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Cleeve's Soviets: 'Socialism From Below' in Revolutionary Ireland, 1920-1922

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Francis Devine & Fearghal Mac Bhloscaidh (eds), *Bread not Profits: Provincial working class politics during the Irish Revolution*, Dublin: Umiskin, 2022, pp. 144-160.

The Irish revolutionary period, which some historians trace back to the 1912-14 Home Rule crisis and others to the 1916 Easter Rebellion,¹ has recently been characterised as a melting pot of 'motivations, expectations and opportunities',² in which class struggle loomed as large as the other ingredients. Not least because, although the revolutionary nationalists of Sinn Féin and the IRA had set themselves the exclusive goal of achieving political independence for Ireland – around which they intended to unite the different social classes in accordance with their traditional cross-class conception of national liberation – a considerable amount of social unrest, both industrial and agrarian, swept through the country, especially from 1917 onwards.³ The strong growth in the world demand for food and raw materials, generated by the war effort, had brought a certain domestic prosperity which hardly benefited industrial and agricultural workers, unlike many industrial leaders, traders and large farmers. The post-war economic boom was therefore an opportunity for the different wage earners to radically claim their fair share. And they did so through an unprecedented wave of strikes⁴ that coincided with a resurgence of trade union activism.⁵

1 See, for example, Gabriel Doherty (ed.), *The Home Rule Crisis 1912-14*, (Mercier Press, Cork, 2014); Joost Augusteijn (ed.), *The Irish Revolution, 1913-1923*, (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2002); Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation and not a Rabble: The Irish Revolution 1913-1923*, (Profile Books, London, 2015); Peter Hart, *The IRA at War 1916-1923*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003); Francis Costello, *The Irish Revolution and its Aftermath 1916-1923: Years of Revolt*, (Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 2003); Marie Coleman, *The Irish Revolution, 1916-1923*, (Routledge, London, 2014).

2 Diarmaid Ferriter, *ibid*, p. 231.

3 Olivier Coquelin, 'Class Struggle in the 1916-23 Irish Revolution: A Reappraisal', *Études irlandaises*, 42/2, November 2017, pp. 23-36.

4 A total of 894 industrial strikes were thus recorded in the years 1917-1921, most of them being successful. PROL, Strikes and lockouts, 1914-21, Lab 34/14-20, Lab 34/32-39; 1921-23, Lab 34/39-41. Quoted in Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland, 1917-1923*, (Cork University Press, Cork, 1988), p. 25.

5 The Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) had considerably increased the number of its affiliates since the 1914 annual meeting, rising from below 110,000 to 230,000 in 1920. This dramatic growth in union membership was mainly the result of diverse campaigns by the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), which boasted 120,000 members by 1920 – up from 30,000 before the 1913 Dublin Lockout –, about 40 % of whom were employed in agriculture. Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Sixth Annual Meeting*, Cork, 1920, p. 145-154, [26th-annual-report-1920.pdf \(nationalarchives.ie\)](#) [retrieved 20 November 2021]; Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Meeting*, Dublin, 1921, p. 75, [27th-annual-report-1921.pdf \(nationalarchives.ie\)](#) [retrieved 20 November 2021]. For the proportion of ITGWU members in agriculture in 1920 and ITGWU membership in 1913, see Desmond Greaves, *The Irish Transport and General Workers' Union: The Formative Years, 1909-1923*, (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1982), p. 91, p. 259; Francis Devine, *Organising History: A Centenary of SIPTU, 1909-2009*, (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 2009), p. 68. It should be noted here that, except for Congress membership for 1914, which is only mentioned in the 1921 annual report, these figures do not take into account such affiliated organisations as the trades' councils, but only comprise the members of each affiliated trade union.

In fact, all these social disputes took place in a context of widespread unrest across Europe, where general strikes, mass demonstrations, factory and farm occupations, etc. were the order of the day. The enormous sacrifices made by the working and wage classes during the four years of war had raised hopes of better living conditions (higher wages, eight-hour workday, land reform, etc.), and even of a new society forever purified of the dregs of the old world. In the wake of the Russian Revolution, some movements thus took a more subversive direction, notably through the establishment of council republics – or soviet republics – in Bavaria (April-May 1919), Hungary (April-August 1919) and in south-eastern Slovakia (June-July 1919); of agricultural communes of libertarian communist inspiration in certain regions of Ukraine (1918-21); of factory councils in northern Italy during the ‘Biennio Rosso’ (‘the two red years’) of 1919-20 ...⁶ This phenomenon did not exempt Ireland, where a hundred or so ‘soviet’ type organisations sprang up from November 1918.

The organisation of a number of Irish workers into soviets emerged not only in the industrial field, but also in the agricultural sector and various services (hospital, transport and port), together with certain urban areas where the workers organised into soviets pursued not socio-economic but socio-political aims – as in Limerick in April 1919 and in many Irish towns, outside Ulster, for two days in April 1920.⁷ In the specific context of socio-economic struggles, this occurred when work stoppages, negotiations or other methods specific to the agricultural world proved insufficient to achieve full satisfaction of the demands. This mode of action, based on the continuation or revival of the management or production of a given organisational structure, under the exclusive leadership of workers in struggle against a previously discarded official hierarchy, was thus consistent with an approach specific to those councils which appeared mostly throughout the 20th century in revolutionary situations as representative bodies of socially oppressed or exploited categories, and which gradually established themselves as organisational tools of the struggle and as organs of the political and economic reorganisation of society.⁸ However, it was in the south-west of Ireland that the winds of the soviet revolt blew particularly hard on a dairy and bakery industry controlled by the Cleeve company, from 1920 to 1922. So hard that it even somewhat disrupted the socio-economic order of much of Munster for a few months in 1922.

6 See, for example, Chris Wrigley (ed.), *The Challenges of Labour: Central and Western Europe, 1917-1920*, (Routledge, London, 1993); Alexandre Skirda, *Nestor Makhno, Anarchy's Cossack: The Struggle for Free Soviets in the Ukraine, 1917-21*, (AK Press, London, 2004).

7 On the different categories of Irish soviets, See Brian Kenny, *When Ireland Went Red: The Soviet Experiment, 1918-1923* (Dublin, 2017); Olivier Coquelin, ‘Soviets irlandais: expériences autogestionnaires dans l’Irlande révolutionnaire (1918-23)’ in Patrick Silberstein et al. (eds), *Autogestion: L’Encyclopédie internationale (tome 7)*, (Syllepse, Paris, 2019), pp. 173-191.

8 Yohan Dubigeon, ‘Conseils ouvriers (Soviet)’, in Jean-Numa Ducange, Razmig Keucheyan, Stéphanie Roza (eds), *Histoire globale des socialismes, XIXe-XXIe siècles*, (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2021), p. 144.

If these council experiments are acknowledged to be part of the socialist project of workers' self-emancipation, then the question arises as to the extent to which Ireland experienced genuine socialist organisation over a significant part of its territory during the revolutionary period. Furthermore, given that the Labour and major trade union leaderships did not support the Cleeve soviets of 1922, did these not therefore more accurately fall under the heading of what is known as 'socialism from below' – as opposed to 'socialism from above'?⁹ To address these questions, this chapter sets out to recount the history of the Cleeve soviets, paying particular attention to the motivations and aims of their protagonists.¹⁰ Before doing so, however, it will be necessary to define what is meant by 'socialism from below' and its dialectical relationship with 'socialism from above'.

Socialism From Above – Socialism From Below

The concept of 'socialism from above' was originally devised by the American socialist activist Hal Draper in his essay *The Souls of Socialism*, which first appeared in 1960.¹¹ He argues that the real division in the socialist movement rests not between reformists and revolutionaries, democrats and authoritarians, peaceful and violent, etc. (divisions of which he was otherwise aware), but between proponents of 'socialism from below' and those of 'socialism from above'. The latter is based on the idea that socialism can only be built from above downwards, i.e. under the leadership of an enlightened elite, elected or self-proclaimed representatives of the working masses. In contrast, 'socialism from above' is intended to be the vehicle for the self-emancipation of the masses, whereby they assume responsibility for their own destiny without the guidance of any avant-garde elite. This conception of socialism was obviously in direct line of descent from Marx's

9 Throughout the present chapter, the use of 'socialist' and 'socialism' will be consistent with the constitution and manifesto of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (ILP&TUC) endorsed at a Special Conference in November 1918, whose ultimate aims included: 'To win for the workers of Ireland, collectively, the ownership and control of the whole produce of their labour; To secure the democratic management and control of all industries and services by the whole body of workers, manual and mental, therein, in the interest of the Nation and subject to the supreme authority of the National Government'. Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Special Congress*, Dublin, November 1918, pp. 122-123, pp. 165-169,

<http://centenaries-ituc.nationalarchives.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/24th-annual-report-1918.pdf> [retrieved 20 November 2021]

10 The soviets that arose in the Munster dairy and bakery industry have already been discussed in two essays, but from a different perspective. See D. R. O'Connor Lysaght, 'The Munster Soviet Creameries', *Irish History Workshop*, 1, 1981, pp. 36-49; Davie Lee, 'The Munster Soviets and the Fall of the House of Cleeve' in David Lee & Debbie Jacobs (eds), *Made in Limerick (vol. 1): History of Industries, trade and commerce*, (Limerick Civic Trust, Limerick, 2003), pp. 287-306.

11 Hal Draper, 'The Two Souls of Socialism' in E. Haberkern (ed.), *Socialism from Below*, (Center for Socialist Study, Alameda CA, 2001), pp. 2-33. See also Hal Draper, *The Two Souls of Socialisms* (1966), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1966/twosouls/index.htm> [retrieved 20 November 2021]

famous principle that ‘the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves’.¹²

However, while Harper’s theoretical approach – which was later taken up and popularised by David McNally – can be given credit, some of its assumptions are not without problems. Firstly, Harper and McNally include among the proponents of ‘socialism from above’ not only authoritarian socialists of Stalinist and Maoist inspiration, reformist socialists, utopian socialists and conspiratorial socialists, but also anarchists – though in essence anti-authoritarian and anti-statist –, whom they seem to narrow down to Proudhon and Bakunin. Moreover, they make Marx and Lenin the main, if not essential, theoretical sources of ‘socialism from below’.¹³ The reference to Lenin is justified, not least because of his battle cry ‘All power to the Soviets’, his desire to destroy the capitalist state apparatus and his denunciation of the growing bureaucratic threat.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, such assertions provoked severe criticism in some militant and academic circles, starting with the anarchists themselves who, in *An Anarchist FAQ*, contends inter alia:

‘In terms of the immediate aftermath of a revolution, anarchists and Leninists do not seek the same thing: the former want a free society organised and run from below-upwards by the working class based on workers self-management, while the latter seek party power in a new state structure which would preside over an essentially state capitalist economy ... [T]he idea of ‘socialism from below’ is a distinctly anarchist notion, one found in the work of Proudhon and Bakunin and repeated by anarchists even since ... For anarchists ‘socialism from below’ can only be another name like libertarian socialism, for anarchism (as Lenin, ironically enough, acknowledged).’¹⁵

For his part, political scientist Tom Keefer points out:

‘While Draper and McNally correctly attack the individualist and petty bourgeois tendencies present within anarchism, they forget that, as with socialism, there are “two souls of anarchism” ... [T]here is also a working class, liberatory anarchism which on numerous

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 2

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 3-31. David McNally, *Socialism from Below*, (International Socialist Organization, Chicago, 1984 [1980]), 2. Birth of the Socialist Idea; 3. The Myth of Anarchist ‘Libertarianism’; 4. Marxism: Socialism from Below; 5. From Marx to Lenin, [SOCIALISM FROM BELOW \(sa.org.au\)](http://www.anarchistfaq.org/afaq/pdf/sectionH.pdf) [retrieved 18 November 2021]

¹⁴ Hal Draper, *ibid.*, p. 24; David McNally, *ibid.*, 5. From Marx to Lenin, [5:FROM MARX TO LENIN \(sa.org.au\)](http://www.anarchistfaq.org/afaq/pdf/sectionH.pdf) [retrieved 18 November 2021].

¹⁵ ‘Section H – Why do anarchists oppose state socialism?’, *An Anarchist FAQ*, p. 143, p. 149, p. 158, <http://www.anarchistfaq.org/afaq/pdf/sectionH.pdf> [retrieved 20 November 2021]. See also ‘Reply to errors and distortions in David McNally’s pamphlet ‘Socialism from Below’’, *An Anarchist FAQ*, <http://www.anarchistfaq.org/afaq/pdf/append31.pdf> [retrieved 20 November 2021].

occasions in history has taken part in great mobilizations against capital, state, and authoritarian socialist dictatorships.’¹⁶

And Keefer adds further down:

‘McNally left out the revolutionary critiques of Leninism made by Rosa Luxemburg, the “ultra-left” communists, Alexandra Kollontai and the Workers’ Opposition, and the Russian anarchist-communists, not to mention such momentous events as the Kronstadt revolt and the Makhnovist peasant uprising in Ukraine – all of which made coherent criticisms of Leninism and the Bolshevik tradition from the perspective of the self-organization of the masses from below.’¹⁷

However, for Keefer, the question is not so much to oppose ‘socialism from above’ to ‘socialism from below’ as to see how they can combine and become complementary. Does this mean, therefore, that genuine socialist politics would originate both from below and from above? Without this combination, would socialism be incomplete and doomed to failure? Keefer implicitly answers these questions in the affirmative, underscoring the limitations of socialism ‘from below’ and ‘from above’.¹⁸ From this premise, it seems clear that the Cleeve soviets represented a form of ‘socialism from below’, based on workers’ councils, which found itself at odds with the obvious top-down socialist designs of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (ILP&TUC) leadership. We will now see up to what point these soviets fell within the process of struggle specific to workers’ councils as synthesised by the Dutch Marxist theorist Anton Pannekoek in his 1946 essay, *Workers’ Council*, which is undoubtedly one of the most significant theoretical contributions to what became known as council communism – itself falling within the ambit of ‘socialism from below’.¹⁹

Cleeve’s & The Knocklong Soviet

Cleeve is the name of a wealthy Protestant family who, at the time of the Irish Revolution, were at the head of a network of over one hundred creameries, separation stations, flour mills and condensed milk and bread factories located in the counties of Limerick, Tipperary and Cork. This

16 Tom Keefer, ‘Marxism, Anarchism, & the Genealogy of ‘Socialism From Below’’, *Upping the Anti*, 2, 2006, p. 65.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 68. Keefer also points out that in the 1997 second edition of his book, McNally would revise his position on anarchists and mention the work of other Marxist theorists, such as Antonio Gramsci and C. L. R. James, while maintaining his position on Leninism. *Ibid*, p. 71.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

19 In his book, Pannekoek thus draws on the practical experience of workers organised in councils throughout history, from which he derives a theory. Anton Pannekoek, *Workers’ Councils*, (AK Press, London, 2003 [1946]).

industrial and commercial empire employed around 3,000 people and was supplied by around 5,000 grain and dairy farmers. The company was founded in 1889 by Sir Thomas Henry Cleeve, born in Canada in 1844 to a father with an English background and a mother of Irish descent. Together with his brother, Frederick Charles, he arrived in Limerick in 1864 to work for J. P. Evans & Co, a general merchant firm owned by their maternal uncle, Ben Journeaux. On the death of the latter, Thomas took over the business and gradually expanded it. He became interested in milk and condensed milk production in Ireland and sought to convince the farmers of Munster – most of whom produced their milk on individual farms – that they would benefit from having their milk delivered to centralised production plants. With this in mind, he embarked on the production of butter and condensed milk and in 1889 formed the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland. Eleven years later, the company's expansion into Munster culminated in a network of creameries and nineteen factories, the main manufacturing centre being established at Lansdowne, Limerick City. With four of his brothers, he then took this success a step further by setting up a dairy distribution business, Cleeve Brothers. Politically Cleeve was a staunch Unionist and it was under this banner that he was elected as a Limerick City Councillor (1899-1902) one year after the passing of the Local Government Act. When he died in 1908, his brother Frederik took over as managing director. During the First World War, the Condensed Milk Company became a major supplier to the British forces, which is said to have earned the company nearly £1 million. This prompted the workers to demand a fairer distribution of profits after the conflict. From 1918 onwards, Cleeves, like many other companies across the country, was thus the scene of industrial disputes over wages and working conditions – mainly involving the ITGWU – some of which developed into self-managed 'soviet' experiments, starting with the Knocklong creamery.²⁰

For some years, Knocklong Central Creamery had experienced considerable tension between the workers (members of the ITGWU) and manager David Riordan (also known as the 'Tyrant'). With the situation remaining unchanged over time, the workers decided to go on strike in May 1919. Seven weeks of strike action saw the factory closed, picketing, many farmers' milk spilled on the road and one of the strikers dismissed. Although an agreement was reached, it did not include the removal of manager Riordan. Then, in March 1920, the company refused to meet the demands for higher wages for all employees. Similar claims subsequently failed, so the 40 workers employed at the Knocklong Creamery and its twelve branches in Ballimona, Gormanstown, Kiltteely, Elton, Knockcarron, Hospital, Knockainey, Ballingaddy, Kilbreedy, Ballylanders, Lisuakilla and Bilbea

20 Shaun Boylan, 'Cleeve, Sir Thomas Henry', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 2010), [Cleeve, Sir Thomas Henry | Dictionary of Irish Biography \(dib.ie\)](https://www.dib.ie/biography/cleeve-sir-thomas-henry) [retrieved 22 November 2021]; David Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 296-298; *Dublin, Cork, and South of Ireland: A Literary, Commercial, and Social Review, Past and Present*, (Stratten and Stratten, London, 1892), pp. 280-281.

walked out on 15 May. The next day, the strikers took over their workplace and installed a new management. Jack Hedley (better known as John O'Hagan)²¹ was appointed manager of the Knocklong plant and John O'Dwyer, secretary of the local ITGWU branch, assistant manager.

Production was thus resumed under the control of the striking workers. Cleeve's brand was removed from the boxes and replaced with that of Kilmallock Soviet Creamery, also used for their correspondence. The red flag and the Irish Republican flag were raised over the building and a banner with the words 'We Make Butter, Not Profits' was displayed over the main entrance door. The factory received 97 % of the milk normally supplied, with all suppliers having been informed of the new creamery rules by notices prominently posted. Furthermore, the wages were paid as originally demanded by the workers. Orders and revenues were processed and managed in the usual way. Only the director of one of the auxiliary branches refused to assume his duties under the control of the soviet. All the conditions were therefore in place to achieve an output of almost two tonnes of butter per day.

The achievement of this self-managed organisation seemed to be so successful that it was said by some of the protagonists to have aroused a certain enthusiasm among the working population of the district: 'The bold move by which we established the Soviet appealed to the imagination of the workers, many of whom, including women, have since come into our ranks'.²² Ultimately, the Knocklong soviet workers got their way after negotiations which resulted in increased wages, the former manager's dismissal being put to the directors (with the threat of a renewed strike should Riordan remain in his position) and the reinstatement of a dismissed employee. On 21 May, the workers returned the factory and its twelve auxiliary branches to their owners, thereby marking the end of the first experiment of soviet-style self-management in Cleeves.²³

The soviet tactics as espoused by the Knocklong Creamery workers gained enthusiastic support at the time from the ITGWU through its official organ, the *Watchdog of Labour*, going so far as to draw parallels with the takeover of the Mazzonis' factory in Italy. The union newspaper also suggested that the Knocklong soviet would pave the way for many other, more lasting experiments

21 Jack Hedley was an English revolutionary activist who reached fame for his involvement in various social disputes in Ireland in the period 1919-1922. In January 1919, he thus found himself in Belfast during the Great Strike, where he and two of his comrades tried unsuccessfully to instil a more subversive orientation to the dispute. He also took part in the Easter week 1920 hunger strike in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, with 190 other prisoners, socialists and republicans. Once released, as a result of a two-day General Strike across much of the country, Hedley became for a time a permanent organiser of the ITGWU, a position by which he assumed leadership of the Knocklong soviet in May 1920. After several stints in prison for seditious activities in Ireland and Britain, he is said to have settled in Liverpool in 1923, where he became active in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). See Austen Morgan, *Labour and Partition: The Belfast Working Class 1905-23*, (Pluto Press, London, 1991), pp. 235-236; *Voice of Labour*, 19 November 1921.

22 Quoted in *Freeman's Journal*, 22 May 1920; *The Anglo-Celt*, 29 May 1920.

23 *Freeman's Journal*, 22 May 1920; *The Anglo-Celt*, 29 May 1920; *Watchword of Labour*, 13 April, 22 May, 29 May 1920; *The Irish Times*, 29 May 1920.

‘in direct control of industry by the workers engaged therein’.²⁴ It did not, on the other hand, specify whether the soviet movement was meant to be the instrument of the social revolution it supposedly called for. For its part, the ILP&TUC also praised the Knocklong workers’ mode of action at its 1921 annual meeting. However, the union and Labour leaders were careful not to use it as a tool for gaining socio-economic power, while recognising that it represented ‘a challenge ... to the rights of property’. The soviets were therefore not intended to go beyond the tactics of struggle, which were based on the workers themselves running and managing production, thus enabling them to demonstrate that their demands were valid and could be successfully put into practice.²⁵ This was essentially the *modus operandi* of the Irish soviets, at least until 1921: a means to put pressure on the employers so that they would yield to the striking workers’ demands.²⁶ In any case, it can be said that at this stage there was no real dissent between the rank-and-file and an admittedly ITGWU-dominated union leadership that endorsed the One Big Union principle. As Pannekoek points out, the organisations that claimed to adhere to this principle traditionally supported this type of illegal action, as did the International Workers of the World (IWW) in the USA. The Dutch theorist also observes, along with the German Marxist activist and theorist Paul Mattick, that unless there are socially revolutionary circumstances, the working class often fails to concern itself with the wider implications of the council system, although they may be involved in particular struggles through councils, as seemed to be the case with the protagonists of the Knocklong soviet in 1920, when the balance of power was still favourable to labour.²⁷

Bruree Soviet 1921

However, the labour peace in the Munster company was broken again several months later, when in February 1921 the ITGWU demanded the reinstatement of two employees of the Bruree mills, who had been dismissed in November 1920, as well as the payment of about £70, equivalent to the wages due for the 14 weeks they had been idle. In response to Messrs Cleeves’ persistent refusal to meet their demands, the workers decided to take control of the mills and bakery along the lines of the Knocklong Soviet, on 25 August 1921, at the instigation of two ITGWU officials, John Dowling and John McGrath (also involved in the Knocklong Soviet). Local ITGWU organiser

²⁴ *Watchword of Labour*, 29 May 1920.

²⁵ Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Official Report of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Meeting*, Dublin, August 1921, p. 13, pp. 91-94, p. 158, p. 163.

<http://centenaries-ituc.nationalarchives.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/27th-annual-report-1921.pdf> [retrieved 9 December 2021].

²⁶ This is how one of the protagonists of the Drogheda soviet, set up in September 1921, would define Irish ‘sovietism’. See Christie Burke, ‘The Soviets’ Interpretation’, *Drogheda Independent*, 1 October 1921.

²⁷ Anton Pannekoek, *op. cit.*, p. xxix, p. 65-66.

Patrick O'Donoghue was appointed manager and, as had happened in Knocklong, the Bruree workers hinted at subversive intentions in various ways. Starting with the red flag flying over the building and their famous slogan emblazoned on the front of the factory, 'Bruree Workers Soviet Mills. We make Bread not Profits', echoing that of the Knocklong soviet. But even more explicit was the text posted at the entrance to the factory, informing the population of the new operating conditions that were concerned about their well-being: 'Bruree Mills and Bakery are now the property of the workers. The mill and shop are open for the sale of bread, flour and meal. It is hoped to reduce prices and do away with profiteering within a day. By order of the workers'.²⁸ More than a simple occupation, the Bruree soviet thus amounted to temporary expropriation in its protagonists' view, during which they took over the management of the various stages of economic activity, from production to the setting of sales prices, in a socialistic mode.

This too proved to be a commercial success. Two main factors strongly contributed to this. Most grain farmers continued to supply the mills despite its transfer to workers' control, and the local community, especially the poorer sections, had access to such items as bread, flour, meal and coal at much lower prices than anywhere else. As a result, bread production and sales in general increased considerably, to the point where the bakery workers even considered to hire additional labour.²⁹ On his visit to Bruree, a special representative of the *Irish Independent* went so far as to point out that 'the local "Soviet", so recently set up, were found to be in control of the village, industrially and otherwise'.³⁰ Does this mean, therefore, that Bruree and the surrounding area underwent a micro-socialist experiment under the guidance of the local soviet? In many respects, one is entitled to think so.

However, the experiment was short-lived, lasting barely ten days. A conference held at Liberty Hall, Dublin, on 2 September, between representatives of the employees and employers, on the initiative of Mr. R. Cotter, Secretary in the Department of Labour, resulted in an agreement.³¹ The latter, according to the *Voice of Labour*, the official ITGWU organ, was skewed in that the Minister for Labour, Constance Markievicz, had reportedly threatened to send the IRA to force the workers off the premises.³² But while the workers handed the factory back to the Cleeve family, the strike went on until 21 October when a satisfactory agreement was reached through arbitration.³³

28 Quoted in *Irish Independent*, 31 August 1921; *Freeman's Journal*, 31 August 1921; *Irish Examiner*, 31 August 1921; *Connaught Telegraph*, 3 September 1921; *Nenagh News*, 3 September 1921; *Nenagh Guardian*, 3 September 1921; *Kerry People*, 3 September 1921.

29 *Limerick Leader*, 31 August 1921; *Irish Independent*, 31 August 1921; *Freeman's Journal*, 31 August 1921; *Irish Examiner*, 31 August 1921; *Connaught Telegraph*, 3 September 1921; *Nenagh News*, 3 September 1921; *Nenagh Guardian*, 3 September 1921; *Kerry People*, 3 September 1921; David Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 298-300.

30 *Irish Independent*, 3 September 1921; *Limerick Leader*, 5 September 1921.

31 *Irish Independent*, *Ibid.*; *Limerick Leader*, *Ibid.*

32 *Voice of Labour*, 10 November 1923.

33 *Irish Bulletin*, 22 November 1921; *Voice of Labour*, 29 October 1921.

Bruree thus seems to have gone a step further than Knocklong in terms of village-wide socialist organisation. Yet, in contrast to the glowing speeches about the Knocklong soviet at the August 1921 annual meeting, the ILP&TUC leadership and delegates at the special congress on election policy held in February 1922 and at the August 1922 annual meeting made no mention of the Bruree soviet.³⁴ Even the ITGWU seemed to be swept away by caution, with the *Voice of Labour* only devoting a paragraph to it in two issues.³⁵ What emerged here were most likely the first signs of a rift between the rank-and-file and the union and Labour leadership which would deepen when almost all Cleeve's factories and their auxiliary branches came under workers' self-management from May 1922 – as happened elsewhere and in other times when fighting workers were forced to self-organise within councils for want of support from the central labour bodies.³⁶

Self-Management in Cleeve's

It all began on 1 December 1921, when Cleeve's employees were informed that, along with a number of redundancies, a general reduction of 17 1/2 % would be made by the company and that this would be reduced in March 1922 to 33 1/3 %. The workers immediately expressed their opposition to these proposals.³⁷ It should be noted here that the post-war economic boom had gradually given way to a slump as of the end of 1920. Hence, social unrest in Ireland increasingly evolved into struggles against the wage cuts demanded by employers and farmers. The balance of power had shifted, with class struggle becoming more intense – especially from July 1921 when the War of independence ended.³⁸ It was against this background that the dispute at the Condensed Milk Co. of Ireland was sought to be settled by negotiation in one of the Joint Councils set up following a meeting of all the stakeholders involved in the Irish dairy industry (Cleeves, trade unions, cooperative milk companies, other Irish proprietary creameries, Dáil Eireann) held in Dublin in early January 1922. The members of the two Joint Councils, formed for both sides of the industry (the Proprietary and Co-operative sides), were given responsibility for devising solutions to save it from possible collapse. District committees were later established under these Joint Councils. It was

34 Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Eighth Annual Meeting*, Dublin, August 1922, [<http://centenaries-ituc.nationalarchives.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/28th-annual-report-1922.pdf>] [retrieved 9 December 2021]

35 The first paragraph, published on 29 October 1921, was pithily written, announcing the full exclusive story of the Bruree soviet in its columns at an early date, but which was never to appear. As for the second, it was featured in a long article against Constance Markievicz in the 10 November 1923 issue. It is also true that the ITGWU had had no official organ since the *Watchword of Labour* ceased publication following the British authorities' raids on Liberty Hall in November 1920, with the *Voice of Labour* – formerly known as *Irish Opinion* – only reappearing on 22 October 1921. *Voice of Labour*, 29 October 1921, 10 November 1923; Francis Devine, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

36 Anton Pannekoek, *op. cit.*, p. xxix, p. 61-62.

37 *Limerick Leader*, 15 May 1922; *Freeman's Journal*, 13 May 1922.

38 Emmet O'Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 96-135; Olivier Coquelin, 'Class Struggle', *op. cit.*, pp. 31-34.

therefore during the first meeting of the Munster District Committee, held at Limerick Junction on 23 February and chaired by a representative of the Labour Department, that negotiations really got underway without agreement being reached, as the unions refused to accept the 33 1/3 % reduction in wages demanded by the Condensed Milk Co. of Ireland. The main reasons given for this demand were that the condensed milk part of the business had been run at a considerable and growing loss for the past two years.³⁹

The resolution of the dispute was then entrusted to the Proprietary Joint Council who, at a meeting held on 31 March, agreed that a proposal should be put forward by the company representatives to their board of directors, and by the Labour representatives to the workers. The proposal provided for wages to be reduced by 10s a week for a period of one month, during which time Labour would negotiate with whomever was interested in buying the company's properties and interests. If successful, the amount of the wage reduction would be incorporated into the purchase price, and if not, the money would be returned to the workers, unless the parties agreed otherwise. When put to a vote by the workers, this proposal won by a narrow majority. However, members of the ITGWU, the Irish Clerical Workers' Union and the Automobile Drivers' Association at the central Lansdowne plant, employing 400 hands, refused to endorse the result and threatened to walk out as a result, which they did on 13 April, leading to the factory being closed. Although the Lansdowne strike was called in disregard of the creamery workers' majority vote, the ITGWU officially supported its striking members, who received their strike pay.⁴⁰

However, as no offer to purchase the business succeeded within a month, the workers voted against renewing the agreement for a further month. All the alternative proposals of the labour representatives were rejected by the company's officials. As a result, when the workers refused to vote on their offer of a 12 1/2 % reduction, not least because it had not been submitted via the trade unions, the firm announced the closing down of its plants on 11 May. This drastic decision was countered the next day by the workers as a whole occupying their workplaces and taking over the management of production. Thus, with the notable exception of the Lansdowne plant – not out of choice but due to regular troops blocking access to the premises – virtually all the Cleeve factories and their auxiliary branches came under the control of their employees, including those in Carrick-on-Suir (employing 90 hands), Tipperary Town, Bansha, Clonmel (employing about 200 hands), Mallow, Knocklong, Bruree, Dromin, Athlacca, Tankarstown, Bruff and Ballingaddy. In addition to the creameries, Bruree Mills were also seized. As in Knocklong and Bruree in the two years prior,

³⁹ *Limerick Leader*, 22 May 1922; *Dail Debates*, 26 April 1922, Vol. S2 N°4, [APPENDIX TO REPORT. - DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR. – Dáil Éireann \(2nd Dáil\) – Wednesday, 26 Apr 1922 – Houses of the Oireachtas](#) [retrieved 11 December 2021].

⁴⁰ *Dail Debates*, 26 April 1922, Vol. S2 N°4; *Irish Examiner*, 17 April 1922; *Irish Independent*, 17 April 1922; *Limerick Leader*, 19, 22 May 1922.

the workers hoisted the red flag on the buildings and appointed a manager in each establishment – like Banks, local secretary of the ITGWU, in Carrick-on-Suir.⁴¹

General Council of Action

The driving force behind this direct action initiative was the General Council of Action. It was set up back in April 1919 by delegates from the works committees of all the Cleeve factories to coordinate the struggles against the Condensed Milk Company, eventually disbanding itself after a few months despite some notable successes. The need to influence the course of negotiations affecting the entire Munster dairy industry prompted the creamery workers' leaders to revive it in January 1922. Quite understandably therefore, from 12 May onwards, it became the mouthpiece of the ongoing movement, taking the form of a grand joint-union workers' council federating the local factory councils. It was also seemingly divided into different committees, since it was the Publicity Department of the General Council of Action which issued the statement justifying the seizure of the creamery factories and flour mills⁴²:

‘The decision of the Directors of the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland to shut down all their factories thereby imperilling the livelihood of 5,000 farmers and their dependents, risking the destruction of national produce to the extent of thousands of pounds per week and throwing 3,000 workers and their families out of work to beg or starve, was discussed at length at a meeting of the above Council yesterday. The Council taking into account the serious amount of injury that such a closing down would do to the farming, and agricultural communities of Munster, decided to instruct the workers in the different factories to carry on work as usual as from this [Friday] morning. In a proclamation which was issued from its headquarters, the Council calls for support in its endeavours to save this important national industries for extinction’.

The aforesaid proclamation also states that:

‘[E]ight individuals who trade as Cleeve Brothers, the condensed Milk Company of Ireland, J. P. Evans and Company, Limited, and the *Limerick Chronicle*, admitted before a Council

⁴¹ *Irish Examiner*, 15, 16, 20 May 1920; *Limerick Leader*, 15, 17 May 1922; *Irish Independent*, 15, 16 May 1922; *Workers' Republic*, 20 May 1922; *Irish Times*, 15 May 1922; *Donegal News*, 20 May 1922; *Southern Star*, 20 May 1922; *Manchester Guardian*, 15 May 1922.

⁴² *Irish Opinion*, 19 April 1919; *Voice of Labour*, 7 January 1922; D. R. O'Connor Lysaght, *op. cit.*, p. 41, p. 43.

of Dail Eireann that they made a profit during the war of over a million pounds; that they are now endeavouring to force down the standard of living by demanding a reduction of 33 1/3 per cent in wages; that the workers have refused to allow themselves to be again forced down to the slave level; that Cleeve Bros., having decided to close down their factories, the workers have decided to operate them in the interests of the community and to preserve the industry for the nation’.

Further down, farmers are guaranteed the full value of their work, and the proclamation concludes with the phrase ‘Long Live the Sovereign People’.⁴³

It was therefore the special circumstances of the day that led the workers to resort to direct action, and thus to act outside the control of the union leaderships – in this case via the General Council of Action. They took over their workplaces and continued the production under their own rules, independently of the firm’s directors, in order not only to preserve a whole province from the socio-economic disaster that such a closing down would have caused, but also to avoid the collapse of a crucial industry for the Irish nation. This latter political dimension was obviously reflected in the slogan ‘Long Live the Sovereign People’, as it had been symbolically two years earlier in the red and tricolour flags raised over the Knocklong soviet’s building – clearly redolent of James Connolly’s ideas combining socialism and nationalism. This was more explicitly confirmed one week later, when the Director of Publicity, General Council of Action, gave an interview, published in several newspapers, in which he recalled that they had suggested to the Dublin government that they should run the industry themselves. Their refusal to take responsibility meant that the workers had no choice but to assume the role that the State should have played.⁴⁴ In so doing, they developed a new order from below without waiting for the outcome of the struggle, as can happen when workers are sufficiently powerful to fulfil political functions in the State’s stead through their councils.⁴⁵ And once the new order, it may also be observed, becomes in their view a matter of necessity and justice, then ‘the collaboration of equal companions replaces the command of masters and the obedience of servants. The sense of duty, devotion to the community, praise or blame from comrades according to effort and achievements, as incentives, take the place of fear of hunger and the perpetual risk of losing one’s job’.⁴⁶ This capacity for self-organisation the Cleeve’s workers developed enthusiastically, the effort and dedication they apparently put into producing

43 The Council of Action’s statement and proclamation are quoted in *Limerick Leader*, 15 May 1922; *Irish Examiner*, 13, 15 May 1922; *Irish Times*, 15 May 1922; *Freeman’s Journal*, 13, 16 May 1922; *Manchester Guardian*, 15 May 1922.

44 *Limerick Leader*, 22 May 1922; *Freeman’s Journal*, 20 May 1922; *Irish Examiner*, 20 May 1920; *Irish Independent*, 20 May 1920.

45 Anton Pannekoek, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 18, pp. 19-20.

autonomously with the sole aim of serving the community, and no longer for capitalist purposes, were reported in the *Voice of Labour* about one of the seized factories:

‘And here an impression was confirmed which had been steadily forming in my mind as I watched each successive operation; that these men were straining every nerve to secure perfection in the product they were manufacturing; that no possible slur should be cast upon the Workers’ Factory ... All knew the fierce light of criticism that would meet their efforts, and all were braced to confute the critical tongue. The minutest detail failed to escape the keen observation of the Works manager whose fervent enthusiasm and love of his work was a constant urge to the best in every man and woman. The hundred and fifty workers hung upon his words, and bent to his every order: yet he was “only a worker”, and bore not even the imprimatur of a collar’.⁴⁷

However, the unprecedented large scale of the seizures and workers’ takeovers meant that the challenge to property rights was more deeply felt than in the cases of the Knocklong and Bruree soviets. The virulent condemnations of some liberal and conservative newspapers were not long in coming. The *Freeman’s Journal*, for example, saw the Council of Action as nothing more than ‘dictators’ denying the popular will ‘the right of free expression’ and ‘confiscators’ grabbing ‘other people’s property’.⁴⁸ Besides, the Cleeve management also used the press to warn that it was illegal to deal with the company’s property under soviet control.⁴⁹ This press notice was, of course, directed primarily at the company’s farmer suppliers, many of whom, particularly members of the Irish Farmers’ Union (IFU), would comply with it.

Yet, in the above-mentioned interview, one of the Directors of the Council of Action had also made it clear that their fight was theirs, and that without these workers’ takeovers the farmers would have no choice but to spill their milk production since the cooperative creameries would refuse to process it. He added that they had a greater interest in supplying Cleeves under soviet control, as prices were uncertain and often depended on the goodwill of the official management, while the

⁴⁷ *Voice of Labour*, 27 May 1922.

⁴⁸ *Freeman’s Journal*, 16 May 1922. In the same vein, see also *Irish Times*, 15 May 1922; *Belfast News-Letter*, 15 May 1922. There was also concern in the Catholic hierarchy, with Rev. Fr Maguire from Co. Monaghan urging ‘those responsible for social order to expel those who had invaded private property’. *Irish Times*, 19 May 1922; Dominic Haugh, “‘The Bottom Dog and the Bishop’s Crozier’: The Catholic hierarchy and the trade union movement in Limerick, 1916-22”, *History Studies*, 7, 2006, p. 13. Concern was felt even on the benches of the House of Commons in London where Colonel Newman asked ‘whether the firm of Messrs. Thomas Cleeve and Son, whose milk factories in Mallow, Limerick, Kilmallock, and elsewhere in Munster, have recently been communised, hold contracts for the supply of condensed milk to the Admiralty; and, if so, are the contracts still in force?’. HC Debates, 24 May 1922, vol. 154, cc1233-4w,

<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/written-answers/1922/may/24/condensed-milk> [retrieved 20 December 2021]

⁴⁹ *Freeman’s Journal*, 16, 27 May 1922; *Irish Independent*, 26 May 1922.

Council of Action intended to fight this monopoly and dictatorship and thus raise the price of milk for the farmers while reducing the selling price of butter for consumers – as had been done in Knocklong two years earlier. He was therefore quite optimistic about the relationship between the soviets and the farmers, especially as, at the time of the interview, the soviets were functioning normally and satisfactorily.⁵⁰

The Farmers' Counter Offensive

However, this optimism was not to last long. The IFU began a most virulent counter-offensive from mid-May in the form of calls to boycott the Cleeve soviets made at various meetings organised by its local branches or by local farmers' associations. Thus, instead of selling their products to the soviets, the farmers were incited to ask for the State's help through financial compensation for the losses they had suffered, or to look for outlets elsewhere, in particular with the creamery cooperatives, the latter eventually refusing to process their milk in the interest of their own suppliers (perhaps for fear of reprisals), as the Council of Action had foreseen.⁵¹

This approach was clearly more ideological or dogmatic than pragmatic, as evidenced notably by the rejection of the proposal to the farmers' representatives in the Carrick-on-Suir district to have the farmers work with the local soviet in collaboration with the workers. While it was recognised that the offer had its points, 'it had the fatal flaw that the people making the offer were not the owners of the property to be exploited'. In any case, the farmers being very conservative people, they could not but refuse to co-operate with 'agents of Bolshevism and their theories of expropriation and confiscation' tantamount to ending or undermining private property. In short, they feared that all agricultural activity in Munster would be taken over by the Bolsheviks as in Russia.⁵²

This traditional distrust of many farmers towards the socially revolutionary ideas, often endorsed by industrial workers, is attributed by Pannekoek to the fact that in capitalist society, free disposal of the soil is difficult. It is only possible if farmers can work and fully enjoy the fruits of their labour on their own land, actions from which the landowner benefits in part. This means that property and labour are closely linked in the farmer's mind, leading to what is often regarded in him

⁵⁰ *Limerick Leader*, 22 May 1922; *Freeman's Journal*, 20 May 1922; *Irish Examiner*, 20 May 1920; *Irish Independent*, 20 May 1920. The last fact mentioned here was confirmed in a feature published in the *Irish Examiner*. See *Irish Examiner*, 16 May 1922.

⁵¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 19, 24 May, 1 June 1922; *Irish Independent*, 19, 22, 24, 30 May 1922; *Irish Examiner*, 24, 26 May, 3 June 1922; *Irish Times*, 19, 24, 29 May 1922; *Evening Echo*, 19 May 1922; *Limerick Leader*, 29 May 1922; *Nenagh Guardian*, 27 May, 3 June 1922; *Nenagh News*, 27 May 1922; *Voice of Labour*, 27 May 1922; *Manchester Guardian*, 29 May 1922; *Workers' Republic*, 3 June 1922; *Connacht Tribune*, 3 June 1922.

⁵² For a full account of this meeting of the Carrick-on-Suir district Farmers' Associations, see *Munster Express*, 27 May 1922.

as ‘property fanaticism’. Furthermore, their continuous struggle against the changing forces of nature and climate has brought about a strong and stubborn individualism among the farmers, making them a special class with a distinctive mentality and outlook, alien to the ideas and aims of the working class. There will therefore be many difficulties and misunderstandings, sources of dissension and conflict, not least because the farmers, as staunch defenders of private and individual property, are likely to side with capital against the workers.⁵³ This is actually what happened to a certain extent in Munster in May-June 1922, through a class of farmers many of whom had recently purchased their holdings. This gave rise to friction and strife between farmers and soviet workers, the latter often resorting to acts of retaliation when the former refused to supply them with raw materials. The operating parts of milk separators were thus forcibly withdrawn from farmers’ houses in Carrick-on-Suir district, the manager of the Rathgormack Farmers’ Co-operative Store at Carrick-on-Suir was forced to close the store by representatives of the local ITGWU. Farmers were prevented from selling butter they had made at the Carrick-on-Suir, Clonmel and Kilmacthomas butter markets, the shops of Clonmel traders who refused to sell butter made at the Cleeve factory under the red flag were picketed by soviet workers... Such was the degree of tension that some local farmers’ associations announced that they had formed a citizen guard to protect themselves and their property.⁵⁴

Demise of the Cleeve Soviets

All of this was undoubtedly a major factor in the failure of the Cleeve soviets, bearing in mind that the IFU managed to convince almost half of the farmers not to supply the factories that came under soviet control.⁵⁵ On the other hand, it also meant that a significant number of farmers ignored the IFU’s dictates, like the small farmer John P. Mandeville who, while denying being a proponent of the red flag or of sovietism, disapproved of the actions taken against the soviet workers and even advocated an alliance between farmers and agricultural and industrial workers for the joint takeover of Cleeve’s business – probably in the form of a co-operative.⁵⁶

Other factors, of course, contributed to the gradual demise of the Cleeve soviets, including the serious acts of vandalism suffered by the Grange and Caherconlish soviets in May, which prevented

⁵³ Anton Pannekoek, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-43.

⁵⁴ *Limerick Leader*, 17 May 1922; *Freeman’s Journal*, 18, 29 May, 1, 12 June 1922; *Irish Independent*, 18, 22, 29 May 1922; *Irish Examiner*, 18, 26, 29 May 1922; *Nenagh Guardian*, 20 May 1922; *Nenagh News*, 20 May 1922; *Manchester Guardian*, 29 May 1922; *The Workers’ Republic*, 3 June 1922; *Voice of Labour*, 10 June 1922.

⁵⁵ *Freeman’s Journal*, 16 March 1923; *Irish Independent*, 16 March 1923; *Irish Examiner*, 16 March 1923; *Irish Times*, 16 March 1923.

⁵⁶ *Irish Independent*, 24, 29 May 1922; *Irish Times*, 24 May 1922; *The Workers’ Republic*, 3 June 1922.

them from resuming production under workers' self-management.⁵⁷ Then, regarding the specific case of the Bruree creamery soviet, the return of the property was the result of an agreement reached in late June, while some of the creamery managers who had initially recognised the authority of the Council of Action eventually disowned it.⁵⁸ However, the majority of the soviets would collapse from the end of July, after regular Irish Free State troops intervened in connection with the Civil War. The damage was particularly severe in Tipperary Town, where the irregular IRA burnt down Cleeve's factory as they withdrew.⁵⁹ This situation of political violence was also reflected in the blockade of pro-republican Munster by the Free State government with the help of the Royal Navy, which severely restricted the soviets' access to markets, preventing them from paying all their suppliers properly.⁶⁰ A number of soviets held out for a few more months, but left without strong union support in this civil war context, the workers eventually handed back the premises, some of which were closed down permanently, while others reopened on the drastic terms of the official management, against which the employees had to fight again.⁶¹ But Cleeve's business ultimately failed to recover from the bitter social disputes – not to mention the War of Independence and the Civil War – that had plagued it since 1919, despite the reopening of some of its plants in late 1922 and early 1923. The Condensed Milk Company of Ireland went into liquidation and was bought out by an Irish syndicate of local businessmen in December 1923. Ironically, it was finally taken over in 1927 by a sponsored-state body, the Dairy Disposal Company, in accordance with the Council of Action's demands mentioned above.⁶²

Last but not least, the ILP&TUC leadership showed an obvious lack of interest in these subversive experiments in self-managed factories carried out by the workers of the Munster creameries and flour mills in 1922. Admittedly, throughout 1922 Congress devoted particular attention to political events, such as for the general elections in June – which it had decided to run in – or attempting to civil war from breaking out and then making every effort to end it rapidly. This might explain why the Cleeve soviets were not on the agenda at all at the ILP&TUC annual meeting in August 1922.⁶³ Another explanation would be more structural than circumstantial. Thus, Pannekoek (and others) observed that as capitalism grew, the number of workers increased

57 *Freeman's Journal*, 20 May 1922.

58 *Irish Times*, 27 June 1922; *Donegal News*, 1 July 1922; *Nenagh News*, 1 July 1922; D. R. O'Connor Lysaght, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

59 *Freeman's Journal*, 1 August 1922; *Nenagh Guardian*, 5 August 1922; *Irish Independent*, 1 August 1922; *Manchester Guardian*, 7 August 1922.

60 *Freeman's Journal*, 29 July 1922; D. R. O'Connor Lysaght, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

61 *Nenagh Guardian*, 19 August, 21 October 1922, 10 February, 24 March, 19 May 1923; *Freeman's Journal*, 31 August 1922, 28 June 1923; *Voice of Labour*, 14, 21 October, 4, 11 November 1922, 6 January, 17, 31 March 1923; *Workers' Republic*, 9 December 1922; *Irish Examiner*, 5 March, 28 June 1923.

62 D. R. O'Connor Lysaght, *op. cit.*, p. 46; David Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

63 Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Eighth Annual Meeting*, Dublin, August 1922.

accordingly, transforming the unions into mass organisations, which in turn demanded an increasing staff of officials and leaders. All this gave rise to a trade union bureaucracy, administering all business and exercising top-down power over the rank-and-file, who were mostly required to be disciplined and obedient to decisions taken from above.⁶⁴ This trend towards bureaucratisation in the ILP&TUC – as in many other organisations internationally – was combined with a strategic shift towards reformism and legalism that prevented it from supporting subversive and illegal modes of action, while continuing to empty strongly revolutionary rhetoric in line with its supposed political goals. Certainly, for its part, the ITGWU executive was active in assisting its members involved in the soviets. It allowed the soviet butter to be stored at Liberty Hall and organised boats to transport it to Scotland and Wales.⁶⁵ Not to mention the glowing article about one of the soviets that was published in the *Voice of Labour* on 27 May.⁶⁶ On the other hand, ITGWU officials also took part in negotiations in the Property Joint Council which resulted in wage cuts that many of the fighting workers rejected.⁶⁷

It is therefore through this dichotomy between rank-and-file and leadership that the dialectic of ‘socialism from below’ and ‘socialism from above’ takes on its full meaning. In the context of revolutionary Ireland, it manifested itself with, on the one hand, a bottom-up, councilist-like desire for socialist transformation – even if the Council of Action never explicitly revealed any revolutionary intentions on a national scale – and, on the other, a top-down, reformist desire for socialist transformation. The junction between the two having failed to materialise, Ireland experienced nothing more than experimental attempts at ‘socialism from below’ at the provincial level.

64 Anton Pannekoek, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-62.

65 *Workers' Republic*, 9 December 1922; D. R. O'Connor Lysaght, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

66 *Voice of Labour*, 27 May 1922.

67 *Irish Independent*, 22 May 1922; *Limerick Leader*, 22 May, 7 June 1922; *Nenagh Guardian*, 3 June 1922.