

TROUBLING IRELAND

**From shorthand identities to a
longhand understanding**

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*Regional Secretary,
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The current decade has been dubbed ‘the decade of commemorations’, and this year we have been marking the first of three centenaries: the 1913 Dublin Lockout. Next year we will mark the centenary of the start of the First World War, and in 1916 we will remember the Easter Rising. Each of these anniversaries, in different ways, should ‘trouble’ our perceptions and pre-conceptions about who we are – and who we were.

In Ireland, those perceptions and pre-conceptions too often centre around religious, cultural and national identity.

Viewed through the prism of those generally accepted identities – national, cultural and religious – it is easy to develop a (misleading) shorthand: to say, for example, that the 1913 Lockout and the 1916 Easter Rising were Catholic/Nationalist, while the start of the 1914-1918 war was Protestant/Unionist.

But those events look rather different, and become more textured, when viewed through the prism of economic – or class – identity.

As Regional Secretary of a union which organises in both parts of this island, I have learnt that the simple and simplistic shorthands of identity do us all a disservice. I see every day that working people are united by far more than divides us.

That knowledge should inform us not only as we remember the Lockout, but also as we prepare for the more potentially divisive commemorations of 1914 and 1916.

In 1913, working men and women – mainly but not exclusively Catholic – came together under the leadership of Jim Larkin to demand that the city’s employers – Protestant and Catholic – grant one of the most basic rights: the right to join a union of their choice and collectively seek to improve their terms and conditions. Previously, Jim Larkin had organised workers in Belfast, culminating in the 1907 Belfast Lockout. Dockers, both Protestant and Catholic, had gone on strike after their demand for union recognition was refused. They were soon joined by carters, shipyard workers, sailors, firemen, boilermakers, coal heavers, transport workers, and women from the city’s largest tobacco factory.

In 1914, working class Catholics from all over this island, as well as Protestants, joined the British Army to fight in ‘the war to end war’. In many cases, they simply joined to have a job and learn a trade.

And in 1916, some of those who took part in the Easter Rising – including many members of the Irish Citizens’ Army – believed they were fighting as much for the rights of working people as for national independence. Others viewed the insurrection with cynicism – like the Dublin slum dwellers who famously mocked the revolutionaries.

As the trade unionist and socialist James Connolly – one of those executed following the Rising – had previously pointed out, national freedom is not sufficient if exploitation continues.

Economic status – or class – defined how working people experienced the events of 1913, 1914 and 1916. There is a danger that the real experience of working people – a hundred years ago, and today – will be sidelined in this decade of commemorations, as we resort to the accepted shorthands of identity. Integrating an understanding of economic identity – of class – will allow us to develop a more sophisticated longhand with which to interpret the events of the past, and analyse their implications for our present.