

James Connolly

A Lesson of the Strike

1916

Workers' Republic, 8 January 1916.

The long-drawn out fight with the City of Dublin Steam Packet Company is one of the most striking lessons yet offered of the absurdity of our present social arrangements. Here we have the spectacle of one man being able to upset the business and destroy the happiness of a whole community, in order to gratify his personal spleen against men who refused to be lowered beneath the level of their fellows. We find the Chamber of Commerce, representing all their fellow-business men; the Lord Mayor, representing the interests of the city at large; the Under Secretary for Ireland, representing the British Government in Dublin; and the Chief Industrial Commissioner, Sir George Askwith, representing the Government of Great Britain, all anxious to have the dispute settled and the business of the port resumed. And this one man is able to set them all at defiance, and proceed on his own way, wrecking their hopes along with his own business.

The social system we live under is held by its apologists to be the one that gives the greatest freedom to the individual, combined with the fullest service to the community.

The work of serving the public is not undertaken by a public authority but is left to the haphazard enterprise of individuals spurred by the desire of gain. People are not fed, clothed, housed, or warmed because the feeding, clothing, housing or warming is a public duty; but because certain individuals think that they can make a profit by so doing. If at any time these individuals think that they are not making enough profit by performing these functions, then they cease rendering this public service, and the whole life of the community is thrown out of gear. This dispute is a case in point. Every shipowner on the quays of Dublin has learned that he can pay the rate of wages asked by the City of Dublin Company strikers, and make a profit while doing so. Knowing this to be the case they keep their boats running to serve themselves and the public. The Chairman of the City of Dublin Steam Packet Company declares that he cannot make his boats pay under the same conditions as his competitors, and stops his boats accordingly. If his statement is true then it is a most lamentable confession of inefficiency and bungling mismanagement. Yet no power says to this man –

Either run your boats, or resign and go out of business. You cannot be allowed to disarrange the business of half of the merchants in the city.

He as owner of the mail boat from Kingstown receives a large Government subsidy, and is thus in a better position than his competitors who have to make their business pay without any such aid. If he cannot make his business pay then he should be treated as he would treat a dock labourer who could not work under the same conditions as his fellows – he should be fired to make room for men who can.

But just there is the weakness of the present social system. His is not a public service, and he is not a public servant. It is a private service for private gain, and he is a private individual out for private profit, and willing to punish all his associates in the business world in order to make that profit – or in revenge for not making a profit big enough.

Some day the world will wake up sufficiently to recognise that the capitalist conducting business on his own account is just as much a nuisance, and as bunglingly inefficient at the job, as were the soldier chiefs of the past making war on their own account. And when the world does so recognise the fact it will reduce private business enterprises to the same level as private armies and private wars. The nation will take over the work of organising the industries of peace as it has taken out of private hands the owning of armies and the conducting of wars for private profit.

And when it thinks about that matter the recollection of the City of Dublin Steam Packet Company's war upon the interests of the port of Dublin will be of great service in educating the public mind to agree to the change.