

Remembering ‘Big’ Jim Larkin

By

James T. Farrell

James Larkin, leader of the 1913 Dublin Lockout, died on this day in 1947. An exceptional orator and Ireland's most influential trade unionist, he came from what Marx once called "the great heart of the proletariat."

Jim Larkin died in Dublin on January 30, 1947, at the age of sixty-nine. Along with his associate, James Connolly, he was one of the outstanding leaders of the Irish working class in the early years of this century. He and Connolly played major roles in the organisation and development of the Irish trade union movement. He reached a great peak of his career in the great Dublin transport strike of 1913 and in the lockout which followed it. Thousands of Irish workers lived in misery and squalor, scarcely different from the conditions of life of the workers during the time of Marx and Engels.

Larkin was intimately associated with the militant struggles to better the workers' lot. With the aid of his inspiration and example they lifted their heads, and they set out to act like men rather than slaves. Under his leadership, the militant Irish Transport and General Workers' Union became a menace to the Dublin employers. The year 1913 was a period of labour unrest all over Europe. In Dublin there were at least thirty strikes from January to August 1913. The climax of labour militancy and unrest was reached in August 1913.

William Martin Murphy, head of the Dublin employers' group, and the bitterest enemy of Jim Larkin, informed dispatch workers of the *Irish Independent* that they must choose between Larkin, "the strike organiser," and their jobs. A similar ultimatum was given to the tramway workers, during Horse Show Week in August — the time when the biggest social events of Dublin are held — the tramway workers went out on strike. The employers began a war of extermination against the unions, and against Larkin. The most bloody and bitter class warfare in the history of modern Ireland broke out. Connolly came down from Belfast to participate in the leadership of the strike.

On August 29 a big mass meeting was held in Dublin. Larkin was one of the speakers. He burned a proclamation which forbade a meeting, planned for the coming Sunday, and at which he was to speak. He talked, and he sang to the workers. He declared that if Carson in the north could organise volunteers, then also, Irish workers could organise their own army for self-defence. This was one of the first public calls for the organisation of a workers' army in Ireland.

During the strike, the Irish Citizens' Army was organised by Connolly, Larkin, and others. Jim Larkin was the first leader of this organisation, the first army of the working class in the twentieth century. In this same speech Larkin also promised that if force were used against labour, labour would reply by force. He declared that if he were alive on the following Sunday, he would speak, regardless of the police order prohibiting a meeting.

Larkin hid out at the home of the Countess Markievicz. She reserved a room at the best hotel in Dublin for her "country cousin" who was, presumably, a parson. This hotel was owned by William Martin Murphy. On Sunday, August 31, the workers and their wives poured into O'Connell Street, then, I believe, named Sackville Street. A large force of Peelers was on hand. Larkin, disguised and wearing a false moustache, passed through the police lines

unnoticed. Suddenly and dramatically, he appeared at one of the windows of the hotel, and pulling off his false moustache, he began to speak. The Peelers charged the workers with batons. There were at least five hundred casualties in Dublin. This day has been commemorated as Bloody Sunday in modern Irish history.

Larkin was arrested but soon released. Murphy and the other employers took the offensive against the workers. The Federated Employers issued a document in which they demanded that the employees of 404 firms sign. It read:

I hereby undertake to carry out all instructions given to me by or on behalf of my employers and, further, I agree to immediately resign my membership of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (if a member), and I further undertake that I will not join or in any way support this union.

The Irish workers refused to sign this document. Many who were unaffiliated with the union, and who were not even interested in the union, came to the defence of the union. The great Dublin Lockout began. William Martin Murphy and other Dublin employers set out deliberately and cynically to starve about a hundred thousand workers with their wives and children into submission. And they called this lockout "the Larkin conspiracy." Thirty-seven Dublin unions supported Larkin.

The heroism of the Dublin workers and their wives during this lockout constitutes one of the noblest chapters in the story of the labour movement anywhere in the world during this present century. Half-starved, without funds, they held out for eight months. They asserted themselves at a terrible personal cost. They pawned everything they owned for food. They stood on the streets and the corners of Dublin, pasty-faced, hungry, miserable, wretched, and shivering. They waited day after day for a settlement. But the employers remained adamant. When representatives of the British labour unions attempted to negotiate a settlement, the employers broke off negotiations. Similarly, the efforts of the Archbishop were in vain. But the Dublin workers stood hard and firm.

Those workers who joined the Irish Citizens Army, at this time, marched and drilled on half-starved stomachs, and with broomsticks and hurley sticks. The literary men of Ireland rallied to the support of the workers. Meetings were held in England, and both Connolly and Larkin appealed to British labour for aid. They secured help from British labour in the form of food ships, but the sympathetic strikes which they wanted and needed didn't materialise. Only sympathetic strikes in England could have secured the victory of the Irish workers. Larkin campaigned up and down England in the interest of the strikers. His speeches were acidulous and violent, but justice was on his side.

In December 1913, a Special Trade Union Congress was called in England in order to deal with the demands that the British workers come to the support of their class brothers by strikes and/or by a blockade of Dublin. The officials of the British trade unions turned this congress into an effort to defeat Jim Larkin. Smarting under the lash of his tongue, speaker after speaker rose and denounced him as a disruptionist. He replied with equal fire. He rose to answer the attacks on him, and began: "Mr Chairman, and human beings." He delivered a scorching speech. At one point, there was a shout from the floor. "You said we were human beings."

"Yes, but you don't give much evidence of it," Larkin answered.

James Connolly also spoke. He declared that the conference was called to help Dublin. He said: "Remember the workers of Dublin have been locked out for months. They are hungry and desperate."

A hostile delegate jeered at Connolly, telling him that he should have thought of all this before the Dublin workers had been driven to such a plight. Connolly answered by declaring: "If you think we are ready to withdraw a single word of criticism of your inaction, you are wrong. We will raise this at the proper time and place. We want you to concentrate on helping Dublin." He stood with Larkin.

The workers lost; they were driven back to their jobs by hunger. They were laughed at, scorned. But the victory of the employers was not complete. The union was not broken. However, the Irish workers of that time never fully recovered from the effects of this struggle. The story of the Easter Rebellion in 1916 might have been much different but for this defeat.

Larkin came to America in 1914. He was associated with The Industrial Workers of the World. He was active in strikes in America, and he was one of the founders of the American Communist Party. Along with Ben Gitlow, he was sentenced to the Ossining prison in New York state on charges of criminal syndicalism. He was subsequently pardoned by the late governor Al Smith, and was deported to Ireland.

He returned to Ireland about 1924. After that time, he did not play the same role as he had in his younger days. He could not regain control of Liberty Hall and of the Transport Workers Union. The Irish union movement had slid into the same pattern as that of the British. Larkin was a great agitator. But he was not the type of leader to be at the head of a movement in retreat or in stabilisation. He was still feared and hated in Dublin, and I am sure that when he drew his last breath, he was, equally, the object of fear and hatred. He was head of some unions, among them clerks, butchers, abattoir, and hospital workers.

Meeting Jim Larkin

I saw Jim Larkin in Dublin in August of 1938. At that time he was sixty-two or sixty-three. Jim was a broad-shouldered giant. When I first went to his union headquarters, the building was being remodelled. Inside of it there were stone pillars. Work was going on. As I entered, I saw a huge grey-haired man in a spotted unkempt blue suit, swinging a sledge hammer. It was Jim. He used the sledge hammer with more force and power than many a younger man could.

He was very cordial and hospitable. He wanted to know what he could do for me, what he could show me. It has often been remarked that Dublin is a whispering gallery. It is. Jim knew that I was in Dublin. He knew something about me. He knew that I was an anti-Stalinist, and we had only talked for a few moments when he called me a Trotskyist. Subsequently he introduced me to his son: he told me that he wanted to introduce his friend, Farrell, but that he should beware of him because he was a Trotskyist.

He expressed disappointment that I had not come over to see him sooner. He offered to take me around and show me various features of Dublin. We left his office, and entered his car. He asked me if I wanted to see the monument to the Invincibles. Jim's chauffeur drove us out to Phoenix Park. I imagined that I was going to see a statue, but this did seem passingly curious. The idea that there would be a monument commemorating the Invincibles in Dublin didn't make sense.

We stopped in Phoenix Park, just opposite the archbishop's palace. This had, in the eyes of Parnell, been the headquarters of the British rulers of Ireland. We got out. Jim walked along a path, looking down at the grass. I was bewildered. Jim became nervous, and he stared on the ground with some concern.

Then he pointed. There it was. I saw a little hole where grass had been torn up. A cross had been scratched in the earth with a stick. I gathered that many Dubliners did not know of this act commemorating the Invincibles. Jim's boys always went out to Phoenix Park, and marked this cross in the earth. No matter how often grass was planted over it, it was torn up. The cross was marked in the earth.

He drove me around Dublin, and out to Howth, the sight of the famous gun-running episode in 1914. His home was near Howth. We went there, and Jim cooked lunch, scrambling eggs and frying bacon. He talked continuously, incessantly. His conversation was chaotic, rambling. Flashes of the Jim Larkin of his earlier days would constantly enliven this old man's talk. He would suddenly burst out in sudden indignations and denunciations, describing his adversaries and his enemies as "twisters." This was the splendid style of his past. Jim seemed bitter and disillusioned. He had stood for the Dáil, and he had not been elected. He felt that he had been let down by the Irish workers. He said that they didn't remember their own.

He was interested in housing. He drove me about and showed me the new houses that were being built in the slums of Dublin. I had wandered the streets of these slums fairly frequently during my stay in Dublin, and I had visited

some of the rotting old houses, and had talked with those who lived in them. They were beaten and cowed people. Jim spoke at length of the new houses, of his hopes that they would do some good. He showed me various ones which were in the process of being built. He knew that these would not at all be adequate, but he was very proud of them.

I also met him at a hospital where members of his union worked. He was having difficulties, and he spoke of those with whom he was dealing as "his lunatics." He described the hospital as a lunatic asylum. There was some trouble concerning a girl. It seemed that she was having a child out of wedlock, and an effort had been made to discharge her. Jim prevented it. He had mingled humour, argument, threat, and castigation in his successful defence of the girl. He introduced me to various people at the hospital, but always in the same way. "I want you to meet my friend, Farrell. He has written great psychological novels, but you dare not read them for fear of losing your immortal soul." (He had not, of course, then read my books.)

As we walked around, Jim was recognised by almost every one we saw. Now and then, he would nudge me, and he would tell me to look at some one. He would make some remark such as, "Now, there's a twister." And he would launch forth. And then, he would ramble on. He said that he had never smoked nor drank, and he attributed his health and strength to this. He, at one minute, lamented the condition of Ireland, and the next, he spoke hopefully, with pride.

I spoke of the Moscow trials. He didn't commit himself, other than to say: "The trouble with Trotsky is that he doesn't know how to work with anyone." This criticism was often and justly made of Larkin himself. He spoke warmly of Bukharin, and remarked that he had told Bukharin once that Trotsky was unable to work with anyone. This was just about the substance of what he had to say of international affairs or politics.

He spoke of the Corporation of Dublin [Dublin's city government] with irony. He liked to needle the city officials. In fact, he didn't fancy the Corporation at all. Jim was a Catholic, and he was proud that Ireland had a Christian civilisation. The world needed (he said) a Christian civilisation, based on the sanctity of the family. He spoke with pride of his own family life. He had almost no respect for the literary men and the Abbey crowd in 1938. He asked me about some of those whom I had seen, and when I mentioned them, he was sharp and ironical.

Of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), he was somewhat ironical, also, but he seemed to have admired them. But he remarked that they had done little for labour. At the hospital, we ran into a doctor who had been one of the IRA diehards in the days of "the Troubles." I had met him and some of his old comrades in arms. I observed that he and this doctor greeted one another coolly.

When Jim took me to the abattoir, he explained the work there in detail. In fact, he described it with some pride. An air gun was used to kill the sheep. It permitted humane slaughter, and this was what struck Jim. With all of his fire, his wild angers and indignations, his bitter struggles, he was warmhearted, sentimental, hurt by cruelties to others.

The last time I saw him, we spent a number of hours together. We went to his sister's home in Dublin. No one was home. He scrambled eggs and made tea for our meal. He wanted to give me some of the James Connolly papers. Many of his books and papers were kept at his sister's house. After eating, Jim spent an hour looking for papers of Connolly and for some Irish books. One of them was *The Labour Leader*, a play by Daniel Corkery. Jim was the model for the hero of this play. His books were in dusty cabinets along the floor.

He bent down on his knees, and grumbling and muttering to himself, he kept pulling out books and spreading them all over the floor. Nothing was in order. He found everything but what he wanted to find. He flung out piles of books. One's throat became dry and one almost choked because of the dust in the room. And Jim kept looking, wondering where he had put Connolly's papers, and where he had put the Corkery play, and some plays of Boyle which he also wanted to give me. This seemed to go on endlessly. Finally, he grunted with pleasure. He had found the books. He gave them to me to take back to America. But he couldn't find Connolly's papers.

When we shook hands in farewell, he told me that he would always like to hear from me. He said: "Write to me, Jim Larkin, Dublin. Everybody knows me."

Jim Larkin became a legendary figure in his own lifetime. Stories and anecdotes about him are endless. Many of them are true. At Ossining, he was popular with both the guards and the prisoners. One of the stories about Jim at Ossining was told to me by a class war prisoner who served time at a later date. Most of the guards (called "hackies") were Irish. On St Patrick's Day, they asked Jim to make a speech, and he got up on a table. Jim's speech began: "St Patrick drove the snakes out of Ireland. They all came to America and they became hackies and warders." This was the beginning and the end of Jim's St Patrick's Day speech in Ossining.

An anecdote told of him in Dublin may or may not be true. But it suggests the contradictions in his character. Jim was once on the way to an important meeting. He noticed a bird trapped in some telephone wires. He was moved by the plight of the bird, and he became indignant with the Corporation. He telephoned immediately, said that it was Jim Larkin speaking, and that a bird was trapped in some electric wires, and that it might be electrocuted unless it were quickly rescued. He demanded that men be dispatched immediately to save the bird. Jim kept calling back, demanding, expressing indignation, threatening. He waited on the spot until men did come and save the bird. In the meantime, his important meeting was delayed.

Another anecdote concerns the time when he returned from America. He went to Liberty Hall, and ensconced himself. He had been leader of the Irish Transport Workers Union. He was back. He took over. His adversary, O'Brien, went to court. During the court case, Jim had a quarrel with his lawyer. He fired him and then appealed for a delay. The court ruled against Jim remarking that it was not responsible for the defendant's difficulties with his solicitor. Jim declared that he would defend himself. And he did.

He put his adversary on the stand and asked all kinds of questions. He was very dramatic, and his gestures were magnificent. He would point a wagging and accusing forefinger at his adversary and ask him, with a glint in his eyes, if it were or were not true that the defendant had been guilty of speculations when he was in (let us say) the milk wagon drivers union? This went on for several days. There was a fine and a very appreciative gallery. But Jim lost his case.

Michael Gold used to tell a story about Jim in America. A unity meeting was called among various of the Irish in New York. Jim brought Michael Gold to the meeting. (I might add that he was very fond of Gold, and called him Mickey. While he spoke sharply concerning many of those whom he'd known in America, he talked most warmly of Mike Gold.) Jim started to deliver his "unity" speech.

As he got warmed up he began pointing around the room, telling those in the audience that so-and-so who was sitting in this or that place was a "twister," and a double-crosser, and not to be trusted, telling someone else what Jim Larkin thought of him, and that this went on until the unity meeting agreed on one proposition: it was a good idea to have a riot. Heads were cracked, blows exchanged, chairs broken. Thus ended the unity meeting at which Jim spoke.

In one of his flaming speeches during his stormiest days in Dublin, he bared his chest to the Peelers, and challenged them to shoot him, then and there.

Stories and anecdotes about Jim could be recounted almost endlessly. The ones which I have given are typical.

Larkin was almost the polar opposite of his associate, James Connolly. Connolly was precise, methodical. He thought and planned ceaselessly. He tried to take everything into account in advance. He studied the revolutions of the past in order to draw lessons which he might apply in the Irish struggles which he anticipated. He had deep indignations, but he was usually controlled.

Larkin was more emotional, impetuous, violent, extravagant. In his speeches and in his actions, he was an improviser. He did not stop to reason or to plan. He spoke with a rapid flow, with sweeping gestures. His speeches were filled with hyperbole, with castigation, with acidity, with sentimentality, and with rousing appeals. In one speech he declaimed that it was his divine mission to preach subversion and discontent to the working classes. This more than suggests his style.

He was brave to the point of foolhardiness, and he was self-sacrificing. Again and again, he was ready and willing to

give up his life and to be a martyr of the working class. In his great days as an organiser and an agitator, he lived a life of danger. He flung challenges into the teeth of the police of the British Crown. He flung bold and insolent challenges into the face of Martin Murphy and the other employers of Dublin. He gave his services to the struggle for the emancipation of the working class of the world: at the same time, he refused to appear on the same platform with an American socialist of international repute because this man was divorced!

In a period when the most depressed sections of the Irish working class were militant, he was peculiarly fitted to play the role of agitator. His ability to lash their enemies, and to rouse and stir them, enabled him to appeal to the will to freedom which slept within their hearts. He added his own daring example to the appeal of his words. And when he led these workers in strikes he was adamant, uncompromising, and in the forefront where danger lurked. His bravery and daring were as extravagant as his foibles.

But in a period of letdown, of retreat, of the sodden rule of the middle classes and the clergymen in Ireland, he was like a lost child. In the slums of Dublin after the Troubles, he could not repeat what he had done in this same area in the early days of this century. This was apparent when I saw him in Dublin in 1938. He was embittered.

Now this man is no more. When Larkin's associate, the wounded Connolly, was carried in a chair to face the guns of his executioners, he was asked if he wished to say a prayer. He answered: "I will say a prayer for all brave men who do their duty." We, who do not pray, might alter this fine statement. We will pay our last respects to all such brave men. And Jim Larkin was such a brave man.

He was a brave soldier of the working class. He was a great agitator. He gave his spirit, and the best years of his life, in their service. Karl Marx spoke of the great heart of the proletariat in his pamphlet on the civil war in France. Jim Larkin came from this great heart. One bows one's head in memory of this brave Irish labour leader.

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About the Author

James T. Farrell (1904-1979) was an American novelist and author of the Studs Lonigan trilogy.