

THINGS BEFORE

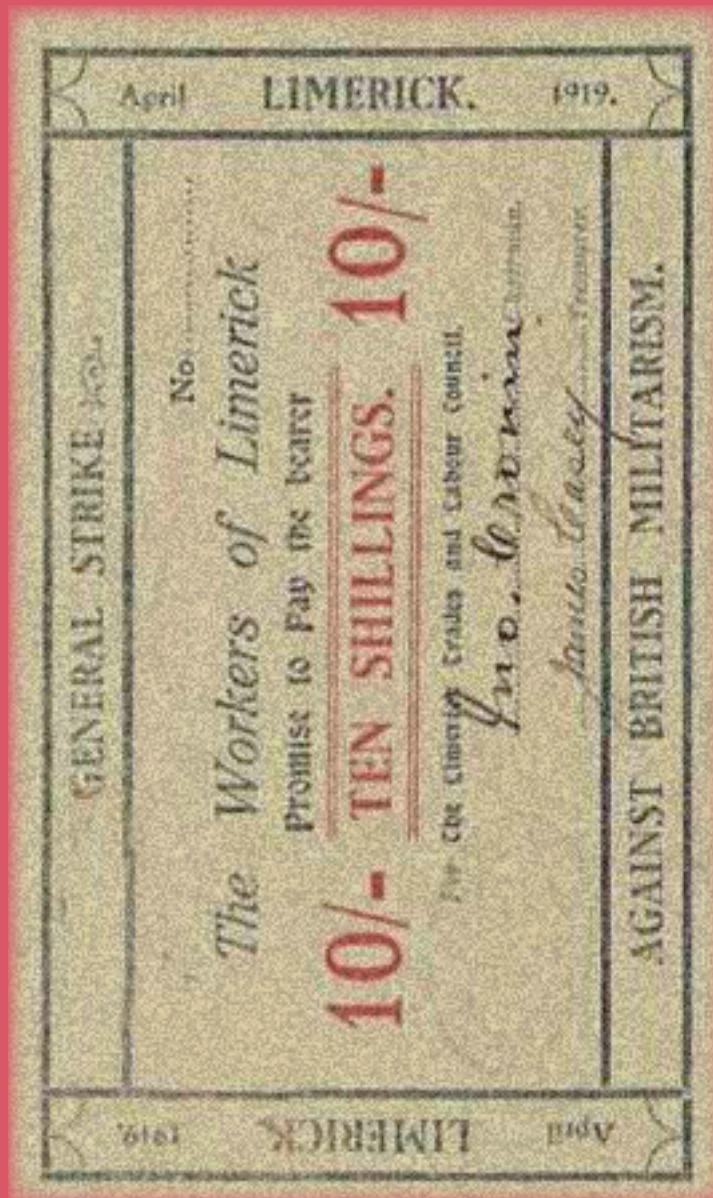
HISTORY AND MATERIALISM



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A RADICAL REFLECTION ON THE

LIMERICKS SOVIET ★



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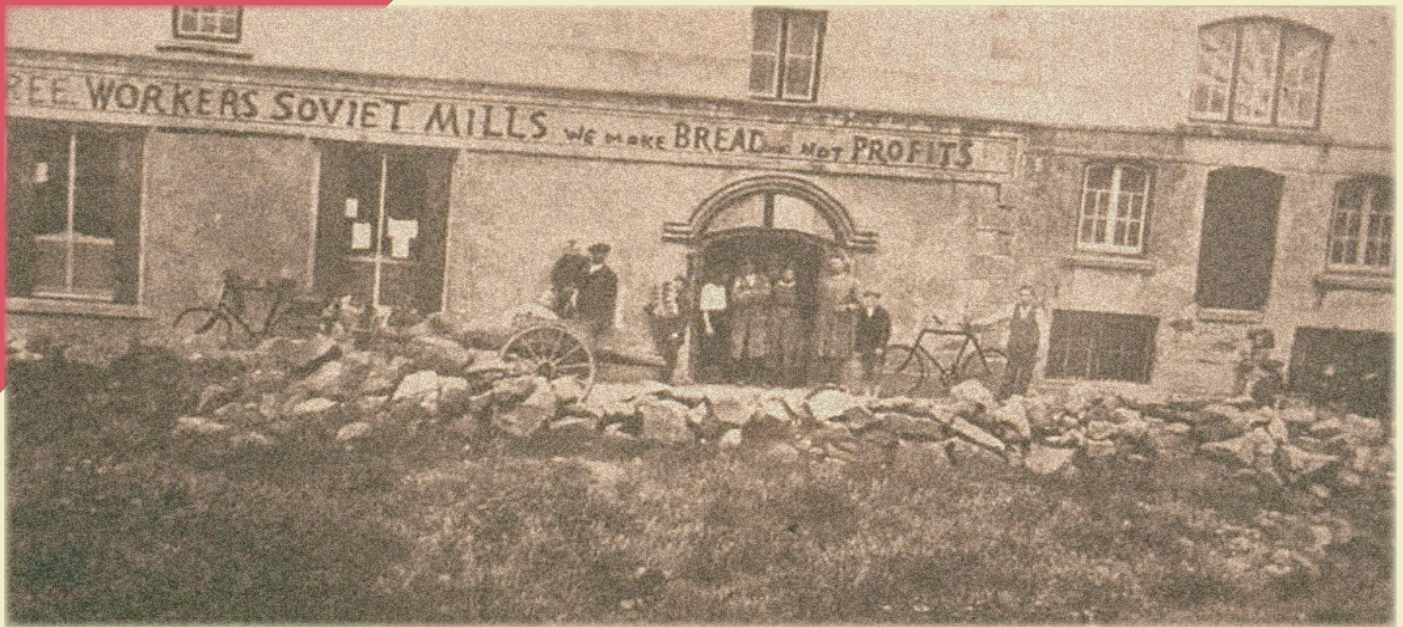
Towards a Socialist Ireland



AS WE ONCE AGAIN move to commemorate another anniversary of the War of Independence (1919-1921), it becomes our collective duty to preserve the legitimate legacy of the participants and events that consolidated the national reawakening of anti-colonial sentiments throughout Ireland. In order to do so, we must begin by articulating an accurate depiction of this critical period, one which centers on the collective struggle of the People, and brings to the forefront its lessons so that it may guide our actions today. The activities and aftermath of 1916's Easter Rising exposed the ideological fault lines of economic and political liberalism embodied by the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), with local communities across the island rising in rebellion and resolutely self-organising towards a national liberation that went hand-in-hand with the emancipation of labour.

APRIL'S LIMERICK SOVIET would become the embodiment of this new-found ambition sweeping across Ireland in early 1919, establishing itself as a symbol of resistance that would resonate across the island and with future generations.





AS RADICAL THOUGHT spread in the aftermath of the Easter Rising, tensions between local inhabitants and the colonial administration intensified. The popular syndicalism and national consciousness of the Irish Citizen's Army (ICA) and Irish Transport General Workers Union (ITGWU) paved the way for the electoral mandate of January 1919 for Sinn Féin. The subsequent opening of Dáil Éireann and the formation of its Provisional Government stood as a direct challenge to empire through the radical economic promises contained within its Democratic Programme. The eradication of IPP influence over nationalist objectives combined with a newfound sense of industrial consciousness brought with it a more direct opposition to all aspects of colonial enforcement, with the interlinking of local campaigns led by trade unionists and political

representatives keen to avoid the mistake of the Dublin-centric approach that had engendered failure in the recent past.

TENSIONS BROKE into outright war almost immediately upon the convening of the new parliament. Previous ICA cadres, now pledged to other organisations, began coordinating a regimented movement in solidarity with the Provisional Government; ITGWU members simultaneously refused to transport colonial troops and supplies on public railways. The response within Limerick to the outbreak of war was a dramatic example of this coordinated national campaign in action: when prominent trade unionist Robert Byrne and the locals surrounding him were arrested by Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) officials for a breach of the peace, workers throughout the city

spontaneously withdrew their labour while the imprisoned engaged in a campaign of organised disobedience which involved both hunger strikes and the call for a new political status.

AS THE NATIONAL defence of Dáil Éireann continued to produce credible victories against the colonial forces, local forces in Limerick were increasingly emboldened in their ongoing attempt to seize control of the city. The militant example of industrial syndicalism continued to hold out against colonial punitive-legislative measures such as the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) that jailed prominent republican leaders without trial. By early April, local leadership was confident enough to plan a rescue of Robert Byrne from prison. The attempt, under the cover of darkness on the sixth of April, became a pivotal turning point in the city's local campaign against occupation: when RIC officers ambushed the rescuers, Byrne himself was caught in the crossfire and fatally wounded. As news of his death spread through the city amidst administrative attempts to use DORA legislation as a means of (unsuccessfully) preventing a funeral with full military honours, tensions within the city intensified further. As mass civil disobedience escalated despite the judicial inquiry surrounding the circumstances of Byrne's death, local colonial authorities responded by declaring Limerick a Special Military Area (SMA) on the thirteenth of April. The city effectively locked down under their command, and

those without state-issued passes were barred from entering or leaving the city amidst an upswing in trade union recruitment. Communication between various volunteer detachments was increasingly hindered as a result.

WITH THE CONFLICT between the colonial state and the urban population reaching a fever pitch within Limerick's jurisdiction, the Limerick United Trades and Labour Council responded to the SMA legislation by calling for a general strike across all sectors of the city. Whereas the withdrawal of labour and picketing had largely been a spontaneous decision up to this point, the need for discipline now became an essential component of the opposition to the imperial forces, with James Connolly's vision of a working class taking charge of its own destiny finding fruition among Limerick's industrial base. An elected strike committee, propped up by a democratic mandate from trade union branches across the city, began to organise a mass exodus from workplaces in a struggle for collective dignity and control of the city. Production of all essentials became regulated by the committee in order to maintain the strike; the distribution of foodstuffs and basic supplies was centrally planned to prevent individual hoarding. The official newspaper of the strike committee, *The Worker's Bulletin*, was published and distributed throughout the city to combat the propaganda of the reactionary press and clergy. A local currency was issued to facilitate the regulation of prices and

production. As news began to spread across the island of Limerick's achievements, national support grew and was welcomed by the Limerick Soviet. ITGWU workers consistently refused to transport the products of scab labour while the GAA organised four high profile matches across football and hurling to raise money for the strike committee's fund.

For over a fortnight, Limerick became a shining example of community resistance against the anarchic whims of a colonial occupation hell-bent upon dominating Irish political and economic affairs for imperial gain.

While the pressure of careerist deviations (the same that would eventually go on to prop up reactionary parliamentary structures in post-war Ireland) brought the Soviet's efforts to a skidding halt, its example was replicated across the island throughout the War of Independence. This forgotten revolution, buried by contemporary education programs and clerical propaganda, serves to remind us that socialism is not a 'foreign import' alien to Irish shores, but intrinsically woven into the fabric of our ongoing campaign for national liberation. A militant union strategy backed by strong political leadership and underlain by syndicalist objectives can ensure social and economic dignity for Irish citizens and presents a legitimate means of resistance against the ongoing carnival of reaction wrought by global capitalism. Despite the brevity of its existence, the example of the Limerick Soviet is one that deserves reflection, both on its status as a symbol of the heroism of the Irish working class and a reminder that the Irish and indeed, workers of all nations, can never be truly free until the working class owns everything from the plough to the stars.

*Be sure to check out more from David on the always-superb **Radical Reflections** podcast, at @RadReflections on Twitter and online at radicalreflections.co.uk*

