

## 'THE GREAT STRIKE'

Violence surrounding labour unrest plagued Dublin from February, 1913 to February, 1914. Just during August and September, 1913 there were fifteen distinct and separate riots, with a number of them resulting in large-scale clashes with the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP). Twelve of these occurred on Saturday, August 30 and Sunday, August 31, five and seven per day respectively. The findings of the Dublin Disturbances Commission established that only a few of these riots had their origin in organised tram-car attacks, while the remainder predominately originated from organised attacks on the police. Two men died and hundreds were injured.

The relationship between the police and the public was charged for some time. This state of affairs had been escalating for months before erupting into the series of major riots. Dublin newspapers printed daily court proceedings of assaults on the police on duty. There was tension and inevitable hostility between the DMP ranks and the people. Inquiries made in early September determined that there were 910 policemen on duty in Dublin in connection with the strikes. The force was comprised of five hundred DMP men (nearly half the total strength) and four hundred and ten men from the Royal Irish Constabulary drawn from various places all over the country. In the aftermath of the labour disturbances, between August and December, there was a total of 656 people apprehended, with 416 of them imprisoned. The inquiry into the disturbances concluded that these riots were not confined to working men only, for in all of them 'the worst element was supplied by those who seldom or never work, and who may be described as the corner-boys and criminal class in the City.' Roughly half of the interred men held previous convictions.

These events divided society not only into unionists and 'scabs', but placed the civic police force on the other side of the barricades from the community it was meant to serve. Since its inception, the objective of the Dublin Metropolitan Police was to prevent crime and preserve peace. The vice regal commission appointed to inquire into the conduct of the police during the riots found that the DMP men did precisely that and discharged their duties with courage and patience. The total number of constables injured in the riots exceeded two hundred.

The press coverage of the day provides conflicting evidence, however. Reports quoted witnesses whose testimonials swore of unprovoked violence from the police armed with batons, indiscriminately charging at the crowds. Likewise during a cross-examination, two witnesses swore on oath that they saw the police attack Liberty Hall, the Head Quarters of the Irish Transport Workers' Union, without any provocation. A witness, Charles M'Day stated that he saw the police rush across and clear the square in front of the "Hall". He then saw other police come down from O'Connell Bridge and on running towards Eden Quay he witnessed 'James Nolan being struck by 224C with a baton on the side of the head near the ear'. James Nolan was one of the two men killed during the riots. Nolan sustained a fracture of the skull, which resulted in his death at Jervis Street Hospital, on the morning of Sunday, August 31, the day after he sustained his injury during the night riot. The post mortem examination found that the injury was caused by the blow of a baton.

Other accounts state that the police retaliation was in response to the showers of stones that rained on them from the windows of the surrounding buildings. Stones, bricks, and bottles were thrown by the crowd. The riot in this locality went on for a long time and while it lasted, the throwing of stones and bottles was almost continuous, and according to the inquiry into these disturbances, many injuries were inflicted.

The DMP constables, the workingmen themselves, were placed in a precarious situation. The orders to provide protection to the Tramway Company in running their cars notwithstanding the strike created greater resentment against the police. Jim Larkin's rhetoric was to the effect that a non-unionist worker, or a scab, is a traitor to his class, a deserter who goes over to the enemy in time of war to fight against his own people. Even though the policemen were inadvertently made into accomplices in this 'war', an overwhelming majority of the DMP recruits were of the labouring stock themselves. Many of them enlisted to secure modest but stable incomes for their families.

The wages of a DMP or RIC Constable during his first years of service were by no means high, and equalled the wages of a labourer during a full week of summer employment, or just over a pound (20-22 shillings). The report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Royal Irish Constabulary and the Dublin Metropolitan Police published in 1914 found the minimum and maximum Constable's weekly pay rates have not changed since the final decades of the nineteenth-century. The minimum weekly rate stood at twenty-three shillings and the maximum, granted after fifteen years of service, amounted to thirty. On average, a Dublin Police supernumerary received fifteen shillings and six pence (15s.6d.) for his keep. The weekly pay of the Royal Irish Constabulary was even lower. A probationer in the force was paid fifteen shillings per week. To compare, an inquiry into the housing conditions conducted around the same time showed an off season casual workman's pay to be about ten to fifteen shillings per week. Out of this amount two to three shillings were sacrificed for rent. The housing such rent afforded could hardly be called a 'house', much less a 'home'. Often a family of five existed on the remaining few shillings, all in one room void of basic furniture, and at times even windows. The Dublin slum, in fact, was a thing apart in the inferno of social degradation. Although, the men employed in the Dublin Metropolitan Police were not housed in slum-like conditions, the accommodations available for these men were run down and continuously in need of repairs.

Undoubtedly, these men were financially more secure than the unskilled labouring classes; still the policemen's wages were significantly lower than the wages of the skilled artisans. Moreover, in contrast to the general rise in workmen's wages, ten per cent in skilled labour and twenty in unskilled, policeman's pay remained constant from 1883; while by 1914 the Dublin rents increased by a quarter. As it stood, Irish policemen had been under financial strain for some years. In the popular mind, however, during the Lockout these men seemingly sided with the 'capital' against the 'labour', which naturally fueled fervid resentment and eventually violence. The scale of it was striking but not incomprehensible.

Sources:

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