



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

Athlone and the munitions strike



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Between 1918 and 1923 Athlone witnessed many large public gatherings. There were anti-conscription demonstrations, speeches by national leaders, funerals and election meetings. Thousands of people, as discussed in earlier articles, crowded into Athlone to celebrate the handover of Custume Barracks from British to Irish forces or to follow the funeral cortege of George Adamson as it made its way to Mount Temple. Another example of an event, or series of events, that brought people together on the streets of Athlone was the 'munitions strike' conducted by railway workers during 1920.

Munitions of war

As noted by historians such as Donal Ó Drisceoil, the organised labour movement made significant interventions in Ireland before and during the War of Independence. It was integral to the success of the anti-conscription campaign during 1918 and the two-day strike of April 1920 that forced the British government to release republican hunger-strikers. However, the most prolonged of organised labour's campaigns was the munitions strike of May to December 1920, when railway workers refused to transport armed British soldiers or military equipment belonging to the British army. The strike was a remarkable manifestation of passive resistance and its influence was felt throughout Ireland, including Athlone and its hinterland.

The strike was inspired by London dockers who, in May 1920, refused to load a ship with munitions purchased by the Polish government which was then fighting a war with Soviet Russia. Dublin dockers in the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union decided that a similar policy could be carried out in Ireland: a policy aimed at disrupting the activities of the British Crown forces. In late May, dockers refused to handle what they described as 'munitions of

war for the slaughter of their fellow-countrymen.' That policy was then taken up by Irish members of the National Union of Railwaymen who refused to transport British military equipment and personnel. Their example spread from Dublin to the rest of the country and, within weeks, newspapers were reporting on major disruptions to the railway system. Passenger services in large areas of Ireland were almost completely curtailed, as was the transport of goods by railway. At that time and during subsequent months only one goods train ran daily from Athlone to the west.

To the last shilling

Railway companies responded to the strike by dismissing over a thousand workers, threatening them with destitution. The Irish railway workers were also abandoned by the British headquarters of the National Union of Railwaymen. The British union, despite talk of international communities of workers and the policy of refusing to handle munitions destined for use against Soviet Russia, refused to support its Irish members, since those members were striking in protest against the British army. For union leaders in Britain, it seems, some workers were more equal than others.

The prolonged nature of the strike caused immense hardship for the strikers so the Irish trade union movement launched a national effort to gain funds and support. In June 1920, public demonstrations were held across Ireland with a series of church-gate collections taking place during subsequent weeks and months. On 22 June, Athlone hosted one of those demonstrations. The Westmeath Independent gave extensive coverage to the strikers in advance of the demonstration, with one headline, praising the 'gallant workmen' and promising that 'Ireland will stand with them to the last shilling'. The event itself was, as described by the Westmeath Independent, a 'huge public demonstration', with a brass and reed band, pipers and drummers taking part in 'a magnificent parade through the streets of the town, prior to the holding of the meeting in St. Mary's Square'. Although the paper did not provide an estimate for the size of the crowd, it filled the square.



'The Midland Great Western Railway station, Athlone'

The demonstration was jointly organised by Sinn Féin and Labour and it included local railway strikers. Among the speakers was Seán O'Hurley, a well-known republican, member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the chairman of the Athlone Poor Law Guardians. O'Hurley acknowledged both the bravery of the strikers and the costs that they, and their families, were incurring: 'The railway workers saw the danger, and without consulting even their own leaders, without counting the cost to themselves and their wives and families, they refused to handle the war material being poured into the country for the destruction of the lives and property of the Irish people.' Those words, according to watching journalists, were met with loud applause as was O'Hurley's subsequent exhortation: 'To aid these gallant men, it was the duty of the Irish people to give their last penny and their lives, if necessary'. O'Hurley also made reference to the British leaders of the National Union of Railwaymen and their refusal to support the Irish members of their organisation. In that refusal, he told the crowd, there was a lesson: 'As a Trades Unionist and an Irishman, I will say this much: if

we want to be really free we must break away absolutely from England, and meet England, if we are going to meet her, on terms of equality.' That statement was met with loud applause.

Another speaker, a man named Magennis, whom newspapers described as a 'labour organiser', advocated international unity among workers: 'The workers of the world', he said, 'were the only people who mattered'. Speaking of the strikers, he told the crowd: 'The workers whom they were now called together to support, had begun a great fight, not only for political, but also for social freedom'. Magennis's speech, at least according to contemporary reports, was cordially greeted by the crowd although it seems to have garnered less enthusiasm than O'Hurley's speech, perhaps because Magennis suggested that Ireland would not achieve independence until 'the English worker' had, at some unspecified time in the future, gained 'social freedom'.

A time of war

The demonstration concluded peacefully and without any confrontation with the Crown forces: an outcome that was not

guaranteed at that time in Athlone's history: a year earlier, in May 1919, a unit of British soldiers with fixed bayonets charged a crowd that had gathered in St. Mary's Square to hear a speech by politician Laurence Ginnell. The munitions strike greatly hampered the British war effort but, as summer turned to autumn, the conflict in Ireland intensified. In areas such as Athlone and Moate, the months between August and December 1920 saw increased IRA activity and multiple attacks by the Crown forces against civilians and property.

Inevitably, given its disruption of rail transport, the strike added to the already severe economic impact of the conflict. By November 1920, thousands more rail workers were out of work and the rail system was on the verge of collapse. Although the fund-raising efforts held in Athlone and elsewhere raised large sums of money, it was not enough to continue the strike, particularly with the prospect of yet more railway workers being dismissed from their jobs. In December 1920, the trade unions decided to stop the strike, bringing an end to a massive campaign of civil disobedience that had united people across Ireland.

