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Witness

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Identity.

Son of the late James Larkin, T.D., who was a founder member of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union and founder of the Workers' Union of Ireland.

Subject.

Labour in Dublin, 1913, and the genesis of the Irish Citizen Army.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

5a College Street,
DUBLIN

BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH
(Dublin)

8th December, 1953.

Colonel J. V. Joyce,
Bureau of Military History,
Department of Defence,
26, Westland Row,
DUBLIN

With the compliments of

James Lalor

T.D.

Lecture to be delivered by Mr James Larkin Jnr at Mansion House tonight (Mon) 7/12/53.

"1913 - the Year of Uprising".

The history of Ireland and its people during the past forty years is filled with events and developments which have moulded the course of Irish history to possibly a greater extent than the events of any other similar period of time. In those forty years certain events stand out, some fixed in the popular mind, some evalued by historians in their writings, some relatively widely known even outside Ireland, but few, very few, having an international acceptance by both historians and publicists as well as by the common people.

From this period of forty years two events do stand out clear and sharp in that widest sense - "The Insurrection of 1916" and the "Great Labour Struggle of 1913".

On the "Insurrection of 1916" one need not pause to determine its importance and place in Irish history, it is manifest and clear, but why should the Labour Struggle of 1913 assume such importance, this struggle of some thousands of unskilled workers in one city over a brief span of months, and centred round such a minor issue as membership of a particular trade union.

"1913" - the symbolic name for that struggle - was not important because of the numbers involved, greater numbers have participated in other conflicts; not because of geographical extent, it was in the main confined to one city and locality; not by intensity of conflict, Belfast in 1907 in some degree underwent as great an unleashing of police and military terror; and certainly not by material success gained, because the struggle in its immediate phase ended indecisevly

Not for these reasons is "1913" remembered, but because it marked an upsurge of human courage, an unleashing of the human spirit, the standing erect of men and women who had hitherto not known what it was to walk with unbowed heads. "1913" was the uprising of the common people, of working men and women who had lived and laboured in the lower depths of a dark and noisesome pit but who in that year raised their heads and having raised their heads fixed their gaze on the stars, declared that they were of humanity and reclaimed their heritage as men and women in rejecting the fate their masters had decreed for them of being beasts of burden and helots in servitude. "1913" is memorable because it is an epic of the human spirit, of the unconquerable fortitude and determination of the working class, which through suppressed and enchained will never acknowledge ultimate and complete defeat.

Two movements in the history of this land have contributed profoundly to the struggle of the Irish people during the last half centruy and both occurred around the turn of the century. The first being the land war of the farmers which was to bring them the ownership of the land of Ireland, but this struggle though great and significant in itself did not directly merge into and drive forward the main stream of national resurgence. The second was the struggle of the urban workers against economic servitude and human degradation symbolised by the year "1913" but this struggle did directly lead on to and merge with the broad national current of revolt which culminated three years later in the 1916 Insurrection. "1913" was not only the uprising of the workers of city and town, it was the sign, the beacon, the manifestation that the Ireland of the common people was again stirring and ready for another forward move.

But "1913" was something more, in that it was the first occasion on which Irish workers had fought their own economic, their own class struggle, against all their ememies, native and alien, choosing their own objective, relying on their own strength and resources, under their own leaders, and with all other elements in the nation., at least in the beginning, either ranged against them or indifferent to their struggle. It was the emergence of the Irish working class as an independent force on to the broad field of Irish history.

To the working man or woman who is still with us to-day, and who participated in that great struggle of forty years ago it was a year of pride and glory, somewhat akin to the feeling of pride naturally felt by the man who shouldered a rifle in 1916, and why not - because the courage to carry and use a rifle is but another facet of the courage to endure the long months of hunger, terror and overwhelming odds which was the lot of those who battled with their masters in Dublin forty years ago. But that courage is even more remarkable when one looks back to the conditions in which the Dublin working man lived, to the forces arrayed against him and the terrible heartbreaking effort he had to make before he realised that within himself he had such dauntless and unconquerable spirit.

Dublin of the first decade of the century was not a city to take pride in. It was a city of economic and social degradation, national demoralisation, bitter and corrupt factional politics, and for the mass of workers a city of dire poverty, inhuman housing conditions, and a feeling of living outside the bounds of civilised society. The workers lacked organisations to defend and protect them, they lacked faith in themselves, they lacked leaders of courage and honesty. Their only common bond was their readiness to bow their head and tip their cap in a servile salute to every petty tyrant and master.

John Mitchell had called Dublin "a city of genteel dastards and bellowing slaves" and if anything it was an understatement.

Some 300,000 people lived in Dublin. It was a city of few industries, wherein the people made a livelihood by handling the country's exports and imports, and in the service of the gentry. The old crafts were dying, the craftsmen living in a narrow limited, insecure life their main hope and purpose to keep themselves above the swarming mass of casual, unskilled workers.

Those 50,000 unskilled workers were dependent on casual work at the docks, in transport and in the building trade and in the limited number of factories and workshops. The unskilled worker depended for his few days casual work each week on the fhvour of the employer, the foreman or the stevedore, and his economic existence and the welfare and security of his family was in the final analysis determined by the slum landlord, the publican and the pawnbroker. The unskilled workers of the city not only competed among themselves for the available jobs but were under continuous pressure from the never ending influx of labourers from the countryside who with their inherent memories of the Famine, their servility and readiness to work for any wages and under any conditions were a ready means by which the employers could keep any impertinent town worker in his place. For his family the unskilled worker could not provide eith decency of living or security for the future, and the outlets for his children were the British Army for his

sons and the fortunate chance of a job in "service" for his daughters.

Dublin was the capital city, a city of fine Georgian houses which had been slowly rotting away for a hundred years and which had become an ever growing cancer of horrible, inhuman, dirty, vermin infested tenements, unequalled by any modern city in Europe. The official statistics of the housing conditions in Dublin gave it the enviable reputation of having the worst housing conditions in Eurppe, being only approached by the city of Moscow (and here one might note in pasing the effect of terrible housing conditions in relation to later outbreaks of social revolt in both these cities).

Nearly 90,000 persons lived in these tenements - that is almost a third of the population of the City - and of these more than 20,000 families lived each in one room in tenement houses officially declared to be unfit or unsafe for human habitation.

To seek to describe such housing conditions is futile, it is more effective to quote from an open apologist for the employing class, a Mr.Arnold Wright who in his book "Disturbed Dublin" wrote

> " Nowwhere can there be found concentrated so many of the evils which are associated with the underworld of our modern civilisation. To say that men and women live like beasts of the field is the merest truth".

And that is a spokesman for the employers.

Of the wages in Dublin of those years, it is almost impossible to convey an accurate account understandable by the workers of to-day who have not had the experience of those years. The unskilled workers starting hour was generaally 6 a.m. and his normal day ended 12 hours later, but might well be extended to any hour beyond that and not always with an additional penny paid. For a full weeks work of anything from 60 to 80 hours a wage of from 10/- to 16/- was paid. Casual work was the general experience, and that meant wages, if lucky of from 4/- for a broken week up to the princely sum of even 20/- for a full week. As late as May 1913, an agreement between the Shipping Companies and the Union provided for a wage for casual dockers of 5/- per day from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., and this was after three years struggle by organised members of a union. Women workers received wages as low as 2/6d. a week for working ten hours a day, six days a week, while young boys and girls prospered and grew fat on wages of a shilling a week, but no one asked the hours they worked. Payment for bank holidays, holidays with pay each year, fixed overtime rates, sick pay when out sick, pensions, trade union machinery to represen and protect the individual worker, workers welfare or even elementary safety precautions - all were lacking.

Trade Unions only existed in name, being in the main the old guilds carried over into the limited and largely ineffective craft unions. There were general

unions but their scope and power hardly merits examination, and in the whole of Ireland there were less organised trade unionists than there are to-day in the city of Dublin alone. The unskilled workers had been given up as incapable of organisation by the older trade union leaders, and trade union solidarity was not considered as extending to the lower ranks of labour. Political organisations of labour had no effective existence, fragamentary efforts had all failed; a local Dublin Labour Party had dwindled away leaving behind a sorry record, while the small socialist groups had sown seeds of social revolt but the harsh realities of Dublin working class existence had killed off any harvest.

This was the Dublin of the first decade of the twentieth century, a Dublin of brutal, soul destroying poverty; of horrible housing; of disease and ignorance; of inhumanity and slavery; of desperate, helpless unorganised workers. Dublin, the capital city, was truly a reflex of a nation degraded and demoralised in which the very spirit of nationhood was fluttering like the dying flame of a burnt out candle. Dublin, like Ireland, was dazed and supine in the choking mists of its own servitude.

From such human degradation could there be any hope of human advance. Could men and women born into

and living their lives in these festering conditions ever hope to stand erect, defy and defeat their masters. The employers thought not, and at the first stirrings of discontent ordered the malcontents back to their tenement hovels. Such forward looking minds as there were in the nation recoiled from this hopeless human mass of poverty and misery. None had faith, certainly not the down trodden workers, nor the weak trade unions and their inept leaders, or the few brave spirits who yet dreamed of national resugrence; lacking faith nothing was attempted.

Looking back at historic movements it is not always possible to clearly see the starting point, but for the Dublin workers and their struggle of 1913 the year 1909 marks the beginning. To-night I am not seeking to tell the story of 1913 in terms of great men and there were great men, great leaders in and at the head of that great struggle whose place in Irish history is already assured and recorded. But great national or social leaders find their greatness in the movements which they lead and of which they are part, for without the historic moment and the readiness of ordinary men and women to fight and suffer, great leaders would be denied the opportunity to make their mark on history or their record of service to humanity. Rather tonight at this fortieth anniversary meeting of "1913" I would speak of the tens of thousands of ordinary working men and women, aye, and of their children, whose names are unknown and whose individual deeds of heroism and endurance have gone unrecorded, but through whose valiant battles a new epic was written in working class

struggles and from whose faith and courage a nation was later awakened. To pay our due tribute to those men and women is to mark in the most fitting manner our debt of appreciation and gratitude to those leaders who won and held the trust and confidence of Dublin's workers.

"1913" in Dublin was the outbreak of a storm which had been building up and gathering its forces from Belfast in 1907, Cork in 1909, Wexford in 1912, and in Dublin week in and week out had been fanning and strengthening the spirit of revolt. Organisation of workers into the new union with its new outlook, its new spirit, its new tactics and methods of struggle; its demands for higher wages, better conditions, the right to join a trade union and the right to refuse to work with scabs and blacklegs had been a mission carried on with fervour and energy. A growing tumultuous wave of revolt and resistance had developed, challenging the old power of the employers, audacious in its demands, merciless in its exposures, uncompromising in its battles, but above all confident of its strength and ultimate victory. Yet, through it all was the ever growing and spreading belief that all workers were brothers; that all were being robbed of the fruits of their toil, that brutal exploitation and injustice must be fought and that solidarity was the source from which strength would flow and victory be won.

Each struggle against the employers was everybody's struggle, and no more fitting example can be given than when the sailors and firemen outside of Ireland entered into struggle against the Shipping Federation in 1911. Sailors coming into the Port of Dublin were organised by the Dublin dockers into their own union, paid strike pay, and when the fight was over were transferred to the National Sailors and Firemen's Union, and this at a cost of over £5,000 in strike pay - a huge expenditure in terms of trade union funds and 1913 money values to the newly organised Dublin dockers.

To this reawakening of the workers employers first reacted like a man brushing away an irritating fly; later they acted with set purpose and determination to retain their mastery, but nonetheless still acting as individuals or small groups. Finally appalled by the experience of six years of widening struggle and intensifying revolt on the part of the workers, the Dublin employers decided to act together to crush out the growing movement.

The first skirmish was in the dispatch department of the "Irish Independent" were, on the 15th August, William Martin Murphy told the staff they could choose between their Union and their jobs, following it by a similar ultimatum to the men in the Dublin United Tranways Co. The challenge had been thrown down, it was not long before it was hurled back.

On the 26th August, in Horse Show week, at a quarter past nine in the morning tramwaymen all over the city put up the Union badges in their coats, told the passengers they could walk or get Martin Murphy to drive the trams, and reported to Liberty Hall. Battle was joined between the advance guard on either side, and steadily the ranks of each side were swelled as employer after employer demanded of his worker the choice of job or union, and workers replied "We choose the union and the right to be free men".

By the 1st September 404 employers had met and bound themselves together in a bond to support each other by all means and to abide by an agreement that declared

> "We hereby pledge ourselves in future not to employ any persons who continue to be members of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, and any person refusing to carry out our lawful and reasonable instructions or the instructions of those placed over them will be instantly dismissed, no matter what Union they belong to".

The unskilled workers in their thousands stood by their Union and were forced out of their jobs; the skilled workers asserted their manhood and stood by their unskilled brothers and they also were thrown out on the streets, until finally more than 30,000 workers in 37 different unions were in the bitter struggle. How great was the spirit of solidarity can be measured by the fact that the Builders' Labourers' Union, which had been in conflict with the Irish Transport Union at an earlier date and had petitioned the Building Trade employers not to employ any Transport Union members, rejected the employers

order with contempt and took their stand with their former opponents in the Transport Union.

Within forty eight hours of the walk-out of tramwaymen police terror was loosed on the workers starting at Ringsend in the afternoon of Saturday the 29th August, spreading to Beresford Place and Eden Quay later in the same night, with great numbers of workers injured and Byrne and Nolan batoned to death.

Sunday, August 30th, was a day of bloody and prolonged terrorism, commencing with the batoining of thousands in O'Connell Street by the members of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, assisted by hundreds of R.I.C. men specially imported into the city and made drunk for the brutal campaign. But the workers fought back, with stones, bottles, hurleys and their bare fists, and on the Inchicore tram line so fierce was the battle that soldiers of the West Kent Regiment were finally called out.

In the three days from the 30th August to the 1st September no less than thirty battles took place between the workers and the police. It was out of these battles and turmoil that the Irish Citizen Army was born, when workers carrying hurleys marched alongside their bands and processions or stood round their meetings as protection against the vicious police attacks.

The workers leaders were arrested, hundreds of ordinary workers were gaoled and sentenced to terms of imprisonment. Their homes were forcibly broken into, women and children beaten, terrorised and furniture smashed. Men and women in custody were brutally maltreated and through all this naked terror the daily press and the scurrilous, lying fly sheets financed by the employers, slandered and attached the workers, their union and their leaders.

The struggle flowed over, crossed the Irish Sea and English transport workers and railwaymen took action in sympathy with the Dublin workers. The issues involved in the struggle were raised in the British Trade Union Congress, official delegations visited Dublin. Throughout England, Scotland and Wales a wave of sympathy and support for the embattled Dublin workers swelled up and money, food and clothes started to pour in, until finally through the Co-operative Movement the first food ship arrived, and the "pucks" were distributed at Liberty Hall - those famous "pucks" which workers even to-day boast of having received in the same manner as they would display a medal for valour.

The struggle became an issue in English domestic politics, bringing about the defeat of the Government candidates in two English bye-elections: a fiery cross campaign was carried on throughout the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, and finally

on the 26th September, a Government Court of Inquiry sat in Dublin, under Sir George Asquith, in an effort to settle the dispute by conciliation. After a full investigation the Court stated in its report that

> "Whatever may have been the intentions of the employers, this document imposes upon the signatories conditions which are contrary to individual liberty and which no workman or body of workmen could reasonably be expected to accept."

But the 404 employers were adamant in their determination to deny liberty th the workers and insisted on their right of victimisation, by selecting those whom they would re-employ. The struggle continued for eight long months, until, with no formal settlement, work was gradually resumed, although great numbers of workers had to seek employment elsewhere, homes were brokenup, the bodies and minds of children suffered from the privation and suffering - but the Union remained and the workers retained their liberty as individuals and their rights as human beings..

We who meet here to-night to recall that great struggle and pay our tribute to the men and women who fought that battle for human dignity and rights may, through the lapse of time, fail to see in clear focus the wonderful courage and endurance, the loyalty and deep human spirit which raised those simple Dublin workers to the heights of human endeavour. I personally feel I lack the words to frame our tribute, and so with your indulgence I have recourse to one who, though not a worker, took his stand with them in those dark days, George Russell, whose name may be unknown to younger men and women but whose words nevertheless bear a strength of conviction

which will arouse an instant response in all our minds even after the lapse of forty years:-

> I have often despaired over Dublin, which John Mitchell called a city of genteel dastards and bellowing slaves, but a man has arisen who has lifted the curtain which veiled from us the real manhood of Dublin. Nearly all the manhood is found among obscure myriads who are paid from five to twenty-five shillings per week. The men who will sacrifice anything for a principle get rarer and rarer above that limit of wealth. I am a literary man, a lover of ideas, but I have found few people in my life who would sacrifice anything for a principle. Yet in Dublin, when the masters issued that humiliating document, asking men - on penalty of dismissal - to swear never to join a trades union, thousands of men who had no connection with the Irish Transport Union - many among them personally hostile to that organisation - refused to obey. They would not sign away their freedom, their right to choose their own heroes and their own ideas. Most of these men had no strike funds to fall back on. They had wives and children depending on them. Quietly and grimly they took through hunger the path to the Heavenly City. They stand silently about the streets. God alone knows what is passing in the hearts of these men. Nobody in the Press in Dublin has said a word about it. Nobody has praised

them, no one had put a crown upon their brows. Yet these men are the true heroes of Ireland to-day they are the descendants of Oscar, Cuchulain, the heroes of our ancient stories. For all their tattered garments, I recognise in these obscure men a majesty of spirit. It is in these workers in the towns and the men in the cabins in the country that the hope of Ireland lies. The poor have always helped each other, and it is they who listen eagerly to the preachers of a social order based on brotherhood and co-operation".