

The Munster Soviets and the Fall of The House of Cleeve

David Lee

1. Homer *The Illiad* Book II, Lines 522-36. Robert Fagles (trans.), Penguin, 1991.

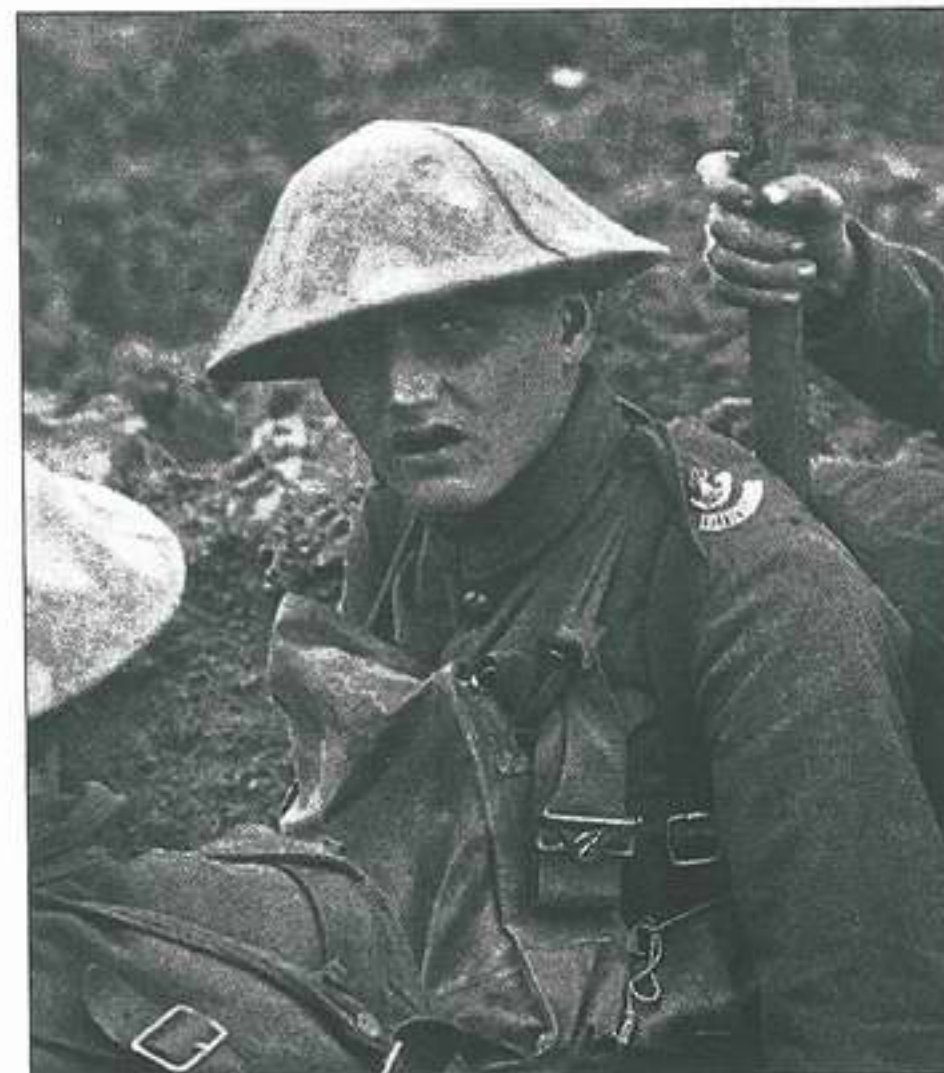
'The whole of Europe is filled with the spirit of revolution. There is a deep sense not only of disappointment but of anger and revolt amongst the workers against pre-war conditions. The whole existing order in its political, social and economic aspects is questioned by the masses of the population from one end of Europe to another.' (Lloyd George, British Prime Minister, March 1919).

It was in the midst of this revolutionary crisis that one of the most radical strikes in Irish labour history took place – the Limerick Soviet of April 1919. For ten days the workers of Limerick, led by the local Trades Council, went on general strike and the leadership assumed control over many aspects of the city's economic life. Such was the extent of the authority exerted by the Strike Committee that the event was immediately labelled the 'Limerick Soviet'. But before discussing the Soviet it is necessary to outline the international context in which the strike took place, for the event was very much a product of its time – a time of war and revolution in Europe and nationalist rebellion in Ireland.

War

Patriotic fervour swept through Europe when war was declared in the late summer of 1914. This was hardly surprising because for years the peoples of Europe had been psyched up for war by nationalist propaganda and imperialistic rhetoric. War was popularly regarded as a noble and heroic adventure, and besides, there was every expectation that the conflict would be over quite quickly.

'Agamemmon the lord of men. . .
commanded heralds to cry out loud and clear
and summon the long-haired Achaen troops to battle.
Their cries rang out. The battalions gathered quickly.
. . . no stopping them now,
mad for war and struggle.'



Stress of war.

Naïve idealism quickly soured, however, when confronted with the realities of war. In an epic clash of arms lasting four years the Allied Powers of Britain, France and Russia fought against Germany, Austro-Hungary and Turkey. By 1915 the conflict on the Western Front had stabilised into a static, trench war slogging match in which set piece battles were designed to bleed the enemy white of men. By 1917 the general mood among soldiers was one of loathing for the war and the awe and respect with which the peoples of Europe had traditionally held their ruling elites and monarchies began to crack and wither away. Military defeat led to the collapse of dynastic houses in Russia, Germany and Austro-Hungary and opened the way

for socialist revolution. It was Russia that proved to be the weakest link among the warring nations and there the 300-year-old Romanov monarchy collapsed and an entire ruling class eradicated, with dramatic consequences for the entire world.

Conditions for the Russian soldiers on the Eastern Front were particularly bad and they suffered huge losses in men in an unequal struggle with their opponents, the armies of Germany and Austro-Hungary. The stresses and strain of waging war fell most heavily on economically weak Russia because it lacked the industrial and transport infrastructure capable of sustaining armies in the field and supplying the home front. By 1915 war-time taxation, price inflation and scarcities of basic commodities was causing unrest in industrial centres and the government had to contend with strikes as workers attempted to improve their economic position. Heavy-handed repressive measures by the Tsarist government only served to further embitter the workers and politicise them. On the war front casualties mounted ever higher and morale slumped lower and lower. Resentment against the Tsarist monarchy was building up to dangerous levels among broad sectors of the population, particularly among peasant soldiers and urban workers. By the winter of 1916-7 strikes in the industrial districts were becoming ever more frequent and larger in scale with demands transcending economic objectives and became ever more radical; calls being made for an end to the war and an end to the Monarchy.

Revolution

The Russian Revolution began on 8 March 1917 when women textile workers in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg) went on strike in protest at food shortages. Other workers came out in support and two days later 240,000 people were on the streets of the capital demanding an end to war and an end to the Autocracy. Violent clashes took place between demonstrators and armed police, but as the



Tsar Nicholas II pictured with Tsarina Alexandra and their son Alexis.

protest developed the resolve of the Tsar's armed forces in dealing with the protesters disintegrated. Cossack cavalry and army units were sent in to quell the swelling revolt, but they were as disillusioned with the war as were the civilians and they began to fraternise with the demonstrators. Whole regiments mutinied, officers were

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slain and the soldiers made common cause with the workers. Without the army Tsar Nicholas II, the 'Emperor of All The Russias', was nothing, and on 15 March 1917 Nicholas was forced to abdicate and the Romanov dynasty was no more.

Out of the chaos into which the country was plunged a Provisional Government was formed by parliamentary deputies from the Duma (Russia's feeble version of parliament). However, the new regime still wanted to keep Russia in the war in order to fulfil aspirations of territorial expansion. Side by side with the Provisional Government another political institution came into being – the Petrograd Soviet of Workers and Soldiers Deputies. It was a body to which representatives from factories and military units based in the capital were elected. The word 'Soviet' is simply the Russian word for a council made up of delegates from workplaces etc. that acts as an administrative and governing body. The first act of the Petrograd Soviet was to issue Order No. 1. This edict successfully urged all army and naval units to establish soldiers' and sailors' soviets that were to be politically subordinate to the Petrograd Soviet. Later, soviets sprang up all over the Russian Empire in workplaces, urban centres, peasant communities and on the vitally important railway system.

Between March and November 1917 a situation of Dual Power existed in Russia; for although the Provisional Government claimed to be the sole government of the country an alternative source of power lay in the interrelated network of soviets that acted as a focus of political loyalty for millions of soldiers and sailors, workers and peasants. Given the fact that the elected members of the military soviets were openly challenging the authority of the officer corps and that civilian soviets were carrying out many local government administrative functions, the soviet system had the potential to completely supplant the weak and fragile administrative machine of the pro-war

pro-western, Provisional Government. All was well for the government while the soviets were run by nationalist minded right-wing socialists who deferred to the politically weak government. However, the regime became increasingly divorced from the people as it proved incapable of granting the widespread popular demands of ending the war, introducing land reform by dividing the landed estates among the peasantry and providing adequate supplies of food. Lenin's Bolshevik Party backed these demands under the slogan 'Land, Peace and Bread' in order to galvanise popular support. Revolutionary leaders Lenin and Trotsky also sought to overthrow not only the government, but the entire social system as well and replace it with a socialist society. This aim was succinctly expressed by the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets'. The Bolshevik political programme became increasingly popular and by October 1917 the Party had gained electoral majorities in many soviets. It was in this favourable political situation that the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government and seized State power using workers' militias.

Soviets in Germany

Industrialised Germany had always been considered by Lenin as the key to a European-wide revolution and he was ecstatic when in late 1918 soviets appeared in that country. By October 1918 Germany was facing certain defeat in the war, but naval chiefs made plans for the Battle Fleet to go out into the North Sea and engage in a death or glory ride against the Royal Navy. In response the sailors mutinied on 29-30 October and established soviets in naval ports, an action that inspired workers and soldiers throughout Germany to follow suit. Amidst the crisis Wilhelm II, Germany's Emperor, abdicated and a re-run of the Russian Revolution seemed possible, despite the ending of the war on 11 November.

However Fritz Ebert, conservative socialist and newly appointed Chancellor of Germany, had no intention of

Made in Limerick



Anti-soviet militia during the Munich Soviet, 1919.

allowing history to repeat itself. He made a deal with the Army High Command whereby the authority of the officer corps would be maintained if the army co-operated in crushing revolution. Right-wing paramilitary units known as *Frei Corps* (Free Corps) were organised. Recruiting former soldiers, they were ruthless in dealing with the radical left. In January an attempted revolutionary insurrection in Berlin was smashed by *Frei Corps* squads who then embarked on a nation-wide rampage destroying soviet institutions throughout Germany. Undeterred by the right-wing backlash, radicals in Munich proclaimed a Bavarian Soviet Republic in April 1919, but that too was violently suppressed on 1 May during street fighting.

Other countries were not immune to the revolutionary upsurge during the spring of 1919. March 21 saw a soviet republic proclaimed in Hungary and a similar regime appeared in neighbouring Slovakia. The Hungarian socialist regime lasted until 31 July when it too was destroyed by counter-revolutionaries. A failed uprising in Vienna in Austria also took place in mid-June.

During the early part of 1919 virtually every European country was affected by large-scale working class unrest raising fears among the propertied classes that revolutionary socialism posed a threat to the status quo. In northern Italy, for instance, there was widespread strikes and factory occupations while agrarian unrest broke out in rural Italy. In London and Liverpool the police went on strike and large scale strikes took place in industrial centres such as Glasgow and Belfast.

Even in the British Army mutinies took place. After the Russian Revolution a civil war had broken out between the Bolsheviks and counter-revolutionary forces known as the 'Whites'. A number of governments hostile to the Soviet regime sent troops and munitions to aid the Whites, including the British government who sent military units

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to Northern Russia. However, with the ending of the First World War in November 1918 widespread discontent spread throughout the British Army because many conscripted soldiers felt that they were not being returned to civilian life fast enough. Also, the prospect of being sent to fight in Russia was not an appealing one. These two factors brought about a series of mutinies in 1918 and early 1919. For instance, on 3 January 1919 12,000 soldiers mutinied at Folkestone and Dover and 60,000 mutinied in other camps. January 6 and 7 saw lorry loads of angry soldiers driving to London and demonstrating for immediate demobilisation. In March 1919 Canadian troops rioted at Kimmel Park Camp where they raised the Red Flag and during fighting in the camp five men were killed and twenty-one wounded. Meanwhile, the morale of the British expeditionary force stationed in Russia was abysmal with cases of soldiers refusing to fight. The government was forced to withdraw the expeditionary force in September 1919.

It was in midst of this deep-seated European crisis that the Limerick Soviet of April 1919 took place.

Limerick Soviet

The immediate catalyst for the beginning of the Limerick Soviet was the death of Robert Bryne, a member of Sinn Féin and adjutant of the 2nd Battalion, Limerick Brigade IRA. He was also actively involved in the trade union movement as branch president of the Post Office Clerks Association and as a member of Limerick Trades and Labour Council. Arrested for being in possession of a revolver and ammunition, he was sentenced in early February 1919 to twelve months hard labour in Limerick Prison. Once there he led a campaign of disobedience for the better treatment of political prisoners, a protest that developed into a hunger strike. Due to his deteriorating medical condition Bryne was transferred on 12 March 1919 to the Union Hospital, now St. Camillus Hospital, on



courtesy of Limerick Museum

Funeral procession of Bobby Byrne at the junction of O'Connell Street and William Street. McBirney's department store is in the background.

Shelbourne Road where he was lodged in a ward under police guard. On Sunday 6 April an IRA active service unit attempted to rescue Bryne from captivity, but during a confused mêlée in the ward, in which shots were discharged, Robert Bryne was seriously wounded and an RIC constable killed. Although the Volunteers managed to spirit Bryne away from St. Camillus, he died later that day in a labourer's cottage near Meelick in Co. Clare.

Tension ran high in Limerick when Bryne was buried on 10 April because the British Army, wishing to suppress paramilitary displays, turned out in force for the funeral. In response to the activities of the IRA, the authorities announced that from midnight on Monday 14 April the city would be designated a special military district and all those entering or leaving the city had to be in possession of a pass issued by the military. Those applying had to appear in person at a military office at 78 O'Connell Street and details of the applicant's physical appearance, name, occupation and address recorded on the document. Army checkpoints were to be placed on all access roads into the city, including checkpoints on both Thomond and Sarsfield Bridge, the river Shannon forming part of the northern boundary of the military district.

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2. Cahill, Liam *Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet 1919. A Threat to British Power in Ireland*, The O'Brien Press, Dublin, 1990, p. 59.

3. *ibid.*

These restrictions on the free movement of people were bitterly resented by the citizens of Limerick, especially by workers who had to cross the Shannon to get to their place of work. Those particularly aggrieved were the residents of the working class district of Thomongate, which lay outside the military boundary on the northern bank of the river, and those who worked in the Cleeves Condensed Milk Company at Lansdowne who faced the prospect of having to pass through army checkpoints four times a day and being delayed for work. Bad time-keeping was a cardinal sin in those days and workers who turned up late for work were liable to be sent home with the loss of a day's pay. In protest, on Saturday 12 April over 600 workers at the Cleeves factory took strike action. A special meeting of Limerick Trades Council (a body composed of delegates from all the local trade union branches) met the following day to discuss the situation and it was decided to call a general strike 'Against British Militarism' commencing 5 a.m. on Monday 14 April. Over 14,000 workers responded to the call bringing the city to a complete standstill. The Council elected a Strike Committee to provide leadership for the protest and sub-committees were also elected to deal with publicity, finance, food and vigilance. Right from the very beginning a soviet-style administrative structure was set up to look after the day-to-day life of the city.

The Trades Council stressed that their action was taken in defence of civil liberties and on day one of the stoppage they issued a statement declaring that the strike was a protest against the decision of the British government compelling them to procure permits in order 'to earn our daily bread'.² In a later press release the Council declared that, 'our fight is . . . against the inhuman and tyrannical imposition of martial law . . . As peaceful workers we only desire that we should be left alone to exercise the right of free men in our own country'.

With the shutdown of virtually all economic activity in the city the Trades Council's Strike Committee held a position of power, for business people and workers alike had to defer to its authority. That something quite extraordinary was happening in Limerick was indicated at the very start of the strike when all the public houses obeyed an order to close. As the protest continued over the following ten days the Strike Committee began to function increasingly as the governing body of the city and the committee was immediately dubbed 'the Soviet' by the *Irish Times*.

Food Crisis

The combined effects of the strike and British Army restrictions on the movement of people and goods soon resulted in a shortage of food in the city and on Wednesday 16 April the *London Times* carried a report from its Limerick correspondent reporting that no food had entered the city since the previous Saturday. To alleviate the situation the Strike Committee ordered bakeries to re-open on Tuesday 15 April and also allowed provision shops to open. A food committee organised food depots on the Thomond side of the Shannon (which lay outside the proclaimed district) and a Catholic priest, Fr. Kennedy of Ennis, Co. Clare helped to organise local farmers to supply food to the Soviet. The farmers went along with this arrangement because it ensured an outlet for their produce. Shops were supplied with food at fixed prices and anyone who overcharged was liable to be closed down. 'The Soviet strictly controlled the price of food', writes Liam Cahill in *Forgotten Revolution*, 'They issued posters throughout the city showing a list of retail prices for essential foodstuffs. The posters warned that drastic measures would be taken to prevent profiteering'.³

During the stoppage only essential services were allowed to operate and those who worked had to carry a permit or badge stating that they were, 'Working under the authority of the Strike Committee'. Public utilities such as gas and

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water still functioned, but organised groups of picketers wearing distinctive badges ensured that non-essential businesses and shops remained closed. Local newspapers were permitted to publish once a week provided they carried the caption 'Published by Permission of the Strike Committee'. Conscious of the need to keep the public informed of its side of the argument the Soviet produced its own daily news-sheet, *The Worker's Bulletin*.

Ironically, the Trades Council, in its protest against the 'tyranny' of the British Army in imposing permits on the citizenry, was to far outstrip the authorities in its enthusiasm for issuing permits. Virtually nothing of a commercial or business nature could be done in the city without such a piece of paper, whether it was opening a cinema or conveying cabbages from one location to another. Whether one was a doctor, a chauffeur or dock-side carter driving a horse-drawn cart, the only vehicles allowed on the roads were those with the requisite document and those without were ordered off the streets by workers' patrols. In all, thousands of permits were issued by the Strike Committee and its various sub-committees. Given the circumstances of a mass general strike attempting to face down military authority it was highly commendable that the Strike Committee succeeded in maintaining disciplined control of the protest and managed to regulate the daily life of the city without a single drop of blood being spilt or any noticeable increase in crime, but it is amazing how quickly bureaucracy can flourish, especially in institutions associated with the trade union movement and the political Left once they have gained some power in society.

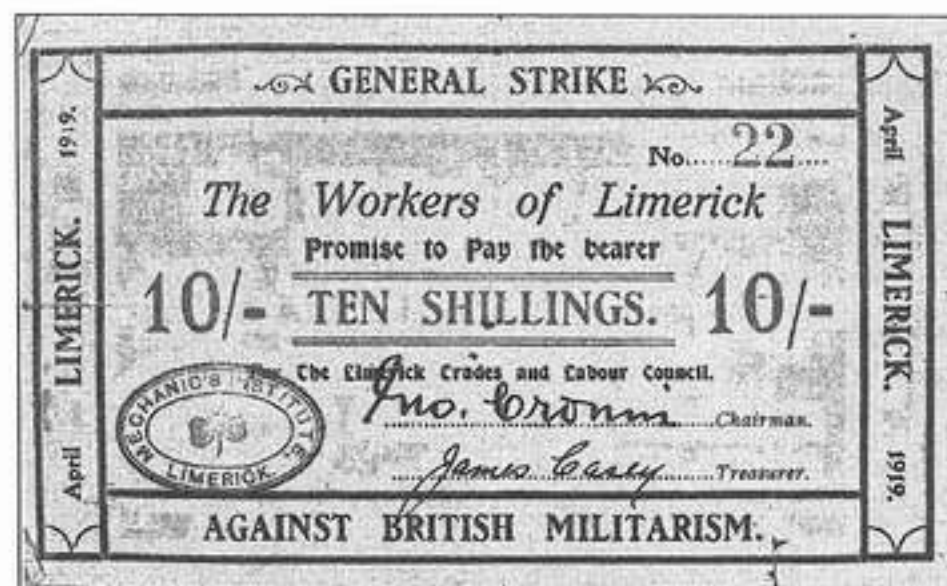
In terms of publicity for the workers it was a stroke of good fortune that Limerick was at that time host to a number of Irish, British and American journalists who had arrived in the city just prior to the commencement of the strike. They were there to cover a solo transatlantic flight

by a Major Wood who was to use a temporary airstrip just outside Limerick at Bawnmore as his departure point for America. The intrepid aeronaut never made it to Limerick however, for he crashed his aeroplane on his way over from Britain. But the presence of so many journalists in the city during the strike provided the Strike Committee with heaven-sent publicity, especially among newspaper readers in America, in its struggle against the British military.

Press reports testify to the good order prevailing in Limerick at the time. This was due to the organisational abilities of the strike leaders and the spirit of solidarity that existed among the workers. The British Army acted with commendable restraint towards the strikers and no violent incidents marred the general strike. It is likely that many of the rank and file British soldiers stationed in Limerick, many from working class backgrounds themselves, had sympathy for the strikers for there had been unrest, even mutinies, in the Army itself in early 1919. There was a general air of rebellious unrest among the working class of Europe and military personnel in Limerick would have been influenced, to some extent, by this political climate.

Financial Crisis

A problem that became acute during the second week of the stoppage was a shortage of money in the city, for many workers did not receive strike pay and the financial resources of the Trades Council were virtually non-existent. As a solution the Strike Committee issued its own paper currency in one, five and ten shilling denominations, each note carrying the pledge that 'The Workers of Limerick Promise to Pay the Bearer' the amount stated. The currency, backed by the National Executive of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, was distributed to strikers and accepted by approved shopkeepers on the understanding that the token notes would be redeemed once funds had arrived from the National Executive and sympathisers.



courtesy of Limerick Museum

Token 10 shilling note issued by the Strike Committee during the Limerick Soviet, 1919.

The fact that the Limerick general strike was quickly developing into a creative experiment in workers' control was quite evident to those who participated in the event. As the *Workers Bulletin* of 21 April commented,

'A new and perfect system of organisation has been worked out by a clever and gifted mind, and ere long we shall show the world what Irish Workers are capable of doing when left on their own resources. Ministers of the various departments have been selected, and with each one doing his bit, satisfactory results are certain'.

It might be said that the general strike was solely a nationalist affair, but other influences were at work. On Easter Monday 1919 the *Workers Bulletin* stated that, 'The English Press is doing its level best to dub the strike a Sinn Féin one, in hopes that the English working class will be fooled . . . The strike is a workers' strike and is no more Sinn Féin than any other strike against tyranny and inhuman oppression' and, 'Tommy (the British soldier) is not our real enemy, and we wish him to understand he is merely the tool of his Imperialistic, Capitalistic Government'.

But it would be a distortion of historical fact to claim that the Limerick Soviet was evidence that Irish workers were thirsting for Socialist revolution in 1919. Essentially the strike was in defence of civil liberties and once a compromise solution over the permit system was arrived at out through backroom negotiations the general strike was brought to an end. The breakthrough came on 24 April following discussions involving the Strike Committee; the Mayor of Limerick, Stephen O'Mara; the Catholic Bishop of Limerick, Denis Hallinan and General Griffin, Officer Commanding the Limerick garrison. What happened at these negotiations is unknown, but subsequent events indicate that a compromise was agreed whereby the strike would be called off and, if there was no trouble in Limerick after that, the military permit system would be ended. April 24 saw the strike notice withdrawn.

The Strike Committee had no other option, for they had been informed by the national executive of the Irish Labour Party/Trade Union Congress that they would not sanction a national general strike in support of Limerick and the hard cash necessary to sustain the Limerick Soviet would not be forthcoming. The National Executive did come up with the 'bright' idea that the entire population of Limerick voluntarily evacuate the city as a means of maintaining the protest, but that was a farcical and frankly ludicrous suggestion.

It could be said that the strikers won a moral victory because a week after the strike ended the Order establishing the military district was rescinded. Taking the Limerick Soviet in the context of the national struggle for independence from 1918 to 1921 involving an IRA military campaign, the political activities of Sinn Féin and a series of mass general strikes in the country, the Limerick protest action was one of a series of nails in the coffin of British rule in southern Ireland. The use of soviet-style measures by determined Irish workers to hammer home a political

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4. The first soviet occurred in November 1918 in Dublin when tailors' pressers took over their workshop and continued supplying drapery stores. In January 1919 there was a two-day occupation of Monaghan Asylum by ITGWU members.

point concerning civil liberties would have been of some concern to the British Imperial government who were facing a number of serious threats to its world role, including the spread of Bolshevik revolution, nationalist unrest in Egypt and India as well as a maturing nationalist rebellion in Ireland that was now entering into a military conflict with the IRA.

The Limerick Soviet occurred during the peak of the revolutionary crisis in Central and Western Europe that saw socialist regimes established in Hungary, Slovakia and Bavaria in March and April. While the decisions and actions of the Trades Council were pragmatically taken in response to problems as they arose, and were not ideologically driven, the radicalism then current among the European working class clearly influenced the confident and assertive way in which Limerick trade unionists confronted a local political crisis and developed an administrative framework to cope with the situation. The spirit of solidarity and the effectiveness of the organisation behind the strike makes the Limerick Soviet an outstanding event in local and national labour history.

Knocklong Soviet

While the Limerick City Soviet of 1919 is very much part of local lore, it is not generally known that a number of other Soviet-style actions, in the form of factory occupations, took place in Limerick County during the period 1920-21. These seizures arose out of trade disputes during which the workers, rather than just simply going on strike, decided to occupy the workplace and kept the enterprise running as a going concern under workers' control. Such actions were naturally labelled 'Soviets'.

The first such action in the county began on 15 May 1920 at the Cleeves Creamery at Knocklong when members of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union took command of the business under workers' control in

support of a wage claim. As well as the main creamery at Knocklong twelve auxiliary creameries in outlying areas were also seized. At that time such workplace occupations in Ireland was almost unknown and it was quite a radical development in a conservative, predominately rural, country.⁴

The main grievance of the Knocklong creamery workers was that their wages had lagged behind their colleagues in other branches of the company who had improved their position through strikes and local wage bargaining. Several months of negotiations proved unsatisfactory to the Knocklong workforce and to pressurise management into a more amenable frame of mind it was decided to occupy the plant.

The take-over of the Knocklong Cleeves creamery in May 1920 was devised by Sean O'Hagan (a.k.a. John Hedley), a radical left-wing activist, and two local ITGWU organisers, John McGrath and John (Jack) Dowling. The Red Flag was hoisted over the plant along with the tricolour, the Cleeves name plate removed from the main entrance door, which was then painted red, and a banner erected declaring 'KNOCKLONG SOVIET CREAMERY, WE MAKE BUTTER NOT PROFITS'. Responsibility for running the venture was given to Sean O'Hagan who took over the role of creamery manager with the assistance of John O'Dwyer, an employee of the creamery. Throughout the five-day occupation local farmers continued to supply milk to the creamery and work continued as normal, with the company's products – cheese, butter and condensed milk – being produced and delivered to regular customers.

Faced with this situation, Cleeves conceded a wage increase backdated to the previous March and the factory was handed back to the owners. Other concessions included the introduction of a 48 hour week, fourteen days

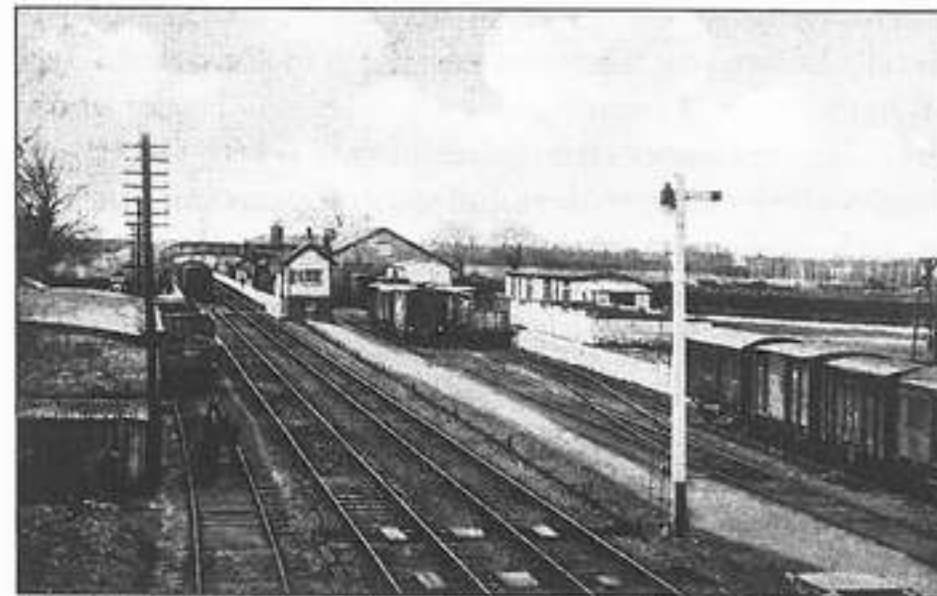
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5. *Limerick Leader*, 27 August 1920.

6. *Dublin, Cork and South of Ireland: A Literary Commercial and Social Review Past and Present with a Description of Leading Mercantile and Commercial Enterprises*, Stratten and Stratten, London, 1892.

holiday between 1 June and 1 October and a promise that a better ventilation system would be devised for the plant. It had taken only about five days for the workers to achieve their objectives. The successful outcome of the action for the workers involved greatly enhanced the standing of the ITGWU among workers and farm labourers in the area, encouraging further strikes and occupations against Cleeves. In Tipperary Town, for instance, women workers at the company's plant there occupied the premises in July in pursuit of a wage claim.

These events took place amidst the War of Independence when ambush and shootings by rebel forces were met with State reprisals. Reprisals that included the burning of creameries in Munster to deny farmers an outlet for their milk and disrupt local farming economies. The creameries systematically targeted were mainly co-operative creameries, but privately owned creameries, including those those owned by the Unionist Cleeve family, could also suffer attack. Early on the morning of Thursday 26 August 1920 several lorry loads of uniformed men, presumably Black and Tans, arrived in Knocklong firing shots and setting the Cleeves creamery on fire. That same morning, continuing their heroic deeds, they attempted to



Signal box at Knocklong Railway Station, damaged by grenade in 1920.

Tom Keogh Collection.

wreck the local railway signal box by throwing a hand grenade through the window.⁵ What with industrial and politically motivated strikes, creamery burnings, soviets and disruption caused by military operations, Cleeves management had a whole series of head-aches to contend with during the Troubles.

The Business House of Cleeve

The Knocklong creamery was but part of a far larger business empire run by the Cleeve family that provided quite substantial employment both in Limerick City and East Munster where Cleeves had a network of some 100 creameries, separation stations, condensed milk factories and mills in counties Limerick and Tipperary and at Mallow in Cork. About 3,000 people were employed by the company and its economic importance to the dairy lands of the province is attested by the fact that Cleeves processed the milk of some 5,000 farmers. Its business operations were divided between three firms: Cleeve Brothers who distributed the milk products (cream, butter, cheese, caramel toffee and condensed milk), the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland which produced them and J. P. Evans & Co., dairy engineers and suppliers of agricultural machinery and implements. J.P. Evans, with an emporium and several wholesale warehouses in Limerick, also ran a pharmacy and were providers of a variety of products including seed, lamps, paints, oils, varnishes, glass and cement.⁶ The various branches of this complex, interlocking web of enterprises were run by Thomas Cleeve and four of his brothers. Their main business centre was Limerick City where the Condensed Milk Company operated a large manufacturing plant employing 600 workers at Lansdowne, many of them women. (see article on page 307 for background information on the early years of Cleeves)

The Cleeve family were Unionist in political allegiance, helped promote local recruiting campaigns for the British

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Sir Thomas Henry Cleeve.

7. O'Connor-Lysaght, D.R.

'The Munster Soviet Creameries',
Saotharlann Staire Éireann 1, 1981, p. 40.

8. *Limerick Leader*, 8 September 1915.



Irene Steer

Plaque of members of the Limerick Protestant Young Mens' Association who took part in the Great War, 1914-1918 'For King and Country'. One of Sir Thomas Cleeve's sons, Edward Henry Cecil Cleeve, is listed on the plaque. Please feel free to use a magnifying glass!

Army during the 1914-18 War (during which they made a substantial profit of over £1 million exporting their products to the British military) and had control over the untiringly unionist *Limerick Chronicle*.⁷ It was the family-owned J.P. Evans engineering company that received the only wartime munitions contract to come Limerick's way, the company making components for artillery shells.⁸ Naturally, other businesses in the city did receive wartime contracts: the clothing trade manufacturing military uniforms, the timber firms of Ryan's and McMahon's producing wooden ammunition boxes and Spillane's tobacco manufacturing company based in Sarsfield Street

receiving a large War Office contract, to cite just three examples; but Evans was the only one involved in munitions production.

On Saturday 7 April 1900 the principal founder of this fine family fortune, Sir Thomas Henry Cleeve, gave 500 of his Limerick employees a holiday excursion to Dublin by special train for the occasion of Queen Victoria's visit to the capital. Such clear displays of loyalty by the Cleeves to the Crown caused the family to be dubbed 'foreign' in nationalist circles. Green posters were pasted up around Limerick by Irish nationalists declaring that the factory

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9. *Limerick Chronicle*, 7 April 1900; *Clonmel Chronicle*, 11 April 1900

10. Lysaght *op. cit.* p. 41.

11. Power, Patrick C. *History of South Tipperary*, The Mercier Press, Cork & Dublin, 1989. p. 224.

girls, 'should not allow themselves to be paraded before the Saxon Queen.' Nevertheless, the planned trip went ahead without incident in Limerick itself. According to the *Clonmel Chronicle* over 300 Tipperary workers, mostly girls, from Carrick-on-Suir, Clonmel and Tipperary Town also joined the excursion, 'They were all nicely dressed, and to each was presented a neat badge coloured red, white and blue, and inscribed 'Queen's Visit to Ireland, April 1900,' with the word 'Cleeve' in the centre and a knot of green ribbon attached'. When the train returned to Tipperary that evening it was greeted by a hostile crowd throwing stones, the windows of some of the carriages being shattered, 'the glass falling over those who were seated inside,' and some of the women received 'rough treatment' on the platform.⁹

The excursionists were provided with refreshments by the company, but it would seem that this generosity did not necessarily extend to the wage packet, for in 1914 the average unskilled Cleeves wage of 17 shillings a week was considered one of the lowest in Ireland.¹⁰ Wartime inflation resulted in a decline in Irish workers' living standards, Cleeves staff being no exception. However, beginning in 1917 rising labour militancy began to redress the balance. The next few years saw a significant upsurge of working class militancy previously unseen in this country and witnessed a rapid expansion of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union among previously non-unionised unskilled and semi-skilled workers throughout urban and rural Ireland, including the recruitment of large numbers of agricultural labourers. The ITGWU established its first branch in Limerick on 15 October 1917 and achieved a major breakthrough in the city with the unionisation of Cleeves, a report in *Irish Opinion* for 6 July 1918 stating, 'Cleeves is now a union shop and is booking its additional staff through the Union.' Among the new recruits were Cleeves employees in the Munster branches of the firm.

From 1918 Cleeves was hit by a series of demands for better hours, wages and conditions, the company being plagued by industrial trouble of one sort or another until 1923. Life became particularly stressful for management and may have cost the life of Alexander Stewart, manager of the Carrick-on-Suir creamery, who shot himself with a revolver. The coroner's finding was that Stewart was so depressed over the labour trouble at the plant that he killed himself. Naturally, the local Clonmel Trades Council hotly disputed the coroner's finding.¹¹

The combativity of the Cleeves workforce was very much in evidence during the Limerick Soviet when the Lansdowne plant was the first to go on protest strike. The man who set that whole train of events into motion was Cleeves employee Batty Stack, an IRA man involved in the rescue of hunger-striker Robert Byrne at St. Camilius Hospital in April 1919. Stack was the only member of the rescue team armed with a firearm, the others having cudgels. Several policemen were shot, one fatally, during the attempt and Stack may have inadvertently mortally wounded Byrne during the confused mêlée in the hospital ward.

Bruree Soviet

Another soviet occupation in East Limerick took place on 26 August 1921 at a mill and bakery in Bruree. Again the owners were the Cleeve family who ran both a creamery and corn mill at a substantial premises known as Bruree Mill. Built as a corn mill about 1850, the machinery was powered by a massive 8 metre diameter water wheel. (The five storey building and mill wheel can still be seen today, a picturesque landmark on the River Maigue). While the immediate circumstances leading to the Bruree occupation are unclear, it is known that the dispute originated during the previous year resulting in the sacking of one, possibly more, workers in November 1920 (newspaper reports differ as to the number of employees that were dismissed).

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courtesy of Limerick Museum

Bruree Mills occupied by workers, 1921. Slogan proclaims 'Bruree Workers Soviet Mills, We Make Bread Not Profits'.



Tom Keogh Collection.

Bruree Mill as it is today.

The union involved, the Irish Transport, demanded in February 1921 that the dismissed employee(s) be reinstated with their wages paid for time spent out of work. Management refused the demand and the grievance festered until the following August when union officials John (Jack) Dowling and John McGrath (both men had been prominent in the Knocklong Soviet) led the workers in a seizure of the mill and bakery.

Patrick Doherty, the local ITGWU organiser, was appointed manager. A red flag was hoisted over the premises and a banner proclaiming 'Bruree Soviet Workers Mills, We Make Bread Not Profits' was draped on the front of the building. The mill continued in production, the workers awarding themselves a wage increase of 7 shillings & 6 pence and implementing a decision to reduce

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12. Provisional Government Correspondence
R 6, S.P.O.

prices. Apparently this decision led to a 100% increase in orders, output increasing to meet demand.

Following negotiations at Liberty Hall in Dublin the factory occupation ended on 2 September and the premises were handed back to Cleeves. These talks were brought about by the intervention of Countess Markievicz, Sinn Féin Minister for Labour. In an article that appeared in the *Voice of Labour*, the official ITGWU publication, it was claimed that Markievicz threatened to use the IRA to remove the workers from the premises if they did not leave of their own accord.

Castleconnell Soviet

A few months later another takeover took place at the fishery in Castleconnell. The beginnings of the this time dispute went back to October 1920 when the owner, a Mr. Mackey, agreed to grant a wage increase but turned down requests for a 54-hour working week and overtime paid at time-and-a-half. Six months later Mackey agreed to submit the case for arbitration but refused to accept the arbitrator's decision when he found in favour of the workers. In November 1921 Mackey's employees went on strike over the issue of back-money owed to them and when this tactic failed the workers seized control of the fisheries and ran the business themselves.

By mid-December the dispute was over, negotiations taking place under the threat of forcible eviction by Republicans. The Sinn Féin Dáil Cabinet had discussed the Castleconnell Soviet on 2 December 1921 and the course of action to be taken was recorded in the Cabinet minutes: 'Min. for Home Affairs to instruct police to proceed with aid of Volunteers to put strikers out of Mr. Mackey's premises. Min. of Lab. to interview Liberty Hall officials in meantime with a view to having an organiser sent down to settle dispute'.

The threat of government intervention persuaded the antagonists to sit down and negotiate a settlement that proved satisfactory to the workers.

The Munster Soviets

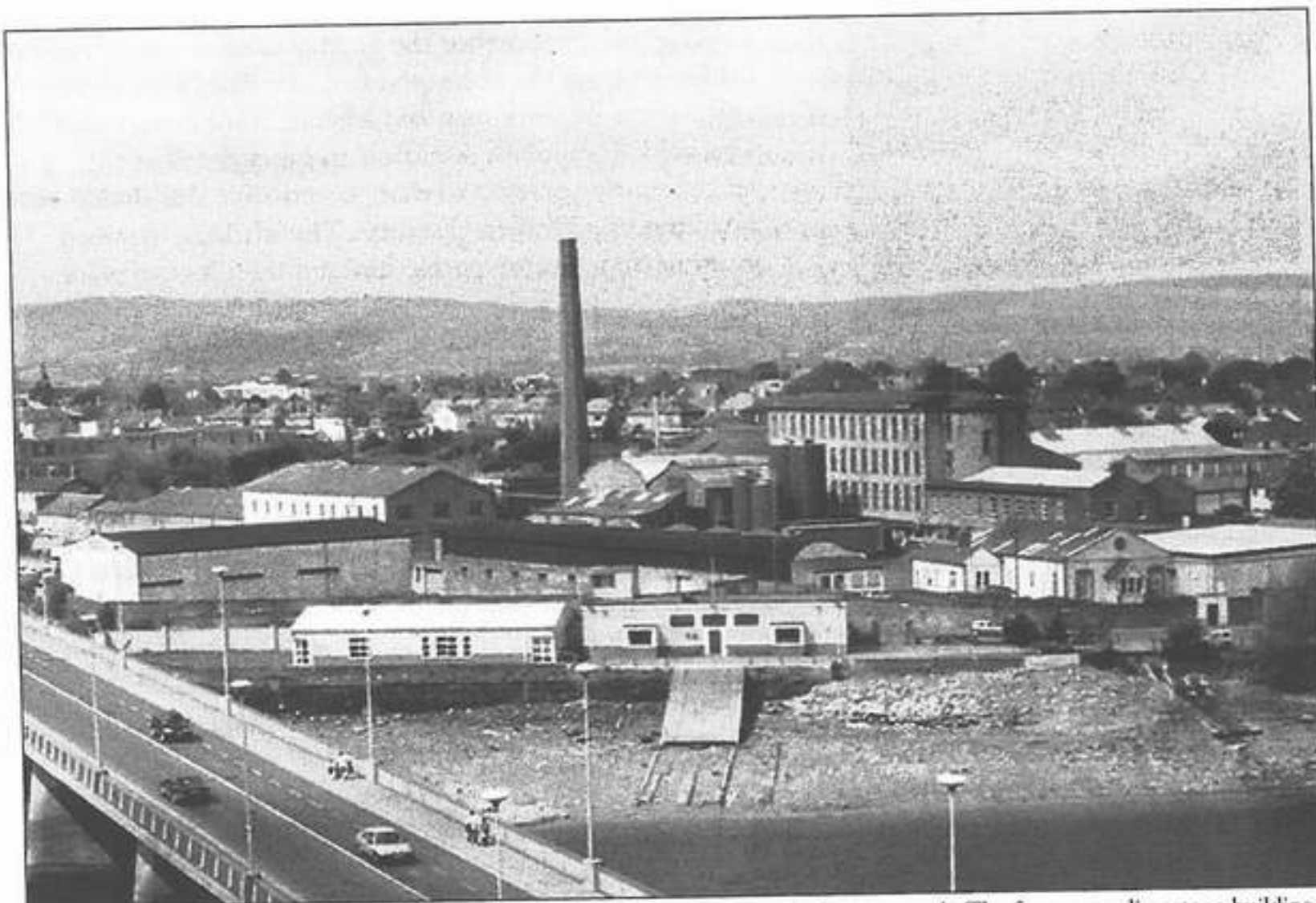
The period 1921-22 saw many other workplace occupations in southern Ireland involving groups of workers as diverse as miners in Arigna in Co. Leitrim, harbour workers in Cork and Drogheda foundry workers. In Tipperary Town workers seized the British-owned Gas Works on 4 March. The gas company sought diplomatic assistance from the British government who immediately put pressure on the Provisional government in Dublin,¹² then attempting to administrate the country following the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921.

Unlike the rising tide of labour militancy that took place during the partial economic recovery of the immediate post-war years when the occupation of the Knocklong creamery in May 1920 could produce positive results for workers within a matter of days, this new phase of occupations took place at a time of down-turn in the trade cycle. Employers were simply no longer in a position to buy industrial peace with speedy concessions. In fact, falling prices were actually leading to demands by employers for wage cuts. Cleeves was particularly hard hit by falling prices and by the end of 1921 the company claimed that its debts amounted to £100,000 with a net loss of £274,555. Thus, a situation arose in which workers still retained expectations that militancy paid dividends, while at the same time employers were seeking to confront labour and introduce cutbacks. In such circumstances trade disputes can develop into protracted, trench-war affairs.

In December 1921 Cleeves Condensed Milk Company sought staff lay-offs and wage reductions amounting to 33.3%, the company claiming that it had been operating at

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Brendan Gleeson

Site of former Cleeves Lansdowne plant, Limerick with its towering red brick chimney stack. The four-storey limestone building on right was the main factory building. Cleeves is now owned by Kerry Group Plc.

13. *Limerick Chronicle*, 27 September 1951.

a substantial and increasing loss for the previous two years, especially since the loss of its lucrative wartime contracts and a fall in prices. Given the severity of the wage-cuts proposed, and a track record of poor industrial relations and lack of mutual trust between workers and their employer, the company's demands were strongly opposed by the unions involved – the ITGWU, the Clerical Workers Union and the Automobile Drivers Union – who treated Cleeves lamentations with the utmost suspicion. The employees still harboured an acute sense of historical grievance when they recalled the war-time good times enjoyed by the company when excessive profits were not

matched by corresponding pay increases. The view from Cleeves' perspective was somewhat different, management stating that in the economic climate then prevailing, even if the wage cuts were fully implemented, it would make more economic sense for the company to close down manufacturing operations altogether and simply import milk products. So, it was strongly implied, the workers should be thankful for having jobs at all.

Negotiations brokered by the Dáil's Department of Labour failed to achieve a breakthrough in the dispute and the Lansdowne workers went on strike on Holy Thursday, 13 April 1922 against the company's decision to implement a 10 shillings wage cut in the factory. This was actually less than the 33.3% reduction initially sought, but it was nonetheless a severe reduction. According to an account written thirty years after the event, the situation was so tense in the factory that day that when, 'a few hot-heads, imbued with resentment at the decision' sounded the factory siren, 'ordering all employees to leave the premises' the entire plant was shut down within an hour.¹³ The dispute was declared official by the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, the strikers receiving strike pay.

The positions of both parties to the dispute were irreconcilable and the situation deteriorated to the point when the company completely lost its patience with the unions and announced the closure of all its plants on 12 May locking out some 3,000 employees. In response, on 11 May creameries, separator stations and condensed milk plants throughout Munster were seized by Cleeves workers who were guided in their actions by a joint union co-ordinating Council of Action, the plants continuing production as soviets under local union management. Among the creameries and factories seized were Bruff, Athlacca, Bruree, Tankardstown, Dromin and Ballingaddy in Co. Limerick; Tipperary Town, Galtymore, Bansha, Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir in Tipperary; and Mallow in

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14. *Limerick Chronicle*, 24 April 1923; 17 February 1925.

15. *The Voice of Labour*, 27 May 1922.

16. *Limerick Chronicle*, 29 September 1951.



Cleaves Creamery, Tipperary Town, was occupied by workers in 1922 and burnt down during the Civil War.

Co. Cork. The presence of pro-Treaty troops guarding the Lansdowne premises deterred striking workers from entering the factory and establishing a soviet in the city.

Given the climate of the times the seizures were less than gentlemanly affairs. According to the testimony of John Heffernan, manager of the Tipperary Town condensed milk factory employing 300 men and girls, on the day of the occupation the keys of the plant were forcibly taken away from him by Michael Shelly, the local secretary of the ITGWU, and Thomas McCarthy, an employee, who both ordered the manager to leave the premises and not to return, otherwise, 'he would be shot'.¹⁴

The media condemned the occupations, *The Irish Times* remarking on 15 May that the workers owed their political allegiance not to Free State or Republic, but to Soviet Russia. But the condemnation was not universal, for a contributor to the ITGWU journal *The Voice of Labour*, reporting from one of the seized creameries, 'that had been ruthlessly closed down by its late Capitalist owners',

filed a glowing report for the 27 May edition. Under the byline 'Treivos', the correspondent described the, 'fervent enthusiasm' of every man and woman in the Soviet plant who paid, 'scrupulous attention' to every detail of the manufacturing process so that, 'no possible slur should be cast upon the Workers' Factory'. The workers, 'strained every nerve to secure perfection' and their love of work was a 'constant urge.'

The location of the plant is unnamed, but in the background could be seen the soaring range and rugged peaks of the Galtee Mountains, while over the soviet the Red Flag flew daringly, bravely. The manager was a paragon of virtue, naturally, upon whose every word the 150 workers hung, yet, 'he was only a worker' himself who 'bore not even the imprimatur of a collar'. Written shortly after the seizure, the article portrayed the Soviet as in full production with long lines of horse drawn cars, flat-bedded, and laden with cans of new milk, queuing up to deliver their supplies.¹⁵ But this happy situation was not to last too long, for many of the soviet creameries were soon to be hit by a farmers' boycott.

The occupations took place at a critical juncture in Irish history that saw a deepening breakdown in central political authority coming on the heels of the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1922, the withdrawal of the British forces and the resultant bitter wrangling between the pro- and anti-Treaty factions of Sinn Féin and the IRA. Class conflicts in the new Free State complicated matters still further and the rancour of the strikes and occupations at Cleeves remained in the memory of some Limerick people for years afterwards. A local newspaper article concerning the history of the Lansdowne plant published nearly thirty years after the event making the comment, 'It will be remembered that at this period law and order were practically non-existent. The workers appeared to get out of hand and became most aggressive to the proprietors.'¹⁶

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17. *Limerick Chronicle*, 17 May 1922.
18. *Limerick Chronicle*, 25 May 1922.
19. Separators: machinery for separating cream from milk.
20. Power, P.C. *Carrick-on-Suir and its People*, Dublin, 1976.



courtesy of Limerick City Library

The creamery soviets lay within the territory of the anti-Treaty 'Munster Republic' and due to the political instability and uncertainties of the period, which were pointing towards civil war, the soviets were generally left to their own devices, for the Republican wing of Sinn Féin/IRA did not want to have to face additional political complications by having to deal with recalcitrant workers. However, the natural sympathies of many Republicans lay not with the soviets and the 'Cause of Labour', for in rural areas many active members of the local IRA units were farmers' sons. Regardless of the IRA stance on the issue, economic and political circumstances conspired to weaken the Munster creamery soviets. Farmers, led by the Irish Farmers Union, were openly hostile to what they perceived as dangerous Communist agitation and launched a campaign to withdraw milk supplies to the soviets, significantly reducing creamery production and undermining the economic position of the soviets. Typical of the response from the farming community was a meeting of the County Limerick Farmers Union held in Geary's Hotel, Limerick on Wednesday 17 May that resolved to, 'forbid our members to supply under the Red Flag, which is the flag of anarchy and revolution.'¹⁷ Dairy farmers in other areas of east Munster took similar decisive action. In Clonmel on Tuesday 23 May farmers from the locality met to consider their response to this 'attempted Communism' and decided that they would withdraw all milk from the soviets, 'until the Red Flag is taken and rightful ownership resumed.'¹⁸

The political crisis then facing the country placed a stark choice before the people: either 'law and order' or 'militarism and anarchy' - soviets and militant trade unionism being closely identified by the media and political conservatives with the latter. An indication of the general mood of Irish workers for a return to stability came on 24 April 1922 when a nationwide general strike was held in protest against the slide to civil war by both

factions of Sinn Féin and the IRA. The Cleeves workers were further isolated due to a distinct lack of interest shown by the broader Irish labour movement in the soviets despite the favourable, pro-soviet report that had appeared in the 27 May edition of *The Voice of Labour*.

Faced with a myriad of difficulties several creameries, including that at Bruree Mills, were voluntarily returned to company ownership before the Civil War started on 28 June, while conflict between soviet workers and farmers in other areas led to the burning of two creameries by arsonists and damage to a third. At the Lansdowne plant in Limerick the tide turned in favour of the company in the latter half of June when the strike there was called off after eleven weeks.

The experiences of the Cleeves creamery in Carrick-on-Suir provides some idea of the local political antagonisms the soviets generated. Farmers refused to supply milk to the plant and installed separators¹⁹ on their farms in order to produce their own butter. Tempers became a little frayed when the creamery workers saw their livelihoods being undermined and took to confiscating separator parts from farmers. In one alleged incident, men armed with revolvers turned up at a farmer's house demanding he hand over his milk. At one stage in the drama farmers threatened to march *en masse* to the creamery and sort out the problem once and for all. Fortunately, this drastic action was averted by the timely intervention of the local IRA commander who offered to broker a truce involving the soviet handing back the separator parts and the Red Flag being removed.²⁰

Reality was not proving a kind friend to the 'sovieters', as they were dubbed. The end of the Munster Soviets came with the Civil War and the routing of the Republicans in the towns and cities by Free State soldiers in July and August 1922. During their advance into Munster the Free

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Barricades during the Civil War, 1922 on O'Connell Street. Cruises Royal Hotel in background.

Tom Keogh Collection

State government was anxious to not only suppress armed resistance to the Treaty but also to deal decisively with 'Bolshevik' agitation and with a militant trade unionism that had come to intensely annoy employers, farmers, financial institutions and anyone else who had a vested interest in a return to normal economic life and political stability. The Free State government was also anxious to convey to the British cabinet, and the world financial community in general, that it would not put up with all this Bolshevik nonsense.

Although the Munster Soviets were a 'third force' in some areas during the period leading up to the Civil War, they could not prosper long in the face of a strengthening nationalist conservatism that had very distinct ideas about what 'Freedom' was all about and what limits needed to be



Building at 36, William Street pock-marked by bullets during the Civil War in Limerick. David Begley was proprietor at the time.

Limerick Civic Trust Collection

imposed. There was also the harsh reality that the Irish labour movement did not have the guns, nor indeed the political will, to impose its vision of the future on the Irish nation.

One of the very first acts of Free State troops when they

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arrived in a town or village was to immediately suppress any soviet they found and arrest the leaders. When pro-Treaty soldiers fought their way into Tipperary Town during the weekend of 28/29 July they shot down the Red Flag that had flown over the soviet Gas Works since 4 March. Retreating Republican forces burnt down a number of buildings in the town including the military barracks and Cleeves creamery.

The arrival of government troops in Carrick-on-Suir in August saw the end of that particular experiment in workers' control. But considering the ruthless counter-revolutionary methods used against the 'Reds' in German cities, such as Berlin and Munich, in 1919, the measures taken against the Irish 'Sovieteers' were quite mild.

Soviet Methods

The experience of soviet occupations of Cleeves premises during the period 1920-22 shows an interesting escalation of workers' militancy in response to changes in economic circumstances. The first occupation of a Cleeves plant occurred in Knocklong in May 1920 and had been a brief affair lasting less than a week. The seizure was an example of direct action methods used as a tactic to extract concessions from a reluctant employer and once the causes of the dispute had been resolved the premises were returned back to the company. At the time Cleeves could afford to make concessions, but when the economic boom turned to recession in 1921 the company was no longer in a position to buy off workers demands. Quite the reverse, for the company was now seeking drastic wage reductions and the workforce had to fight tooth and nail to maintain its previous gains. Using soviet methods on a widespread, ambitious scale in 1922 the workforce, highly confident after four years of industrial conflict with management, engaged in a toe-to-toe fight against a family who felt that in order to survive financially they were in no position to back down. With no meeting of minds, the dispute

resulted in a prolonged dispute of two to three months during which workers exercised direct control over a large number of Cleeves premises. It was a clear challenge to property rights in Ireland.

Cleeves Liquidated

Cleeves emerged economically battered and psychologically bruised from the bitter and acrimonious military, class and political conflicts of the Troubles. Furthermore, the prolonged occupation of their premises during May to August 1922 resulted in the loss of vital company markets to rivals. Even with the return of its creameries from the hands of Red Flag workers the company did not immediately reopen for business and it maintained its lock-out until pledges had been extracted from employees at each plant to accept company demands and ban strikes. As a consequent, a number of creameries did not open until February or March 1923, while others needed extensive repair due to fire damage for which compensation was sought. For instance, Cleeves put in a claim for £120,000 for damage caused to their premises in Tipperary Town. But no amount of industrial coercion or claims for compensation could save the Cleeves business network from collapse and the Condensed Milk Company went into liquidation in November 1923 with debts owing to milk suppliers. An Irish syndicate headed by Cork businessman Andrew O'Shaughnessy, TD and butter merchant, took over the Condensed Milk Company shortly afterwards, but ultimately the former Cleeves creameries and Lansdowne factory were taken over in 1927 by the Dairy Disposal Company, a state-sponsored body established to guarantee dairy farmers a stable outlet for their produce. In a sense the sovieteers had been vindicated, for the company was now in public ownership as a semi-state body.

So ended one of the largest, privately owned industries to have been established in Limerick. At the beginning of the

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21. *Limerick Chronicle*, 19 December 1908.

century the Cleeves were socially one of the leading business families in the city - the pioneering founder, Thomas Henry Cleeve being knighted in 1900 by his Queen as a loyal captain of industry and heaped with local honours such as Deputy Lieutenant of Limerick City, and City High Sheriff.²¹ His wife, Lady Phoebe Agnes Cleeve, was called upon to officiate at the opening of worthy functions and charitable events and she sat on the committee of the 'Countess of Limerick's Shamrock League' along with The Lady Clarina, the Countess of Limerick (of Dromore Castle) and Mrs Barrington. But within fifteen years after Sir Thomas's death in 1908 the whole Cleeves milk empire had collapsed in ruins, destroyed by the virulent class and nationalist forces unleashed by the First World War.



Lady Phoebe Agnes Cleeve

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