

Documents for the Askwith Inquiry

(1913)

From James Connolly, **Socialism and Nationalism** (ed. Desmond Ryan), Dublin 1948.
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James Connolly:

Statement of the Workers' Case

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The following statement on behalf of the workers' side was submitted to the Court of Inquiry at Dublin Castle on October 4th, 1913:

With all due respect to this Court, it is neither first nor last in our thoughts to-day, nor at any other stage of the inquiry. The ultimate tribunal to which we appeal is not this Court, much as we desire to assist its operations, but rather the verdict of the class to which we belong. We do not claim to be philanthropists labouring to preserve social amenities for the sake of some nebulous, changing thing known as 'the public'. We do not pretend to be animated by a fierce zeal for public order, though we hope we shall never wantonly disturb it, nor do we profess to be inspired by a single-minded desire to aid capitalists to conduct their business at all costs. No, we are banded together for the purpose of elevating our class, of organising that class for the conquest of its rights. If the public, the forces of law and order and the capitalist class are willing to co-operate with us towards that end, well and good. If, on the other hand, the social and political forces represented by these three terms unite to defeat and subdue us and to thwart our just aspirations as we believe they have done in this case, we shall still press onward believing that eventually victory, and the verdict of history will be on our side. This mental attitude of ours explains our position in this dispute. The learned counsel for the employers says that for the past five years there have been more strikes than there have been since Dublin was a capital. Practically every responsible man in Dublin to-day admits that the social conditions of Dublin are a disgrace to civilisation.

Have these two sets of facts no relation? We believe that they stand to one another in the relations of cause and effect, the long period of stagnation in the labour ranks of Dublin was responsible for the growth in your midst of labour and housing conditions scarcely to be equalled outside Bombay or

Constantinople. Now that the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union and its officials have set out to arouse the people; now that fierce, and it may be sometimes reckless, fighting has inspired the suffering masses with a belief in their own ability to achieve some kind of emancipation; now, in short, that the luxury, comfort, and even the security of the propertied classes are menaced, we see the quickening of a faint sense of social conscience in Dublin. But until aroused by the shock of industrial war, the propertied classes of Dublin have well deserved their unenviable notoriety, for, like the typical Irish landlords of the past, "enforcing their rights with a rod of iron and renouncing their duties with a front of brass".

They tell us that they recognise trade unions. For answer we say that when they did so, it was wherever the necessity of a long apprenticeship made it difficult to replace a worker if he went on strike, but whenever no such apprenticeship existed to protect the worker the Dublin employers made fierce and relentless war upon trade unions amongst the unskilled labourers. Messrs. Tedcastle and M'Cormack is an instance among shipping firms. The Tramway Company has seen at least two attempts to organise its men. It fought and crushed the attempts, and the workhouse, the insane asylum, and the emigrant ship received the ruined lives of those who made the efforts. They complain that the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union cannot be trusted to keep its agreements. The majority of shipping firms in Dublin to-day are at present working, refusing to join in this mad enterprise engineered by Mr. Murphy, and with perfect confidence in the faith of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. They complain of the sympathetic strike, but the members of the United Builders Labourers' Trade Union, a union recruited from the same class of labourers as the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, have been subjected to a sympathetic lock-out because of their refusal to pledge themselves not to help the latter body if they so desired it at any time in the future. A more unreasonable pledge was never asked for. It is as if, instead of waiting until the contingency arose, the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union were to call a refusal to pledge themselves not to help the latter body if they so desired it at any time in the future. A more unreasonable pledge was never asked for. It is as if, instead of waiting until the contingency arose, the Transport Union were to call a strike in a

shop because the employer would not sign an agreement not to lend his own money to another employer if he needed it. To such an extent has the madness of the employers led them. We on our side say that we are proud of the spirit of solidarity exhibited in Dublin; we are proud of the manner in which organised labour in these islands has rallied to help us in defeating the attempt of the employers to dictate to the workers to what Union they should or should not belong.

Thomas MacPartlin

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The conference with the Dublin Employers' Executive which had been arranged for through the instrumentality of the Joint Board Delegates acting on the instructions of the National Conference held in London on December 9, reopened in the Shelbourne Hotel on December 18.

Previous to its reopening the delegates of the National Executives, and of the unions affected locally met in conference in the Trades Hall, Capel Street, and after two sittings decided unanimously to present the following as embodying the minimum statement of the position of the workers.

Dublin Dispute

That the Employers of the City and County of Dublin agree to withdraw the circulars, posters and forms of agreement (known as the Employers Agreement) presented to their employees, embodying conditions governing their employment in the several firms as from July 19th, 1913.

That the unions affected agree as a condition of the withdrawal of such conditions and forms of agreement governing employment in the firms affected, to abstain from any form of sympathetic strike pending a Board of wages and conditions of Employment being set up by March 17th, 1914.

And the conference also agrees that in restoring relations no member shall be refused employment on the grounds of his or her association with the dispute, and that no stranger shall be employed *until* all the workers have been re-engaged.

All cases of old workers not re-employed on February 1st, 1914, shall be considered at a conference to be held not later than February 15th, 1914.

Upon the conference meeting on Thursday morning the workers were informed that the employers considered that the conference was a resumption of the previous one which broke up on Sunday morning December 7, and therefore stipulated that the immediate business in hand was the discussion of the question upon which the previous conference had broken off, viz., the question of reinstatement. The Labour delegates did not entirely agree that this interpretation of the position was the correct one, but rather than peril the negotiations consented to make an effort to proceed upon the lines indicated.

Several efforts were made to obtain from the employers an indication of what they meant by the phrases, "that they will make a *bona fide* effort to find

employment for as many as possible and as soon as they can”, and that “they will take on as many of their former employees as they can make room for”. The Employers’ Committee was asked to state the firms that could not give reinstatement, or the proportion in which reinstatement could be given immediately, but no information could be elicited. Reference was made to the statement of Mr. Murphy in the press that all but five per cent. of the men could go back to work immediately, and the Labour representatives asked was there any indication of the extent to which immediate reinstatement could be made now. The answer returned stated that it was not, and further that Mr. Murphy’s statement only referred to five per cent of the men whose places were not filled up. This meant that Mr. Murphy was determined that even five per cent of the men whose places were not yet filled would be victimised, and is a fair indication of the vindictive spirit of the employers.

Finding it impossible to come to any agreement or to receive any information the Labour representatives resolved to lay the whole matter before the Joint National Conferences. The latter body after fully considering the question in all its bearings resolved finally to instruct the delegation to bring back to the employers for further consideration the document presented on Thursday morning. This was done on Saturday, and the document handed in by Mr. Larkin at the request of the Delegation. Upon it being handed in the Chairman of the Employers asked Mr. Henderson if Mr. Larkin was speaking on behalf of both Labour bodies, and was assured by that gentleman that Mr. Larkin spoke with the full and unanimous endorsement of the whole National Conference and all its constituent parts. Then the Labour representatives withdrew to allow the employers to consider the position. Upon reassembling the following document was presented by the employers, after which negotiations were broken off.

The Committee observe that the proposals put forward through Mr. Larkin this morning are the same as those presented on Thursday morning, and bring us back to the position in which we then stood.

The clauses submitted again to-day by the Representatives of the workers require the full reinstatement by the Employers of all the workers. This would involve the victimisation of many who have been employed since the dispute began. The

Employers cannot agree to dismiss men who have proved suitable, but subject to this condition are willing and anxious to re-employ their old hands as far and as soon as possible.

The members of the Committee have laboured to try and effect a settlement so much needed and desired, and regret that their labours in conjunction with those of the Joint Board representatives and the Trades Council Delegates have not succeeded in arriving at an agreement.

John Good,
20/12/1913.

On behalf of the representatives of the workers we wish to draw attention to the fact that the employers insisted all through the negotiations that the question of reinstatement should be left absolutely in the hands of the employers, that we should trust entirely to their goodness and generosity. Remember the fact that the employers had locked out their workers, and had brought on this dispute in order to force upon us an agreement now universally repudiated and condemned by all classes from Sir George Askwith's Court of Inquiry down till to-day, as "contrary to individual liberty and one which no self-respecting workman or body of workmen could possibly accept". Remember this, and remember also that the workers now out are out because they protested against this insult to their self-respect, and resolved to protect their individual liberty, and consider that we are asked to surrender these men and women to the tender mercies of those who so wantonly made war upon them. In view of this fact and the further fact that our proposals now refused by the employers have been described by such a broad-minded lover of peace as his Grace, Archbishop Walsh as "fair and reasonable – eminently reasonable", and that these proposals gave the employers every opportunity and sufficient time to adjust their business. What other course was open to us than to respectfully but firmly decline to surrender our brothers. We also wish to draw the attention of the public to the fact that many of the trade unions involved have had for some considerable time past agreements with the employers stipulating for the exclusive employment of trade union labour, and that all such agreements would be completely destroyed by the acceptance of the employers' proposals. Thus they are now trying to introduce the principle of

nonunion labour in places where such labour has not recently existed. In the building trades, for instance, the rules call for three months' notice before such agreements can be altered, yet the employers are now striving to undermine this trade union position without any notice at all. And these are the men who prate of breaches of agreement!

The workers' proposals gave the employers full time, and only stipulated that within a certain period another conference should be held to consider the question of the workers still unemployed. No fairer proposal could be given. The employers' proposal on the other hand demanded that the question of re-employment should be left entirely to the generosity, the ill-will, the forbearance, the malice, the fair-mindedness, the vindictiveness, the passions and the prejudices of the employers who four months ago set out to starve us into submission, and to drive us back to slavery.

Under these circumstances the fight must go on.

Thomas MacPartlin,

Chairman, Workers' Representation.