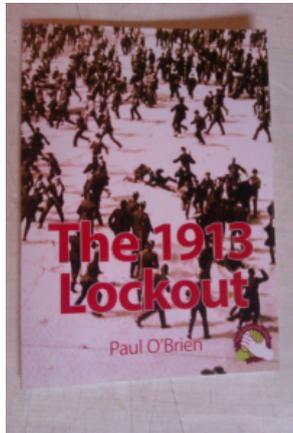
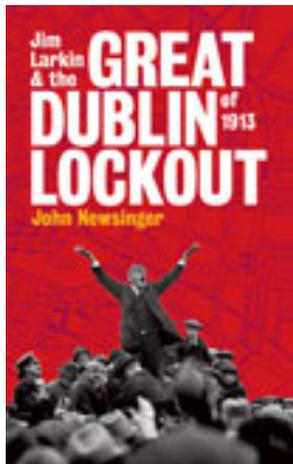


Review: Paul O'Brien, *The 1913 Lockout* & John Newsinger, *Jim Larkin & the Great Dublin Lockout of 1913*

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Paul O'Brien, *The 1913 Lockout*
People Before Profit, 2013 €3



John Newsinger, *Jim Larkin & the Great Dublin Lockout of 1913*
Bookmarks, 2013 €5

The 1913 Dublin Lockout is the most significant industrial struggle in Irish

labour history. The defeat of the workers, after almost eight months of heroism, was a defining event, with continuing effect to the present. Because of its significance, many have stepped up for its centenary to present their view of it and its outcome. In the week before the start of the centenary anniversary, a memorial plaque to William Martin Murphy, the employers leader, was unveiled at his birthplace in West Cork. An article in the *Irish Times* spoke of ‘The slow rehabilitation of William Martin Murphy’.¹ Another article quotes Murphy as saying that he had ‘not the smallest objection to men forming a legitimate union’,² slightly undermining the view that the fight was solely one for union recognition. More importantly the major unions SIPTU, IMPACT and others, with the ICTU have been carefully presenting their view. I recently went to the trade union sponsored 1913 tenement house in Henrietta Street. The terrible living conditions, the intransigence of the employers, the brutality of the police but above all the heroism of the workers and their families are all brilliantly presented. But you leave with a sense of yet another glorious defeat. The question ‘could they have won?’ is never addressed.

It is with that question in mind that these two pamphlets, both by historians sympathetic to the politics of this journal, are particularly welcome. Their answer to the question is a resounding ‘Yes’. The

¹Ann Marie Hourihane: ‘The slow rehabilitation of William Martin Murphy’, *Irish Times*, 22 August 2013

²Thomas J Morrissey: ‘William Martin Murphy. Patriotic entrepreneur or ‘a soulless, money-grubbing tyrant’?’, *History Ireland*, July/August 2013

years 1910-14 saw a huge wave of working class struggles, known as the Great Unrest, across both Britain and Ireland. It was in this period that the Irish Transport & General Workers Union was built. In 1911 membership grew from 5,000 to 18,000 members. At its heart were the ideas of solidarity action, that an injury to one was an injury to all, and the blacking of 'tainted goods', those produced by scab labour. It was this form of trade unionism, described as Larkinism, that Murphy opposed and with the support of his fellow employers, and most importantly the police, he set out to break. Speaking to the Dublin Chamber of Commerce, Murphy clearly set out his calculated intention to starve workers back to work,

The employer all the time managed to get his three meals a day, but the unfortunate workman and his family had no resources whatever expect submission, and that was what occurred in ninety-nine cases out of one hundred. The difficulty of teaching that lesson to the working man was extraordinary.(O'Brien p.15)

The support of the police was critical for Murphy in winning the agreement of the employers to his plan to break the union. Over the weekend of the 30 and 31 August they demonstrated that support, running riot, beating three men to death and injuring hundreds more. They stormed into the tenements beating men, women and children and smashing furniture and other possessions. A Liberal MP visiting the city described them as 'the most brutal constabulary ever let loose on a peaceful assembly kicking the victims when prostrate was a settled part of the police programme.'(Newsinger p.40)

The Lockout got a huge response from British workers, some no doubt remembering the supportive action by Dublin workers to their own strikes. Railwaymen in Liverpool refused to handle Dublin traffic and the dispute spread to Birmingham, Sheffield and Derby. This was unofficial action organised by rank and file militants. For a moment it looked as if a national railway strike was possible but the full time officials managed to halt the action and get a return to work. A TUC delegation came to Dublin to try to settle the dispute, over the heads of the strikers if necessary, but the employers were not interested in a compromise, they wanted the complete destruction of the ITGWU.

Over £11 million, in today's value, was collected in Britain in support of the Dublin workers. Some was given from central union funds, but much of it was collected on the streets. Huge meetings of support were held throughout Britain. The TUC sent several ships with food supplies and at Christmas presents and sweets for the children. Not surprisingly Murphy's papers described it as a British plot to bankrupt Dublin shopkeepers!(Newsinger p.50) A proposal to give a holiday to children in British workers' homes was stopped by a vicious sectarian campaign of press and priests. In a comment breath taking in its cynicism, Archbishop William Walsh warned that it would make the children 'discontented with the poor homes to which they will sooner or later return, that is to say, those of them who return at all'. The writer James Stephens was moved to comment 'The difference between a priest and a policeman is too slight to talk about.'(Newsinger p.55-56)

But financial support, important as it was, was not sufficient. Larkin went to Britain on what became known as the 'Fiery Cross Crusade'. He addressed meet-

ings all over the country looking for solidarity action. 12,000 attended in the Albert Hall in London, with thousands more being turned away. One person commented of Larkin's speech 'He denounced them, jeered at them unmercifully and called to battle, while the eyes of young enthusiasts glowed and kindled.'(Newsinger p.62) The TUC leadership under pressure from the membership called a special conference. It took place on the 9 December was filled with full time officials. The leadership were more worried that a victory for the ITGWU would be seen as a victory for Larkinism and be an inspiration to their own rank and file to militancy. A motion censuring Larkin was carried and one for solidarity action overwhelmingly defeated. A defeat clutched from the jaws of victory. Even the threat of solidarity action might have been enough to break the unity of the Dublin employers, but it was not to be.

In an afterword to Paul O'Brien's pamphlet, *People Before Profit* Councillor Brid Smith comments,

The 1913 lockout shows a different style of trade unionism. The heroic struggle in Dublin saw the greatest level of solidarity, of worker participation, of emerging ideas of how to fight and organise. The defeat of the lockout was the result of

the sell-out of the TUC, not the cowardice of workers in Dublin or Britain.

The statement that 'Connolly and Larkin would be turning in their graves' is a common mantra today from workers and the unemployed who instinctively know that our history represents something completely different from what we are witnessing today. It means that the 'Jack O'Connor and David Beggs' school of leadership has failed and shamed us as trade unionists and workers.(O'Brien p.33)

Two pamphlets on the same topic which would I recommend? I read them back to back and I did not find it repetitive. Newsinger gives more detail about the activities and politics in Britain and O'Brien on the Irish context. The two are complementary and both recommended as an antidote to the almost sickening coverage being given to the anniversary. From the *Irish Times* to the *Irish Independent*, Daíl Eireann to the ICTU it is like everyone is in support of the strikers. It was not the case in 1913 and it is not so now. The lessons of 1913, of solidarity and rank and file control of our unions, are as relevant today and we urgently need to learn them.