

The Biggest General Strike in Irish History

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On Tuesday 13 April 1920 a general strike took place in Ireland that was by far the greatest strike in Irish history. All over the country there was a complete stoppage and not only that, in some regions and towns the workers took over the running of society, declaring ‘soviets’ and workers’ councils to be in charge. The aim of the strike was to secure the release of prisoners being held by the British authorities in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin and, after two days, the strike ended with a complete victory.

In the early part of 1920, an intense conflict was taking place – the War of Independence – between the imperial authorities of the British government and the vast majority of the Irish people. A radicalised Irish population had defeated the threat of conscription at the end of 1918, had voted overwhelmingly for Sinn Féin in the elections of December that year (a party that was determined to bring Ireland out of the empire), and were engaged in a mass popular undermining of all the systems of British rule, through strikes, boycotts and support for the guerrilla campaign of the Irish Republican Army.

On the other side, Britain was still at this time determined not to lose an inch of soil in Ireland. When it came to the conflict in Ireland, the main fear of the British cabinet was that should Ireland achieve independence, this would have disastrous consequences for the rest of the empire.

To quell the mass disobedience of the Irish population, the authorities began a campaign of repression and ‘reprisal’. As part of this campaign, sweeping arrests had resulted in over a hundred men being imprisoned at the Mountjoy without any charge or legal process being directed against them.

The Hunger Strike at Mountjoy Prison, April 1920

A determination sprang up among these prisoners to embark on a hunger strike in protest at their treatment. On 5 April 1920, a core group of thirty-six men refused food. These men were trade unionists, socialists and republicans, sometimes all three combined. Among them was the revolutionary socialist Jack Hedley, who had been arrested in Belfast (with a pamphlet by Lenin in his pocket). The *Manchester Guardian*’s reporter interviewed a participant of the hunger strike and described him as follows:

A young man, normally engaged as a trade union organiser and he may be taken as a type of the small but rapidly-growing band of idealists to whom the name of James Connolly is constant inspiration... he is as keen that the Irish nation should become a workers’ republic as that it should be a republic at all.

The next day, 6 April, thirty more men joined them as the republicans in the jail promoted the hunger strike. Each day, more prisoners took part, so that five days after the protest had begun there were 91 men on hunger strike in the Mountjoy prison.

Theirs was not just a passive campaign: while they had strength for it, the men broke all the furniture they could, including the doors, and damaged the interior walls. The IRA ordered their more experienced men who had been sentenced (and were in ‘A’ wing) to wreck their cells and bore through the walls from cell to cell. This was a ‘smash-up’ strike and the point was to ensure the hunger strikers could mix together and not be prevented from acting in unison by being locked into their cells. The participants were handcuffed and moved to ‘C’ wing, which they managed to damage significantly also. Those men who had not been identified and sentenced

joined the hunger strike but not the smash-up strike. To keep morale high everyone sang socialist and rebel songs, concluding with the 'Red Flag'.

It wasn't long before a huge public reaction surged up in response to the hunger strike and it was one of determination to help the men. On Saturday 10 April, people thronged the jail, where an unsuccessful attempt to set fire to a tank took place and the same night the crowds tested the gates to the jail, which withstood their efforts to push against them.

Workers join the protests in large numbers

The following evening, Dublin's dockers – who were in the middle of their own radical action, a refusal to export food to avert a possible famine – were joined by postal workers and others at the jail to once again attempt a break-in to free their suffering comrades. British soldiers fixed bayonets and fired shots over their heads but the crowds did not move back. Ireland was on the cusp of witnessing a Bastille Day. Socialists were present, distributing leaflets appealing to the soldiers, urging them not to attack the demonstrators. A critical moment was approaching. Would the crowds succeed in breaking in? Or would the British soldiers open fire, even at the cost of taking many civilian lives and the consequent political backlash that would accompany such an event?

The *Dublin District Historical Record* described the scene:

Rapidly constructed obstacles were soon trodden down by the leading ranks ... being pressed from behind; even tanks were no obstacle. The troops thus found themselves in the unenviable position of either being overwhelmed or having to open fire on a somewhat passive, but advancing crowd of men and women.

Yet the pressure on the authorities and the possibility of their being caught up in a disastrous invasion of their prison was relieved by Sinn Féin members.

Seán O'Mahony was a Sinn Féin organiser, businessman and hotel owner. He was a member of the Dáil and Dublin Corporation. Seeing a number of priests at the demonstration, O'Mahony got them to form a cordon at the front of the crowd and then pushed everyone back from the entrance, while shouting, 'in the name of the Irish Republic, go away!' This effort had the merit of avoiding bloodshed, but it left the soldiers untested as well as serving to ensure a popular insurrection against British rule did not begin that day. O'Mahony was no Desmoulins and he took it on himself to sustain this role.

The following day, one week after the hunger strike began, Monday 12 April 1920, a crowd of twenty-thousand men and women gathered around the jail, which remained in danger of being stormed by these huge numbers of protesters. A thin line of troops with fixed bayonets, as well as an armoured car, a rock in a sea of protesters, and the political impact of Sinn Féin's intervention were all that held back the crowd (see video). There was no hope of moving any traffic in the streets around the prison. Inside the Mountjoy, the authorities were totally cut off and could only reach their superiors by telephone.

The IRA and Cumann na mBan mobilise at Mountjoy Jail

Frank Henderson, a commandant in the Dublin Brigade of the IRA recalled that the British soldiers were provocative and there was a real danger that the crowd would be fired upon. Henderson was put in charge of IRA activities outside the prison, with orders to not allow the IRA parties to be provoked by the British military and restrain the crowd from provoking the soldiers. The IRA had brought arms, however, revolvers in their pockets, and were ready to fire back should shooting begin. 'The spirit of the orders was restraint unless fire was opened by the British.'

A full mobilisation of Cumann na mBan took place and the women's organisation was very active in parading with posters and providing 'guard' duty. On Tuesday 13 April, Marie Comerford obtained admission to visit Frank Gallagher and brought out news of the prisoner's demands, information which was issued by Sinn Féin as a press release. But by Tuesday evening, the authorities had recovered their position by deploying an additional two tanks, a number of armoured cars, a great many more soldiers and rolls of barbed wire. They even had air support: the RAF flew close to the rooftops (in dangerous 50mph winds), to try to intimidate those filling the streets around the jail. These RAF missions were considered an innovation and a success, confirming to the authorities that, 'aeroplanes could be used for clearing streets by dropping warning notices and, if necessary, using Lewis gunfire.'

The prison was safe.

Safe, but surrounded.

This was the context for Ireland's biggest general strike.

The Irish labour movement resolved the crisis by taking decisive action. With the attention of the country focused on the prisoners in Mountjoy jail, the executive of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Council (ILPTUC) called for a national stoppage. Earlier, on Monday (12 April 1920), they had sent telegrams to the organisers of the ITGWU and placed a manifesto for a strike in the *Evening Telegraph*. The railworkers of the Great Southern and Midland Company began the general strike by halting all trains after 4.30pm on that day, all trains, that is, apart from those which were bringing the announcement of the general strike to the rest of the country.

Ireland's greatest general strike begins 12 April 1920

Tuesday, 13 April 1920 saw a complete shutdown of all work in Ireland, along with massive local demonstrations and in some places, 'soviet' power. The reports that trade union officials sent back to their headquarters really convey in their own words just how effective was the strike and how wholehearted was the workers' participation:

Galway:

Well, the Workers' Council is formed in Galway, and it's here to stay. God speed the day when such Councils shall be established all over Erin and the world, control the natural resources of the country, the means of production and distribution, run them as the worker knows how to run them, for the good and welfare of the whole community and not for the profits of a few bloated parasites. Up Galway!

Cavan Branch, ITGWU:

Wire received 6pm; meeting held, strike agreed upon. Tues. – Cattle fair dispersed; shops closed; protest meeting held; resolution protests passed; red flags and mottoes ‘workers demand release of all Irish political prisoners’ prominently displayed... strike committee formed. Town Hall commandeered as headquarters ...

Rathangan Branch, ITGWU

Our strike was carried through with great success. All work was at a standstill. The only work that was done was malthouse work. Myself and all our post staff was on strike. We picketed the town. Had all the shops closed for the two days. We allowed them to sell no drink, only groceries and provisions.

Castletownroche Branch, ITGWU

Acted on instructions issued on the Press, 13th inst. Wire received at 9.30, 13th inst. Flour mill men then out. Ordered them back to work – by great work I got them to go. The whole Branch acted like one man. Paraded 200 members through streets yesterday with the general public, under the Rebel Flag – and proud were they. A monster meeting followed. Branch pledged themselves no going back until their countrymen were released.

Tralee Branch, ITGWU

Your instructions re strike were carried out splendid. All organised labour responded. Meetings of protest were held. The Trades council was turned into a Workers Council who took full control of everything. We had our own police who kept order, saw that all business was suspended, issued permits for everything required. Pickets patrolled the streets. In fact the workers controlled all. Workers showed that they were highly organised and that they can carry out any orders at a moment’s notice.

Kilkenny Branch, ITGWU

I received President’s wire at 5.11 on Monday evening. I being the first to get intimation and as I could not get in touch with either the President or Secretary Workers Council I acted on my own and by the help of willing volunteers the strike was completely made public at 7 p.m., not a single man going to work on Tuesday or a single house of business opened either. It was really magnificent the response... I also wired the different branches in the county as far as I can learn the stoppage in those places also complete. As far as the public in this city state that the whole success of the stoppage is due to the prompt action of the members of this Union

Maryborough Branch, ITGWU

You may be interested to know that so far as Maryboro was concerned the strike was a great success. All our Branch members co-operated and we had a strike committee which regulated the closing of shops and opening of same for sale of food. We stopped motors and compelled them to get permits from strike committee. Also compelled stock owners to clear off the fair on Wednesday; ten minutes to get off the square. Our pickets allowed no drink to be sold, as far as we of the O.B.U. were concerned here we did our best.

Virginia Branch, ITGWU

We had a very enjoyable time in Virginia at the strike for the release of the Mountjoy prisoners. The Transport members all struck work, and all other labourers joined in with them. We got on to the business houses first. Got them all closed, with which we had not much trouble. We then held a meeting and put a picket on all roads leading to town and stopped all people pending special business. We celebrated the release of the prisoners with a parade through the town at 8 p.m., which over 100 took part, headed by the local Sinn Fein band.

Maynooth Branch, ITGWU

... It may be mentioned that, with one solitary exception, the procession was composed of workers only, which goes to show the sincerity of the mouthings of the bosses with Ireland a nation... The procession carrying the Tricolour and Red Flags made a most imposing display... Noteworthy by their absence on both days was the usual bodyguard of Irish Ireland and Workers Processions, the R.I.C. who by the way are now homeless in Maynooth.

Carrigallon Branch, ITGWU

You will be glad to hear our strike took place on Thursday last, the 15th inst. Our Branch, with Sinn Fein Club and Volunteers went out to a man. All trading and business was completely suspended for the whole day, the banks, post office, every shop in the town and all traffic was kept suspended. At 12 o'clock in dashing rain one hundred men marched to our red banner and the tricolour through the town and returning placed our colours on the high roof of the post office.

In Dublin, the Drapers' Assistants' Association was given information that several shops in Grafton street were attempting to remain open. They organised a sizeable flying picket, which went to the salubrious part of town, where they found that the information was incorrect. Everything was closed. All sailings from Dublin were halted. You could only obtain bread and milk from particular shops and vans which had agreed with the ILPTUC the basis on which they could deliver their goods, mainly for a limited period on the afternoon only. It helped alleviate concerns about hunger in the capital that boats returning with the day's catch were obliged to just dump their haul on the North Wall and sell them off for what they could get.

The general strike of April 1920 leads to 'soviets' and workers' councils across Ireland

In Waterford, reported the *Manchester Guardian*, 'the City was taken over by a Soviet Commissar and three associates. The Sinn Féin mayor abdicated and the Soviet issued orders to the population which all had to obey. For two days, until a telegram arrived reporting the release of hunger strikers, the city was in the hands of these men.' The same newspaper also gave a survey of the events of the day, 'in most places the police abdicated and the maintenance of order was taken over by the local Workers' Councils... In fact, it is no exaggeration to trace a flavour of proletarian dictatorship about some aspects of the strike.'

Freedom summed up the general strike with this observation: 'never in history, I think, has there been such a complete general strike as is now for twenty-four hours taking place here in the Emerald Isle. Not a train or tram is running not a shop is open, not a public house nor a tobacconist; even the public lavatories are closed.'

From Kilmallock, East Limerick, came a report that vividly describes what workers' control of a town looked like:

A visit to the local Town Hall – commandeered for the purpose of issuing permits – and one was struck by the absolute recognition of the soviet system – in deed if not in name. At one table sat a school teacher dispensing bread permits, at another a trade union official controlling the flour supply – at a third a railwayman controlling coal, at a fourth a creamery clerk distributing butter tickets... all working smoothly.

It was much more difficult for the strike to take hold in the north. The demand to release the prisoners was going to serve the nationalist cause and significantly weaken Britain's ability to

police the national movement if it won. Even so, in certain strategic industries like the railways, the strike was effective. Robert Kelly, for example, railworker organiser and member of Newry Brigade IRA successfully built the strike in that town.

It is clear that the Irish Labour Party and Trades Union Council (Labour and the trade union movement were united at the time) were hardly exaggerating when they summarised that:

Probably never has there been so sudden and dramatic a strike in the history of the Labour movement anywhere... Local Town Councils in many towns handed over the use of the municipal buildings to the workers' committees.

The *Manchester Guardian* also noted the significance of the workers' council:

It is particularly interesting to note the rise of the Workers' Councils in the country towns. The direction of affairs passed during the strike to these councils, which were formed not on a local but a class basis.

In the face of this incredible working class militancy and with the prospect of it deepening, the British authorities gave in. The first offer the governor made to the prisoners was that of a transfer to Wormwood Scrubs, which, they were told, would be accompanied by their being given political status. This, the prisoners refused. The second offer was to give the prisoners political status in Mountjoy Jail. This too, the prisoners refused. Peadar Clancy (second in command, Dublin Brigade) rejected it on behalf of the Volunteers. 'I know the risk I'm taking but there are men here who must get out before they are recognised... the Castle isn't done by a long chalk, but they're done for the moment. The general strike has them beat.'

The British authorities are forced into a humiliating defeat by the power of the general strike

The most senior imperial figure in Ireland at the time was Field-Marshal Lord French. Seeking a resolution to the crisis, French sent for the constitutional nationalist and Lord Mayor of Dublin, Laurence O'Neill. O'Neill was visiting the Mountjoy Prison at the time and left for the Viceregal Lodge where he met the newly arrived Commander in Chief of the British forces in Ireland, General Nevil Macready. It seemed that Macready was the right man for the job the British had in mind. In 1910, Macready had used the threat of shooting workers to prevent a miners' strike in Wales. As a result, he had earned the nickname, 'strike breaker.' At first French and Macready presented O'Neill with a hard line coming from London. On the Monday the British government had made it clear that the demand to release the prisoners, 'cannot be entertained.' Bonar Law told the House of Commons: 'A decision has been taken by the Government and I do not believe that there is any chance of its being reviewed.'

'Why don't they eat,' shouted an MP, to general merriment. The British establishment was complacent.

Forty-eight hours later, however, with the powerful general strike underway and many towns in Ireland under the control of workers' councils, the authorities were wavering and when O'Neill proposed that the prisoners be released on parole for good behaviour, Macready and French accepted the idea.

The third offer to the prisoners, therefore, was put them with O'Neill's return to the prison at 3pm on Wednesday 14 April: they could all leave the prison if they signed the parole form. Once again and despite suffering from the effects of their hunger strike (some of the men were never to fully recover), they said 'no'.

In a panic, with no help from telephone calls to London, from where the cabinet told him that he must decide for himself, Lord French contacted the jail and said that the prisoners could be released. Pathetic attempts were made to hide the extent of this defeat when the prison officials read the parole document out to each prisoner as he left. No one gave any pledge to recognise it and scornful of their warders, the emaciated hunger strikers were greeted with an intense surge of delight from the crowds, who although now allowed to come right up to the steps of the prison were careful to give the men room and assistance in reaching ambulances waiting to take them to hospital.

This was one of the most disastrous defeats ever experienced by the British authorities in Ireland and they were well aware of it. The *London Morning Post* described the scene as one of 'unparalleled ignominy and painful humiliation.' Subsequently, the official history of the Dublin garrison of the British army reported that the effect of the strike was to drive from the streets military and police secret services, who could now be identified by many of the released prisoners.

The release of the hunger strikers and the cancellation of policy... nullified the effect of the efforts made by the Crown Forces during the three preceding months. The situation reverted to that obtaining in January, 1920, and was further aggravated by the raised morale of the rebels, brought about by their 'victory' and a corresponding loss of morale on the part of troops and police.

What can be learned from the great general strike of 1920?

It is often argued that Ireland could not have been (and never will be) a socialist country because of the adherence of the population to national parties and to Catholicism. Typically, the events of 1916 – 1923, Ireland's revolutionary years, are framed by narratives that make this assumption. What this misunderstands is the nature of revolutions. No revolution has ever taken place in which the revolutionaries started with complete independence from the values and institutions that they end up overthrowing. Always, it is a process of differentiation and development, of realisation, often of delighted surprise to the revolutionaries themselves (the reports from local trade unionists above have this quality). And this process is always uneven. In Ireland's biggest ever general strike there were towns in which workers continued to offer a leading role in affairs to the clergy and to prominent nationalists and other towns, like Waterford and Galway, where the workers unhesitatingly took the lead and referred to the language of the Russian Revolution in doing so.

Unfortunately for the radical workers of 1920, their own organisations and leaders were far from eager to lead the movement towards a socialist Ireland. James Connolly was dead and Jim Larkin was in Sing Sing jail, leaving a generation of Labour and trade union leaders in charge whose values were closer to those of the modern Labour Party and ICTU than their socialist, former colleagues.

Rather than urge workers to draw revolutionary conclusions from the general strike, Ireland's labour leaders hurried to discourage further general strikes and to keep the subsequent enthusiastic workers' movement within boundaries acceptable to Sinn Féin. It was therefore left to conservative newspapers to draw the most important conclusion from the 1920 general strike.

The *Daily News* put the lesson like this:

Labour has become, quite definitely, the striking arm of the nation... It can justly claim that it alone possessed and was able to set in motion a machine powerful enough to save the lives of Irishmen when threatened by the British Government and that without this machine Dáil Éireann and all of Sinn Féin would have beaten their wings against the prison bars in vain.

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