

Larkin, James

by Emmet O'Connor

Larkin, James (1874–1947), labour leader, was born 28 January 1874 at 41 Combermere St., Toxteth, Liverpool, England, second eldest of three sons and three daughters of James Larkin, foundry labourer, and Mary Ann Larkin (née McNulty, McAnulty, or McNalty). His birth certificate gave no middle name, though he was married as James Joseph.

Family and early life Both his parents were recent immigrants of Irish catholic tenant-farmer stock – his father hailed from Lower Killeavy, south Armagh, and his mother from Burren, south Down – and Larkin was to be a lifelong Irish nationalist. From 1909 at latest, he always insisted that he was an Ulsterman, born in the maternal family homestead at Tamnaharry, near Burren. Larkin received a 'poverty-stricken' education at Our Lady of Mount Carmel catholic church school, Chipping St., Liverpool. At the age of seven he became a 'half-timer' – a pupil permitted to divide the day between lessons and work – and left school aged 11. After employment as a butcher's assistant, paper-hanger, french polisher, engineering apprentice, and seaman, he worked on the Liverpool docks from about 1890.

A brash, temperamental, and restless adolescent, from his early teens Larkin took off tramping on foot away from home, and stowed away for the Americas in 1893 and 1901. A serious side to his personality emerged during convalescence from a dockland accident, when he studied socialism, and during a brief imprisonment in New York after his discovery as a stowaway. On being deported to Liverpool in 1893, he joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP), and later the Clarion movement, and evolved as a fairly typical member of the ILP, for whom socialism was a humanist religion rather than a science, driven by moral outrage and underpinned by a personal code of ethics. He did not pilfer ship's cargo, gamble, drink, or smoke – though he would later enjoy a cigar or a pipe. His free time was given to the ILP, charitable work in the slums, and reading. With his natural commanding presence, other workers would often seek his advice. In 1903 he became a foreman docker with T. & J. Harrison, a permanent post paying £3. 10s. per week. In the same year, in a civil ceremony, he married Elizabeth Brown, daughter of Robert Brown, 58 Ashbourne Road, Toxteth Park, a baptist lay-preacher who ran a dockland temperance café which Larkin frequented. The couple lived with Larkin's widowed mother at 37 Roche St., Toxteth Park. It was a marriage of 'chalk and cheese'. Elizabeth was given to home-making and good works, and grew to yearn for a quiet life. They would have four sons: James (qv) (1904–69), Denis (qv) (1908–87), Fintan (1909–81), and Barney (1914–78).

Trade unionist, 1898–1913 Larkin initially held the socialist view of trade unions as palliatives of capitalism. Though he helped to form a branch of the Workers'

Union in Liverpool in 1898, only when obliged did he join the National Union of Dock Labourers (NUDL) in 1901. In 1905 he struck with colleagues, and was recognised as a powerful leader and orator in the struggle. The strike cost him his job, and he accepted a post as an organiser with the NUDL, becoming a general organiser in 1906. After successful work in the north of England and Scotland, he was sent to Belfast in January 1907. In Belfast he adhered to the NUDL's policy of moderation, until rank and file spontaneity and strikebreaking by the employers caused him to unleash his instinctive militancy. After selective strikes (April–May) and escalating violence – Larkin himself was charged with assaulting a scab on 31 May but was ultimately acquitted – he called a general strike in Belfast port in June. Already his most celebrated talent, his oratory, had made a dramatic impact on the city. The generalised strike created a highly charged atmosphere. On 24 July the police mutinied and fraternised with the strikers, prompting the government to rush in troops. Larkin's willingness to generalise action also alarmed the NUDL general secretary, James Sexton, who took control of the strike and negotiated a weak settlement (August). Feeling humiliated in Belfast, Larkin turned to Dublin and the south. His leadership of further strikes of unskilled workers in Dublin and Cork (November, December 1908) stretched his strained relations with Sexton and led to his suspension as an NUDL official on 7 December.

On 28 December Larkin founded the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) from breakaway NUDL branches, arguing that Irish workers needed Irish unions. As general secretary, he would run the union in a dictatorial manner. Now his own boss, he revealed a streak of insecurity about finance, and pursued a restrained policy up to 1911. Moreover, he faced opposition from Sexton and conservative trade unionists. Elected to the parliamentary committee of the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) in 1908, he failed to get the ITGWU recognised at the 1909 congress, but won admittance in 1910, and was reelected to the ITUC parliamentary committee in 1911. He also indicated a preference for trade-union politics and journalism over the mundane work of union organisation, and indulged increasingly his penchant for personal attacks on his enemies. His production (January–June 1910) of a Dublin edition of James Connolly's (qv) paper, the *Harp*, resulted in repeated threats of libel action. On 17 June 1910, with Sexton's connivance, he was sentenced to twelve months' hard labour for misappropriation of union funds raised in Cork in 1908. The harsh sentence won him badly needed sympathy and he was released after a public memorial on 1 October.

The extension of a wave of industrial unrest from Britain in the summer of 1911 enabled Larkin to come into his own. The ITGWU responded with growing confidence, expanding to about 20,000 members by 1913. In 1912 Larkin was elected to Dublin corporation as a labour councillor, and in 1913 became president of the ITUC. He enjoyed notable success as editor of the *Irish Worker*, which he issued from May 1911. The paper supported 'Irish-Ireland' organisations, and promoted syndicalist ideas such as sympathetic action, industrial unionism, and the development of a workers' counter-culture. In its headquarters, Liberty Hall,

the ITGWU organised music, dance, and drama classes. In August 1913 it rented Croydon Park estate, where carnivals and sports were provided for union members. His theatricality and charisma made Larkin a folk hero, and he encouraged a shameless personality cult, on which he developed a dependence.

Dublin lockout, 1913–14 By the summer of 1913 Larkin was at the height of his power, and Dublin's puissant capitalist, William Martin Murphy (qv), determined to resist him. When Larkin started to recruit his employees on the trams and in Independent Newspapers, Murphy began dismissing ITGWU members. The union responded with a strike on 26 August 1913. In September 400 employers joined Murphy, locking out over 20,000 workers for belonging to, or supporting, the ITGWU. The scale of the conflict, violent clashes between workers and police, and repeated arrests of Larkin and other union leaders, made the struggle famous internationally. About £150,000 in foreign aid was sent to Dublin, the bulk of it from the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) and leftist British groups such as the Daily Herald League. Larkin believed that only sympathetic action in Britain could defeat the lockout, and he toured Britain, speaking to huge audiences in his 'Fiery cross' campaign. British union leaders were nervous of syndicalism, and Larkin's open identification with the 'rebels' of the British left, and personal abuse of his critics, alienated the TUC leadership. On 9 December a TUC special conference voted overwhelmingly against approving direct action to help Dublin. On 18 January 1914 Larkin was compelled to advise ITGWU members to return to work as best they could. The defeat had a shattering effect on him. Suffering from bouts of depression, he avoided union work, but took an increasing interest in nationalist politics. As commandant of the Irish Citizen Army, formed on 13 November 1913, he transformed the force from a picket-militia into a uniformed pocket army, and associated it with the Irish Volunteers. He also denounced partition and Irish support for Britain in the world war. His relations with ITGWU officials continued to deteriorate, and on 25 October he departed for New York on what was to be a world speaking tour. It was thought in Dublin that he would return after a few months recuperation. Whether he intended to come back is unclear.

America, 1914–23 Larkin disembarked in New York on 5 or 6 November 1914. His immediate contacts were with the Socialist Party of America (SPA) and Clan na Gael. The Clan arranged a few speaking appointments on the east coast, only to find that Larkin's confrontational style of oratory and propensity for personal abuse drew a negative response. He was better received on the west coast in the summer of 1915, but failed to make a living from it. In September he took a job as organiser for the Western Federation of Miners. This was not the work he wanted, and in October – through John Devoy (qv) of Clan na Gael – he arranged with German embassy attachés to receive money in return for anti-war agitation. In November 1915 he travelled to Chicago to give an oration at the funeral of Joe Hill, and made the city his base. Over the next two years German funding allowed him to issue an edition of the *Irish Worker* and travel extensively around the United States. After repeated appeals, Elizabeth and the two eldest boys joined him in December 1915, before

returning to Dublin in August 1916. The ITGWU too felt neglected by him. With a secretive nature and a dislike of explaining himself, Larkin maintained little contact with the union. He was dismayed by Connolly's decision to lead the Citizen Army into the Easter rising; more for being upstaged than for any political differences with Connolly. After the rising he paid homage to Connolly. But in private he resented Connolly's status as a national martyr. After America's entry into the world war, Larkin was subjected to arrest and harrassment from the authorities, and spoke of going to Russia. In October 1917, his career as a secret agent ended in Mexico city, when the Germans broke with him for refusing to undertake industrial sabotage.

After collaboration with the Industrial Workers of the World in San Francisco (December), Larkin settled in New York, where he joined the SPA. Jealousy and egotism caused him to co-found his own group, the New York James Connolly Socialist Club, on St Patrick's day 1918. He requisitioned a club premises by breaking into his SPA branch rooms in West 29th St. and moving in with the only possessions he needed: a mimeograph, a cooker, and a frying pan. When John Reed addressed the club in May on events in Russia, Larkin was captivated, and plunged into transforming the SPA into a communist party. The Connolly Club became the national hub of the project, housing the editorial offices of the left SPA faction's *Revolutionary Age* and Reed's *Voice of Labor*. In February 1919 Larkin helped to organise a left section of the SPA in New York, in June he topped the poll in elections to the national left-wing council, and in September he supported the foundation of the Communist Labor Party. In practice, he remained a syndicalist, drawn superficially to communism by its apparent success. Theory – of any variety – or Bolshevik tactics meant little to him. On 8 November 1919 he was arrested in the 'red scare' that gripped America, and on 3 May 1920 sentenced to five to ten years imprisonment for 'criminal anarchy'. During his time in Sing Sing, Clinton, and Comstock prisons, he again achieved international renown as a political prisoner, and was honoured with election to the Moscow soviet in February 1922. He kept an eye on Ireland and violently denounced the Anglo-Irish treaty as a betrayal of national aims. When the 'red scare' abated, the governor of New York released him on a free pardon on 17 January 1923. He remained subject to police harrassment, was prevented from entering Canada, and on 21 April was deported to Southampton.

Communist, 1923–32 Arriving back in Dublin on 30 April 1923, Larkin had no great appetite for resuming work as ITGWU general secretary. Zinoviev had appealed to him to visit Moscow, and he nursed the ambition of becoming Russia's commercial representative in Ireland. However, his personality had acquired a negative, destructive mentality, suggesting that egotism had degenerated into egomania. He and Elizabeth separated, and for the rest of his days Larkin would live with his sister Delia (qv) and her husband, at 17 Gardiner Place and, from 1931, at 41 Wellington Road, Dublin. In May 1923 he toured ITGWU branches and repeatedly called on republicans to disarm, though he remained a vehement opponent of the Free State. On 3 June, in a sudden switch of tack, he denounced the ITGWU leadership in a bid

to restore his absolute control of the union. Led by William O'Brien (qv), who became an obsessive enemy, the ITGWU executive suspended him as general secretary. Offering no coherent rationalisation, Larkin went on to attack the Irish Labour Party and TUC leadership, reissued the *Irish Worker* (June), launched his own political movement, the Irish Worker League (IWL) (September), and fought a legal battle before the master of the rolls for control of the ITGWU, which he lost on 20 February 1924. On 14 March he was expelled from the union. On 15 June, acting against his advice, Larkin's brother, Peter, and son, young Jim, formed the Workers' Union of Ireland (WUI). Sixteen thousand ITGWU members, two-thirds of the membership in Dublin, defected to the new union.

Big Jim meanwhile was in Moscow, to attend congresses of the Comintern and Profintern. The Soviets believed his personality could be restrained by party discipline and that he would be an important asset in the English-speaking world. Larkin was elected to the executive committee of the Communist International, and became general secretary of the WUI on his return to Dublin in August. In January 1925 Peter Larkin signed an agreement in Moscow providing for the WUI to affiliate to the Profintern and the IWL to be turned into a communist party. Big Jim expected Russian financial aid, and preferment in Soviet commercial relations with the Free State in return; expectations that were largely disappointed.

Over the next four years, Larkin went to inordinate lengths to prevent the creation of a communist party. The split in the ITGWU had worsened his personality problems, as both sides exchanged merciless abuse. While Larkin could dish out the insults, he was remarkably sensitive himself. His jealousy and persecution complex had reached near-paranoiac proportions, he found it impossible to work with those who would not accept his leadership uncritically, and he had a fear of being accountable. He did mobilise the IWL for the September 1927 general election. The League fielded three candidates, and Larkin himself was returned in Dublin North, the only communist ever elected to Dáil Éireann. The Labour Party prevented him from taking his seat as an undischarged bankrupt. Aware that the Comintern intended to bypass him through Irish students being trained as cadres in the International Lenin School in Moscow, and through its developing links with republicans, Larkin broke with the Soviets in 1929. He continued to admire the Soviet Union, while expressing misgivings privately about its increasing authoritarianism. He was also disillusioned with revolutionary trade unionism. Membership of the WUI had fallen to about 5,000 by 1929. After the break with Moscow, the WUI adopted a reformist policy, and membership rose to about 10,000 by 1940. Larkin still represented the IWL as 'communist', and as such was elected to Dublin corporation in September 1930 for electoral area no. 2, comprising Clontarf, Drumcondra, and Glasnevin. After a disappointing vote in the 1932 general election, and against the backdrop of violent hostility to communism from the catholic church, he finally abandoned revolutionism, discontinuing the *Irish Worker* after 12 March and retiring from the IWL.

Labourist, 1933–47 From 1933 to 1941 Larkin styled himself as 'Independent Labour'. He lost his seat on Dublin corporation in 1933, but was again elected for electoral area no. 2 in July 1936, and remained a councillor until his death. In municipal politics he took a robust interest in housing, served as chairman of the council's housing committee from 1939, and was instrumental in securing a government inquiry into housing in Dublin in 1939–40. In 1937 he narrowly secured a dáil seat in Dublin North-East, and entered Dáil Éireann for the first time, losing his seat in 1938. Larkin's admiration for de Valera (qv) was rewarded in January 1939 with his appointment to the commission on vocational organisation. An enigmatic nominee, he expressed reservations about the commission's fascist potential, attended few sessions, and did not sign the final report in 1943.

From 1936 Larkin enjoyed a gradual rehabilitation in the labour movement, and as he continued to mellow, he reestablished friendships with some old antagonists in the movement. In 1936 the Dublin trades council overrode the implacable opposition of the ITGWU to welcome the WUI into affiliation. Larkin served on the council executive from 1937, and was president of the council from 1943 to 1945. While the ITUC continued to reject the WUI's annual application for membership, Larkin attended annual congresses from 1937 to 1942 as a trades council delegate. Still a powerful speaker, he recovered some of his political credibility in campaigning against the wartime wage freeze and the Trade Union Act, 1941. Although his strictures on fellow trade-union leaders for their perfunctoriness towards these campaigns led to his exclusion from the ITUC annual congresses after 1942, he was admitted into the Labour Party in 1941, and elected again for Dublin North-East in 1943, losing his dáil seat in 1944. His entry to the parliamentary Labour Party caused the ITGWU to sponsor the breakaway National Labour Party. When the ITGWU left the ITUC in 1945, the WUI was quickly admitted. It claimed a membership of just over 9,000. Larkin's hopes of crowning his municipal career with a term as lord mayor of Dublin were frustrated, but he enjoyed the vicarious honour, in March 1946, of initiating the conferment of the freedom of the city on George Bernard Shaw (qv). Larkin had always taken a lively interest in literature and drama, and was the subject of plays, poems, and songs in his lifetime. From 1939 he renewed acquaintance with Sean O'Casey (qv), arguably his greatest admirer, who took him as the model for 'Red Jim' in his play 'The star turns red' (1940).

Notwithstanding their long estrangement, Elizabeth's death on 2 December 1945 had an unsettling effect on her husband, and in the summer of 1946 he told the ITUC that he was 'going down rapidly to the grave'. In late 1946, while supervising repairs in the WUI's Thomas Ashe Hall, he fell through the floor and suffered internal injuries. He died in the Meath Hospital on 30 January 1947, and was buried in Glasnevin cemetery on 2 February. William Norton (qv) delivered the graveside oration. Young Jim succeeded him as general secretary of the WUI. Before his death Larkin was attended by Archbishop John Charles McQuaid (qv) and reconciled with the catholic church. Of material wealth, he left £4. 10s., the balance of his weekly wages, and a personal estate to the gross value of £16. 2s. 6d.

Assessment Larkin revolutionised Irish trade unionism in two respects. In developing the ITGWU he delivered a terminal blow to the crippling policy of dependence on British labour, and laid the basis of the modern Irish labour movement. In industrial relations, he introduced a method of struggle that made possible the unionisation of unskilled workers, and he ennobled strike tactics into a morality of struggle. He is remembered especially not for what he did, but in image and idea; in the image of Dublin workers as a 'risen people' in 1913, and the idea of workers' solidarity as a code of honour. Significantly, he has been celebrated more in art and literature than in historical scholarship.

Archives and images Larkin left no private papers or major writings, though he published an as yet unknown number of ephemeral articles, unsigned contributions, and editorials in various newspapers, notably the *Irish Worker*. The substantial material on Larkin in Russian state archives is cited in detail in *IHS*, xxxi (1998–9), 357–72. The numerous images of Larkin include a life-size bronze statue by Oisín Kelly (qv) in O'Connell St., Dublin; a bust by Mina Carney in the Hug Lane Gallery, Dublin; drawings by Sir William Orpen (qv), done in Liberty Hall, Dublin, in 1913; a drawing of Larkin in 1942 by Seán O'Sullivan (qv), now in the NGI; a pastel drawing of Larkin in 1946 by Seán Keating (qv), now in Liberty Hall; a mural by Nano Reid (qv) of 'Larkin speaking in College Green, Dublin', a colour slide of which hangs in the Irish Labour History Museum, Dublin; two postal stamps, designed by Peter Wilbur, issued in 1974; numerous photographs; and representations on union banners and posters. Larkin has also featured in plays, poems, songs, and novels: see 'Larkin in literature and art', Donal Nevin (ed.), *James Larkin: lion of the fold* (1998), 406–11.

NLI, William O'Brien papers; Rossiiskii Gosudartsvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii (Russian State Archive for Social and Political History); Federal Bureau of Investigation file, 'James Larkin' (no call number), Washington, DC; NA, Workers' Union of Ireland file, 369T A, 369T B; *Irish Worker*, 12 Aug. 1911, 4 Jan. 1913, 9 Aug. 1913, 24–31 Oct. 1914, 5 Jan. 1924, 1–15 Nov. 1930, 27 June–18 July 1931; Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, *The attempt to smash the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union* (1924); *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lxxi, 403–18, 456, 1594 (27 Apr.–25 May 1938); xci, 2460 (18 Nov. 1943); Irish Labour History Archive, *Dublin housing inquiry, 1939: verbatim report of proceedings* (1946); Emmet Larkin, *James Larkin: Irish labour leader, 1876–1947* (1965); C. Desmond Greaves, *The Irish Transport and General Workers' Union: the formative years, 1909–1923* (1982); John Gray, *City in revolt: James Larkin and the Belfast dock strike of 1907* (1985); John Newsinger, 'A lamp to guide your feet: Jim Larkin, the *Irish Worker*, and the Dublin working class', *European History Quarterly*, xx (1990); Donal Nevin (ed.), *James Larkin: lion of the fold* (1998), 63–99; Emmet O'Connor, 'Jim Larkin and the

Communist Internationals, 1923–9', *IHS*, xxxi (1998–9), 357–72; Pádraig Yeates, *Lockout: Dublin 1913* (2000)

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 192.168.60.239 on Wed Apr 01 09:14:00 BST 2015 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2015 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.