

May Day in Dublin, 1890 to the Present

Author(s): Seamus Cody

Source: *Saothar*, Vol. 5 (May 1979), pp. 73-79

Published by: Irish Labour History Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23195188>

Accessed: 30-04-2020 12:26 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Irish Labour History Society* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Saothar*

# Essay

## May Day in Dublin, 1890 to the Present

May Day was first celebrated in Dublin in 1890. Dublin was in industrial turmoil, for unskilled workers were being unionised for the first time as the 'new unionism' spread to Ireland from Britain. Railwaymen, carters, dock labourers and gas workers joined the ranks of the organised working class, previously largely confined to skilled tradesmen, and, in common with English workers, adopted the slogan of an eight hour day. A public demonstration was organised on this issue for the first Sunday of May, 1890.

The old, conservative, skilled trades were conspicuous by their absence in an attendance dominated by railwaymen, dockers and gas workers. The address by a Liverpool representative of the National Union of Dock Labourers, McKeon, perhaps gives a hint as to why the composition of the meeting was such. While he denied that his aim was to stir up trouble between the classes, he went on to condemn shareholders and landlords as the real enemies of labour. This message was reinforced by Adolphus Shields of the National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers. Shields was a prominent advocate of socialism in several Dublin debating societies and was a founder of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in the city.<sup>1</sup>

A year later the Dublin Trades Council (DTC), bastion of the skilled trades, took matters in hand and organised the demonstration. Thousands of trade unionists marched through the city in an impressive display of the pageantry, traditions and discipline of the Dublin trade union movement. Nearly all the unions carried their distinctive banners. The printers even brought a banner over from London. The Operative Horseshoers provided twenty mounted horsemen for the occasion. The essentially conservative nature of the event was emphasised by the DTC President, John Martin, when he praised the 'unity of all classes of labour in Dublin'. Martin continued by demanding an eight hour day and praising trade union organisation but his caution resurfaced when he stressed, to Dublin capitalists, that trade unionists only wanted 'fair play' and 'nothing unreasonable'. A Mr. Poole, MA, a socialist who had chaired the 1890 meeting, inserted some radicalism by praising the usefulness of strikes, condemning the poverty that existed in Dublin and denouncing 'degrading charity' as a solution. The most popular and controversial contribution was made by officials of the Gasworkers' Union, however, who praised Charles Stewart Parnell's new opening to urban workers. Parnell, who had recently been removed from the leadership of the Irish Parliamentary Party, was attempting to build a new base among the urban working class and had attended a conference of the Irish Labour League. The League, under Shields' leadership, had a number of progressive demands, including the nationalisation of land and transport and an eight hour day.<sup>2</sup> By identifying with these demands, Parnell won a popular response from Dublin's unskilled workers.

Even this purely verbal radicalism had disappeared a year later in 1893 as 12,000 trade unionists marched through Dublin. The *Freeman's Journal* commented,

'There was nothing in their demeanour to awaken unquiet feelings in the governmental mind and . . . the speakers were characterised by an admirable spirit of moderation. They were free from all wild and foolish ranting.'<sup>3</sup>

The DTC executive led the impressive march which included many recently unionised men such as 3,000 coal porters. The spirit of new unionism was represented by the Amalgamated

Society of Railway Servants' banner bearing the motto 'all grades united to support, not combined to injure'. The ASRS, although initially identified with the interests of skilled railway workers in Britain, organised all grades in Ireland, hence the significance of their banner.

The largest demonstration of this early period took place in 1893. The procession numbered over 20,000 and thousands more attended at a rally in the Phoenix Park. From three platforms, speakers moved resolutions favouring an international reduction of the working day to eight hours, emphasising the importance of organisation to workingmen, demanding the introduction of a democratic franchise for municipal government and calling for the enforcement of legally recognised trade union rates for government contracts. An emergency resolution was passed condemning military and naval intervention in a shipping strike in Hull. The 'respectability' of the DTC was seen when speakers denounced an explosion caused by extreme republicans at the city courts the previous day. It is doubtful if this condemnation reflected the views of all trade unionists. Fred Allen, an IRB leader, was also a prominent trade unionist, while in Cork and Limerick, police reports suggested that labour organisations of the time were almost synonymous with the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Moderation in the industrial field in 1893 was emphasised by E. L. Richardson, a printer, who said that legislation and not strikes would win the eight hour day.<sup>4</sup>

The numbers marching in 1894 were only half that of the previous year. The discipline of the skilled trade unionists was shown as 8,000 workers from thirty unions marched. The total membership of these thirty unions amounted to 9,310. Speakers repeated the themes of previous years although the *Freeman's Journal* noted that

'the creed of cosmopolitanism is getting outworn and being replaced by national feeling and interest.'

This was a reference to the absence of any English trade union speakers and the presence of many prominent Parnellite politicians.<sup>5</sup>

The demonstration in 1895 was a small affair with only 13 unions attending. Most unions explained their absence with the excuse that they had too many expenses as they had to send delegates to the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) which was meeting in Cork. Other reasons became apparent, however, when the chairman of the meeting, P. J. Tevenan, denied allegations that the meeting was 'political': 'It was a labour meeting pure and simple'. The politics of this pure and simple labour demonstration had, nevertheless, clearly offended the conservative trades. Amongst those participating was a branch of the ILP. They carried a banner bearing the motto 'workers of the world unite'. As well as the usual resolutions a call was made for the nationalisation of land 'and the whole of the means of production, distribution and exchange'. A printer, P. J. Dunne, expressed the feelings of the attendance when he spoke in favour of nationalisation because, 'they now needed a more advanced programme than trade unionism. The people should seize political power'.<sup>6</sup>

The popularity of a May Day demonstration fell rapidly after its initial success. This in part reflected a massive decline in unionisation among unskilled workers in Dublin. A combination of economic recession and growing unemployment, coupled with the defeat of several major strikes, caused the collapse of unskilled unions. Demoralisation replaced optimism and enthusiasm and this was evident on May Day. Without the impetus from the unskilled, the ambiguous attitude of the DTC became apparent. The DTC principle of political neutrality was in constant danger of being compromised as May Day became identified with radical nationalism. It was not surprising that the DTC was equivocal about continuing the celebration. Indeed, May Day was not publicly celebrated in the city for the next 13 years.

The tone of these early May Day meetings had not been favourable to socialism or interna-

tionalism. The keynote was the conscious moderation and respectability of the trades council. Political speeches were Labour/Nationalist, paralleling the 'Lib-Lab' aspect of British politics. William Field, a Nationalist MP, addressed all DTC celebrations in this period as a 'friend of labour'. Michael Davitt, another prominent nationalist with labour sympathies, addressed other May Day meetings. In short, it was an unspoken assumption that the 'national question' would take preference over any 'pure and simple labour question'.

The early 1900s saw the growth of a more developed labour consciousness. Younger and more radical delegates began appearing on the DTC. These represented both the old skilled trades and unskilled workers such as ship assistants, carters, dockers and factory workers, who were being unionised in this decade. Inevitably the old guard of Dublin trade unionists were replaced along with their conservative ideologies. In 1908, at the suggestion of William O'Brien, a member of the marxist Socialist Party of Ireland, the DTC decided to revive the celebration of May Day. The council invited trade, labour and socialist groups to co-operate. Speakers were invited from the major Trades Councils of Ireland, the Socialist Party of Ireland, the Independent Labour Party and the 'advanced nationalist' party, Sinn Féin. A leaflet was prepared bearing the slogan

'Workers unite, you have nothing to loose  
but your chains and a whole world to gain'.<sup>7</sup>

According to O'Brien, the 'old crowd' were conspicuous by their absence but nevertheless the procession was of 'very imposing dimensions'. Resolutions extended 'fraternal greetings to the workers of every country who are striving for the emancipation of their class' and called for the complete control of their internal affairs by the Irish people. A 48 hour week, a minimum wage and a state system of social welfare were demanded. They called for the abolition of boy labour, night time work in bakeries and excessive overtime. Full employment was demanded by 're-adjusting the relations between capital and labour'.<sup>8</sup>

Flushed with the success of the revival there was pressure for the exclusion of the so-called 'friends of labour' from future May Day celebrations. The SPI and ILP were, however, specifically invited as they were credited with responsibility for the revival of May Day. These celebrations began to reflect the growing self-confidence and militancy of the Dublin working class. These years saw massive industrial disputes, street violence, sympathetic strikes and revolutionary rhetoric as the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) waged industrial warfare with Dublin's employers. The largest May Day celebrations of the period took place in the eventful year of 1913. The industrial war was reaching a climax as strikes averaged more than one per week in Dublin, and the historic six month-long lockout and general strike began in August. At the May Day demonstration an attempt was made by an old style skilled unionist to distance himself from this class conflict. James Nolan, a bookbinder, declared that he was an anti-socialist and said that he stood by the declaration of Pope Leo XIII on the relations between capital and labour. Amidst loud cheering Jim Larkin replied that

'the economic structure of society badly wanted overturning'.

Later speakers continued in the same vein as socialist after socialist spoke from the platforms.<sup>9</sup>

The ITGWU survived the 1913 lock out and strikes, albeit with a much diminished membership. Larkin had left for the USA and Connolly assumed the role of Acting General Secretary. Taking place shortly after the ending of the industrial conflict, the May Day celebrations of 1914 provided an opportunity for the workers of Dublin to show their employers and their trade union colleagues around Ireland that they were neither demoralised nor disorganised. The ITUC was due to meet in Dublin on the 1 June and so the May Day celebrations were

postponed until Sunday 31 May. Ten thousand Dublin workers attended a mass rally and only trade union speakers were allowed to speak. Given the magnitude of the defeats of 1913–14 and the victimisation of militants, the mobilisation of this large number testifies to the depth of the changes that had taken place in Dublin during the previous six years.<sup>10</sup>

Chronic housing conditions, high levels of unemployment and rampant inflation gave the charismatic Larkin the elements from which to launch his 'divine mission of discontent'. Once this revolt began it very quickly became 'bigger than a bob a day'. These years saw the building of a strong and united labour movement, destroying the old distinctions between skilled and unskilled, employed and unemployed. The May Day celebrations in this period underlined such changes.

1915 saw an even more resolute display on May Day. Units of the Irish Citizen Army accompanied the marchers. The Citizen Army was established as a workers' army to defend the strikers in 1913. Lenin considered it the first Red Army seen in Europe.<sup>11</sup> The principal speaker in 1915 was James Connolly, then a leader of both the ITGWU and the Citizen Army. Blending his marxism and nationalism, Connolly led the Citizen Army in joint participation with the 'physical force republicans' in the Easter Rising of 1916. There were no public May Day demonstrations in 1916. Most of the Dublin socialist and trade union leaders were either dead or imprisoned. Peadar Macken, a painter, Richard O'Carroll, a bricklayer, Michael Mallin, a silk weaver, and Connolly were all either killed or executed. William O'Brien, a tailor, and P. T. Daly, a printer, were both in gaol.

James Connolly was executed on 12 May. This date was adopted by the Dublin trade union movement as a Connolly Commemoration in future years, thus detracting from the enthusiasm for May Day parades. Connolly Day was an attempt to combine the nationalism of 1916 with the international spirit of May Day. After 1916, however, republicans assumed virtually unchallenged control of popular political movements in Dublin. The labour movement consequently abandoned the aggressive political stance it had adopted in the years 1908–13. Instead it concentrated solely on trade union affairs. That no May Day marches were held in 1917 or 1918 is symptomatic of the fact that the political stage had been surrendered to Sinn Féin.

Nevertheless, a massive increase in unionisation took place in these years as workers rallied to join Irish unions in particular. This growing strength gave the Labour Party and Irish Trade Union Congress enough confidence to call a nationwide general strike to mark May Day in 1919. This stoppage was extremely successful. The strike call was answered everywhere in Ireland except Belfast and Limerick. In Limerick, a general strike against British militarism, the Limerick Soviet, had just ended.<sup>12</sup> Demonstrations were held in most towns across Ireland. In Drogheda police banned a trades council march because red flags were to be carried. Nevertheless the ITGWU organised a huge demonstration and hundreds of red flags, banners and badges were displayed. Dublin was completely closed down. There were no newspapers, theatres or cinemas. Schools were shut and some shops were given permission to open in the morning to sell milk. The Chief Secretary threatened to dismiss civil servants who did not attend work but most remained at home because of the transport strike. Clerks picketed government offices. The Labour Party organised a huge festival in Croke Park. The national leadership attended and the ground was a sea of red bunting. The police and military stood by, 'political speeches' were banned and the DTC were ordered not to unveil their new banner, which doubtlessly expressed seditious aspirations.<sup>13</sup>

May Day 1919 is often represented as an example of the socialist politics and strength of the Irish working class. The poster displayed for the event, and reproduced on the back cover, certainly gives credence to this belief, as do the speeches, attitudes and reports of labour's participation in the International at Berne.<sup>14</sup> This view is, however, open to question. The only

significant opposition to the strike came from the British government and police authorities. The employers apparently saw little threat in the strike. It was certainly a major action by the Irish working class, but it was directed more against the British than any class at home. Considered in this light, the political weaknesses of the Irish labour movement are more easily understood. 1919 was nonetheless the biggest and most successful May Day ever held in Dublin.

By 1920, the DTC had split after a dispute over corruption, but personal and ideological reasons were also involved. The more radical group around P. T. Daly distrusted the Labour Party and when the Labour Party decided that there was no need to observe May Day because of the success of a recent two day anti-military strike, Daly's group went ahead and organised a May Day march. Thousands of trade unionists paraded behind a banner of James Connolly and wreaths were laid on the graves of labour and Citizen Army leaders killed in 1916.<sup>15</sup>

The celebration of May Day for the rest of the 1920s was a *débâcle*. The Labour Party either ignored the occasion or celebrated it with sports events. The tiny Communist Party and the Workers' League, as well as the Larkinite Irish Women Workers' Union and the Workers' Union of Ireland, organised various marches. The only really successful one was organised by the WUI in 1928. In 1928, the trades council reunited and celebrated Connolly Day on Sunday, May 12, 1929. The theme of 'back to the unions' reflected the decline that had occurred over the previous decade. Resolutions were passed extending greetings to the workers of the world and pledging allegiance to Connolly's struggle.<sup>16</sup>

Connolly Day continued to be celebrated by large numbers throughout the 1930s. Despite the fact that Labour's 'Workers' Republic' manifesto was denounced as extreme by the bishops, the major speeches were reformist in character. Helena Molony, of the Irish Women Workers' Union, vigorously denied in 1937 that the Labour Party demand for a Workers' Republic was Godless.

'There was nothing in that against any Christian principle' she said.

It would have been difficult to contradict this assertion as she went on to say that the demand was

'for the great mass of people that God given right of freedom, the right to live and acquire private property'.<sup>17</sup>

With this attitude it is not surprising that it was possible to hold a Connolly meeting in Mullingar in 1935 with an attendance including labour groups, old IRA men and the local Fianna Fáil branch!<sup>18</sup>

More radical groups organised alternative celebrations in the 1930s. On May Day 1932, a meeting was held in the centre of Dublin and the speakers included Larkin and a speaker from the British Communist Party. Resolutions pledged allegiance to Connolly and expressed the view that 'the capitalist system was a menace to the livelihood of the masses'.<sup>19</sup> In 1935, a small demonstration was organised by the Communist Party, the Republican Congress and the Irish Unemployed Workers' Movement. The principal speaker was Frank Ryan, of the Republican Congress, who was later to lead the Irish International Brigade Volunteers to fight in the Spanish Civil War.<sup>20</sup> On Connolly Day of the same year, Larkin's WUI organised a counter demonstration to the DTC's own. After the official Labour Party denounced the Irish Blueshirt Movement as Fascist, Larkin denounced the Labour Party as the 'real fascist organisation by its actions towards the working class'. Not surprisingly, a large number of police separated the two groups.<sup>21</sup>

May Day and Connolly Day were only occasionally celebrated during the war years and by 1945 the Irish trade union movement had split.<sup>22</sup> The attitude of the two sides was shown in the two commemorations held in 1945. The ITUC held a march and Roddy Connolly, a son of

James Connolly, said that the differences between the workers were less than their united antagonism to the prevailing social and economic system. In contrast, the ITGWU honoured Connolly with a commemoration Mass.<sup>23</sup> Despite allegations by some Congress of Irish Unions (CIU) leaders, the ITUC had not become a communist organisation. This was proven on May Day, 1948, when all the trade unions of Dublin turned out for a demonstration of between 50,000 and 100,000 under the slogan 'we stand for God' and demanding the release of Cardinal Mindszenty and Archbishop Stepanic. Hysterically anti-communist speeches were made by trade union speakers and the mood of the meeting was expressed by a speaker from the Lady of Fatima Association who voiced their fears of

'this hellish thing beginning to come into your country . . . you have in this city the sign of Satan, the Hammer and Sickle on your streets'.<sup>24</sup>

Inspired with the moral of this, the DTC began to honour Connolly in what it considered to be a more fitting manner. Accordingly, a Catholic Mass was held each year.

Throughout the 1950s attempts were made to unify the ITUC and CIU and their allied trades councils. In 1955 a joint Connolly commemoration was held and by 1959 the movement was reunited in the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). The Dublin trades councils also merged as the Dublin Council of Trade Unions. The Connolly Day celebrations began to assume the air of a burdensome duty rather than a festive, political occasion. From the mid-1960s, the number attending fell drastically as interest waned. In the late 1960s May Day was revived by a number of organisations including the Communist Party of Ireland, Sinn Féin, the Women's Liberation Movement and the Liaison Committee of the Labour Party Left. Speakers at the 1971 demonstration included Noel Browne, Des Bonass, Mary Kenny and Máirín de Burca.<sup>25</sup> These demonstrations grew in size as trade unions again began to participate.

In 1978, recognising that May Day demonstrations were proving more popular than Connolly Day, the DTC voted to substitute a May Day march for the traditional Connolly commemoration. This move was resisted by many delegates. Some opposed May Day in principle, some saw it as an attempt to downgrade the nationalist implications of Connolly Day, while others simply wanted to continue old traditions. The 1978 march was very successful, despite being held after working hours, and the large attendance was addressed by leaders of the national trade union movement.

In the early months of 1979, taxation reform became a central issue in Irish labour politics. A Government attempt to impose a 2% levy on farmers' sales was resisted by the Irish Farmers' Association and the anger of the country's trade unionists, slowly growing over the previous five years with the realisation of the increasingly regressive nature of the country's taxation system, exploded in the face of the Government's apparent climbdown. The DTC called a one-day stoppage and demonstration for March 20 as part of a national campaign. Despite the reservations of the ICTU leadership, the stoppage was a huge success. Two hundred thousand people demonstrated in Dublin and tens of thousands in other centres throughout the Republic. Divisions between the ICTU and the DTC affected the attendance at the DTC's May Day stoppage and demonstration, also marshalled around the theme of tax reform. Despite disagreements over tactics some 25,000 workers marched through Dublin's streets, including many prominent trade union leaders.

1979 represented the first political strike on May Day since 1919, reflecting economic, industrial and demographic changes in Irish society.<sup>26</sup> The history of May Day in Dublin provides a general indication of the strengths, weaknesses and political directions of the capital's organised labour movement. If nothing else, 1979 has shown that the labour move-

ment is stronger than at any time since 1919, and demonstrates that, having reasserted its right to campaign on openly political issues, it has rediscovered the fire to challenge the very system of an inequitable society that motivated and inspired Dublin workers in the past.

**Seamus Cody**

### Notes

1. *Freeman's Journal*, 5 May, 1890
2. *Ibid.*, 4 May, 1891
3. *Ibid.*, 2 May, 1892
4. *Ibid.*, 8 May, 1893
5. *Ibid.*, 7 May, 1894
6. *Ibid.*, 6 May, 1895
7. William O'Brien Collection, National Library of Ireland, Ms. 13952
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. VI Lenin, *Lenin on Ireland*, Dublin, 1970
12. Jim Kemmy, 'The Limerick Soviet', *Saothar* 2, May 1976, pp. 45–52
13. *Freeman's Journal*, 3 May, 1919
14. For a description of Ireland at Berne and other international attitudes see *ITUC Annual Report, 1919*, and *Irish Labour and Its International Relations*, Cork Workers' Club Historical Reprints No. 13, Cork, 1975
15. *Freeman's Journal*, 3 May, 1920. In 1926, P. T. Daly, in alliance with Roddy Connolly, Nora Connolly, Captain Jack White and Tom Lyng, an old Irish Socialist Republican Party member, established the Worker's Party of Ireland and applied to Moscow for membership of the Third International. Larkin's Irish Workers' League was already recognised, *ibid.* Arthur Mitchell, *Labour in Irish Politics, 1890–1930*, Dublin, 1974, p. 234
16. Dublin Trades Union and Labour Council, *Connolly Souvenir, 1929*
17. *Irish Independent*, 3 May, 1937
18. *Irish Times*, 7 May, 1935
19. *Irish Independent*, 2 May, 1932
20. *Irish Times*, 2 May, 1935
21. *Ibid.*, 7 May, 1935
22. Charles McCarthy, *Trade Unions in Ireland, 1894–1960*, Dublin, 1977, chapter 6
23. *Irish Press*, 14 May, 1945
24. *Irish Times*, 2 May, 1948
25. *Irish Press*, 3 May, 1971
26. For an introduction to a discussion of the changing Irish society which faced trade unions see the introduction to Charles McCarthy's *The Decade of Upheaval: Irish Unions in the Nineteen Sixties*, Dublin, 1973