

THE FALLS AND SHANKILL UNITE

# **The Struggle of the Unemployed in Belfast, Oct. 1932**

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THE CORK WORKERS' CLUB

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### ***THE CORK WORKERS CLUB***

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# **The Struggle of the Unemployed in Belfast, Oct. 1932**

The struggle of the unemployed workers in Belfast, Northern Ireland, including the heroic struggle against the armed police on October 11, contains many lessons on proper methods of work among the unemployed. Especially important is the fact that this movement was initiated and led by the Revolutionary Workers' Groups of Belfast (the preparatory groups for the formation of the Communist Party of Ireland) which numbers only about fifty members, and works under very difficult conditions.

Northern Ireland, established in 1920 as a result of the partition of Ireland by British imperialism, has been more severely affected by the economic crisis than any other industrial district of Britain. The two main industries, linen textiles and ship-building, are in a catastrophic condition owing to the crisis. The creation of the boundary separating Northern Ireland from the Irish Free State, and the protectionist policy of the latter (greatly increased since the establishment of the De Valera Government) has deprived Northern Ireland of a large market which it supplied as a distributing centre. The puppet state of Northern Ireland is entirely subordinated to Britain in fiscal policy, and is unable to introduce any protectionist policy which would enable local industries to compete with the imported commodities from Britain. The economic crisis in Britain, the United States and Canada, has put a stop to emigration from Northern Ireland, which amounted before the crisis, to about 10,000 a year, and formed an outlet for the unemployed.

The bourgeoisie of Northern Ireland has hitherto been able to utilise the religious prejudices of the Protestant majority against the Catholic minority to prevent a united struggle of the workers. In each crisis they have been able to divert the fight of the Protestant workers against the Catholics. This happened in 1920, when the movement of the unemployed shipyard workers was diverted into a pogrom against the Catholic workers. A year ago an unemployed demonstration organised by the Revolutionary Workers' Groups was broken up by the police, aided by the Protestant workers. It is therefore of great importance, that in

the present period the Protestant and Catholic workers are fighting shoulder to shoulder, and many of the fiercest battles against the police took place in the Protestant quarters of the city.

Out of a total population of less than a million and a quarter, the unemployed number over a hundred thousand. The official figures issued by the Labour Exchanges are:

Total Registered at Labour Exchanges. . . . .	76,000
Total receiving statutory benefit. . . . .	42,710
Total receiving transitional benefit . . . . .	19,380
Total receiving no benefit . . . . .	13,908

These figures by no means give an accurate picture of the extent of unemployment, because, owing to the length of the crisis, many thousands have been deprived of benefit long ago, and struck off the live register. The *Irish Press* stated that the number of unemployed not registering amounts to thirty thousand. These are mainly composed of youth. The merciless operation of the "Means Test" has deprived thousands of benefit and reduced the benefits of others. Of the total registered unemployed 47,964 reside in Belfast. In several industries the percentage of unemployed is greater than in other districts of Britain. In engineering industries unemployment amounts to 40.8 per cent, while in Scotland it is 40 per cent. In shipbuilding Ulster has 73.7 per cent unemployed and Scotland has 71.8 per cent. In the building industry unemployment reaches 38.3 per cent.

Through the operation of the "Means Test" increasing the number of unemployed not receiving benefit at the Labour Exchanges, there was an increase in the number of unemployed applying to the Board of Guardians for outdoor relief. Relief work schemes (road repairing etc.) were started by the city authorities, at which unemployed married men were employed, paying eight shillings a week to a married man and a maximum of twenty-four shillings a week to those having more than four children. Before being employed at this task work the unemployed had to submit to a rigorous investigation as to their circumstances. At the time of the strike about 2,000 were employed on these relief works. The length of employment averaged about six months, at from one to three days a week.

During this year the Revolutionary Workers' Groups carried on a broad agitation among the relief workers and was able to organise the Outdoor Relief Workers' Committee, composed of elected delegates from the various relief works and trade union branches. This committee elected Comrade Geehan secretary and



developed a campaign for a strike of relief workers. On September 30 at a mass meeting of 2,000 relief workers the decision to strike was endorsed and the following demands adopted:

1. Abolition of task work.
2. Increase in scale of relief to following rates: Man 15s. 3d. per week, wife 8s. per week, each child 2s. per head.
3. No payment in kind—all relief to be paid in cash.
4. Street improvement work under the Exceptional Distress Relief scheme, or schemes of like character, to be done at trade union rate of wages.
5. Adequate outdoor allowances to all single men and women who are unemployed, and not in receipt of unemployment benefit.

The date for the strike was set for October 3, and on that day 20,000 workers demonstrated in support of the strikers. The Mayor and Board of Guardians invited representatives of the Relief Workers' Committee to meet them, to discuss the demands of the strikers, and offered to increase the amount of work per man by fifty per cent. A mass meeting of the strikers held on October 7, on the proposal of Comrade Geehan, who was chairman of the meeting, rejected this offer. The meeting further adopted the proposal to organise a demonstration on October 11, and, in preparation for it, organised demonstrations in various districts and at factory gates. The slogans of a school children's strike, a rent strike, and a general strike of the trade unions were issued. The general strike slogan was so popular that the leaders of the Trade Council called a special meeting to discuss the situation and to sidetrack the general strike sentiment, by means of paying lip service to the idea of a general strike. This they did by means of a resolution calling on the Board of Guardians to grant the demands of the strikers, and in the event of them not doing so, a special meeting of the Trades Council was to be called to discuss the calling of a general strike.

On October 8 the Relief Workers' Committee organised a house-to-house collection of money and food to establish a food depot to supply the strikers. Over £300 was collected in cash, plus many tons of food collected from shopkeepers, and this was distributed to the strikers. The single men and women unemployed carried out a mass raid on the workhouse under the leadership of Comrade Arthur Griffin. The Board of Guardians attempted to split the ranks of the strikers by appealing to them to return to work on Monday on the promise that they would receive more days work per week. This was combatted by the Committee, which

pointed out that such an offer did not meet their demands regarding continuity of benefit, payment in cash, and relief for the single unemployed.

On October 8 and 9 many mass meetings were held, including a special meeting for the wives of the strikers and the working women from the textile mills. These meetings decided to proceed with the demonstration on the 11th. The government of Northern Ireland prohibited the meeting on October 10 and brought in 800 police from other districts, armed the police with rifles (about 4,000 altogether) and patrolled the streets with armoured cars and mounted police. In spite of these elaborate preparations for the smashing of the demonstration, the unemployed came on to the streets on the morning of the 11th. At the various concentration points where the demonstrators gathered, the police immediately attacked with their batons, and, at those points where they could not disperse the demonstration, they opened fire with their rifles. Two workers were killed, one seriously wounded, and about one hundred in all wounded by rifle fire.

The workers defended themselves with stones, erected barricades by ripping up paving stones, and in some places dug trenches to hold up the armoured cars. The resistance to the police attacks was so stubborn that it was not until the evening that the streets had been cleared. The police attacked with unexampled savagery, and entered houses and beat the inmates. In many districts where the streets had been torn up by the workers, the residents were forced, under the rifles of the police, to repair the streets. During the day seventy workers were arrested. The government introduced a curfew law under which no one was allowed on the streets between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m. A cordon of police was thrown around the city and no one was allowed to leave, or enter, without police permission.

But the unbreakable solidarity of the workers, and especially the heroic struggle against the armed police forced the government and the Board of Guardians to announce a new scale of relief as follows: On October 14, for a man and wife, 2½ days work at 20 shillings a week; man and wife with 3 or 4 children, 3½ days work at 28 shillings a week; man and wife with over 4 children, 4 days work at 32 shillings a week. These terms were made to a delegation from the Trades Council who, in turn, communicated them to the Relief Workers' Committee. The latter called a mass meeting of the strikers and proposed that the terms be accepted. Comrade Geehan, who was chairman of the meeting,



stated:

"What we have achieved gives the direct lie and contradiction to those who said the workers of Belfast could not be united, and would not fight. They had seen Protestants and Catholics marching together and, on Tuesday, fighting together. Three weeks ago married men with families went to the Guardians, to be treated with contempt, and offered 8s. a week. Now the government and Guardians had been forced to increase this to 24s. and 32s. a week, and to fix a scale. Never before was there a scale. The amount offered depended on the mood of the Guardians. The single men and women had also secured a victory, and a minimum of 10s. a week would be granted. The workers would no longer have to answer insulting questions. The only qualification required for the benefit would be that the applicant was genuinely unemployed, and was not in receipt of the dole. Although accepting the terms, they would make it clear to the authorities that they were not satisfied with the task work. They looked forward to the day when task work would be stopped altogether."

In preparations for further struggles the meeting decided to organise a *trade union of relief workers* to see that the new terms were carried out. Another resolution demanded the release of those arrested during the week and protested against the deportation of Comrade Tom Mann.

The funeral of the victims of the police shooting was attended by tens of thousands of workers, and the press states that one hundred thousand people lined the streets. The police were mobilised for the occasion and armoured cars accompanied the procession. While leaving the cemetery, Comrade Tom Mann was arrested by government order and deported back to England.

The Belfast events show it is possible for the small Revolutionary Workers' groups, by the correct application of united front tactics, to lead such a mass movement. It would be a mistake to think that the movement only drew into action the married unemployed relief workers. By correctly concentrating their work among the married and single unemployed, who were receiving no benefits from the Labour Exchange, the R.W.G. were able to set the whole mass of the unemployed in motion. The Relief Workers' Committee contained, besides our comrades, representatives from the unemployed, the trade unions and the Labour Party. At the mass meetings the Labour Party and "left" trade union officials attempted to defeat the R.W.G. policy by putting forward the slogan: "Wait until the June elections," i.e.,

until the elections for the Board of Guardians, at which the Labour Party will appeal for the election of "Labour men" to the Board, who will grant higher relief to all applicants. This treacherous policy was defeated by the R.W.G. going to the workers with a concrete programme of demands, and a persistent agitation for strike action, and the organisation of mass demonstrations, exposing the opportunist policy of the trade union officials and Labour Party politicians. Undoubtedly the success of the unemployed struggle in Birkenhead had a great effect in Belfast. It lent impetus to the slogans of action put forward by the R.W.G. and the fact that, in Birkenhead, the unemployed had forced concessions by militant action, made it easier for our comrades to expose the Labour Party policy of switching the struggle on to the parliamentary arena. During the mass meetings and demonstrations the workers themselves put forward the slogans: "Up, Birkenhead," "Up, Soviet Russia," this movement has resulted in a political awakening among the workers. This is seen by the more farseeing of the bourgeois press, *The Manchester Guardian* wrote on October 14:

"It is one of the paradoxes of Northern Ireland that the maintenance of an old religious and political feud has prevented the development of what by economic conditions, temperament and tradition is almost naturally a revolutionary urban proletariat: *The social order was rather badly shaken this week.* (Our emphasis.)

This is further shown by the statement of Sir S. Cripps, a leader of the British Labour Party in the parliament of October 19:

"When they (the Labour Party politicians) told the unemployed that they could achieve nothing by rioting they were met at once by the argument of what happened at Birkenhead and Belfast."

The solidarity of the workers, and the open appeals of the R.W.G. against religious sectarianism, and the exposure of those using religious prejudices to split the workers' ranks, deprived the bourgeoisie and their churches of their favourite weapon of religious pogroms of Protestants against Catholics. The Protestant churches united in an appeal to the government to make concessions to the unemployed, and the Catholic church dignitaries followed suit at the same time denouncing the "menace of Bolshevism." The bitter reactionary newspaper, the *Northern Whig*, which is notorious for its pogrom-mongering against the Catholics, abandoned the "No Popery" cry and launched an attack of the Communists. In its issue of October 10 it wrote:



"... the strike of the men engaged on these schemes continues though it would probably have been ended by now, but for the intervention of the Communists, who have assumed the leadership of the strike movement, and are more eager to prolong the dispute than to promote a settlement on reasonable terms."

Following the events of October 11 it wrote under the heading: "Mob Rule Must be Suppressed":

"Yesterday's events have made it abundantly clear that the strike of relief workers, numbering over nineteen hundred men, was fomented by political extremists, who have gathered around them large numbers of people ready to stone the police, wreck property, loot shops, and generally create a reign of terror in the streets. No community can tolerate mob rule, and those whose duty it is to maintain law and order will have the support of every good citizen in rigorously suppressing any further attempts to reduce the life of the city to chaos."

On October 15 it wrote:

"We heartily congratulate the police authorities on the prompt action they have taken to counteract the new Communist offensive in Belfast."

In the same issue it uttered a warning to the trade union leaders as follows:

"In our view, which we believe is shared by the overwhelming majority of the citizens of Belfast, the leaders of the trade unions, *who have been toying with the general strike weapon*, would do well to dissociate themselves from any such attack on industry, on the employed workers and on the community." (Our emphasis.)

The "Labour Leaders" showed by their actions that they were only "toying with the general strike weapon" in order to prevent any general strike, and the R.W.G. were so weak in the trade unions that they were unable to give leadership to the sentiment for a general strike among the trade union membership.

Revolutionary mass action in Belfast, Birkenhead and Liverpool forced concessions for the unemployed from the bourgeoisie. These revolutionary actions gained practical results for the starving workers, and glaringly exposed the reformist leaders of the Labour Parties and trade unions who continually "warned" the workers the the "riot" policy of the Communists would gain them nothing. "The proof of the pudding is in the eating," and the practical results of the revolutionary policy of the Communists did more to disillusion the workers with the "safe and sane" policy of the

reformists, than the most eloquent speeches could have done. That is why the Labour Party politicians in the British parliament whine before the die-hards, and plead with them to give *them* some concessions, otherwise the workers will be more convinced, that not the Labour Party policy, but the revolutionary policy of the Communist Party alone can bring them success in their struggle against starvation.

In a manifesto issued on October 15th the Belfast District Committee of the R.W.G. drew the lesson from the Belfast events:

"The problem before militant workers, in their fight for wages and maintenance, is the strengthening of the R.W.G., the organisation in every factory and work-place, the spreading of the R.W.G. throughout the country, and the earliest drawing together of all those forces for the organisation of the Communist Party of Ireland.

"Through a powerful movement of the working class in alliance with the poor farmers, in the creation of a powerful All-Ireland Workers' Party—the Communist Party of Ireland—can the starvation policy of the capitalists be defeated, their rule, and that of imperialism over Ireland be broken, and a united independent nation, a Workers' and Farmers' Republic be brought into being."

Quite correctly the comrades in Belfast see that, operating on the basis of the tremendous mass movement, they can place before the most advanced revolutionary workers the immediate task of forming the Communist Party of Ireland, and have broken with the policy hitherto pursued of pushing the necessity for the organisation of the Communist Party into the background. The R.W.G. have the task of recruiting from the workers who participated in the action of October 11 into the ranks of the R.W.G., and concentrating all forces in building a mass basis for the Communist Party of Ireland. At the same time, the work inside the trade unions must be speeded up. The manner in which the trade union leaders were able to smother the sentiment for a general strike must be taken into account, and the lesson learned, that the grip of the reformists on the trade union workers can only be broken by the most vigorous work inside the trade unions and factories. The successful leadership of the mass movement, and the defeat of the Labour Party before the masses, gives us the possibility, by real mass work, to isolate the Labour Party politicians from them. Only the failure of the Communists to take advantage of the favourable objective situation can prevent the lessons of the mass struggle of the Belfast unemployed being made clear to the workers, making a great step towards the formation of the Communist Party of Ireland.



## IRELAND UPON THE DISSECTING TABLE

— James Connolly on Ulster & Partition —

When the spectre of a Partitioned Ireland first loomed on the political horizon, James Connolly saw with adequate clarity what was at issue, and he opposed it. Why he did so can be readily gleaned from the collection of his writings assembled and arranged in chronological order in this pamphlet. Here, the reader is presented with the greater body of his work pertaining to Ulster. It is not suggested that herein is provided the answers to current problems; the writings of no man can do this on their own. What is offered, however, is a ready insight into the values and considerations that influenced Connolly, as a revolutionary Socialist, in his opposition to Partition. This opposition was based not so much on the abstract principles of an inviolable national territory, as on the real dread that from such a political arrangement the forces of a revolutionary working class movement would emerge the one real loser. To him this was the crucial issue. Partition would not merely introduce a new element of regional division in working class ranks, it would also assure the perpetuation of sectarian divisions already rife within those ranks, especially in Ulster. That is to say, Partition would divide the Irish working class vertically as well as horizontally, and in the process re-enforce the ascendancy of the respective bourgeois ruling factions over the whole. James Connolly did not survive to see his fears realized, but there are few who could quibble with his prediction that Partition

“would perpetuate in a form aggravated in evil the discords now prevalent, and help the Home Rule and Orange capitalists and clerics to keep their rallying cries before the public as the political watchwords of the day. In short, it would make division more intensive and confusion of ideas more confounded.”

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