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COSANTA:

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,755.

**Witness**

Thomas Johnson,  
49, Mount Prospect Ave.,  
Clontarf,  
Dublin.

**Identity.**

Leader of Irish Labour Party;  
Member of Mansion House anti-Conscription  
Conference;  
Member of Dáil Éireann.

**Subject.**

Labour, Trades Union and National activities,  
1907 - 1918.

**Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.**

Nil.

File No S. 1,142.

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRÉ MILÉANTA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 1755

STATEMENT BY MR. THOMAS JOHNSON,

49 Mount Prospect Avenue, Clontarf, Dublin.

Any historians incidents of the history of the military struggle would require at least a background of knowledge of the social and political conditions prior to 1914, and I think this would also apply to Belfast as well as to Dublin and other parts of the country. As I had some association with the Labour agitation in Belfast from the time that Larkin came to that city in January, 1907, and later in connection with the Dublin upheaval in 1913, there may be certain facts that I can give evidence about, which will be helpful. I have a vague theory that 1914-1921 can be connected directly with the strikes on the docks in Belfast in 1907 and the military intervention at that time.

Regarding the Belfast strike, from the date of his coming to Belfast in January, 1907, James Larkin, Organiser for and on behalf of the National Union of Dock Labourers, whose headquarters were in Liverpool, was working amongst the unskilled workers on the docks and the carters who were mainly working in connection with the docks. They had been imperfectly organised in a Trade Union, and of these, I believe, the majority were connected with the regular labourers employed by the cross-channel steam-ships, and I think I am right in saying that the casual labourers, employed at what were called the low docks which dealt with the overseas deep-sea ships, were very badly organised. Larkin's coming was very successful in bringing

dockers generally into trade union organisations, and, from dockers, his organising extended to carters, and thence to building-trade labourers, until, by the middle of the year, unskilled labourers generally were either in, or on the verge of coming into organisation.

I cannot recall the immediate cause of the strike which occurred amongst the dock labourers, but there was a great fever amongst the workers of the city generally. The Shipping Federation, which was an organisation of ship-owning employers, following a practice which had begun some years before in England in cases of strikes, organised 'blacklegs', or 'scabs', and lodged them in a steamship which lay alongside the quays. These were intended, of course, to break the strike, and, in order to protect the 'scabs', British military forces were brought into activity. I have a number of post-cards of the time.

(Post-cards in question were handed to Comdt. Kearns by Mr. Johnson, for photographic reproduction.)

Carters, taking goods from the docks, were protected by convoys of R.I.C. men through the city, and many carts were overthrown, with goods damaged. A culmination of the turmoil occurred when riots broke out in the Falls-Shankill area, and military were brought out who fired on the rioters, killing two or three. The military then were put on duty, principally on the Falls Road, and the Executive of the Trades Council which had been interested in the strike and a number of whose members acted as part of the strike committee saw clearly that the presence of

military would mean an extension of the riots. A delegation from the Trades Council went to interview the Lord Mayor, requiring of him to use his influence with the military authorities to withdraw the troops, and promising that the Trades Council and the Strike Committee would take the responsibility of patrolling the Falls Road and keeping order. This was done for two or three nights, and order was kept. The full story, no doubt, could be found in the newspaper of the time. At this time, Sir George Askwith was head of the Board of Trade (Labour Section) at London, and his responsibility was to act as collaborator(?) in trade disputes. He came to Belfast on that mission. During his visit, I accompanied him round the area where the riot occurred, and showed him many of the workers' houses; and we went through several of them. He was appalled at the conditions, but he was amused at what he saw in the streets - children of five, or six, or seven, digging up small kidney paving stones with which the side-walks were paved, and piling them up against the houses, to be used as ammunition, if necessary. It is interesting to recall that the Corporation afterwards, as a preventive measure, embedded these kidney paving stones in concrete.

I should have said that almost the first task that Larkin took upon himself in the organising of the dockers was to change the method, up to then in vogue, whereby men were paid in the public houses which frequently belonged to the stevedores.

At one point in this story of the Belfast strike which took place on or about the 12th July - maybe a

few days earlier - in marching through the street from the Falls Road to Ballymacarret, a march of workers, Orange and Nationalist, followed behind Orange and Nationalist bands. This was considered to be a wonderful exhibition of unity between the two sections of the unskilled workers, working for the common welfare.

There was a 'scab' attacked in Waring Street, Belfast, and Larkin was alleged to have participated in the attack, and was prosecuted. The chief witness against him stated that he was in the Commercial Hotel, looking out of a window, and saw Larkin strike the man. Larkin produced evidence at the trial that the 'scab' had attempted to stab him. I forget, for the moment, what the result of the trial was.

It was during this period, and, I think, as a consequence of the duties that had been placed upon them to act as convoys to carts and lorries, conveying goods from the docks, that the R.I.C. mutinied. They had grievances of their own, and an attempt was made to organise them and make a demand for improved conditions. A meeting was held in the barrack square and addressed by members of the Trades Council. I am not sure whether Larkin was a speaker. The action of the R.I.C. was treated seriously by the authorities, and disciplinary action was taken, some of the ringleaders being dismissed; others were scattered to different parts of the country. I think that is about all I can remember at the moment of that period. There was a funeral, of course, which was the occasion of a great demonstration. That may have been the occasion of the patrolling of the streets.

With regard to the Dublin Strike, here is an article you may keep. It is a letter from Captain White in the "Irish Worker", December, 1913, dealing with the Citizen Army. This letter is of direct interest.

(Mr. Johnson handed letter to Comdt. Kearns.)

There is another document here, in connection with the activities of Mr. Martin Murphy, which led to the lock-out, and giving quotations from the "Irish Independent" as to the official attitude of the Dublin employers. This was published in the "Daily Herald", a London Labour paper, and was used to further the campaign, on behalf of Dublin strikers, in England and Scotland.

(Document loaned to Bureau for copying.)

(A further 'open letter' was handed to Comdt. Kearns, described as record of story taken from "Irish Independent".)

At one of the night conferences held at the Shelbourne hotel between employers and a delegation from the Unions Strike Committee, and a representative of the British Trade Union Congress sent over here, negotiations went on all night, but failed.

(Document in this connection handed to Comdt. Kearns.)

This particular conference was important, because it fell down.

(Further documents handed to Comdt. Kearns.)

Going back to Belfast, James Connolly came to Belfast in 1911, shortly after his return from America. He had returned from America by arrangement with the Socialist Party in Dublin. In order to promote the

organisation of the Socialist movement, a Belfast group had promised to assist in the guarantee of his wages. After spending a short time in Dublin, he came north to Belfast and began propaganda meetings. These were continued for some time, but the Belfast group failed to keep up its proportion of the wages fund, as we'll call it. A strike of seamen took place in England, and shipping in and out of Belfast was affected by the British strike. It should be said that a Transport Union in Dublin had acted more or less as representatives of the Seamen's Union. As was anticipated, Belfast was immediately involved, and I remember Connolly receiving a telegram from Larkin in Dublin, saying to him that he should take charge of our interests in Belfast. That particular message was, I think, the first formal association with the organisation of the Transport Union. Up to that time, the responsibility for Connolly's maintenance was with the Socialist Party. He had become despondent, and, in fact, was seriously thinking of undertaking election campaign in Scotland and England when the telegram arrived to fix him in Belfast for a couple of years. Then, again, the reorganising of the Union Branch in Belfast has fallen away greatly since Larkin left it to come to Dublin. His work as a Union organiser was, of course, inescapably bound with other activities as a Socialist propagandist. The chapters in his book, "The Re-Conquest Of Ireland", were, in fact, lectures which he delivered, mainly in the open air at the corner of Library Street, on Sunday evenings. The Dublin strike in 1913 meant Connolly spent a considerable amount of time in Dublin, but he came back to Belfast where his family were, and continued with his propaganda for socialism and his Union organisation work.

Connolly was in Belfast at the outbreak of the War in August, 1914. This was, perhaps, the most critical moment of his career. Immediately, his thoughts turned in the direction of anti-war, anti-recruiting and revolutionary action here in Ireland. He hoped, perhaps, without much expectation of fulfilment, that the Socialist parties in the Union would rise against the war. From its inception, I believe that, if it were not done anywhere else, an attempt would be made to start a revolutionary conflagration in Ireland. His idea, most certainly, was not merely a nationalist revolution, but a revolution to overthrow the capitalist system. In his propaganda speeches, these things were said more or less openly, and they are on record in his writings for the "Irish Worker" and other publications. O'Brien is the authority on this aspect of things.

I think the 1913 Citizen Army began, in so far as it could be called an organisation, after the police attacks on the carters. The idea was to have a disciplined body to withstand the police. It was purely a protective force, and I think when the strike was over, it faded out. It probably faded out after the outbreak of the war.

The action of the Trade Union Congress Executive in relation to the rest of the officers, the secretary and other members of the Executive, in relation to the damage done on houses and furniture of Trade Union members, and claims for compensation and other matters arising out of the Rising are dealt with fully in the report to the congress and at the annual gathering in August, 1916. This report contains copies of correspondence between Mr. Campbell and myself, on

behalf of the National Executive, and from Mr. Arthur Henderson, M.P. for the Labour Party, and the Prime Minister, Mr. Asquith's interview with Lloyd George, then Minister of Munitions, and a report also on a discussion at the congress on the action taken by the Executive. I should say, in this connection, that Mr. D.R. Campbell, as Treasurer, and myself, as Chairman, both living in Belfast, thought to take upon ourselves the responsibility of acting on behalf of the Executive without having an opportunity to consult with the other members. However, our action was confirmed by the Executive at the first opportunity, and, subsequently, by the Annual Congress.

Cover for Report.

(Extracts from Report of the 22nd Annual Meeting, held in the Town Hall, Sligo, on August 7th, 8th and 8th, 1916, added as an appendix to the statement.)

(The document described hereunder was handed to Comdt. Kearns for photostatic reproduction in the Bureau.)

Independent Labour Party of Ireland.

Ireland Upon The Dissecting Table:

Was provided by James Connolly on behalf of the Belfast Branch, dated some time early in 1914, and distributed in Belfast. As will be seen, it is an eloquent initiation of a proposal to exclude any part of the North from the whole of Ireland.

(Description of further documents:

Manifesto to the Workers of Ireland from the Irish Trades Union Congress Parliamentary Committee, dated 27th March, 1914, and signed by individual members of the Committee.

Dated 27th March, 1914, and signed by individual members of the Committee, it comments on a proposal to divide Ireland in two parts, and contains a paragraph stating that, if it was legal for Carson to arm and drill, it is legal for the workers to arms and drill.)

(To be retained by Bureau.)

On the question of anti-recruiting and anti-conscription, an amount of propaganda was carried out in Belfast, prior to the outbreak of the war in 1914. It should be understood that this kind of propaganda was not, in the main, inspired by an anti-British state of mind, but rather an anti-militarist one. No doubt, the anti-British nationalist attitude entered into the matter to some degree, but the predominant sentiment was anti-militarist. An illustration of this is to be seen in a leaflet, prepared by me, printed for me, and distributed to soldiers at Hollywood barracks in Belfast. It was addressed to British soldiers stationed in Ireland, and referred to the likelihood that they might be called upon to shoot down miners, who were then on strike in Great Britain.

(The above-described leaflet was also handed

to Comdt. Kearns, for copying and return of original to Mr. Johnson. The document was headed: "To The Soldiers Of The British Army Stationed In Ireland".)

In the matter of Irish recruits for the British army, attention should be called to a report issued on the 14th January, 1916. It is addressed by the Viceroy, Lord Wimbourne, to Field Marshal, Earl Kitchener, Secretary of State for War. It states that the number of recruits raised, from the 2nd August, 1914, to the 8th January, 1916, was 86,277, of whom 10,984 enlisted after 10th October, 1915. The Belfast recruiting area accounted for 26,883, between 2nd August, 1914, and 8th January, 1916. The Dublin recruiting area, city and county, accounted for 16,726, between the same dates. From 10th October, 1915, to 8th January, 1916, Belfast recruited 2,345, and Dublin, 2,090. The report also states that the distribution of recruits, both in the army and navy, up to 15th December, in the four provinces, is estimated by the police to be as follows:-

Ulster	...	49,760.
Leinster	...	27,458.
Munster	...	14,190.
Connaught	...	3,589.

(Mr. Johnson handed copy of 'Northern Whig', in relation to the above, to Comdt. Kearns, with a request that it be returned to him.)

#### Motor Permits Strike.

In October or November, 1919, an order was issued, called the Motor Permit Order, requiring every driver of a motor vehicle to obtain an official permit. A

communication from Mr. Thomas Foran, on behalf of the Transport Workers' Union, and one, a day or two later, from the Automobile Drivers' and Mechanics' Union intimated that, as the order would interfere with their members leaving work, the latter had decided to strike, and the Automobile Drivers' Union decided upon calling all their members out on the 29th November, that is, the date of the order being put into operation. The Transport Union, on the other hand, decided that their member-drivers should not apply for permits, but should continue to work for as long as their employers were willing that their cars should go out. The National Executive of the Congress believed that the policy of the Transport Union was the wiser, and the automobile drivers were advised accordingly. It was not found possible to bring the two Unions into line, in regard to this. The National Executive published a resolution, joining in a general protest against the order, commending the action of the men and their Unions in resolving to ignore the order, and calling for financial and moral support. A delegation was sent to London on 18th December, and interviews were held with the Secretary, British Trades Union Congress, officials of the National Union of Railwaymen and the Transport Workers' Federation, and other leading Trade Union officials. The object of the deputation was to make these organisations aware of the situation created in Ireland by the Motor Permits Order. A considerable amount of disunion arose within the Trade Union movement, regarding this matter, particularly the desire of the Automobile Drivers' Union to extend the dispute in such a way as to bring about a general stoppage of labour, but, as this is an internal trade union matter, I need not go into details. The matter is

fully discussed in the Congress Report of 1920.

#### Munition Strike.

In the month of May, 1921, there began what became known as the Munition Strike. It was an unusual kind of strike, perhaps unique, inasmuch as there was concerted action on the part of a large number of persons, acting individually. It did not involve simultaneous action by a group, leading to a stoppage of industry.

The story is outlined in the report of a special conference of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, held in the Mansion House, Dublin, on 15th November, 1921. (See pp. 51-87 of the 27th Annual Report, also, p. 41 of the 26th Annual Report.) In the spring of 1921, General Macready had been appointed to direct the British operations in Ireland. The Black and Tans had been recruited, and the supply of arms augmented. Simultaneously with these developments, there occurred the counter revolutionary operations in Russia, aided by the British Government. Arms were being shipped from London, for Poland, to assist in the attack on the Soviet revolutionary forces. London dockers refused to load the steamship, "Jolly George", with munitions, and their action was generally applauded by the trade union workers and their leaders in Britain. The Executive Committee of the National Union of Railwaymen, to which most of the Irish railwaymen belonged, passed a resolution, ordering their members not to entrain munitions of war for Poland.

Irish railwaymen, members of the N.U.R., and other railwaymen, members of other unions (particularly the locomotive engine-drivers and firemen) decided

that what was proper in the case of the attack on the revolutionary government of Russia was even more clearly applicable when munitions were being sent from Britain, for use by British forces against the Irish people and their government. The Irish railwaymen, on their own initiative, without waiting for direction from any authority, decided not to participate in the transport of British munitions of war. The movement began at Dublin and Dún Laoghaire, where both dockers and railwaymen belonged to the N.U.R. Their refusal led to the dismissal of over four hundred men. When the National Executive of the Labour Party and Trade Union Congress - at that time, a single, united body - were apprised of the position, they advised that a strike of railwaymen, and stoppage of the railway services, should not be called. They applauded the action of the railwaymen, but advised caution and restraint, to prevent them from going further and faster than was advisable. Their advice, which was adopted, was that each man, when called upon to man a train carrying munitions, should act individually, and await dismissal for refusing to do duty. Instead of a general mass strike, the men were to await individual dismissal. By adopting this course, the greater part of the railway services was carried on. Funds were raised to maintain the dismissed railwaymen. A national appeal was very generously responded to, and the men were paid very nearly the full amount of the wages they would have earned, if at work. In the view of the National Executive on this question, a great moral issue was at stake. Not merely was it a matter as between an alien Government and an attempt to force the workers to assist in the

political subjugation of a people, but it meant that the railwaymen refused to participate in work which was morally indefensible. It was an assertion that the workman was conscious of the purpose of his work, and not merely a cog in a machine. The Congress Report, August, 1921, p. 6, dealing with this subject, contains the following:

(Mr. Johnson here read extract which referred to two malicious lies by Sir Hamar Greenwood, thus - "... One of the orders issued to railwaymen in Ireland, and signed by the Minister of War of the Government of the Republic of Ireland. This one fell into the hands of the British police".)

Verily, it had not far to fall. The alleged order read as follows, and was published in American newspapers, at the instigation of British propaganda:-

"The Government of the Irish Republic - acting under instructions - You are hereby notified that after this date you are forbidden to drive any train, or to assist in any way the transport of armed forces of the English Government.

By Order Minister of War.

Dated 20/8/1920."

Of course, this production was a simple forgery. No such order was ever issued to Irish railwaymen in the name of the Government of the Irish Republic by the Minister of War, or by any governmental or military authority. The railwaymen acted, from the beginning, on their own initiative, and were supported by the National Executive, by the Trade Union movement, and

by the country generally. They dictated their own policy, independent of any instructions from any authority outside the Labour movement.

The second statement by Sir Hamar Greenwood was repeated in the House of Commons by Mr. Lloyd George, that Irish railwaymen refused to carry police and soldiers. This was merely another characteristic lie. "They would not carry a single soldier", said Mr. Lloyd George. During the whole of the munitions struggle, police and soldiers were constantly being sent on the railways, and, so long as they were not carrying arms, they were not interfered with. The railwaymen's position was stated, quite clearly, hundreds of times, and loyally adhered to. It was that they were not to facilitate the transport of munitions of war for the slaughter of their fellow-countrymen. This subject is dealt with in the Report of August, 1920, pp. 41, 51, 114, 121, and in the Report, Dublin, August, 1921, on pp. 6, 10, 15, 86, 49, 67, 140.

N.B. A sum of about £120,000 was collected and distributed in the six months.

Anti-Conscription - Mansion House Conference.

In the spring of 1918, the British Government decided to extend the Military Service Act to Ireland. This meant the application to Ireland of the system of conscription for military service. Organised labour in Ireland, represented by the Labour Party and Trades Union Congress, had vehemently opposed conscription, both before the outbreak of the European War and

afterwards. To some extent, this meant opposition to the idea of conscription, but mainly it was an organisation against conscription in Ireland, imposed by the British Government.

As early as the first week in October, 1917, the Executive of the Labour Party and Trades Union Congress had adopted the following resolution, which was sent to a governmental authority in Ireland and the British Labour Party:-

"That, in view of the renewed demand in the English Press, which we suspect is promoted or incited by leading members of the War Cabinet, the National Executive of the Irish Trades Union Congress and Labour Party calls upon all trade unionists to prepare to resist, by every means, the imposition of compulsory military service on the Irish people, and that copies of this resolution be communicated to the Trades Unions and Trades Councils of Ireland."

Following this resolution, a deputation was sent to London to put the views before the British Labour Party leaders. When it became manifest, a few months later, that the Government was determined to enforce conscription in Ireland, the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Alderman Lawrence O'Neill, called a conference, to which he asked the Labour Party Executive to send representatives. This conference became known as the Mansion House Conference. It consisted of Messrs. John Dillon and Joseph Devlin, representing

the Irish Parliamentary Party; Eamon de Valera and Arthur Griffith, representing Sinn Féin; Mr. William O'Brien (Mallow), representing All For Ireland League; Mr. T.M. Healy, then an Independent; and Messrs. William O'Brien (Dublin), Michael Egan (Cork), Thomas Johnson (Belfast), representing Labour.

The Military Service Bill passed its third reading in the House of Commons on Tuesday, April 16, 1918. This Bill enabled the Government to apply, by order in Council, the Military Service Act to Ireland.

A meeting of the Irish Parliamentary Party was held in Dublin at mid-day on Saturday, April 20. The following resolution was unanimously adopted:-

"That, in the present crisis, we are of opinion that the highest and most immediate duty of the members of this Party is to remain in Ireland and actively co-operate with their constituents in opposing the enforcement of compulsory military service in Ireland.

That the enforcement of compulsory military service on a nation, without its assent, constitutes one of the most brutal acts of tyranny and oppression that any Government can be guilty of; that the present proposal of Mr. Lloyd George's Government to enforce conscription in Ireland is an outrage and a gross violation of the national right of Ireland; that the history of the relations between the two

"countries                    decay the population from which Ireland has suffered under the domination of English Government, and the manner in which Ireland's generous offer at the outbreak of this war was treated by the British Government and the British War Office cruelly intensifies the shameless character of the present proposal, and that we pledge ourselves to use all the influence and power of the Irish Parliamentary representation to defeat any attempt to enforce conscription in this country, and to carry out the decisions of the national conference."

The first meeting of the Mansion House Conference met on Thursday, 18 April, two days after the Bill had been passed in the House of Commons. Co-incident with the summoning of this conference, a labour convention was called from all over Ireland, to be held on Saturday, April 20. It was held in the Round Room of the Mansion House, and was the largest and most representative assembly of labour delegates ever held in this country. A resolution was adopted, of which the following is the text:-

"That this Convention of the Irish Labour movement, representing all sections and provinces of Ireland, pledge ourselves and those whom we represent that we will not have conscription; that we shall resist it in every way that to us seems

"feasible; that we claim the right of liberty to decide as units for ourselves, and as a Nation for itself; that we place before our fellow-workers - both men and women - in the Labour movement all the world over our claim for independent status as a nation in the International movement, and the right of self-determination as a nation as to what action or actions our people should take on questions of political or economic issues. The women here represented pledge themselves further to support the Irish Labour Party in resisting conscription without resorting to violence, and to do their utmost to prevent women taking the places of men liable to conscription.

That, in view of the great claims on the resources of the National Executive of the Irish Trades Union Congress and Labour Party, we hereby call upon the bodies represented here to forward subscriptions for the purpose of enabling them to carry out their campaign against conscription, and pledge ourselves to make it a success.

That this Conference recommends to the delegates present that they ask their various unions to strike a levy of 3d. a week per member for the purpose of raising a fund to finance the Labour movement in this fight.

"That this Convention calls upon the workers of Ireland to abstain from work on Tuesday next, April 23rd -

- (1st) As a demonstration of fealty in the cause of Labour and Ireland;
- (2nd) As a sign of their resolve to resist the application of the Conscription Act; and
- (3rd) For the purpose of enabling every man and woman to sign the pledge of resistance against conscription.

Believing that our success in resisting the imposition of conscription will be a signal to the workers of all countries now at war to rise against their oppressors and bring the war to an end, we pledge ourselves in the name of the oppressed of every land in every age to use all means that may be deemed effective to defeat this present conspiracy to enslave our nation.

We call upon all lovers of liberty everywhere to give assistance in this impending struggle, on the grounds that the forcible conscription of an unwilling people is a violation of the fundamental principles of democracy; that to sanction it would be to place in the hands of governments a power

"which could be used with deadly effect against the progress of the Labour movement; and which would establish a precedent full of danger for the whole cause of democracy."

As will be seen, the resolution decided to call upon workers throughout Ireland to abstain from work on the following Tuesday, April 23rd, i.e., three days afterwards.

As will appear from another section of my statement, the general strike against conscription was an outstanding demonstration of labour solidarity in this country.

At its first meeting, the Mansion House Conference (the Lord Mayor presiding) decided, after prolonged discussion, to send a deputation, consisting of Messrs. Dillon, de Valera, Healy, O'Brien (Labour) and the Lord Mayor, to Maynooth, to wait on the Irish hierarchy, who were meeting there. The Conference decided to await the return of the delegates, and to re-assemble at seven o'clock.

On resuming at seven o'clock, the deputation reported the result of the Conference with the bishops. They reported that the bishops had come to the following conclusion:-

"That the clergy were to celebrate a public Mass of Intercession on the following Sunday; that an announcement should be made at every public Mass of a public meeting to be held the same day,

"for the purpose of administering a pledge against compulsory conscription in Ireland. The pledge was in the following terms:-

'Denying the right of the British Government to enforce compulsory service in this country, we pledge ourselves solemnly to one another to resist conscription by the most effective means at our disposal.'

The clergy were also requested by the bishops to announce on Sunday next that a collection will be held at an early suitable date outside the church gates, for the purpose of supplying means to resist the imposition of compulsory military service."

The report of the delegation was received with great satisfaction. The Conference then adopted the following declaration:-

"Taking our stand on Ireland's separate and distinct nationhood, and affirming the principle of liberty, that the governments of nations derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, we deny the right of the British Government or any external authority to impose compulsory military service on Ireland against the clearly expressed will of the Irish people.

"The passing of the Conscription Bill by the British House of Commons must be regarded as a declaration of war on the Irish nation. The alternative to accepting it, as such, is to surrender our liberties and to acknowledge ourselves slaves. It is in direct violation of the rights of small nationalities to self-determination, which, even the Prime Minister of England - now prepared to employ naked militarism to enforce his Act upon Ireland - himself officially announced as an essential condition for peace at the Peace Conference.

The attempt to enforce it will be unwarrantable aggression, which we call upon all Irishmen to resist by the most effective means at their disposal."

The declaration was signed by all the members of the Conference. The Conference proceeded to discuss the methods to be employed to give effect to the policy of the declaration.

It will help to explain many things in connection with the Conference and its proceedings if I were to state, at this stage, that, at this first meeting, a decision was reached that the Conference should confine itself strictly to the issue of conscription and how to resist its application to Ireland, that there should be no voting in the Conference, and that all decisions should be unanimous; if general agreement was not reached, no action was taken.

In addition to the decisions of the hierarchy mentioned, they met and published a pronouncement containing the following passage:-

(Miss Macardle's book, "The Irish Republic", p. 262.)

"We consider that conscription forced in this way upon Ireland is 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."

The action of the bishops was followed by a tremendous outburst of denunciation in the British and American press.

The day following the general strike, Tuesday, 23rd April, a statement was prepared by the Labour delegates at a conference, and circulated throughout Britain, explaining the position and suggesting a form of resolution to be adopted by Trade Union branches and other Labour organisations in Britain, which, it was suggested should be sent to the Prime Minister and other Ministers and the Labour Party. This document was published with the authority of the Conference. I was deputed to go to London, to meet and discuss the matter with representative Labour men and publishers. (I am not certain whether I was accompanied **on** this occasion by anybody else, but I think not.) The result was, however, that the Parliamentary Committee of the British Trades Union Congress and the Executive of the British Labour Party issued jointly the following appeal to the Government:-

"The proposal to empower the Government to enforce conscription upon Ireland was passed by Parliament only fourteen days ago, and already the country is faced with the most menacing situation since the outbreak of war. In view of the relationship between British and Irish Trade Unionists, the Labour movement is deeply concerned with all the possible consequences of such a position.

When the Military Service Bill was before the country, organised Labour declared its opposition to the proposal to enforce conscription upon the Irish people without their consent. We were not influenced in our decision by hostility to enforced military service or indifference to the nation's requirements to successfully prosecute the war. But we were of those who realised what the attempt to impose conscription at such a critical moment would mean. We had information which enabled us to gauge the strength of Irish feelings and to form an estimate as to the fierce resentment which would be excited. That we were correct in our forecasting of the position is only too obvious, for though men have doubted whether, after all, Ireland is a nation, no one who knows the state of the country to-day can still doubt, for the passing of the Conscription Act has done more to cement the national unity

"than any other act could have done.

It must be clearly evident to the Government that the attempt to enforce conscription will mean not merely the shedding of the blood of thousands of Irishmen, and Englishmen and Scotsmen too; but also the maintenance of a huge permanent army of occupation in Ireland. To-day, every soldier is needed at the western front; yet the Government is proposing to take a course which will involve the withdrawal of many thousands of soldiers to engage in a civil war which will outrage the conscience of the civilised world. Nay, more, Irishmen are scattered wide over the world - in America, in the Dominions, in Great Britain itself, and there are large numbers in our armies on the Western Front. The tragedy cannot be merely local, or confined to Ireland; it may easily be the beginning of a world tragedy in which our last hopes of a fairer future will be extinguished. It is to be remembered that the active co-operation of Ireland is now vital to the maintenance of the full supplies alike of the armies in France and of the British people. During 1917, the part played by Ireland in providing food for Great Britain was only a little inferior to that of the United States, and, during the present year, a greatly increased production may be confidently

"counted on. The consequence of exasperating the Irish people at such a moment might well be ruinous to the realisation of this programme and might so reduce the food supplies of Great Britain as to convert what is already a serious situation into a critical or calamitous one.

With all these facts and terrible anticipation in mind, we confidently appeal to the Government at once to take the necessary steps to avert the appalling disaster which now threatens our country and our national good name. We appeal to them on grounds of principle and of expediency alike not to violate the national conscience, and not to jeopardise the whole future of this country and its allies, and their success in the war, by imposing conscription upon a nation without its own consent, and in face of this certainty of the most determined and united opposition. At the least, we appeal to them to give an open and unmistakable public promise that no proclamation applying conscription to Ireland will be issued until an Irish Parliament expressing the real will of the Irish people has come fully into existence.

With the possibilities involved in a serious prolongation of the war, a restless, angered, estranged, lawless Ireland is serious to contemplate, and we appeal to the Government not only for the sake of Ireland, but for the

"sake of our own country, of our allies and of the future of the democracy of the whole civilised world."

(Perhaps I may say here that this document was prepared, in the main, I believe, by Messrs. T.J. Cole and R.H. Tawney.)

Some time about June of the same year, statements, official, or near-official, had been made by British Ministers, which indicated that the threat to enforce conscription had become less urgent. A letter from Professor McNeill, dated 6th June, indicates that local committees were looking for guidance from the Conference as to the action they should take, and submit a draft communication for publication. I do not remember the precise course of the discussion, and there is no record available, but I have drafts of statements made by other elements of the Conference, i.e., Mr. Healy, Mr. Dillon, Alderman O'Kelly and the Labour representatives which I am handing in with this statement.

Mr. Dillon's and Mr. O'Kelly's drafts are as they handed them in themselves; the others are typescript copies. It will be seen from Mr. Dillon's draft that he was insistent upon strict adherence to the decision of the first meeting, that the conference should not go outside its mandate, and should not countenance action by any local committees to spend local health funds for any other express purpose.

From some points of view, the most striking statement is to be found in Mr. Healy's draft, which

suggested that the control of Irish territory during the war should be handed over to American forces, and that the Conference is prepared "to guarantee the best order and good government of Ireland during the war, and promote the safe and speedy departure therefrom of British troops". In effect, this meant that the Mansion House Conference would become a Provisional Government, leaving the executive power in the hands of the American forces. It is hardly necessary to say that these various statements could not be reconciled, and, as far as I remember, no other statement was agreed to.

In October, 1918, it became evident that the war was nearing a end, and proposals were being made for a Peace Conference. I am handing in several documents, including a letter from Professor McNeill, dated 18th October, suggesting that the Conference should issue a statement regarding self-determination for Ireland. (I should say here that I was acting as Secretary for the Conference at the time.)

After consultation with my colleague, Mr. O'Brien, the new draft was submitted to the Lord Mayor, with a suggestion that each member of the conference should send in his comments on the draft, or proposed alterations, these to be considered at a full meeting. This was done, and reports were received from Mr. William O'Brien (Mallow), Mr. Egan (Cork) and Mr. Healy, approving in general, with slight reservation in some cases, the purport of Professor McNeill's draft. Mr. Dillon, however, dissented emphatically. He intimated that it would be impossible for him to attend a meeting in

Dublin for a couple of weeks. His letter is dated 31st October.

On the 1st November, 1918, a Labour Conference was held to deal with several matters, including election policy, in view of the expected general election.

At this conference, a statement was presented by Mr. Cathal O'Shannon on behalf of the National Executive, dealing with the international situation. It declared, among other things, in favour of free and absolute self-determination for all people, including the Irish, claiming for Irish Labour the right to representation at international conferences, for the right of denunciation of imperialist aggression and the attempt to suppress the Russian revolution. There was, however, added to this general statement a special addendum, instructing the National Executive to approach the Lord Mayor of Dublin with a request that he should take such steps as he deems advisable to call together a special national conference, or to augment the present anti-conscription conference, for the purpose of giving national expression to the Irish demands for self-determination, in the same manner as the Mansion House conference defined Irish nationality on that issue. (p. 120 of the Report of the Special Congress, November 1st and 2nd, 1918.)

On the following Monday, the Labour delegation approached the Lord Mayor, and conveyed to him the decision of the Labour Congress. By this time, Mr. Dillon's letter had been received. At the Lord Mayor's request, I drafted a letter to Mr. Dillon, to be sent

by him, urging upon him the necessity of the desirability of complying with these request. A pencilled draft of the Lord Mayor's letter is handed in.

A meeting of the Conference was held, possibly, on the 9th or 10th. Alderman Kelly submitted the notice of motion, in the following terms:-

"This Conference has decided to accept the responsibility of having Ireland's claim for self-determination brought before the various Governments of the world, and requests from the Irish people their full confidence and support in this grave and far-reaching decision."

Messrs. Dillon and Devlin were absent from the meeting. A draft, prepared by Mr. Healy, is attached, which states -

"The Conference met to-day at the invitation of the Lord Mayor, to consider proposals of efficiency and special importance. There were laid before it the resolutions of the Irish Labour Congress and the draft declaration on the subject of self-determination, prepared by Professor McNeill and Mr. Johnson, at the request of the last meeting."

In view, however, of the letter received from Mr. Dillon and his absence, as well as the absence of Mr. Devlin through illness, the Conference felt bound

(having regard to the rule governing its proceeding in perfect unanimity) to adjourn its business to an early date, to consider the following notice of motion, handed in by Alderman Kelly. I have no record or information regarding any subsequent meeting. I have, however, a typewritten draft, which I am handing in, prepared by me of a statement which, it was suggested, should be issued. Whether this was considered or not, I cannot say, but obviously it would not receive the unanimous support of the Conference.

It is necessary that I should explain that no formal minutes of the proceedings of the Conference were kept; actual decisions were noted, of course; in what form, I cannot remember. Most of the documents were kept in the Mansion House, and the Lord Mayor informed me, a year or two afterwards. I think it was his intention to set down all he knew in writing. I understand the papers were kept in the cellars of the Mansion House for some years, but what became of them, I do not know. Some explanation is due as to how I came to possess the various papers which I have quoted from, and others which I am handing in. I cannot say for certain why I should have some of these papers, and not others. The best explanation I can suggest is that I did a great deal of work at home, and that these papers came to be retained in my house instead of being placed among other records.

I may state, however, that there was a great deal of informality so far as documents and records were concerned. Mr. Dillon also assured me, quite seriously, that politics was a game of bluff. This was apropos of the divisions in British Government circles as to

whether the Conscription Act should be enforced in Ireland or not, but it has some application to the proceedings of the Mansion House Conference.

While the public were led to think of the Conference as a happy band of brothers, it could hardly be said to be, in fact, true. While the Conference undoubtedly reported that imposition of public opinion upon the issue of conscription, the application of its insistence would have depended upon the various organisations throughout the country. The driving forces of local activities were, in fact, the Volunteers and the acting Labour organisation.

Amongst the papers I am handing in are a number memoranda, some of which were prepared by myself and Mr. O'Brien; others were sent in, or prepared by other parties, that I cannot relate to any particular document. These memoranda deal with the local organisation, the action to be taken by local committees in certain eventualities, the conservation of food supplies and such matters.

I have no record of the number of people who signed the anti-conscription pledge, and I don't think the Conference ever attempted to tabulate the numbers.

I am handing in some papers regarding the women's organisation, also, a number of documents, including a Protestant protest against conscription, the signatories of which were some very prominent citizens. Also, an appeal, sponsored by Mr. Lorcan Sherlock, signed by a large number of prominent Dublin citizens, a member of which, Professor William McGuinness, was the prime

mover. Several of these documents combined the cause of anti-conscription with the demand for Irish self-determination.

Amongst the papers handed in are a number of printed documents, which were issued by the Conference itself, or paid for, either wholly or partially, out of the funds of the Conference. These are:-

1. Leaflet, headed, "Conscription For Ireland - A Warning To England".  
Letter from "AE" (George Russell) to the 'Manchester Guardian', March 11, 1918, and circulated in Great Britain.
2. Extracts from Official Reports of National Conference - No. 1, No. 2.
3. Memorandum to Local Defence Committees, regarding action to be followed, in case conscription were enforced.
4. 'Handbook For Rebels', compiled by Thomas Johnson, which contains extracts from speeches of Mr. E. Carson, Mr. S.H. Campbell, Mr. A. Bonar Law, Mr. F.E. Smith and others, in furtherance of their insistence against Home Rule.
5. Memorandum on English Conscientious Objectors' Movement.
6. "The Ground-work Of Conscription" - pamphlet prepared by G. Gavan Duffy, B.L.

7. Lord Mayor's Address to the President of the U.S.A.
8. Pamphlet and foolscap version of some document. (I think it was a leaflet dealing with food supplies, printed by the Conference, but I do not seem to have a copy.)

I cannot recollect any other documents, printed on behalf of the Conference.

I am handing in copies of the 'Saturday Herald' for April, 1920; 'Freeman's Journal', dated Tuesday and Wednesday, April 23rd and 24th (combined dates), dealing with the General Strike; the 'Irish Times' of the same date; and the 'London Daily Mail' of Wednesday, April 24th.

I am also handing in a copy of the Report of the Twenty-fourth Annual Meeting of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, held in October, 1918.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
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