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Title	Labour lives: Tadgh Barry (1885-1921)
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Publication date	2008-01
Original Citation	O'Drisceoil, D. (2008) 'Labour lives: Tadgh Barry (1885-1921)', Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History, 33, pp. 89-92.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	http://www.irishlabourhistorysociety.com/index.php?page=saothar
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Download date	2024-04-26 02:50:34
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/3035

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

SAOTHAR 33

Iris an Chumainn le Stair Lucht Saothair na hÉireann

Journal of the Irish Labour History Society

2008

Labour lives no. 10

Tadhg Barry (1880–1921)

Tadhg Barry was born in Cork city in 1880 and grew up in the working-class Blarney Street area. His father was a relatively well-paid cooper, which allowed Tadhg to complete both primary and secondary education, at Blarney Street National School and the North Monastery respectively. He worked as an attendant in the nearby Our Lady's asylum from 1899 to 1903. After a sojourn in London, he took up a post back in Cork with the newly-established Old Age Pensions Board in 1909. Barry was immersed in the Irish-Ireland movement in the city in the first decade of the twentieth century, and the plethora of separatist organisations linked to it such as the IRB and Sinn Féin, along with other key figures like Tomás MacCurtain, Terence MacSwiney and Sean O'Hegarty. It was as a GAA member that he became best-known in these years and was part of the group led by J.J. Walsh which reformed and revitalised the organisation in Cork. Among his many contributions to the GAA was his book *Hurling and How to Play It* (1916), the first of its kind, and his GAA journalism under the pen-name 'An Ciotóg' for William O'Brien's All-for-Ireland-League newspaper, the *Cork Free Press* (1910–16).

Barry was a founding member of the Irish Volunteers in the city in 1913; he stayed with the separatist wing after the 1914 split, and remained a leading member for the rest of his life. The nature of his trade union activity in these years is unclear, but there is evidence of his labour and socialist sympathies. He was apparently involved in organising Jim Larkin's final public address before his departure for the USA in Cork's City Hall in October 1914, and in May 1915 was one of those who brought James Connolly to the city to speak at an Independent Labour Party meeting. The Sinn Féin hall had been booked, but when they arrived it was locked and Barry had no key. He apologised profusely, but Connolly apparently shrugged it off, saying he was well used to it. According to C. Desmond Greaves, when Barry's 'less socialistically-inclined Sinn Féin friends' grew maudlin over the martyr Connolly after his death, 'he used to remind them that they had little time for the living fighter.'[1] He was also involved in Connolly's January 1916 visit to Cork, when he spoke to around thirty Volunteers on urban guerrilla tactics. While such tactics were of use in Dublin three months later, the rising in Cork was aborted. Barry was one of the few leading Volunteers to evade arrest in the aftermath, and was a key figure in holding the movement together pending the release of

MacCurtain, MacSwiney and the others. He also played a central part in the early stages of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) revival in the city at this time, before he was arrested following a speech to the Manchester Martyrs commemoration in Cork in November 1916. He was sentenced by court martial in January 1917 to two years, but only served eight months and was released following a hunger strike in late June, early July 1917. The British army's own secret history of the 'Irish rebellion' identifies Barry's case as the one that 'made clear' that the post-Rising return to 'normality' was transitory.[2]

He passed the time in Cork prison writing poems, verse and ballads, a collection of which were published as *Songs and other (C)Rhymes of a Gaol-Bird* in 1917. On release, he threw himself into the resurgent separatist movement in the city and county, organising, drilling and delivering 'seditious' speeches. In January 1918 he resumed regular journalism with a weekly column on Cork city politics, labour and culture under the title ''Neath Shandon Steeple' for the Skibbereen-based *Southern Star*, and also began contributing a series of articles to the ITGWU's *Voice of Labour*. These articles demonstrated his ability to link general questions of theory and ideology with practical union matters. He argued strongly for independent Irish trade unionism as an essential step if Irish workers were to follow the Bolshevik example and seize power, and was critical of traditional craft unions that privileged their members; when he referred to a 'craftsman', he wrote, 'I mean the man with the shovel as well as the man with the plane'.[3] In his final article before his next incarceration in May 1918, he continued that theme in a reflection on the labour theory of value, noting that if a distinction was to be drawn between skilled and unskilled labour 'it must not be on the lines of money value as purchasing power, but on the lines of relative value of labour in the production of

the profits, such relative values to be assessed not in dollars but in energy.' He concluded, however, that 'this will be for some day in the near future, when Labour rules. In the meantime, get on with the war.'[4]

Barry was lifted as part of the German Plot arrest swoop in May 1918 and sent to Usk prison in England, where he languished, battling boredom and monotony as well as the flu epidemic, until March 1919. His spirits were raised by the remarkable transformation of the Irish political landscape that occurred during his incarceration. Following his release he became a full-time ITGWU organiser and Cork No. 1 (James Connolly Memorial) Branch secretary, and led the farm labourers in the widespread strikes campaign of 1919–20 when the emblems and slogans of revolutionary socialism were fully utilised. In July 1919, 150 farm labourers in Churchtown and Buttevant, county Cork struck for a wage increase and were joined in sympathy strike by the creamery workers. A large contingent marched from Buttevant to Churchtown with a huge red banner inscribed 'Workers of the world unite. The unorganised worker is the slave of his employer'. The majority of servant girls in Buttevant came out on sympathy strike. Barry wrote to the *Cork Examiner*:

> the Transport Union has given its full sanction to the fight and means to show that the agitation which our predecessors carried on for the 'land for the people' means not the 'land for the farmers' as some of them think, but that its fruits shall be the co-operative property of those whose labour produce those fruits.[5]

After a bitter two-week struggle, the workers were victorious – a pattern repeated across the county and country.

In the January 1920 municipal elections Tadhg Barry was elected as alderman for the Sunday's Well/Blarney Street area on a Sinn Féin/Transport Union ticket and took his place in the city hall for the historic election of Tomás MacCurtain as Lord Mayor. Over the next year he played his part in the decontamination of public administration in the city, serving on a range of committees and boards, including that of his old employer, the asylum. The war of independence intensified through 1920, marked in Cork city particularly by the deaths of Barry's long-time comrades, MacCurtain and MacSwiney, and the burning of the city in December – an event presaged by the burning of the ITGWU's Connolly Memorial Hall in the previous month. At his last Branch annual meeting on 23 January 1921, Barry stated that 'the efforts of our union to raise the workers from slavery have brought on the ire of those who wish to have us mere hewers of wood and drawers of water, forever under the heel of a capitalistic foreign government'.[6] When Cork Corporation gathered the following week to elect a new Lord Mayor, the police arrested nine of the councillors, including Barry. He was taken to Ballykinlar internment camp in County Down, where he joined over 2,000 others, including many union activists. He immersed himself in camp life, and is recorded as having delivered lectures on labour and other social issues as part of the educational activities organised by the internees. He was elected head of the 'old men's hut' (he was 40!) and, according to the *Workers' Republic*, flew the red flag proudly on the roof, replacing it each time the authorities tore it down.

In the run-up to the signing of the treaty, the British began to release internees on temporary parole. Barry was not among the first group, and on 15 November 1921 stood with others at the camp fence, waving his comrades off. A British army sentry called on them to retreat; when Barry hesitated, he was shot through the heart and died instantly. The coroner's inquest was inconclusive, with the jury unable to agree a verdict. The British authorities had done everything to muddy the issue, and failed to produce either the sentry or his superiors for cross-examination. A secret report on Barry prepared by the army's 6th Division for the British case at the inquest described him memorably as 'a mischievous socialist, bolshevist, or Sinn Féiner, as the occasion demanded', and, in a final tribute, as an 'utter disloyalist'.[7] There was a massive reaction to Barry's murder in nationalist Ireland, and his showpiece 'final journey' and funeral was the last great public display of republican unity before the treaty split. Public bodies across the country passed resolutions of

sympathy and suspended meetings in a huge, national show of sympathy. According to the Cork Trades Council, Barry had been 'arrested and interned for his qualifications as a labour man, and not as a politician. . . . it was due to his activity in the discharge of his duties as secretary of ITGWU that he was arrested and held in bondage.'[8] Cork Corporation passed a resolution calling for suspension of the treaty negotiations. Thousands turned out in every town en route to Dublin where, on 19 November, 30,000 marched with the coffin in a display on a scale not seen since the funeral of Thomas Ashe in 1917. As the train bringing his body home to Cork passed through Kilmallock, 300 creamery strikers and supporters paraded through the town under the red flag, in tribute to Barry and in protest at the IRA's recent arrest of four ITGWU officials who had taken a separator from a local farmer they believed to be strike-breaking.

His funeral in Cork closed the city, the procession taking an hour-and-a-quarter to pass a given point. The ITGWU was prominent amongst the massed ranks of the multiple organisations that marched. At the funeral mass Bishop Coholan tendentiously and erroneously acclaimed Barry as a Catholic trade unionist who had tried to imbue the ITGWU with the principles of that church. While he was a pious Catholic, he never publicly suggested the intrusion of religion into either politics or trade unionism, except in the manner suggested in his final poem (below). The ITGWU refuted the bishop's sectarian claim in the *Voice of Labour*. Barry sent a final message from the camp to the union a few days before his murder, welcoming the reappearance of the *Voice* and saying he wished he could help 'for there is in Ireland such a dearth of understanding of the real Labour position and such an unthinking fear of "embarrassing the Government" . . .'. He had written a number of essays for the *Voice* that could not get past the camp censor, but promised to pass them over 'when I am free'.[9] Following his death, the paper published his final piece of writing, a verse entitled 'The Future War', which ended:

> And we'll teach the boss that the Bible says,
> Go share with the poor your all;
> And of true religion we'll let some rays
> On his selfish soul to fall;
> And the hungry feed, and the naked clothe,
> And the sick to ease from pain,
> And the heavy of heart to aid with their load,
> And all human rights maintain.

Donal Ó Drisceoil

Notes

1 C. Desmond Greaves, *The Irish Transport and General Workers' Union: The Formative Years 1909–1923* (Dublin, 1982), p. 175.
2 'The Irish Rebellion in the 6th Divisional Area from After 1916 Rebellion to December 1921: Compiled by General Staff, 6th Division', p. 9, General Strickland papers, P 363, Imperial War Museum, London.
3 *Voice of Labour*, 16 February 1918.
4 Ibid., May 1918.
5 *Cork Examiner*, 21 July 1919.
6 *Evening Echo*, 16 November 1971.
7 War Office (WO) 35/145, National Archives of the United Kingdom.
8 *Cork Examiner*, 19 November 1921.
9 *Voice of Labour*, 26 November 1921.