

“CHANGED UTTERLY”: THE SHAPING OF THE MODERN IRISH LABOUR MOVEMENT IN THE AFTERMATH OF EASTER 1916

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James Connolly was gone, executed by a British firing squad at Kilmainham Jail in Dublin. Jim Larkin was incarcerated in America, sentenced for his militant opposition to the First World War. How would Irish labour respond to the loss of their two most eloquent speakers and strategists? What effect would the Easter Rising of 1916 have on Ireland's fledgling labour movement? The two-and-a-half-year period immediately following the Easter Rising and leading up to the December 1918 General Election was significant in several ways, both to the Irish labour movement and to the early formation of the nation itself. It fell directly in the middle of what has often been described as Ireland's "revolutionary decade," the period from 1912 to 1922. Irish labour helped cause, and certainly was also affected by, the radical nature of the changes that occurred within this seminal decade. The years 1916-1918 also marked the latter half of the Great War that in itself was arguably the primary cause of this revolutionary fervour. The growing demands on Ireland caused by this war for more supplies, more soldiers, and more loyalty to the Empire acted to speed up the process of alienation which was already well underway before 1916. Finally, this period was bookended by historical events which undoubtedly must be considered as among the most influential in modern Irish history: the Easter Rising and the 1918 General Election. These two events will serve to frame the scope of this essay.

The major argument made by this essay is that the Irish labour movement was front and centre in all of the crucial political and economic debates and decisions that occurred in the immediate post-Rising years. Historians and political commentators of all stripes in later years have offered criticism of labour, with the most prominent theme being that labour conceded far too much to Sinn Féin on the political front, especially in its decision not to contest the seminal General Election of 1918. While the labour movement is certainly not beyond criticism, this essay maintains that it had valid and substantial reasons for making the decisions that were made, and further that Irish labour took a back seat to no other political party or movement in Ireland in these years in promoting the unity of the country and the agenda of its core supporters, the Irish working class. Essentially, this essay argues that while Sinn Féin could concentrate on the national question, Irish labour had to balance its promotion of nationalism and unity with its social and economic programme among its more diverse membership and supporters.

Several main issues will be discussed, if only briefly, to support this argument: the Anti-Conscription crisis and General Strike of 1918; Labour's withdrawal from the 1918 election and deferral to Sinn Féin; the anti-partition campaign; rural versus urban

support for labour; the 'English' background of some of its leaders; and divisions within the labour movement, epitomized by the Connolly/Larkin/O'Casey/P.T. Daly more radical wing versus the William O'Brien/Thomas Johnson moderate wing.¹

Of particular importance in promoting the argument for the Irish labour movement's centrality in the post-Rising period was the impressive and instrumental role it played in the Anti-Conscription campaign, almost from the beginning of the Great War but especially the crucial days between April and May of 1918. James Connolly's writings on this issue are well known, but as early as 18 April 1916, Thomas Foran, General President of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU), also stated Labour's objection to participation in the Great War with absolute clarity:

The ITGWU is opposed to conscription for military service. In many ways it has expressed its determination to resist any attempt to slaughter its members whether in Ireland in the interest of the British Empire or in France in the interest of international capitalism. (Thomas Johnson Papers, MS 17,115 (ii))

Labour helped to cement almost all shades of opinion within the island, with the notable exception of Ulster unionism, against the imposition of conscription on Ireland by the government of the United Kingdom. Labour was prominent in the Mansion House Anti-Conscription Conference (18-19 April 1918), which adopted a resolution that stated:

The passing of the Conscription Bill by the British House of Commons must be regarded as a declaration of war against the Irish nation. The alternative to accepting it, as such, is to surrender our liberties and to acknowledge ourselves slaves ... The attempt to enforce it will be an unwarrantable aggression which we call upon all Irishmen to resist by the most effective means at their disposal. (*Dublin Saturday Post* 20 April 1918: 1)

When Labour leader Thomas Johnson was dismissed from his Belfast job due to his anti-war, anti-conscription stance, his London-based employer stated that, "We discourage anything in the shape of disloyalty." Johnson quickly responded:

Such steps as I have taken in connection with the opposition to conscription in Ireland were inspired not by what you call 'disloyalty' but by love of Ireland and her freedom. To me, tyranny is equally detestable, whatever the name of tyrant, be he Kaiser, Tzar, Sultan or British statesman ... Your own attitude towards me is a parallel of England's conduct towards Ireland. (Mitchell, *Labour* 89)

The General Strike of 23 April 1918 was called immediately after an All-Ireland Labour Conference where the following resolution was enthusiastically passed:

1 The major sources of primary material used in researching this essay were the Thomas Johnson and William O'Brien Collections in the National Library of Ireland. Other primary materials included the Annual Reports of the Irish Trades Union Congress and Labour Party (ITUC&LP) and select contemporary newspapers, especially the *Irish Opinion and Voice of Labour* and the *Dublin Saturday Post*. Secondary sources by Arthur Mitchell and Joseph Lee, among others, often used and reinforced these same primary sources.

That this Convention of the Irish Labour movement representing all sections and provinces of Ireland pledge ourselves and those whom we represent that we will not have conscription; that we shall resist it in every way that to us seems feasible; that we claim the right of liberty to decide as units for ourselves and as a Nation for itself; that we place before our fellow-workers – both men and women – in the Labour movement all the world over our claim for independent status as a nation in the International movement, and the right of self-determination as a nation as to what action or actions our people should take on questions of political or economic issues. (ITUC&LP *Annual Report 1918*: 37-38)

One month later, Irish conscription was postponed and never imposed. This was a highly effective, albeit rare, example of Irish political unity in these years, and the role of labour was central to its success. For Irish labour this was a seminal moment. It called for a definition of 'Irishness' within what was usually seen as an internationalist movement:

This Conscription Act involves for Irishmen questions far larger than any affecting mere internal politics. They raise a sovereign principle between a nation that has never abandoned her independent rights and an adjacent nation that has persistently sought to strangle them. (Thomas Johnson Papers, MS 17,115 (iv)).²

Leaving the topic of the Great War and labour's prominent role in the Anti-Conscription movement, this essay will now focus more closely on the relationship of socialism and nationalism, specifically the relationship between labour and Sinn Féin in the years immediately following the Easter Rising, in the absence of Connolly and Larkin. Joseph Lee in 1975 provided a brief but well-reasoned critique of Arthur Mitchell's influential study, *Labour in Irish Politics 1890-1930*, published the previous year. In this review Lee discusses what he labeled the "remarkable record of failure" of the Irish Labour Party in the years 1912-30 (Lee 758).

Lee's critique creates a dialectical structure around which many of my subsequent arguments may be constructed. Much of this essay will be in the form of a critique of Lee's critique. Lee maintains that Mitchell's analyses subscribe to the three conventional explanations for Labour's failure in these early years of modern Ireland's political and economic development: (1) the primacy of the national question over social questions; (2) Labour's withdrawal from the 1918 election; and (3) the separation of rural southern and western Ireland from the industrial north-east of the country through partition.

Countering what he describes as Mitchell's three central explanations, Lee argues that: (1) social radicals (by which he likely means labour supporters) should have been as good nationalists as were many social conservatives (likely a reference to many in Sinn Féin, especially those from rural areas or among the middle class); (2) the withdrawal from the 1918 election was merely a recognition of reality, because for Labour the "real failure had already occurred between 1916-18"; and (3) while "Sinn Féin paid too little attention to Ulster, Labour paid too much." Lee further contends

2 For more on the Conscription Crisis, see Mitchell, *Labour*, Chapters 3 and 4 (87-89); Gaughan 86-116; Morgan 194-197; and Clarkson 330-333.

that this over-emphasis on the northeast was symptomatic of Labour's belief that its only support could come from an urban, industrial workforce, and this myopia resulted in a nearly total rejection of the rural and agricultural segment of the population by Irish Labour (Lee 758).

There is much evidence to support Lee's contention that Labour's electoral withdrawal in 1918 was a pragmatic appraisal of its potential voter strength, relative to Sinn Féin. "Initially it seemed that Labour's involvement in the [Anti-Conscription] campaign would also enhance its prospects of winning parliamentary representation" (Gaughan 117). In the weeks between the announcement of Labour's intention to contest the election in September 1918 and Labour's Special Congress held in Dublin in early November, there was an increasingly negative response from supporters in many urban areas, outside of Dublin, indicating either unwillingness or in some cases an outright refusal to nominate or support Labour candidates at that particular time.

This electoral reluctance was prevalent both in the North and in the South. In the debates on this question many Labour delegates spoke in terms of allowing a battle between the two 'political' parties, this being a reference to Sinn Féin and the Irish Parliamentary Party. This was a painful indication that the Irish labour movement had not yet done a sufficient job in educating its supporters of its dual role, including that within the political sphere. This is illustrated by the widespread image of labour, then held by many of its most fervent union members, as essentially being a trades union body organised to primarily play an economic function. By late 1918 the political machinery of labour had grown quite rusty from lack of use. Unfortunately for this movement, it would become rustier still as the Irish Labour Party would now be forced to wait until 1922 before contesting a general election, a costly interval of twelve years.

There were several issues, however, which could be analyzed in a slightly different perspective from that proposed by Joseph Lee, who asked, "Why were social radicals unable to bang the nationalist drum as loudly as social conservatives?" Arthur Mitchell provided his own answer to that question in an earlier article on the prominent Labour leader William O'Brien:

Because of the combined structure of the Trade Union Congress and the Labour Party they were forced (as Sinn Féin was not) to take into careful consideration the existence of tens of thousands of northern trade unionists who were hostile to the cause of Irish nationalism. Since it could not carve out its own political territory, the Labour Party did not want to appear as a tail attached to a purely nationalist body. (Mitchell, "William O'Brien" 321; see also Boyle 244-271 and Munck 36-51)

With this concern in mind, and in consideration of the solid record of Irish Labour in opposition to partition, it is at least understandable why the labour movement in the years 1916-1918 did not more aggressively 'play the green [nationalist] card.' While Lee posited that the failure to do this was "a major tactical error," perhaps this critique would only be valid from the perspective of hindsight concerning the eventual crea-

tion of the Northern Ireland state, an understanding that was not yet a certainty in 1918.

The consistent and determined stance of the Irish labour movement against the partition of the nation, in any form or for any period of time, as well as its equally determined efforts to achieve international recognition for Ireland as a separate nation, together formed the core of Labour's programme on the national question in these crucial years. Labour's forthright stand on these two vital issues was second to none, including that of Sinn Féin. What Labour could not do in this period, partly because of its geographically, politically, and religiously diverse base of membership, was to compete with Sinn Féin on their distinct and unqualified call for a sovereign Irish Republic. Seán O'Casey, former Irish Citizen Army comrade of James Connolly, early in 1918 penned his concerns regarding Labour's political deferral to Sinn Féin:

Labour will continue to grow and can do without Sinn Féin; Sinn Féin cannot do without the sons of Labour. What has the present political and National movement to offer the workers in return for their allegiance? We ask for Bread, let it be certain that we will not be content with a Stone. (Seán O'Casey, "De Valera and Labour," *Dublin Saturday Post* 19 Jan 1918: 1, found in Thomas Johnson Papers, MS 17,239)

Additionally, perhaps, a tactical error was made in not supporting earlier the policy of abstention from Westminster, even though this did eventually become the position of Labour's leadership. But Labour's earlier indecision and waffling on this tactical question created mistrust among the broad body of Irish nationalists, and for a while it became an emotional point of contention between Labour and Sinn Féin. Eamon de Valera was quoted as saying, "Their enemies were trying to get Labour and Sinn Féin opposed to each other and put them in different camps." This was followed by nationalistic critiques of labour being overly influenced by "men with English accents" and a reference to "English socialists coming over to Ireland" (Gaughan 117).

Unlike Sinn Féin's firm demand for a Republic, some in Labour in these years would probably have been content with a sufficient degree of Home Rule for all thirty-two counties. This, at least, might have secured Labour's ultimate concern, the all-important unity of the country. At what future point in time it may have become realistic, or at least expedient, to concentrate on a diminished twenty-six county political entity is another question entirely. The answer to that question, however, would not have fallen within these years of 1916-1918. In 1918, however, Irish labour leaders worried that strongly nationalistic positions on self-determination, Anti-Conscription, and withdrawal from the national election would prompt unionist workers, especially in the north, to look upon them as "a wing of Sinn Féin" (Gaughan 118). Most of the labour executive feared that the loss of Protestant workers would "deal a fatal blow to the unity of the labour movement," and were thus open to the suggestion made by Seán T. O'Kelly at the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis in late October 1918 when he asked Labour to "stand aside to allow the election to be fought on the clear issue of Ireland versus England" (Gaughan 120).

Joseph Lee, in a further analysis of the relationship between labour and nationalism, asserts that the 1916 Proclamation was “a socially revolutionary document.” He further states, “The wheel had turned full circle in the two years since the IRB had felt obliged to restrain the nationalist impetuosity of James Connolly” (Lee 758; see also Mitchell, *Labour* 79-80). Even though the Proclamation of 1916 was certainly politically revolutionary, to classify it as socially revolutionary might represent a bridge too far. Its guarantee of “religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens” is most praiseworthy and certainly progressive, but these are guarantees which could be found in the aspiring constitutions of many newly formed bourgeois states by the early twentieth century. One exception, however, would be the Proclamation’s inclusive and clear embrace of the perceived future role of women, in its famous salutation to “Irishmen and Irishwomen,” probably at the forward-looking insistence of Connolly.

Standing alone, this document changed little as far as the relationship of the people to the ownership and distribution of Irish wealth was concerned. The Proclamation was basically an impassioned demand for national sovereignty. Not by any stretch of the imagination could even its eloquent nationalist demand for “the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies” be portrayed or interpreted as embodying the most modest version of a “Workers’ Republic” along the lines that James Connolly had argued for long before the Easter Rising. Certainly the revised Constitution of the Irish Labour Party and Trades Union Congress (ILP&TUC) of November 1918 and Labour’s Democratic Program of January 1919 were far more socially revolutionary than was the 1916 Proclamation of a Provisional Irish Republic.

In all of these examples, from the question of the tactic of abstention and the ultimate decision not to contest the 1918 General Election, to an analysis of the social content of the 1916 Proclamation and labour’s demand to more firmly address relevant national and local economic questions, and finally to the heart of the matter concerning labour’s somewhat ambivalent position on the national question, these collectively represented a crucial period of indecisiveness for labour. This lack of clarity had many valid causes, particularly the diverse nature of labour’s membership north and south, but regardless of these causes this ambiguity would continue to pose problems for the Irish labour movement in these critical years and going forward.

Joseph Lee’s assertion that “the wheel had turned full circle” since 1916 represents a reference to a perceived diminished nationalist fervour within the Irish labour movement in the post-Connolly, post-Rising period. The facts do not completely bear this out. It should be remembered that neither Connolly nor the Irish Citizen Army represented the mainstream of opinion within the labour movement as a whole on the national question before the Rising. Connolly’s militancy, despite its subsequent popularity, especially following his execution, had placed him far in advance of most ITUC&LP members on the issue of the primacy and compatibility of the national

question with the more practical and parochial concerns of Labour. The compatibility of nationalism with socialism would remain a central question for many countries in the twentieth century.

The core of Connolly's support could be found primarily within the ranks of the Irish Citizen Army itself. In retrospect, it might seem appealing to portray Connolly as representing the norm, but in socialist terms he would surely be considered to have been 'in the vanguard,' at least concerning the feasibility of joining socialism and internationalism with pure nationalism.³ George Russell (Æ) in a letter to the Under-Secretary of Ireland, Sir Matthew Nathan, subscribes to the importance of Connolly's militancy on the national question and also clearly sets him apart from most of the other leaders of the Rising and, by extension, from many within the labour movement itself:

I am very sad over Ireland just now. I knew many of those now dead and had a genuine liking for them. They had no intellect. Connolly was the only one with a real grip in his mind. They were rather featherbrained idealists ... and now they will be national heroes. If I had remembered Connolly was in the counsels of the Irish Volunteers I would have been frightened. He lay low, and I believe he cast the torch on the pile. (Levenson 329)

Lee further contends that "nationalism was ideologically neutral on social issues" (Lee 758). Theoretically, this statement may be correct. But, realistically, nationalism in Ireland in the years 1916-1918, and in subsequent years, was largely manifested by such prominent figures as Arthur Griffith, Eamon de Valera, and Michael Collins, among others, who would not be considered neutral on social issues. With several notable exceptions, such as Constance Markievicz (née Gore-Booth), many post-Rising nationalists, both within and outside of Sinn Féin, shared little or no common ground with Irish workers on their most basic economic and social demands (see Van Voris). At best, many Irish nationalists were either laissez-faire and undecided, or merely apathetic concerning these issues, as was argued in a seminal 1925 study of the Irish labour movement:

At the head of the Sinn Féin organisation stood Eamon de Valera and Arthur Griffith. The latter had changed not a whit since those eventful years when, through the pages of *Sinn Féin* he bade Labour repudiate Socialism and resume its rightful place as the humble servant of the Nation – occasionally to be petted, perhaps, but never to speak until it was spoken to. Eamon de Valera, who, as the sole surviving commandant of Easter Week, had soared to the highest place in the esteem of his countrymen, had imbibed nothing of the ideals of Pearse and Connolly. Long steeped in the abstractions of mathematics, he was an easy prey to the social abstractions of his colleague [Griffith]. (Clarkson 336)

Seán O'Casey advocated that workers should participate in these nationalist movements and thus help to imbue them with a distinctly working-class perspective. This suggestion was followed, to varying degrees, by several different Labour leaders. Even William O'Brien, with whom O'Casey had many serious disagreements, was

3 For a first-hand recollection of the Irish Citizen Army, see Robbins.

extremely active in early 1917 in the national movement. "In the middle of January 1917, William O'Brien was approached by Arthur Griffith with a proposal to bring together the various groups opposed to both the Unionists and the Parliamentary Party" (Mitchell, *Labour* 81-82). O'Brien later recalled and wrote concerning this episode:

Shortly after arriving home [from internment], Griffith called to my residence and had a two-hour discussion with me, in the course of which he proposed that a new organization, something like a Federation, should be formed – consisting of the Volunteers, Sinn Féin, the Irish Nation League and Labour. I did not believe that the Volunteers would work with Griffith but I did not say so. I contented myself with saying that I did not believe the Labour Party would merge in such an organization. (MacLysaght 134-35, and also in the William O'Brien Papers)

The problem which Labour faced at this time was how to support the nationalist inclinations of the majority of its membership, while simultaneously being seen to clearly promote its own distinct social and economic programme throughout the country – all this while keeping its own movement from fracturing. Thomas Foran, the General President of the ITGWU, stated just prior to the 1918 election, that "none but the Labour Party stands for democracy in the full sense," referring to its dual objective of achieving both political and industrial freedom, and he concluded by reminding union members to support Labour's national, social and industrial programme in the General Election.⁴

The decision of the Labour executive to withdraw from the 1918 election was contentious. The recently called armistice meant that this election would be a peace-time rather than a war-time vote, although some critics said that they could not "follow the subtle distinction," with others bitterly referring to this abdication as "a big sell-out." The vote of the general membership to support the executive's recommendation was 96 to 23. Labour's electoral abandonment would only add to the prestige and political power of Sinn Féin. But now they and all of Ireland's political parties and movements collectively "were soon caught up in the maelstrom that was the Anglo-Irish war" (Gaughan 121-122). Above all, however, they wanted to avoid splitting the nationalist vote between Labour and Sinn Féin, thus allowing the possibility of electing "undesirables." As Clarkson observes, "The delegates hoped that they would have a stronger lien on the affections of the Nation for their sacrifice in sinking the issues of the Workers' Republic. The result was the election, in 73 out of Ireland's 105 constituencies, of Sinn Féiners, pledged to the Irish Republic, but not to the Co-operative Commonwealth" (Clarkson 338).

In an additional important critique, Lee contends that Labour's "obsession with Belfast's electoral potential reflected the Dublin leadership's conviction that Labour could

4 "The ITGWU and the General Election," a gift of William O'Brien to the National Library of Ireland, LO P108, Item 21. See also the ITGWU *Annual Report 1918*: 110-12. Several references to this question can be found in the *Freeman's Journal* and especially the *Dublin Saturday Post* from this time period.

not sink deep roots in rural soil" (Lee 758). This argument probably relates more directly to a slightly later time period, the 1920s and 1930s and beyond, when the Irish Labour Party was then operating within a largely rural and socially conservative twenty-six county Irish Free State. As early as 25 July 1916, Labour's M.J. O'Lehane, speaking at an anti-partition rally of the Dublin Trades Council only three months after the Rising, had foreseen this possibility and had presciently issued the following warning:

If the proposals [partition] had come into being, Trades Unionism would be a very minor force in the Government of the 26 counties during the next half century. Practically half of the Trades Union forces were drawn from the area proposed to be excluded from the Home Rule Parliament. The organized workers in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Waterford and elsewhere would be at the mercy, if not of the most reactionary, at least of the most conservative forces in the country, viz. the landed and agricultural classes. (*Dublin Saturday Post* 22 July 1916: 1, found in the Johnson Papers MS 17,119)

Once partition had robbed the Irish labour movement of the industrial northeast, it had no option but to attempt to organise the rural agricultural labourers and other potentially sympathetic rural workers to their cause. Joseph Lee's point that rural Labour's strength was found mainly in areas that contained large numbers of agricultural workers is well taken. In the 1918 Membership Census of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU), all classes of agricultural workers made up the largest category of membership by far. This accounted for nearly one quarter of the entire strength of the Union. However, this was a period of boom prices for all agricultural produce, largely due to the wartime economy. In the years following the war, the amount of organization among agricultural labourers predictably declined along with commodity prices. The neglect of agricultural workers would be a continuing and serious shortcoming of the labour movement as it progressed into the 1920s and 1930s.

In another argument partially related to this urban-rural split, Joseph Lee states that a "disproportionate number of Labour leaders come from English backgrounds. Most of the rest were Dublin-orientated trade unionists" (Lee 758). In this regard Ireland was not unique as the urban nature of labour parties in Ireland, Britain, America, and elsewhere was then and is even now a nearly universal reality. That this reality in Ireland contributed to the neglect of rural agricultural workers is unfortunate, but perhaps understandable. Concerning the former point about 'English' backgrounds, Lee cites James Connolly, Jim Larkin, and Thomas Johnson, with the former born in Edinburgh and the latter two in Liverpool. In the case of the first two, Connolly was no doubt primarily interested in the urban workers of Belfast and Dublin, as was Larkin, even though Larkin had earlier been somewhat successful in organizing agricultural workers, especially in County Dublin (Greaves 264-83).⁵

5 See also Emmet Larkin, esp. 116-118. Other sources on these leaders would include Newsinger, Boyd, and Morgan.

Thomas Johnson was arguably the most important labour leader in Ireland in the post-Rising years. He became 'a popular national figure' because of his central role in the Anti-Conscription campaign. The famous English writer G.K. Chesterton, then visiting Dublin in October of 1918, was asked by William Butler Yeats to debate Johnson on the topic of private property at the Abbey Theatre. Looking back on this event, Chesterton later wrote that Johnson was "an Englishman like myself, but one deservedly popular with the proletarian Irish" (Gaughan 116).

Although born in Liverpool, Johnson had been in Ireland since the age of twenty. Even though he had spent most of his years in Belfast and later in Dublin, he was more than aware of agricultural concerns and rural issues. Johnson was very active in the co-operative movement, and his diligence along these lines could be witnessed by the prominence of agriculture as a major theme in his address to the 1916 ITUC&LP Sligo Congress. Throughout the years 1916-1918, Johnson served as the leading Labour spokesperson on food conservation and prices. At the 1917 ITUC&LP Annual Congress in Derry, and to loud applause, Johnson spoke militantly on the subject of exporting food to Great Britain at a time of food shortages in Ireland:

If the government declined to take steps and insisted that the market for agricultural produce must determine who shall consume that produce, then the responsibility would be on the Government, and he should not be sorry if the people rose up in some way to prevent the export of food. (ITUC&LP *Annual Report 1917*: 25-28; see also Mitchell, *Labour* 86-87)

An unsigned enclosure in the Johnson Papers contained this witty remark, "God divides us, but bacon and butter bring us together" (Thomas Johnson Papers, MS 17,113).⁶

In summary, three of the central themes of this essay, especially when considered together, clearly indicate labour's significance in both the national/political movements in Ireland as well as the social/economic struggles in the years immediately following the Easter Rising, despite the major realignments and re-thinking going on both within and outside of labour itself. It truly was a 'revolutionary decade.'

The national question was, undoubtedly, the dominant issue of this period. But the Irish labour movement, while making several tactical errors on this front, nonetheless did advocate and support a consistent program of Irish national unity and self-determination. Labour should not be criticized for its failure to demand a Republic and nothing less in the period leading up to the 1918 General Election. For better or for worse, and for the reasons previously stated, this simply was not their decided policy at this time, but rather the existential policy of Sinn Féin.

The withdrawal from the 1918 election must be dealt with more thoroughly and at least in two manners. What were the reasons for this decision? What were the results

6 Together with many other references to Johnson's efforts on behalf of food conservation, can also be found in MS 17,112. See also Gaughan; Mitchell, *Labour*, on "The Co-operative Ideal," 224-226; and Mitchell, "Thomas Johnson."

of this decision? On the first question, the main reason for Labour's withdrawal from the election was not purely the altruistic motive, as officially stated at their Special Congress and elsewhere, to unite the country politically, but rather also because they had pragmatically decided that they would do poorly in an electoral sense. Thus, they would likely be blamed for splitting the nationalist vote in the process. This would represent a doubly disastrous outcome for Labour, and such a losing proposition had to be avoided. Ironically, this decision in November 1918 was taken at exactly the same time as the movement, "though retaining the unions as the base of the structure, the emphasis was shifted to the political side." This supposed shift was given form by reversing the order of its previous name, ITUC&LP, to the new ILP&TUC, Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (Clarkson 325).

On the second question concerning the results of Labour's decision not to contest the 1918 General Election, my opinion conflicts with that of the noted Irish political commentator Brian Farrell, who maintained that "placed in the context of the enduring influence of that election on Irish political development, it might be argued [...] that the significance of the Labour decision cannot be over-stated" (Farrell 477-502). Farrell's statement on its own represents an over-statement. Labour's own considered and stated electoral goals were, as of late in the year 1918, already quite modest. Farrell himself reported that Labour was then thinking in terms of only contesting four Dublin seats, one each in Cork and Derry, and possibly one each in Limerick, Waterford and North Sligo (Mitchell, *Labour* 91-103).⁷

If Brian Farrell's argument is that the labour movement did not sufficiently prepare for the aftermath of the Easter Rising on the political front, then he is on solid ground, but the prospect of giving up a meager total of between six and nine seats in 1918, as was Labour's reasonable expectation, could hardly be viewed as being absolutely crucial. This rather widely accepted critique of Labour in the post-Rising years should be further analyzed in a slightly wider perspective. The fact remains that when Labour finally did stand independently in the general election of 1922, just four years later, it was able to secure seventeen out of the eighteen seats it contested. This number represents at least twice the number of seats that Labour might have won had it contested the General Election of 1918, as originally planned. Clearly, for the Labour Executive in 1918 the benefits of contesting politically simply did not outweigh the potential risks of doing so.

The hypothesis of the Sinn Féin Standing Committee was that Labour, while probably unable to win seats from Sinn Féin in 1918, might have allowed the Irish Parliamentary Party to slip in between them by splitting the purely nationalist and the socially progressive vote. The greater threat to Labour, at this crucial moment, was to avoid a substantial split from within. This was also very nearly the final argument of Thomas

7 Farrell (496-497) provides an extensive analysis of Irish Labour's decision not to contest politically; and also Gaughan (119-120).

Johnson before the Irish Labour Special Congress on 1 November 1918. This argument is shared by other historians of this period:

Had the Labour party stood in the election it would have been obliged to take up a position for or against abstention from the British parliament, and would thus have been thrown into disarray over a national rather than a social question. Its reason for backing down, therefore, was as much to avoid splitting itself as to avoid splitting the national front. (Rumpf & Hepburn 22-23, citing Farrell 477-502)

There is a tendency to generalize when speaking of hypothetical trends in politics. Therefore two points should be made here. In 1922 when Labour first stood in a general election, it received 22.1% of the first preference votes. This was the so-called 'pact election' in which the pro- and anti-Treaty forces were intended to vote for a common slate of candidates. In 1923, just one year later, however, Labour's share of the first preference votes was nearly halved, dropping to a mere 11.6% (Farrell and also Mitchell, *Labour*, Chapters 6 and 7). By this time two factors were very important. The first was the highly emotional split over the proposed Treaty to end the Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921). This split eventually led to the Irish Civil War (1922-1923) and Sinn Féin's violent rupture into two distinct factions and, therefore, two separate voting groups. This, of course, represents the origin of the two major political parties in twentieth-century Ireland, ultimately taking the form of anti-Treaty Fianna Fáil and pro-Treaty Fine Gael.

A related concern was the much-anticipated return of Jim Larkin from America and the disastrous O'Brien-Daly-Larkin conflict and split within the labour movement that ensued (Larkin, Chapter XI "Homecoming"; see also MacLysaght and Mitchell, *Labour* 123-124). These factors, I would argue, were of much more importance to Irish labour in 1922 and 1923 than the absence of Labour Party candidates from the one election cycle four or five years earlier.

Finally, there remains the question of partition and its detrimental impact on the Irish labour movement. Labour was uniquely vulnerable to splitting over non-social and non-economic issues:

More than any other party, Labour surely was struck a vital blow by the loss to the Republic of the industrial north-east, the area which with Cork and Dublin had formed one leg of the urban tripod upon which so much of Labour strength in the early years of the country had been based. It is as much this, perhaps, as any other factor, which has orientated Labour's attention away from industry and towards the more conservative rural worker, until the ludicrous point has been reached in which what is historically a party of the industrial working class can hold only a single seat in the one great urban concentration in the Republic. (Thornley 21)

David Thornley, albeit from the perspective of the mid-1960s, seems to join with Arthur Mitchell on the significance of this matter, and both of them are to varying degrees at odds with Joseph Lee. Labour clearly was more damaged by partition than any other Irish political party. Partition had drastically changed the perspective of the Labour Party and the labour movement in general from 1922 onward, well into the twentieth century. The worst fears of Thomas Johnson, M.J. O'Lehane, and countless other

labour leaders, expressed so eloquently by O'Lehane in 1916, would be realized by the advent of partition. Indeed, "during the next half century," representing the fifty years between the Easter Rising and 1966, the Irish labour movement would "be at the mercy of the most conservative forces in the country," within a largely rural twenty-six county state (M.J. O'Lehane; qtd. in *Dublin Saturday Post* 29 July 1916: 1, found in the Thomas Johnson Papers, MS 17,119).

In conclusion, on all of the major issues of the day, in the years following the Easter Rising, the Irish labour movement was front and centre, strongly promoting the programmes and agendas set by its membership in annual meetings and special conferences. From its central role in the Anti-Conscription Crisis and General Strike of 1918, where such an industrial action could never have succeeded without labour's endorsement and clear-eyed leadership, to the much-criticized decision to stand down politically in the General Election of 1918, labour carefully assessed its options and moved in what was considered to be its best interests. Despite the 'English' or urban nature of most of its leaders, Irish labour was highly active in campaigns for food conservation and the cooperative movement and supported agricultural labourers when possible. The splits that occurred within the movement, especially after the death of Connolly and the emigration to America of Larkin and his eventual return, were inevitable, as with any large organization with such a multitude of social and political persuasions to be taken into account.

Finally, Irish labour in the immediate aftermath of the Easter Rising of 1916 was not blind to the possible effects of partition, and it was neither slow nor tentative in taking a firm stand against that despised policy. The long struggle of Irish labour against the partition of the country and for a united all-Ireland labour movement, however, was of little consolation to its loyal members and supporters as their worst fears and predictions gradually became all too real.

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