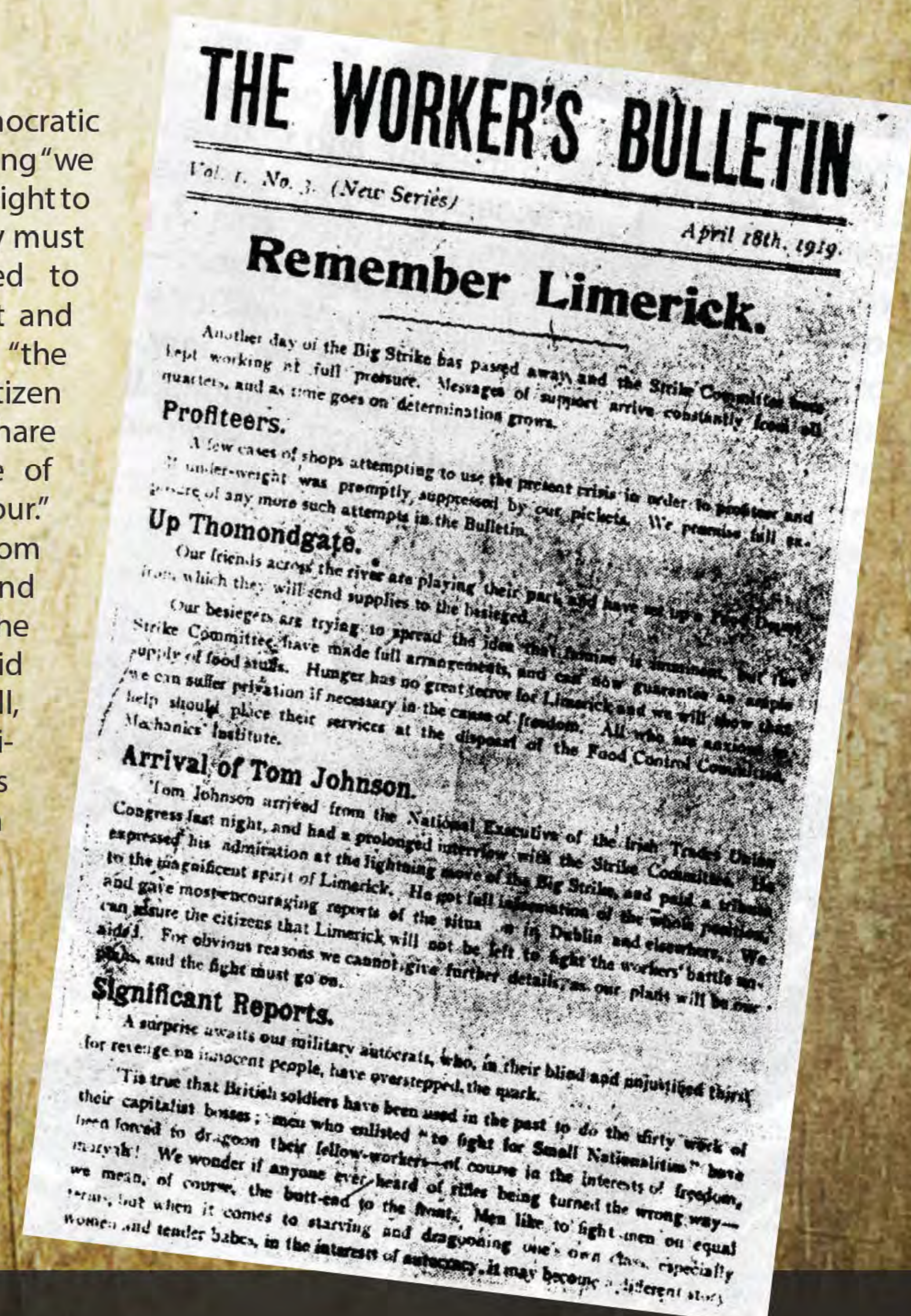
In April a red flag flew over Tipperary town coachworks as a Soviet was declared.



In May 1920 Knocklong creameries operated for five days under the slogan: "We make butter not profits." It won a pay rise, shorter hours and removal of the manager.

For two months in 1921 Arigna mines in Leitrim were run as a Soviet.

Despite the Democratic Programme saying "we reaffirm that all right to private property must be subordinated to the public right and welfare" and "the right of every citizen to an adequate share of the produce of the nations labour." This was far from the case. The land and wealth of the country was said to belong to all, yet Pro- and Anti-Treaty forces united to crush the various Soviets around the country even during the Civil War.



In August 1921 the bakery and mills in Bruree, Co. Limerick were occupied by its employees. They hoisted a red flag and declared the "Bruree Soviet Workers Mill" was the property of workers and would sell its food cheap and reduce "profiteering".



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