

The Conscription crisis 1918: the nail in the coffin?

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Countess Markievicz Memorial Lecture

23 November 2018

Firstly I would like to thank the Irish Association for Industrial Relations for the invitation to give this lecture today. April this year was the centenary of the conscription crisis and we are fast approaching another major anniversary, this time of the December 1918 election, arguably the most important election in Irish history. Both events were linked and I am going to talk about aspects of both of them today and I'll warn you that I am going to roam back and forth between events and people somewhat.

Brigid Foley, a republican activist from Dublin's Cabra Road later recalled how she had been a member of 'the Phibsboro Committee of the anti-conscription organization.' In her view it 'was really the anti-conscription movement that revived national feeling in the country and made the subsequent fight in '19, 20, and '21 possible. This solidarity brought about by the threat of conscription, to my mind, led to the success of the general election at the end of the year.'

Now while there can be a tendency to see events after the Easter Rising as proceeding naturally and inevitably towards the War of Independence, the reality was of course more complex. While separatists had won four seats during 1917, in early 1918 the Home Rule party had bounced back and won three by-elections in a row (in Tyrone, Armagh and Waterford). And while it may have been the case that the newly republican Sinn Féin movement might have overcome the Parliamentary Party anyway, this process was certainly speeded up by the conscription crisis, at the very least. But a major role in defeating conscription was played by organised labour, who did not, in the conventional narrative at least, gain very much from this display of their power at all. Indeed that the trade union movement was a major player in contemporary politics is still largely unknown outside of those of us who take an interest in it; in the education system Irish labour history largely begins and ends with the 1913 Lockout.

But back to conscription: why? And why in March 1918? Over 200,000 Irishmen and women had already played some part in the war by then, most of them volunteers (at least in the sense that they had not been formally conscripted) and mainstream nationalism in Ireland had supported the war effort from 1914 onwards: John Redmond as we know had called for Irishmen to go wherever the 'firing line extends.' But nationalist support for the war effort was always predicated on it being voluntary. From the beginning of the war Home Rule MPs and Catholic churchmen had warned against any attempt at coerce Irishmen into uniform. Indeed fear of conscription had been one of the major campaigning planks of the separatist organisations before 1916. And it has to be said, despite the huge numbers who did serve in British uniform, the numbers joining up were in decline well before 1916 and Ireland always lagged behind British recruiting figures. In July 1915 Cardinal Logue complained at Dundalk that 'the

(British) government that killed their Irish industries, and forced the people to emigrate, were looking out for men to fight for them, and the men were not there to be got.' As the war went on maverick clergymen such as Bishops Edward O'Dwyer of Limerick and Michael Fogarty of Killaloe were openly critical of recruitment. O'Dwyer asked in November 1915 after the arrest of Irish emigrants in Liverpool (who were taunted by an angry crowd for being 'shirkers'); 'their crime is that they are not ready to die for England. Why should they? What have they or their forebears ever got from England that they should die for her?' O'Dwyer's statement was re-published as a pamphlet by republicans and distributed widely. Even before the Rising at local level priests increasingly appeared on anti-war platforms and at Irish Volunteer rallies; reflecting the feelings of some of their flock at least. Gallipoli had also had a major impact on attitudes to the war in Dublin.

In January and May 1916 the British government had introduced conscription through the Military Services Act. It made all men living in Britain between the ages of 18 and 41 liable to conscription except in certain defined circumstances. Ireland however was exempt from this. Irish nationalist leaders successfully argued that the historical circumstances of the Act of Union meant the Irish could never be conscripted into the British armed forces. There was considerable anger about this in Britain itself, across many sections of society. But when the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress met in the aftermath of the Easter Rising, while it remained cautious about identifying with the insurrection it still declared their 'determined antagonism to Conscription and solemnly affirm our intention, to quote the words of the Ulster Covenant, 'of using all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy' to extend the Military Service Act to Ireland.'

It was events in Flanders that forced a change in British strategy. Fresh from victory on the Eastern Front and eager to take advantage of their opportunity before the Americans arrived in force, the Germans launched a huge attack along the Western Front on 21 March 1918. They made the greatest gains in territory of any side in the west since 1914; the British lost 7,000 dead on the first day alone (among them my Great-Grand Uncle, Michael Leahy, a soldier in the Royal Irish Regiment). The German Spring Offensive almost succeeded and exposed a desperate shortage of British manpower. In response the British government passed the Military Service (No 2) Act, 1918, extending conscription into Ireland and expanding the age limit for conscription across Britain and Ireland to 51.

Predictably Nationalist Ireland responded with outrage; whatever chance this may have had before the Easter Rising, after the executions and internment of 1916 it was always likely to be unpopular. With their worries dismissed by the British government, the Home Rule party withdrew from Westminster. The Limerick Home Rule MP Thomas Lundon claimed that it would be 'better to die on their own doorstep than on the plains of France and Belgium on behalf of a gang of traitors and hypocrites.' At

local level the party's MPs were soon appearing on protest platforms with Sinn Féinners; this in the longer run helped respectabilize Sinn Féin for some of the Home Rule party's supporters also well as make Sinn Féin's policy of refusing to attend the parliament in London at all seem less outrageous. The leaderships of the mainstream Home Rule party, John Dillon (Redmond having died in early March) and Joseph Devlin, and its dissident factions, William O'Brien of the All for Ireland League and Tim Healy, joined with Eamon de Valera and Arthur Griffith of Sinn Féin and William O'Brien and Thomas Johnson of the Irish Labour Party and Irish Trade Union Congress in a major anti-conscription conference held at Dublin's Mansion House on 18 April 1918. The conference was presided over by Dublin's Lord Mayor Laurence O'Neill and outlined a series of popular protests against conscription, including a pledge to be signed by members of the public. This pledge was vague enough to be agreed on by almost every nationalist, asking as it did that those signing to pledge themselves 'most solemnly to one another to resist Conscription by the most effective means at our disposal.' One cynic noted that this might cover everything from 'pitch and toss to manslaughter.' On the same day the Catholic Hierarchy met at Maynooth and received a delegation from the Mansion House conference.

The role of the Bishops was important. The entire hierarchy reacted with anger to the announcement of conscription. On 10 April a statement from Maynooth described it as 'a fatal mistake, surpassing the worst blunders of the past four years.' They claimed that if Home Rule had been granted there would 'would be no need for contemplating forced levies' and felt bound to 'warn the government against entering upon a policy so disastrous to the public interest and to all order, public and private.' On April 13 an Armagh priest, the Reverend Joseph Brady announced that 'following the eminent example set us a few years ago by Sir Edward Carson, the priests and people of this Cathedral Parish of Armagh will hold a series of meetings on next Sunday for the purpose of founding a Solemn League and Covenant against Conscription.' Brady stressed that the 'Constitutional Weapon of Passive Resistance' was 'quite sufficient' in the campaign. Similarly Cardinal Logue's message urged 'passive resistance in every shape and form.' But when on 18th April the Bishops met to discuss the issue (in part inspired by fear that clerical students would be liable for conscription) they received De Valera, Dillon and Laurence O'Neill. De Valera informed the clergy that there could be no limits imposed on the tactics that Volunteers would employ in resisting conscription and that passive resistance would not be sufficient. There were a variety of views on this; Logue apparently told de Valera passive resistance 'did not mean that they should lie down and let people walk on them.' The Bishops accepted the wording of an anti-conscription pledge which described conscription 'imposed upon Ireland' as an 'oppressive and inhuman law which the Irish people have a right to resist by every means that are consonant with the law of God.' They agreed that masses of intercession were to be said throughout the country to 'avert the scourge of conscription' and at each mass the anti-conscription pledge would be given. Details of local rallies were to be publicized and collections to finance the campaign would take place at the church gates. On Sunday 21 April these masses took place and

contributed greatly to popular mobilization on the issue. Eventually almost two million people signed the pledge and over £250,000 was donated to the fund. Some months later, on 9 June 1918, a day of protest by women, 'Lá na mBan', was organized by a coalition of women's groups, among them Cumann na mBan, the Irish Women's Franchise League and the Irish Women Workers Union saw thousands of women sign the pledge (again echos of Ulster Unionist tactics from 1912). There was also an anti-conscription pledge specifically aimed at Irish Protestants, because reflecting political and sectarian division very starkly, the leadership of the various Protestant churches supported conscription and many Protestant clergymen denounced those who would not go to the front as cowards and shirkers.

There was a great deal of ambiguity in operation on all sides. The wording of the Bishops statement did not condemn conscription per se, as the Catholic Church in Britain, France and the United States was not opposed to it, though the issue was more problematic in Australia and Quebec. Indeed an Irish cleric, Archbishop Daniel Mannix, was central to the campaign against conscription in Australia. Neither did 'the bishops ... proceed to determine what forms of resistance would be consonant with the law of God.' At local level there was very flexible interpretation of this. In Virginia, Co. Cavan, parish priest Fr. Gaffney stated that if men in uniform enforced conscription, then it was justified to shoot them. In Letterkenny, Dr. McGinley urged passive resistance only 'when every revolver was empty.'

But back to labour. The presence of Tom Johnson and William O'Brien at the Mansion House signified their importance. Both men were part of the nine-man anti-conscription committee alongside Sinn Fein and Home Rule leaders of various shades. Johnson was secretary of this committee. Plans for mass passive resistance were drawn up by this committee, including taking control of food supplies and industrial action.

On Saturday 20 April 1918 1,500 trade union delegates, among them artisans, transport workers, draper's assistants, both men and women, attended another rally at the Mansion House. This meeting was to organize, at short notice, a general strike against conscription for Tuesday 23 April. Laurence O'Neill again welcomed them and told the trade union delegates to cheers, that 'Ireland to-day stands united. Her priests are with her people and her people are with her priests.' This gathering was very much part of a nationalist consensus. Despite press censorship plans for the stoppage were communicated to union branches across the country. On Tuesday 23 in most areas work ground to a halt. Only banks, law courts and government offices stayed open. In Dublin there was 'no bread delivery' and 'grocery ... victualing establishments and restaurants were closed.' Pubs, theatres, cinemas and music halls also shut. No trams ran and while some hotels tried to defy the strike, by afternoon most staff had left work, leaving guests to serve themselves. Members of British-based unions struck along with their Irish counterparts. Strike rallies were held in 59 towns and villages ranging

from large centres such as Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Derry, to rural villages such as Collooney in Sligo and Killtullagh Galway and towns such as Ballaghderreen and Coalisland. (The spread of union organization to areas such as this would become a feature of the next few years). In Limerick on 21 April 20,000 people had rallied against conscription at the Crescent. On 23 April over 20,000 joined another march and rally, which took 25 minutes to pass a given point. It was led by a banner bearing the slogan 'Death before Conscription' and a portrait of James Connolly. Thousands had also gathered in Newcastle West, where a violent clash with police took place (though in most cases there was little trouble). Limerick Corporation voted 18-2 to strike moderate Unionist Lord Dunraven off the Roll of Freedom of the city, because he supported conscription (he was restored to it in 2007). County Inspector Yates of the RIC reported that 'the whole city and county are seething with hatred against the government for passing conscription.' In Sligo, where there had been a bitter lockout in 1913 the strike saw a rally with speakers from the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Home Rule party as well as the Trades Council. The strike was very well observed in Waterford, which had recently seen violent scenes during the by-election which was won by Captain William Redmond. In many cases the strike rallies were chaired by clergymen and again for notable for their expressions of consensus nationalist sentiment.

But it was also clear that it was the unions which had carried out this stoppage. In the aftermath of the strike the *Irish Times* asserted that 'it was the voice of Labour, not the voice of religion or politics, which yesterday stopped the wheels of industry ... We think that April 23rd will be chiefly remembered, not as the day when Nationalist Ireland proclaimed her spiritual and moral isolation, but as the day when Labour found itself.' A week later stoppages again took place on Mayday with thousands taking part in rallies across the country and red flags displayed alongside tricolours. The fact was that the trade unions, especially but not only the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, were experiencing a period of growth and becoming increasingly confident.

So who are we talking about? Well firstly, there were around 25,000 Dubliners in the city's trade unions during 1918. There were around 60 of these, and most of them catered for bricklayers, painters, carpenters and joiners, cabinetmakers, electricians, tailors, stonecutters and so on. There were often several competing versions of each body and many unions were the Irish branches of larger British organizations. There were a growing number of associations for white-collar and shop workers such as the Draper's Assistants, Grocer and shop assistants, or Insurance agents. Women were increasingly joining the ranks of union members, some in the Irish Women's Workers Union, others notably in the Irish National Teachers Organisation. Unions reflected diversity of occupations; aside from the ITGWU on Dublin Trades Council there were representatives of the Cab and Car Owners Society, the Sheet Metal Workers Union, the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters, the Amalgamated Society of Tailors, the Stonecutter's Union, the Fire Brigade Men's Union, the Dublin Operative Farrier's Union, the Hairdresser's Society, the Irish Draper's Assistants Association, the United

Kingdom Society of Coach-makers, the United Corporation Workmen's Union and the Dublin Typographical Provident Society. (This was a union some of whose members had once sent greetings to William Martin Murphy acknowledging 'the spirit of fairness with which he has ever met them in Trades Union matters' in relation to the week's paid holidays printers at the *Irish Independent* enjoyed).

But by 1918 republicanism was clearly becoming a mass movement in the city. What relationship did it have with labour? Many republican activists were tradesmen, white-collar workers, grocers assistants or barmen, (indeed nine members of the Irish National Union of Vintners, Grocers and Allied Trades died as IRA Volunteers between 1919-21, including Paddy Moran, the national president of the union). There were also a substantial number of civil servants and a sprinkling of students in the IRA (an over representation of them in fact given how few people went to university at the time). Republicans also ultimately helped form Irish-based unions in order to weaken their British rivals. During 1919 for instance, Martin Conlon, a Dublin Corporation sanitary officer and member of the IRB supreme council was put in charge of a 'Secret Service Unit' known as the 'Labour Board' by Michael Collins. Conlon described how their 'duty was to use our influence in our various Trade Unions, and in the Labour Movement generally on behalf of the Republic: to get hold of men in important key positions, such as Power Stations, Railways, and Transport Dockworkers etc; and most important of all, to undermine the Amalgamated and Cross Channel Unions, and where possible to organise breakaways from these Unions, and establish purely Irish Unions instead...' The formation of the Irish Engineering, Shipbuilding and Foundry Trades Union in 1920, supported by the Dáil's Minister for Labour was part of this process. This was the union from which both the ETU and NEETU later emerged, which is one of the reasons why the TEEU (now CONNECT) 1916 badge featured Countess Markievicz.

In early 1917 a group of IRB activists also took control of the Dublin Municipal Officers Association. They then used the DMOA to launch the Irish Local Government Officers Trade Union (ILGOU) as a national trade union of local government officials that supported Dáil Éireann as the legitimate authority in Ireland. Members of this group included Henry Mangan, the City Accountant and Joseph Hutchinson, also in the City Accountant's office; and Thomas Gay of the Capel Street Library. At their head was 1916 veteran Harry Nicholls.

In general however the unskilled working class, was I think, under represented in republican ranks, especially given their numbers in society, both in urban and rural areas. This was also reflected more starkly in the political leadership of republicanism: there were no unskilled workers among the membership of the First Dáil. (This is not a reflection on their individual politics or attitude towards labour). The republican Ernie O'Malley reflected of Ireland at the time that 'in the towns tuppence-ha'penny looked down on tuppence, and throughout the country the grades in social difference were as numerous as the layers of an onion.' People were acutely aware of class distinctions, both within and between classes. When we discuss labour, I think, we need to be aware that the trade union movement, let alone the left, is not the same as the working class, and that class is made up of numerous elements, sometimes united, more often

divided. In Ireland in 1918 a very obvious division was that between a powerful industrial working class in north-east Ulster and the rest of the country. But you also of course had differences between skilled and unskilled, craftsmen and general workers, men and women, and concepts such as 'respectability' that sometimes influenced how people viewed class and their relationship to it. The unskilled poor of the rural towns for example, were often regarded as beyond the pale; sometimes described as 'tinkers' 'tramps' the 'rabble' etc and there was a lot of conflict between them and republicans during the elections of 1917 and 1918. But even within the labour movement you had fine dividing lines. After 1916 however the organization of the unskilled became a major factor again.

But at the basic level of trade union organization: Dublin had to be rebuilt after 1916 and by 1918 construction workers in the city were able to demand increased wages. A brief economic boom at the war's conclusion encouraged wage demands. Since the war began social grievances had been stored up, as prices had risen, but working class living standards had not, so there were outstanding wage demands which by late 1916 were translating into industrial action. The context of the war was also significant in that it forced state intervention. In December 1916 members of the National Union of Railwaymen on the Great Southern and Western line struck for a wage rise of 10 shillings. When the company refused to concede, the government stepped in and took control of Ireland's 32 railway companies and instituted a 7s a week rise. Over the next year NUR membership grew from 5,000 to 17,000 members. The importance of the war economy was even more apparent on the land. The British government demanded increased production and farmers were ordered to bring 10% of arable land under tillage in 1917 (another 5% was demanded in 1918). Tillage was labour intensive and suddenly farm labourers were in demand and had potential power. The large farmers and landowners not surprisingly demurred at raising pay or improving conditions and in September 1917 the government set up the Agricultural Wages Board to determine compulsory minimum wages and standards. Among farm labourers the old rural societies were largely superseded by the organizing efforts of ITGWU and by 1920 that union had 60,000 members who were rural workers, mainly concentrated in the south-eastern tillage counties. In October 1920 the union's *Voice of Labour* newspaper described farm workers as 'the most important section of our population' and the paper warned that while farmers representatives spoke of 'anarchy' and 'bolshevism' and complained that they could not pay the wages demanded 'let those big farmers who take up this attitude reflect that the farm labourer is not now the dumb-driven animal and meek slave he was in the past. He has a hunger for land. He has a still more acute hunger for life-he has learned what manhood is ... let the ranchers and graziers force him and he will give them a struggle compared to which the Land War of the last century was only a skirmish.'

An indication of how this confidence was translating was expressed by the *RIC Gazette* during 1920 when it lamented how once the police officer had been 'a vastly superior man to the railway porter and the agricultural labourer, and yet, behold how

they have advanced!' By 1921 the ITGWU had around 120,000 members and over 225,000 workers were in unions affiliated to Congress.

So by 1918 it was clear that organized labour, especially the ITGWU were becoming a force to be reckoned with. At leadership level Congress were also identifying with international revolution and increasingly with national self-determination. In February 1918 for instance, a month before the conscription crisis, 10,000 people gathered at the Mansion House to acclaim the Bolshevik revolution. Among the speakers were trade unionists William O'Brien, Tom Foran and Cathal O'Shannon, but also maverick Home Rule MP and now Sinn Féin Laurence Ginnell, Countess Markievicz and Maud Gonne MacBride. The Red Flag was sung and speakers looked forward to the day when the Vice-Regal Lodge became a branch office of the ITGWU. The broad nature of enthusiasm for the Russian experiment would last far longer in Ireland than many might assume. In the *Voice of Labour* of 23 February 1918 Tom Johnson speculated on what might happen 'if the Bolsheviks came to Ireland'; he argued that 'it is right that our friends who join with us in acclaiming the Bolshevik revolution should understand its implications. It means that as society is based upon labour, Labour shall rule.' Johnson suggested that 'The Soviets – the councils of workmen, peasants and soldiers- who are now in power in Russia have their Irish equivalents in the trades councils, the agricultural societies, and dare we say it? The local groups of the Irish Republican Army. An Irish counterpart of the Russian revolution would mean that these three sections co-operating would take control of the industrial, agricultural and social activities of the nation.'

The language of international revolt also found its way into the vocabulary of social struggles in Ireland. As ITGWU official and editor of the *Voice of Labour* Cathal O'Shannon asserted in August 1919: 'The working class of Ireland ... congratulates the Workers' Republics of both Russia and Hungary upon their successful resistance to the attacks made upon them by international capitalism ... the Workers' Government stands for exactly the same kind of freedom- political, industrial, and social, - as the constitution of the Irish Labour Party stands for.' The term 'soviet' itself was widely adopted in Ireland in workplace takeovers, strikes and so on; in November 1918 tailors in York Street in Dublin locked out their boss and declared their workplace a 'soviet.' In April 1919 you have the Limerick general strike against martial law, which becomes the Limerick Soviet and so on with over 200 instances of this over the next few years. By then Johnson and O'Shannon had written the first draft of the Democratic Programme for Dáil Éireann and labour leaders had identified themselves with recognition of the Dáil as Ireland's legitimate government.

But of course this was not unproblematic. Ironically, the very first rally against conscription was organised in Belfast by Johnson and David Campbell who represented the city on the Labour executive. That was at the Custom House on April 14th, before the Military Service Bill became law, but when they tried to repeat the

exercise three days later at City Hall, the meeting was broken up by loyalist shipyard workers; Johnson was hit by a rock and then sacked by his employers for “disloyalty”. Catholic workers in Belfast were informed that they would be dismissed if they joined the April 23 stoppage and across Ulster most Loyalist workplaces operated as normal. (There were some instances of Ulster Volunteers and members of the Independent Orange Order attending anti-conscription events however). The split between Unionism and Nationalism divided labour, of all types; the Ulster Teachers Union established in 1919 was a split from the Irish National Teachers Organization for example. British trade unionists were also often as resentful at what they regarded as the Irish shirking their share of the war burden. A representative of the Leather Workers Union the English midlands told William O’Brien that he was ‘grieved’ to receive his letter seeking support for the anti-conscription campaign. Of his union members, 42 of a total of 123 were fighting at the Front, ‘some have been wounded, three have paid the sacrifice; and you ask the remainder to pass a resolution condemning the action of conscripting you. I should not like to get you insulted by putting your proposition to them.’ The secretary of the clothing workers union in Leicester told O’Brien, that he had ‘been all my life and still am a supporter of Home Rule for Ireland. But ... while you need the assistance – and you do – of British people to protect your Country – while our lads have to go, yours ought too... England before now would have been overrun by the German Devils, and Ireland would have suffered the same. It is most childish to compare your country with Belgium. What I think ought to be done is to give Ireland Home Rule . . . and I think you should fight it out among yourselves.’

When Congress gathered in Waterford during August, recriminations continued. David Campbell and another Belfast member of the executive, JH Bennett of the Seamen’s Union, were attacked for refusing to sign the declaration against conscription. Campbell said he refused to sign because, ‘There is no fear of conscription. My opinion is that it is less likely to come now than ever.’ Bennett claimed that ‘I am against conscription, and I am a Trade Unionist. I refused to sign because I thought the Executive were allowing themselves to be used for political purposes.’ In other words, by republicans.

In Waterford the labour leadership affirmed their support for Irish self-determination, but not explicitly for a republic. On November 1 1918 a special conference accepted a recommendation from the leadership not to contest the coming general election by 96-23 votes. Sinn Féin had offered Labour four seats in return for not contesting other constituencies. But the prospect of taking part seems to have perplexed the labour leadership; if they did badly, then electoral defeat could shatter the growing confidence of the movement; if they did well then they were faced with whether or not to abstain from Westminster, something they were not committed to. Opposition came from

Belfast labourites, who wanted to avoid association with Sinn Féin (though they supported self-government) and to challenge the Unionists. Four candidates from the Labour Representation Committee did stand in Belfast, winning 12,164 votes but no seats. Their best result was 3,674 for textile workers organizer Sam Kyle on the Shankill, where he came in well behind Unionist Samuel McGuffin's 11,840. (The Unionist party rebranded itself as Labour Unionist wherever it faced a Labour challenge and pointed out that the LRC candidates supported Dominion Home Rule). Nevertheless Sam Kyle would top the poll in local elections on the Shankill in 1920 illustrating a base for labour among the protestant working class.

It later became fashionable to suggest that in 1918 de Valera demanded that 'Labour must wait' and that the labour leaders acquiesced. In fact de Valera never actually said this, though Joe Devlin had alleged that this was what Sinn Féin's policy amounted to (Devlin himself had a large working class base in west Belfast). In reality the Labour leadership did not in the end need to be asked to wait. They did not want to compete with Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin recognised the importance of this. In April 1919 de Valera claimed that 'when we wanted the help of Labour against conscription, Labour gave it to us. When we wanted the help of Labour in Berne, Labour gave it to us, and got Ireland recognised as a distinct nation. When we wanted Labour to stand down at the election and not divide us, but that we should stand foursquare against the enemy, Labour fell in with us. I say Labour deserves well of the Irish people, the Labour man deserves the best the country can give.' In August 1921, during the Truce, de Valera addressed the Labour and TUC conference and told them that 'it is not necessary for me to say- you know it so well ... that were it not for the solidarity of Labour behind the national cause ... the Irish cause would not be where it is today ... we who are in a position to gauge the advance of the Irish cause ... know what your support has been to us and what your refusal to put forward even your own interests has meant for the cause of Ireland in the past two years.' Of course not putting forward your own interests may not be necessarily a positive ...

In the December 1918 election Sinn Féin benefitted from its association with labour and the revolutionary mood in post-war Europe. During the election a number of union leaders spoke at Sinn Féin rallies. In Cork the National Union of Railwaymen official John Good claimed that 'labour and Sinn Féin were one and the same thing' and that both stood for a 'workers republic.' Winifred Carney, one of only two women standing in the election, (the other of course being Constance Markievicz), claimed she stood for the 'Workers Republic.' (Carney was a candidate in the unpromising territory of largely Loyalist Victoria in Belfast). Sinn Féin's election material appealed to workers to 'Keep Connolly's Flag Flying' and asserted that the demand for an Irish republic had 'the support of the Government of the Russian Republics and of the workers of France, Germany (and) Australia.' It reminded voters that Connolly 'the Greatest Labour Leader Ireland has produced ... died fighting for an Irish Republic.'

Election leaflets aimed at workers also stressed that Sinn Féin had declared as part of its policy 'that where Irish resources are being developed, or where industries exist, Sinn Feiners shall make it their business to ensure that workers are paid a living wage.' Cork Sinn Féin candidate Liam de Róiste stated that 'the day had come when the working classes would have the power in the government of the country.' The election was the first in which property qualifications did not apply to men over 21 and the first in which huge numbers of both working class and lower middle class men, (and any women at all of course), could vote. So it was the most democratic contest in Ireland to date, at least. Sinn Féin was also fighting the contest with large numbers of its candidates (including Markievicz) in jail and under conditions of censorship and repression.

But the republican movement was not only concerned with the election. The conscription crisis had been a huge boost to the Irish Volunteers who prepared to fight if conscription was introduced. In jail at the time, Dublin officer Oscar Traynor recalled how 'the feeling was reflected in the attitude of the officials in Dundalk Prison, who informed us that if there was any attempt to enforce conscription ... they would open the prison gates and allow all the prisoners to go free ... when we were eventually released we found all the Companies of the Battalion at almost twice their former strength.' In some parts of Ireland 'virtually every' able-bodied man joined up. Volunteer membership reached perhaps 100,000 in the summer of 1918. The Volunteer's journal *An tÓglác* warned that 'passive resistance in effect means no resistance at all.' Instead it promised 'ruthless warfare' if conscription was introduced and suggested that 'anyone, civilian or soldier, who assists directly ... in this crime against us ... should be killed without mercy.' In fact lives had already been lost. In February 1918 Volunteer John Ryan was shot dead by police during a land protest in Clare. In April 1918 Kerry Volunteers unsuccessfully attacked a Police barracks at Gortalea for arms, leading to the deaths of two men, John Browne and Richard Laide. In June 1918 in Tralee the Volunteers ambushed the two policemen, Boyle and Fallon, they believed responsible during the inquest into the deaths; the constables were wounded but survived. There were numerous confrontations throughout the year during arms raids. Though Volunteer membership had declined again after the crisis passed, those who remained were mainly radicalized younger men who expected military confrontation soon. During the 1918 election the Volunteers were extremely active, canvassing, guarding polling booths and clashing with Home Rule supporters, Hibernians, ex-servicemen and police. The scene was being set for escalation.

To conclude, the conscription crisis was key to the upward surge in separatist political and military confidence. It also gave a clear illustration of the power of organised labour and the trade unions, though they would decide not to contest the political space. Their role in defeating conscription was vital, but part of a wider nationalist consensus. A general strike over solely economic issues would have been received rather differently by the nationalist press and Catholic church. However the general

strike encouraged the confidence of workers in other areas. As we continue to commemorate our revolution we should not neglect the role of workers in the era.

Postscript: Important points were raised from the floor by Jack McGinley, Norman Croke and Peter Rigney. Jack McGinley noted that I had understated the role of women and the promise of the June 'La na mBan' events that they would not take mens' jobs. Norman Croke outlined the importance of the 23 April general strike in building ITGWU branches in hotels and among construction workers. Peter Rigney noted the importance of railway companies holding jobs for servicemen when they returned from the war. Like all who speak about Irish labour history I am indebted to the work of Emmet O'Connor and Padraig Yeates.