

THE DE-POLITICISATION OF BIG JIM LARKIN

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THE DUBLIN TRADES Council campaign, against the new trade union legislation and the Emergency Powers Wages (Standstill) Orders was handled by the Council of Action, its members drawn mostly from the Trades Council Executive.

It had the appearance of having elevated Larkin to leadership beyond the ambit of his own organisation, the Workers' Union of Ireland.

But it was a local leadership, the rank-and-file being of unions or branches of unions, affiliated to the Dublin Trades Council. Larkin's union, whilst affiliated to the Dublin Trades Council, was still denied affiliation to the Irish Trades Union Congress.

Though a restricted or merely Dublin leadership, it was welcome at the time to Larkin. The Council of Action was able to organise big meetings and demonstrations, and with Larkin the main speaker we saw rekindled some of the oratorical fire that lit mass meetings in 1913.

But to old Larkin-watchers like myself it seemed a somewhat hesitant Larkin that strode our platforms in the early forties, to vent his thunder against the de Valera government.

DEPOLITICISED

Some of us did not notice it so much at the time, but the more observant would have noticed the earlier Larkin was now in process of being de-politicised.

Depoliticisation is an awkward, some would say ugly, word. Certainly the condition is ugly. It means the deprivation, if not of political convictions, at least of the desire or inclination to give public expression to one's political convictions.

Aristotle defined man as a political animal. In human society men and women cannot escape being political. The man or woman who claims to have no politics or interest in politics has bad politics.

Larkin in earlier days was highly political and he did not hesitate to let the world know it. For him the simple fact of trade union membership was a political assertion, a challenge to a political system that exploited and deprived human beings.

Following Larkin's differences with some of the leaders of the IT&GWU in 1923 and the secession from the union of a Dublin

group of members to form the Workers' Union of Ireland, Larkin now become general secretary of the WUI, made a bold political gesture, but one surely in keeping with his sincerely-held political views.

In 1924 he went to the Soviet Union, where he was acclaimed as a great working-class leader of international rank. On his return to Dublin he addressed a public meeting in the Mansion House. At the time much was being made by his IT&GWU critics of his being honoured and feted by the Bolsheviks in Moscow.

At the Mansion House meeting Larkin made no apologies about this, but declared his appreciation of having been made a member of the Comintern, and an honorary member of the Moscow Soviet and the Red Army.

In 1927 Larkin's political integrity was again manifested publicly when he stood, successfully, for the Dáil, as candidate of the Irish Workers' League.

For such public avowal of his politics Larkin met bitter and sustained attacks from the traditional anti-socialist sources here as well as from his IT&GWU detractors. (For material on the latter see *O'Brien Papers*, National Library). In 1928 Larkin again visited Moscow, where he attended meetings of the Comintern, which again provoked hostile comment here.

But later these events were to be seen as the high noon of Larkin's public declarations of political faith. It would make a worthwhile study in Irish Labour history to trace from around this period to later times the course of developments affecting Irish Labour and the failure of the leadership to point some of the factors concerned.

Much has been written about the harm done the Labour movement here by the break-away from the IT&GWU and the ensuing faction fighting, made the more bitter by the vicious enmity between William O'Brien, chief spokesman for IT&GWU, and Larkin, leader of the WUI.

But, to my mind, the worst in-

jury done the movement was its political enfeeblement by the apparent political emasculation of the two antagonists, with each making public postures of mild or no politics, in order to discredit the other.

The early 'thirties saw fascism, in the decade before a power only in Italy, extend its sway to Portugal and Germany.

With the coming to power of Salazar in Portugal, in 1932, and Hitler in Germany, in 1933, the corporate state was now established in three countries in Europe. The menace for world Labour in that was that in each of the three countries the corporate state had been established following the suppression of the trade unions and the imprisonment or liquidation of union activists.

The corporate state had taken its name from the fascist corporations which replaced the unions. In the trade corporations the workers were forced to share membership with their employers, with the latter and the fascist party officials dominating the corporation.

The advent of the corporate state, particularly in the case of the Salazar model in 1932, gave much fillip to enthusiasm for corporatism here. Salazar was a devout Catholic and his corporatism was likely to be most in accord with the main sources of the doctrine, the papal encyclicals.

The clamour for the corporate state here went on through the 'thirties and into early 'forties. Then came the Battle of Stalingrad in 1943, with the ensuing defeat of the fascist military forces and the discrediting of corporatism.

But for a decade or so before that, we in the Labour movement here at the time had to listen to corporatism being extolled, whilst many of the Labour leaders, including Larkin, remained silent regarding an important aspect of a doctrine once propagated here and constituting a threat to our Labour movement.

How those leaders failed the movement in this regard will be the subject of future articles.