



## 'Rotten Prod'

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## ‘Rotten Prod’: James Baird and Belfast Labour

Emmet O’Connor

Like so many cities in contemporary Europe, Belfast had its ‘two red years’ in the immediate post-war period, though in Belfast’s case they began in the summer of 1918 with the shorter hours movement in the engineering industry and came to an abrupt halt on 21 July 1920 with the expulsion of Catholics and ‘rotten Prods’ from the shipyards. The city was currently Ireland’s industrial capital, with major concentrations of male employment in shipbuilding and engineering and female employment in linen mills, all boosted by the demands of the war economy and the brief post-war boom. Why this environment failed to sustain a significant Labour politics is a question that has long vexed historians, who have argued about whether the problematic lay in the reactionary character of Unionism or the divisive challenge of nationalism.<sup>1</sup> A neglected aspect of the conundrum is that the sectarianism for which Belfast had become notorious was not the primary political problem for Labour. Catholics accounted for less than 25% of the population in the 1901 census, and their under-representation in the skilled trades meant that Belfast’s craft dominated trade union movement was overwhelmingly Protestant.<sup>2</sup> The predicament was the contradiction between *labour* and *Labour*. Whereas *labour* was mostly Unionist and Conservative, *Labour* was an extension of the British trade union movement, and identified with the Liberals, and later the Labour Party, who in turn were associated with Irish nationalism. In the vortex of the contradiction were men like James Baird.

Baird was one of an extraordinary cohort of agitators thrown up by the wave of syndicalist unrest in Ireland between 1917 and 1923.<sup>3</sup> Like most of his colleagues, he rose without trace, and vanished as mysteriously. Within a few years of his departure, it seemed incredible that he or his kind could ever have existed in Ireland. The enigma is compounded by the fact that since the growth of interest in Belfast labour history in the 1970s, his name has frequently popped into the literature on contemporary trade unionism with no biographical explanation.<sup>4</sup> References to Baird are confined to the 44 hours strike of 1919, the municipal elections of 1920, and the workplace expulsions later that year. His career is all the more remarkable in that he worked as a boilermaker in that paradox of Orangeism and militancy, Harland and Wolff, where he was at the core of ‘the black squad’. Technically, the label applied to iron caulkers, platers, anglesmiths, and riveters in shipbuilding, but in Ireland’s ‘black north’ it also chimed with ‘black Protestant’, a nickname for the most obdurate Unionists, used by both communities. Shipyardmen prided themselves as the shock-troops of loyalism, and were prominent in sectarian riots in 1857, and in attempts to expel

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<sup>1</sup> For a succinct review of the socialist debate on the Northern Ireland question see Terry Cradden, *Trade Unionism, Socialism, and Partition: The Labour Movement in Northern Ireland, 1939-1953* (Belfast, 1993), pp.1-22. To distinguish them from trade unionists, supporters of the Act of Union with Britain, whether members of the Unionist Party or not, will be referred to as ‘Unionists’.

<sup>2</sup> For the composition of the city’s workforce at this time see Boyd Black, ‘Reassessing Irish industrial relations and labour history: the north-east of Ireland up to 1921’, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 14 (Autumn, 2002), pp.45-97.

<sup>3</sup> See Emmet O’Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland, 1917-23* (Cork, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> A recent example is Mike Mecham, *William Walker: Social Activist and Belfast Labourist, 1870-1918* (Dublin, 2019), p.194, who also discusses the ‘Rotten Prod’ concept. Other examples are the excellent contextual survey Austen Morgan, *Labour and Partition: The Belfast Working Class, 1905-23* (London, 1991), and the insightful thematic review Christopher J.V. Loughlin, *Labour and the Politics of Disloyalty in Belfast, 1921-39: The Moral Economy of Loyalty* (Cham, Switzerland, 2018).

Catholics from the yards in 1864, 1886, 1893, 1901, 1912, and 1920.<sup>5</sup> Baird was a ‘rotten Prod’, the derogatory Unionist term for their Ulster Protestant critics, one of hundreds of trade union activists who were driven towards Irish Labour by Orange reaction, and one of thousands of Belfast Protestant workers who opposed partition. Their mentality has been obscured by competing socialist apologias for nationalism and Unionism, and the popular perception that both ‘isms’ were synonymous with Catholic and Protestant.<sup>6</sup> Yet it is a mentality that embodied the now forgotten Labour view of the Ulster question, and was central to the persistence of Labour politics in Northern Ireland until overwhelmed by the crises of 1968-9. Baird’s story also illuminates the attitudes of Ulster Unionists to Labour, and of trade union leaders in London and Dublin to Belfast. He personified positions that defy simple categorization. In Northern Ireland’s centenary year, when commemoration is so focused on matters of state and high politics in neat presentations of Orange and green, they deserve scrutiny.

### Early life

James Baird was born in south Tyrone, on 6 July 1871 to George Baird and his wife Margaret. George was a tenant farmer, and signed the birth certificate with an ‘X’. Protestants formed a large minority in district, and it is likely that George was Presbyterian, James being raised in that faith.<sup>7</sup> James later affirmed that he had been working on Queen’s Island, the main site of Harland and Wolff, since 1893.<sup>8</sup> On 10 December 1898 he married Frances Lavinia Miller, a southern Irish Protestant and daughter of a former Head Constable in the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC).<sup>9</sup> They would have six children. James later claimed to have been ‘a pronounced Home Ruler and socialist since 1893’.<sup>10</sup> Little is known of Baird’s political formation, and one of the few clues to his values is his membership of the Independent Order of Rechabites, a temperance and benefit society founded in Salford in 1835; his tent, or branch, being the Westbourne in east Belfast. The Westbourne was one of some 40 tents in the city, and one of the biggest with 270 members in 1899. In Britain, the Order stood ‘solidly for equality, fraternity, justice’. It was sympathetic towards women’s rights and was associated with the Liberal Party. Of the 26 Rechabites elected to parliament in 1906, 23 were Liberals and two (Arthur Henderson and David Shackleton) were Labourites.<sup>11</sup> The Rechabites in Belfast had a strong connection with the shipyards and Presbyterianism, and the Order was the biggest friendly society in Ulster.<sup>12</sup>

Baird had a limited involvement with Labour politics and Belfast trades council before 1918 and focused primarily on his work as secretary of the Ballymacarrett no.1 branch of the Boilermakers.<sup>13</sup> The union originated as the Society of Friendly Boilermakers to cater

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Hirst, ‘Politics, sectarianism, and the working class in nineteenth century Belfast’, in Fintan Lane and Dónal Ó Drisceoil, *Politics and The Irish Working Class, 1830-1945* (London, 2005), pp.62-86; A.C. Hepburn, ‘Work, class, and religion in Belfast, 1871-1911’, *Irish Economic and Social History*, X (1983), p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> Labour and radical studies of the Ulster question have tended to be partisan. For illustrations, see Austen Morgan and Bob Purdie (eds), *Ireland: Divided Nation, Divided Class* (London, 1980), and Connal Parr, *Inventing the Myth: Political Passions and the Ulster Protestant Imagination* (Oxford, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> General Register Office of Northern Ireland (GRONI), birth certificate; Griffith’s Valuation.

<sup>8</sup> *Voice of Labour*, 19 October 1918.

<sup>9</sup> General Register Office for Northern Ireland, marriage certificate.

<sup>10</sup> *Voice of Labour*, 19 October 1918.

<sup>11</sup> Mecham, *William Walker*, pp. 108, 115.

<sup>12</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 3 March 1920; ‘Rechabitism and Women’s Rights’, *Rechabite*, June 1908, pp.112-13; *Belfast Moveable Conference Souvenir Book* (1899); Mike Mecham, ‘William Walker: social activist and Belfast labourist’, *Saothar*, 43 (2018), p.43. I am obliged to Mike Mecham for these references.

<sup>13</sup> Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), Belfast trades council, minutes, 1903-6, MIC 193/1; Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, p.230; *Voice of Labour*, 21 September 1918; p.230; *Workers’ Bulletin*, 13 February 1920.

chiefly for men in railway workshops in Manchester in 1834 and opened a branch in Belfast in 1841. To reflect its increasing presence in shipbuilding, it became the United Society of Boilermakers and Iron and Steel Shipbuilders in 1852. When Baird joined, its head office was in Newcastle-on-Tyne, and it had 37,300 members throughout the United Kingdom. By 1918 shopfloor unrest in the war economy, and the shopstewards' movement on Clydeside in particular, was giving the Boilermakers a reputation for militancy. The Bolshevik revolution led to a strong communist presence in the union, exemplified by Harry Pollitt, who would become secretary general of the Communist Party of Great Britain.<sup>14</sup> In Ulster, by contrast, Baird was operating in an aggressively Protestant environment. The RIC estimated in 1912 that of nearly 20,000 shipyard workers, some 6,000 were active in Unionist clubs and Orange lodges in their workplaces.<sup>15</sup> On 14 April 1916 a group of young Islandmen rammed a lorry into an anti-conscription meeting organized by the Irish Trades Union Congress (ITUC) at the Custom House steps, Belfast's speakers' corner. After the crowd dispersed in panic, rioting followed in the city centre late into the night.<sup>16</sup> No unions in the Belfast metal trades were affiliated to the ITUC in 1919. Where these unions had members in Dublin, as did the two biggest shipyard unions, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) and the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (ASCJ), they affiliated their Dublin branches only.<sup>17</sup> As late as 1959, the Boilermakers' Society in Northern Ireland had no Catholic branch secretaries, and in the ASE's successor, the Amalgamated Engineering Union, just 12% of branch secretaries were Catholic.<sup>18</sup> Andrew Boyd, an apprentice machine turner in Harland and Wolff in the 1940s, and later a tutor for the National Council of Labour Colleges, was advised by his branch secretary to join the freemasons if he wished to 'get on' in the union. Boyd reckoned the masons were well placed throughout trade union officialdom in Northern Ireland.<sup>19</sup> Boyd also recalled the union as controlled by the Ulster Unionist Labour Association (UULA) up to the mid-1920s.<sup>20</sup> Sir Edward Carson had encouraged the foundation of the UULA in June 1918 expressly to oppose official Labour. Richard Dawson Bates, secretary of the Ulster Unionist Council, argued:

many of the unions are controlled by officials who hold Home Rule views. The result has been frequently the opinions of the working class in Belfast on the question of the union are misrepresented in England and elsewhere. The absence of such means as I have indicated above frequently leads younger members of the working class to Socialist, i.e. extreme, organisations run by the ILP where they are educated in views very different to those held by our body...<sup>21</sup>

<sup>14</sup> British Parliamentary Papers (BPP), *Royal Commission on Labour, Volume III*, C.6894.X (1893), p.21. The official history for this period is J.E. Mortimer, *A History of the Boilermakers' Society: Volume 2, 1906-1939* (London, 1982). It does not mention the events in Belfast in 1919-20.

<sup>15</sup> Henry Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism: The Protestant Working Class and the Belfast Labour Movement, 1868-1920* (Belfast, 1980), pp. 88-9; Henry Patterson, 'Industrial labour and the labour movement, 1820-1914', in Liam Kennedy & Philip Ollerenshaw (eds), *An Economic History of Ulster, 1820-1939* (Manchester, 1985), p. 178; and Ronnie Munck, 'The formation of the working class in Belfast, 1788-1881, *Saothar*, 11 (1986), p. 84.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Gerard Collins, 'Belfast trades council, 1881-1921' (D.Phil, University of Ulster, 1988), pp.272-5. The ITUC became the ITUC and Labour Party in 1914 and the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress in 1918. To minimise the alphabet soup, it will be referred to throughout as the ITUC or Congress.

<sup>17</sup> University of Ulster, Magee College (UUMC), ITUC, *Annual Report* (1919), pp.151ff.

<sup>18</sup> Denis P. Barritt and Charles F. Carter, *The Northern Ireland Problem: A Study in Group Relations* (Oxford, 1962), p.141.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Boyd, *Fermenting Elements: The Labour Colleges in Ireland, 1924-1964* (Belfast, 1999), p.60; letter from Andrew Boyd to the author, 17 June 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Emmet O'Connor, 'Persona non grata: Andrew Boyd, 1921-2011', *Left Lives: Volume 2* (Dublin, 2019), p.99.

<sup>21</sup> PRONI, Carson Papers, D1507/1/3/41.

Belfast's five Independent Labour Party (ILP) branches had been driven into the ground during the third Home Rule crisis in 1912, but with two branches, the city's ILP enjoyed a resurgence in 1917, organizing over 40 open air propaganda meetings that summer.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Belfast soviet**

Baird made his name in 1918 as a rank and file leader in the movement of engineering and shipbuilding workers for a cut in hours. With growing fear of a slump and a surfeit of labour at the end of the war, a movement for shorter hours was gathering pace throughout the United Kingdom. Currently, the week was 54 hours, from 6.30am until 5.30pm Monday to Fridays, with a break for breakfast at 8am or 8.30am and a dinner break from 12.40pm to 1.20pm. Saturday was a half-day, stretching from 6am until noon, with the usual stop for breakfast. In the summer, the Boilermakers' Society requested the Engineering Employers' Federation to introduce a 44 hour week on the return of peace. In Belfast, a rank and file strand in the process was initiated in July when 'a few' shipyard workers formed a committee, began a propaganda campaign, and threatened a strike.<sup>23</sup> Officials of the Belfast district committee of the Federation of Engineering and Shipbuilding Trades (FEST) were invited to a meeting in the Ulster Hall on 21 August, chaired by Baird.<sup>24</sup> The FEST had been founded in 1891, primarily to arbitrate in the chronic demarcation disputes between unions in the metal trades. With the crowd spilling out onto the street, Baird proposed they demand a 44 hour week, 8.30am to 5.30pm with a hour for dinner, Monday to Friday, and an 8.30am to 12.30pm day on Saturdays. He went on: 'They have determined that in future workers must have ample leisure to enable them to take an active interest in all that concerns the welfare of their country. They were no longer content to be mere producers'. By a large majority the meeting amended the proposal to demand a 44 hour week, with no work on Saturday. It was also agreed to let matters be until the end of the war. At this point it was felt that with the failure of its 'spring offensive' Germany's defeat was inevitable, but 'the Huns' could hold out for another year. A collection was made to defray expenses, with any surplus to go to Ulster prisoners of war. Baird would later rue the temporizing, but at the time he was delighted with the outcome. His committee then left matters to the FEST. The FEST interviewed employers in Belfast and decided to await the outcome of negotiations in Britain.<sup>25</sup>

One week after the armistice, on 19 November, the FEST agreed to put the British Engineering Employers' Federation offer of a 47 hour week to a ballot. Baird later implied that his colleagues were pressing for action and telling the FEST's Belfast committee to 'get on or get out'.<sup>26</sup> Both parties agreed to hold a meeting in the Ulster Hall on 5 December, just after the close of nominations for the forthcoming general election. All candidates were invited to attend, and the presence of Carson on the platform indicated the meeting's importance. From the chair, Baird made an appeal, common at trade union rallies in Ulster, to avoid politics: 'The alarm clock which aroused them from dreamland knew no politics. (Applause). The idea of a forty-four hours' week was worth striving for, and, if necessary, worth fighting for. (Applause)'. Of course, by 'politics' was meant the constitutional question, and the meeting reflected the peculiar politics of the Belfast shipyards. The Nationalist and Sinn Féin candidates stayed away, and those present included two of the three UULA candidates. Also present were three of the four Belfast Labour candidates. The Belfast Labour Party had been formed in April when the trades council called a conference of

<sup>22</sup> *Voice of Labour*, 16 February 1918.

<sup>23</sup> Mortimer, *A History of the Boilermakers' Society*, pp.102-3; UUMC, ITUC, *Annual Report* (1919), p.44; *Voice of Labour*, 8 March 1919.

<sup>24</sup> Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, p.96.

<sup>25</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 22 August 1918; *Voice of Labour*, 31 August 1918, 8 March 1919.

<sup>26</sup> *Voice of Labour*, 8 March 1919.

affiliates and ILP branches. It ignored the decision of the ITUC to pull out of the 1918 election.<sup>27</sup> After the proceedings opened with a rendition of ‘God Save the King’, Carson was received with loud cheers, according to the Unionist *Belfast News-Letter*, and some heckling, according to the nationalist *Irish News*. He spoke ambivalently, endorsing the 44 hours demand in principle, but counselling Belfast to accept whatever was agreed in Britain.<sup>28</sup> The Unionist Party would follow Carson’s lead in treading delicately between tepid support for the men and uneasiness about their tactics. The general election confirmed that attitudes had shifted in Belfast, if not decisively. The Belfast Labour candidates polled an average of 22% in their constituencies, which was deemed surprisingly good. Three of the four candidates were Home Rulers and all stood in predominantly Protestant areas.<sup>29</sup> Two greater uncertainties introduced into the political equation were the election of three UULA MPs, and the Sinn Féin landslide in the south. Labour’s attention shifted back to the industrial question.

On 24 December the Employers’ Federation and the FEST agreed to a 47 hour week from 1 January. In the Boilermakers’ poll, more than two-thirds rejected the deal, but in the FEST generally, roughly the same fraction of voters accepted it.<sup>30</sup> The Belfast FEST decided on a local ballot for unofficial action. In the meantime it sent Baird, as a representative of the Boilermakers, and two others from the ASE and the Friendly Society of Operative Iron Moulders, to consult with shopstewards on Clydeside who were planning their own action. Baird was also one of four speakers to address a major rally outside Belfast City Hall as the polls opened on 14 January. Asked if they favoured acceptance of the employers’ offer of a 47 hour week, 1,184 workers ticked ‘yes’, and 13,508 ticked ‘no’; 20,225 then voted for ‘drastic action in the way of an unofficial strike’ and 558 voted against.<sup>31</sup> The strike began on 25 January and affected up to 40,000 workers directly, 20,000 indirectly, and 44 businesses including the shipyards, the town engineering shops, linen mills, and the Belfast Ropeworks. Soon the trouble spread to municipal employees and stopped the trams. In some respects authority passed from City Hall to the general strike committee (GSC) in the Artizans’ Hall in Garfield Street. Its control of gas, water, and electricity supplies gave it an administrative authority and the establishment of a permit system, enforced by 2,500 official pickets, to allow for essential services, led journalists to refer to the ‘Belfast Soviet’. The GSC was an elaborate affair, 150 strong, with sub-committees on finance, organization, picketing, the press, and entertainment. As newspapers shut down or curtailed their production, the GSC published its own *Workers’ Bulletin*. With copies priced a 1d. each, 18 issues were printed between 25 January and 19 February.<sup>32</sup>

Baird’s role on the GSC is unclear. He was mentioned just once in the *Workers’ Bulletin*, as rapporteur to Belfast linen and pieceworkers on a conference in London on 3 February.<sup>33</sup> This in itself was the editorial practice. Far from boosting their champions and giving them personalities with which the rank and file could identify, as was usual in a strike, the *Bulletin* said little on the men and activity of the self-effacing GSC, most likely to conceal their politics or anything else which could be construed as anti-Unionist. The *Bulletin’s* staff too remained anonymous. The tactic did not go unnoticed. ‘Some of the strongest public advocates of the 44-hour movement when it commenced last summer are – probably by their

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<sup>27</sup> Emmet O’Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-2000* (Dublin, 2011), pp.110, 118; Collins, ‘Belfast trades council, 1881-1921’, pp.266, 288.

<sup>28</sup> Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, pp.230-1; *Irish News, Northern Whig, Belfast News-Letter*, 6 December 1918.

<sup>29</sup> Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, pp.256-7.

<sup>30</sup> Mortimer, *History of the Boilermakers’ Society*, pp.103, 344.

<sup>31</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 15 January 1919.

<sup>32</sup> *Northern Whig*, 6 February 1919; Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, p.103; Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, p. 233.

<sup>33</sup> *Workers’ Bulletin*, 3 February 1919.

own desire – rather in the background now’, observed the *Northern Whig*.<sup>34</sup> In an effort to lift the veil, *Whig* editor and Unionist MP Robert Lynn spotted Baird as one attempting to theorize what was happening and willing to go public on it. The *Whig*, which had its own power supply and was able to continue regardless, listed him on 8 February as one of 14 most prominent strike leaders. A Unionist councillor also singled out Baird and denounced him as a syndicalist. Unfazed, Baird published a letter on 11 February defending the ‘hold-up theory’, as Lynn called it, ie ensuring the strike ‘held up’ the community through maximum inconvenience. Baird argued that trade unionism was evolving towards ‘one big union’ which would use strikes strategically as a ‘citizen army’ to win workers’ control of industry. But when a *Whig* editorial accused him of preaching class war, he denied it and denied being a member of the GSC.<sup>35</sup> Morgan concludes that as soon as he emerged as the strike’s foremost socialist and militant, he was removed from the GSC.<sup>36</sup>

It was a delicate time for all sides. The *Belfast News-Letter* questioned the motivation of the workers’ leaders, describing the stoppage as ‘anarchic socialism’, and suggested: ‘There is more than trade unionism and the desire for shorter hours in this situation... The threat to paralyse the public services if carried out will rejoice the heart of Sinn Féin and will play most powerfully into its hands’.<sup>37</sup> The Unionist hierarchy shared the *News-Letter*’s concerns. Dawson Bates told Sir James Craig on 1 February: ‘The aim of Sinn Féin is to let matters drift on in Belfast until conditions arise in which the men would be so embittered with the authorities that they would join hands in a universal strike for the whole of Ireland’.<sup>38</sup> Unionists wanted an end to the strike as quickly as possible, but were reluctant to confront the strikers, and careful to follow Carson’s lead in presenting themselves as sympathetic to the men and understanding of the issue at heart.

The GSC was almost as ambiguous in policy as the Unionist Party. The *Workers’ Bulletin* counselled moderation and wrote about the need for workers’ control.<sup>39</sup> The GSC disavowed any ambition to disrupt and hoped that widespread inconvenience would force a quick settlement. On radicalism, the GSC was more straightforward than the *Workers’ Bulletin*. It wanted a parochial and a-political conflict. It did not involve Belfast trades council, which had long been held in suspicion by shipyard craft unions, especially the ASE and the ASCJ, for its perceived nationalist proclivities. Trades council involvement with the anti-conscription campaign reinforced that perception. Though the Orange Order and the UULA did not ‘take sides’ in the dispute, two of the 14 strike leaders identified by the *Northern Whig*, Bob Weir, a machinist in Harland and Wolff, and Billy Grant, an official of the Ship Constructive and Shipwrights’ Association, were UULA activists. Grant would later become Minister of Health at Stormont. His parliamentary secretary, the future Prime Minister Terence O’Neill, described him as ‘a typical Belfast Protestant working man, strongly anti-Catholic, but decent’.<sup>40</sup>

During the first two weeks, the GSC hoped the strike would spark action in Britain. John Milan, a Londoner recently appointed organizer of the Electrical Trades Union in Belfast, was particularly active in canvassing districts in England and Scotland, and gave speeches hinting of ‘further great developments’ ahead.<sup>41</sup> But the haggling continued cross-channel, with the exception of Glasgow, where the Clyde Workers’ Committee began a strike

<sup>34</sup> *Northern Whig*, 8 February 1919.

<sup>35</sup> *Northern Whig*, 11-12 February 1919; *Belfast News-Letter*, 12 February 1919.

<sup>36</sup> Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, p.236.

<sup>37</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 25 and 31 January 1919.

<sup>38</sup> PRONI, Carson Papers, D1507/1/35.

<sup>39</sup> *Workers’ Bulletin*, 3, 5 February 1919.

<sup>40</sup> *Voice of Labour*, 15 February 1919; Terence O’Neill, *The Autobiography of Terence O’Neill* (London, 1972), pp.31-2.

<sup>41</sup> *Northern Whig*, 8 February 1919.

for a 40 hour week on 27 January. This too would present problems for the GSC. The Clyde Workers' Committee was more avowedly radical and the government feared nothing less than revolution on Clydeside. After the 'Battle of George Square' on 31 January, which saw fighting between strikers and police in central Glasgow, the GSC dissociated itself from the Scottish dispute and affirmed that 'They in Belfast were determined they would be an object lesson to the world as to how a strike should be conducted...'.<sup>42</sup> Extending the strike in Ireland, or nationalist Ireland at least, was more problematic for a GSC determined to avoid any association, or accusation of association, with 'politics'. The ITUC sent a 'telegram of encouragement' on the outbreak of the dispute. No reply was received.<sup>43</sup> When Denis Houston, the ITGWU's Belfast organizer, offered his union's services, the GSC pleaded that there were five transport unions in the city and inter-union rivalry would prevent them from taking sympathetic action. Nor did the GSC seek to raise funds to sustain the dispute.<sup>44</sup> In Derry, FEST officials invited all workers to the Guildhall on 3 February to discuss their response. Shy of asking bluntly for a sympathetic strike, they proposed that Derry unions levy members to help Belfast and notice all local employers for a 44 hour week by 1 May. When Thomas Cassidy rose to speak his presence was challenged, and he said he was there as 'a worker in Derry'. In fact, Cassidy was chairman of the ITUC executive. Cassidy argued that action had to be national, and pointed out that a conference was due in Dublin on 8 February to discuss the formation of an all-Ireland hours and wages movement. After lively exchanges, the meeting adopted an amendment that Derry workers be balloted on a 44 hours movement.<sup>45</sup>

The ITUC had circularised affiliates on 30 January with a call to a national conference to demand a working week of 44 hours, a wage increase of at least 150% on pre-war rates, and a minimum wage of 50s per week. The circular's invocation of Pope Leo XIII, author of *Rerum Novarum*, the first Papal encyclical on the labour question, was not calculated to charm the 'black squad', and the unions in Belfast shipbuilding and engineering largely ignored the conference. In its only discussion of events in Belfast, the ITUC executive agreed on 7 February to 'that a resolution congratulating the workers of Belfast on their fight for a 44 hour week s[houl]d be moved at the conference' and that they be assured of 'hearty support...moral and financial'. A collection among delegates raised £14.5s and the conference agreed 'with acclamation' on an unprecedented levy of 1s. per week on all workers for the GSC's fighting fund. The GSC proposed to respond, and then changed its mind. The levy was never applied, but the Congress accounts for 1919 include a Belfast strike fund with £50, in addition to the 'substantial sum' raised in the collection.<sup>46</sup>

The unusual relationship between the metal trades and the authorities was evident in the inscription of 300 strikers as special constables after crowds had damaged property in Belfast city centre. The RIC paid tribute to the GSC's effectiveness in eradicating the influence of revolutionary tourists, lured to Belfast by the strike.<sup>47</sup> The Viceroy in Dublin, the blimpish Sir John French, was not so sure. Alarmed at the contagion of 'Bolshevism' and the prospect of Sinn Féin winning Protestant support through it, Dublin Castle sent in troops on Saturday 14 February to take over the gasworks and electricity station. On Sunday, trams began to trundle again. The GSC accepted that the strike was crumbling, the Glasgow strike

<sup>42</sup> *Voice of Labour*, 22 March 1919; *Workers' Bulletin*, 3 February 1919.

<sup>43</sup> UUMC, ILPTUC, *Annual Report* (1919), pp.76-7.

<sup>44</sup> Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, pp.92-114; *Voice of Labour*, 22 March 1919.

<sup>45</sup> *Derry Journal*, 3 February 1919; *Voice of Labour*, 8 February, 8 March, 5 April, 14 June 1919; Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, pp 243-4; The National Archives, London (TNA), Royal Irish Constabulary Inspector General's monthly confidential reports, 1 January to 30 April 1919, CO 904/108.

<sup>46</sup> Irish Labour History Society Archive (Dublin), ITUC national executive, minutes, 7 February; UUMC, ITUC, *Annual Report* (1919), pp.44-5, 48, 114, 119.

<sup>47</sup> Collins, 'Belfast trades council, 1881-1921', pp.274, 293-4.

had collapsed on 10 February, and hopes of cross-channel support had evaporated. The GSC recommended a return to work. The strongest opposition came from within the ASE and the Boilermakers.<sup>48</sup> Baird complained that the *Workers' Bulletin* was not allowed to 'give a lead against the offer'.<sup>49</sup>

### **Bearding the *Voice***

Soon after the Ulster Hall meeting in August 1918, Baird began to engage with the *Voice of Labour*. The *Voice* was owned by a co-operative called the Irish Labour Press and nominally served the entire movement. In practice it reflected the views of the ITGWU, relied heavily on 'organized salesmanship' in the expanding network of ITGWU branches, and was edited by an ITGWU officer, Cathal O'Shannon, an enthusiastic Irish speaker and republican as well as a self-styled 'Irish Bolshevik'. A motion of support for the paper at the ITUC annual conference in August 1918 encountered criticism from delegates of British-based unions. O'Shannon was happy to respond to complaints about the lack of northern coverage by Councillor William Logue, Derry trades council. Raised in Draperstown, County Derry, and an ITGWU official in Belfast in 1913, he was keen to embrace his native province and had cultivated contacts in the Belfast ILP. Ties with Belfast ILP'ers were nurtured also through the Socialist Party of Ireland, in which O'Shannon was a key figure.<sup>50</sup> As Logue conceded, the problem had its roots in northern indifference to Dublin, and O'Shannon sought to stir a response with provocative references to shipyard workers as 'the black squad' and the UULA as 'Orange Bolshies'. 'Workers and the 'south and west'', he opined, trailing his coat across the front page:

have long been accustomed to think of Belfast as an industrial Oxford – the home of lost causes, unreasoning conservatism, political and social, with a hopelessly parochial outlook. Their loyalty to trade unionism has been unquestioned, but they have entertained, long after the British worker had abandoned it, the view of trade unionism as a merely protective instrument.

Logue responded, saying that trade unionism in Ulster had 'in large measure succeeded', and could compare favourably with any part of the United Kingdom. He acknowledged that in politics the picture was not so bright due to northern 'suspicions', but was optimistic that 'we are gradually emerging into that position when we fully realise our strength'. The *Voice* remained sceptical, though it welcomed the shorter hours movement and told the shipyard unions to apply their proposed regime unilaterally and immediately.<sup>51</sup>

Baird was one of the few other northerners to join the debate. Emphasising that Ulster opposition to Home Rule was based on fear of 'Rome rule', he suggested that public control of education would go some way to assuaging Unionist concerns, and anticipated 'some sort of 'settlement' of the Home Rule question...in the not distant future'. Once Home Rule was 'out of the way', Ulster would quickly become 'the most democratic province in Ireland'. Another issue dividing the north and south was that of the so-called 'English Unions' which were not 'any more English than Irish'. In a jibe at O'Shannon's ITGWU, he ventured that Irish unions of recent vintage might be less hasty to claim superiority over 'that sturdy [trade] Unionism which took root three quarters of a century ago in Belfast...'. Baird returned to the theme of Home Rule and Rome rule in the *Voice* in October, citing the suppression of the weekly review *Peasant* in 1910 and asking how a people could demand self-determination

<sup>48</sup> O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland*, pp.173-4; Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, pp.108-10.

<sup>49</sup> *Voice of Labour*, 8 March 1919.

<sup>50</sup> *Voice of Labour*, 19 October 1918; Emmet O'Connor, 'Labour lives; Cathal O'Shannon', *Saothar*, 24 (1999), pp.89-90; Ulster University, Magee College (UUMC), ITUC, *Annual Report*, pp.67-8.

<sup>51</sup> *Voice of Labour*, 24-31 August, 7-14 September, 16 November 1918.

and be ‘too cowardly’ to protest against clerical interference in secular affairs?<sup>52</sup> The Catholic primate Michael Cardinal Logue had condemned *Peasant* for discussing public control of education, causing the proprietors to discontinue it. Its editor, W.P. Ryan, weary of being denounced as a socialist, packed his bags for London and work with the *Daily Herald*. Baird’s ‘bolt’, as O’Shannon styled it, drew a varied response. Ryan, a regular Irish language contributor to the *Voice*, assured Baird that there had been protests, a Cork correspondent denounced him as an ‘imperialistic shipwright’, and two Queen’s University professors wrote to oppose public control of education. O’Shannon could not resist heading the debate ‘Two professors and a boilermaker’.<sup>53</sup>

The *Voice of Labour* applauded the 44 hours strike as an encouraging sign of militancy with no illusions as to its political ramifications. ‘The workers of Belfast are not revolutionary’, wrote O’Shannon, ‘We know that well, for we have tried, and failed, to make them so’.<sup>54</sup> Baird responded with a letter to the *Voice* on 22 February, arguing that to prepare for the likely prospect of lengthy ‘industrial warfare’, workers needed ‘one big union’. On 8 March he went further in a front page open letter to the GSC. It amounted to a withering denunciation of the FEST for restraining the rank and file since July 1918 and of the GSC for making no appeal for financial assistance, refusing offers of help from the ITGWU, and accepting an outcome which fell short of what had been promised. In the ensuing debate, Sam Haslett, the GSC’s watchful eye on the *Workers’ Bulletin*, dismissed the claims as irrelevant, as all offers of aid fell far short of the £50,000 weekly that would have been needed to sustain the strike. Corroborating Baird’s poor opinion of the leadership, he went on: ‘No one knowing the Belfast workers would assert that they would face the distress with soup kitchens, etc, for a long period over the fight for one half hour a day’. However William Lorimer, a former ILP’er who would later join the Unionist Party, argued that the provenance of assistance had been a stumbling block, contending that the craft unions found the ITGWU’s industrial unionism unacceptable and citing an instance where a £100 donation had required ‘a full-fledged debate’ as the donor had ‘rejoiced at the blending of orange and green’. Milan struck what would become the official Labour view of events, applauding the solidarity shown and saying the GSC had done the best it could in the absence of support cross-channel.<sup>55</sup> The annual report of the ITUC blamed the collapse of the strike on ‘the failure of the shipyard workers in England and Scotland to act with similar energy and unanimity’. Far from being miffed by the GSC’s snubs, delegates to the annual congress that August, of whom a mere 17 out of 226 were from Belfast, largely insisted that the strike was a moral victory and had brought positive results.<sup>56</sup>

Baird’s next article in the *Voice of Labour*, ‘A townsman’s views on land ownership’, extended his ideas on public control of industry and education to land, and suggested that, like many socialists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, he had been influenced by Henry George’s *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth: The Remedy* (1879). Its concern to avoid the boom-slump cycle would have an obvious appeal for the chronically insecure shipyardmen. Globalization, Baird predicted, would soon challenge the privileged position of European workers:

The artificial conditions which at present prevail cannot endure much longer, and our capitalists will, as a matter of business, employ the labour which is cheap, without regard to colour or race; the cotton mills of India and Japan will be pitted against Lancashire; the industrious Chinaman will be taught to build ships;

<sup>52</sup> *Peasant* had incorporated and changed its name to the *Nation* in January 1909, but would be forever associated with what became a notorious example of ‘Rome rule’. The *Nation* folded on 24 December 1910.

<sup>53</sup> *Voice of Labour*, 21 September, 5-19 October, 2 November 1918.

<sup>54</sup> O’Connor, ‘Labour lives; Cathal O’Shannon’, pp.89-90; *Voice of Labour*, 8 February 1919.

<sup>55</sup> *Voice of Labour*, 22 March, 5 April 1919.

<sup>56</sup> UUMC, ILPTUC, *Annual Report* (1919), pp.44, 74-5.

British steamers will be manned by Lascars; while the men who manned the Navy and Mercantile Marine during the war will be cast aside unless they are prepared to offer themselves upon the altar of cheapness.<sup>57</sup>

Taxation of land and public ‘possession of the soil’ could provide the resources for a new and less vulnerable industrial base, though he did not specify how. Baird’s belief that ‘every article of food or clothing comes from the land’, also reflected a mind shaped by linenopolis, and its roots in flax-growing.

### ‘Dongaree Baird’

In January 1920 Baird was elected to Belfast Corporation for the Belfast Labour Party. The municipal elections were held under proportional representation, despite Unionist opposition, and with a much increased franchise. They marked the high-tide of the post-war radicalism in Belfast. The UULA had already lost the confidence, if it ever had it, of trade unions. As early as March 1919, Sam McGuffin, UULA MP for Shankill, had been deposed as president of the Belfast ASE Literary Society for breaking his promise to vote with the British Labour Party at Westminster.<sup>58</sup> The results of the municipal elections were dramatic. The outgoing Corporation consisted of 52 Unionists and eight Nationalists, numbers which had rarely varied since the introduction of democratic local government in 1899.

#### Local elections in Belfast, January 1920

	Number of candidates	Votes	% vote	Seats won
Unionist	47	40,907	46.0	29
UULA	8	4,699	5.3	6
Independent Unionist	5	4,167	4.7	2
Belfast Labour Party	22	12,768	14.3	10
National Amalgamated Union of Labour	3	1,138	1.3	-
Independent Labour	10	3,007	3.4	2
Nationalist	16	10,758	12.0	5
Sinn Féin	12	7,120	8.0	5
Independent	20	4,467	5.0	1
Total		89,031		

Source: Alec Wilson, *PR Urban Elections in Ulster, 1920* (London, 1972), pp.14, 46.

Seven of the Belfast Labour Party candidates were ILP’ers, two were nominated by the trades council, and the others were proposed by their trade unions. The Tyneside based National Amalgamated Union of Labour, with its strong support among semi-skilled shipyardmen, stood aside from the party and fielded its own slate. All endorsed the programme of the British Empire Union.<sup>59</sup> Founded in 1916 out of the Anti-German Union, the Empire Union turned its attention to combatting ‘Bolsheviks’ and Jews after the war. It was well connected in Belfast, with Carson as a president. By mid-1920, its Belfast branch claimed 5,000 members.<sup>60</sup> With a proven capacity to organize mass rallies, its agents lobbied Belfast Labour Party candidates. Nineteen refused to answer their questionnaire, but three responded positively, as did three independent labour candidates. There were also calls during the

<sup>57</sup> *Voice of Labour*, 5 April 1919.

<sup>58</sup> *Voice of Labour*, 12 April 1919.

<sup>59</sup> Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, p.257; Wilson, *PR Urban Elections in Ulster, 1920*, pp.32-5; *Church of Ireland Gazette*, 30 January 1920.

<sup>60</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 21 May 1918; *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 May 1918; Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, pp.225, 260-3, 288.

election campaign for Protestant employers to the dismiss ‘disloyal’ workers in retaliation for the war in the south.<sup>61</sup> Baird and David R. Campbell, a former president of the ITUC and a trades council nominee, were returned in the Ormeau ward. Baird polled a respectable 802 first preferences. Attracting few transfers, he was elected on the 10<sup>th</sup> count to the last of the six seats.<sup>62</sup>

Councillor Baird instantly infuriated the Unionists and earned himself the sobriquet ‘Dongaree Baird’ by attending the splendid City Hall in his working clothes, his cap sticking out of his side pocket. Labour nominated Campbell for Lord Mayor, symbolically proposed by Alderman Sam Kyle from the Shankill ward and Councillor Houston from the Falls, each district a by-word for loyalism and nationalism respectively. The proposal was defeated 36-18.<sup>63</sup> Baird’s maiden speech requested that council meetings be held in the evening, to facilitate the attendance of workers. That too was defeated. The Labour group became the official opposition and made its presence felt with speeches on every item on the agenda. Baird was elected to the improvement, law, public health, markets, and coal committees. He also took a lively interest in the provision of better tramway services for shipyard workers, the wages of municipal employees, and housing.<sup>64</sup> ‘Is it not time that this man ceased preaching anarchy?’, demanded one Unionist councillor, ‘If I were Lord Mayor I would settle you...’.<sup>65</sup>

### Expulsion

The ‘settlement’ came soon enough. Almost all Labour councillors opposed partition, and Unionists detected here a trojan horse of ‘Sinn Féin Bolshevism’. In particular, Labour successes in the 1920 local elections were seen to weaken the case for six county exclusion from a Home Rule parliament in Dublin. Carson told an Orange ‘field’ on 12 July:

The more insidious method is tacking on the Sinn Féin question and the Irish Republican question to the Labour question. (A voice – ‘Ireland is the most Labour centre in the United Kingdom’). I know that. What I say is this – these men who come forward posing as friends of Labour care no more about Labour than does the man in the moon. Their real object and the real insidious nature of their propaganda is that they may mislead and bring about disunity amongst our own people...<sup>66</sup>

Both Carson and Craig applauded what followed. Of the city’s several loyalist groups the initiative was taken by the Belfast Protestant Association, an evangelical and political organization which had been intermittently active since 1894 and had a special connection with the shipyards. On 21 July the Association instigated workplace expulsions in the yards.<sup>67</sup> Next day, the terror spread to various employments. Three distinct justifications were offered: Britain’s failure to stop the advance of republicanism, Sinn Féin infiltration of Labour, and claims that men from ‘the south and west’ had taken the jobs of loyalists who had enlisted during the world war. At least 7,400 men and women, one quarter of them Protestants, were forced out of their jobs by the end of the year. Others deemed it wise to leave of their own volition. On 28 July Baird and fellow expellee John Hanna set up the Expelled Workers’ Relief Committee (EWRC). It was the beginning of a process that would

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<sup>61</sup> Emmet O’Connor and Trevor Parkhill (eds), *Loyalism and Labour: The Autobiography of Robert McElborough, 1884-1952* (Cork, 2002), fn.39; *Church of Ireland Gazette*, 30 January 1920.

<sup>62</sup> Wilson, *PR Urban Elections in Ulster*, pp.24-5.

<sup>63</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 23, 31 January 1920; *Watchword of Labour*, 31 January 1920;

<sup>64</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 3 February, 2 March 1920.

<sup>65</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 2 June 1920.

<sup>66</sup> *Belfast Newsletter*, 13 July 1920.

<sup>67</sup> J.W. Boyle, ‘The Belfast Protestant Association and the Independent Orange Order, 1901-10’, *Irish Historical Studies*, xiii, no.60 (1962).

take him deeper into the nationalist community. Baird claimed it represented 90% of expelled men. Two other relief committees were formed by the ASCJ and the ASE.<sup>68</sup> Campbell and Baird also called a meeting of the Corporation. With loyalists packing the gallery, their motion was defeated 35-5 in favour of an amendment that the government take 'stern measures' against the 'assassins' who 'have awakened universal indignation in the entire Loyalist population'.<sup>69</sup>

Baird and Hanna turned for aid to the Irish and British Trades Union Congresses. Neither offered substantial help. Arguing that the key lay with the unions concerned, the ITUC did nothing to pressure the British.<sup>70</sup> Most of the assistance given the expelled workers came from Catholic, nationalist, and Sinn Féin sources. Southern Ireland, and the ITUC, expressed solidarity through a largely ineffective boycott of Belfast goods.<sup>71</sup> British trade union officials urged their Belfast committees to work with expelled members, but buckled to a negative response. Only the ASCJ took resolute action, going so far as to strike companies which refused to re-instate expelled members. Of its 4,000 members in Belfast, up to 3,000 ignored the strike call and had their union cards withdrawn. In early September, the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) annual conference had accepted a motion from an expelled workers' delegation calling on the parliamentary committee to summon a meeting of the executives of the unions concerned to pursue a 'common line of action'. The parliamentary committee agreed to send a troika to Belfast consisting of John Hill, general secretary of the Boilermakers, A.A. Purcell, and Arthur Pugh. Alf Purcell had been treasurer of the FEST and supervised the Irish branches of the National Amalgamated Furnishing Trades Association. Like many British Labour leaders, he sympathised with Irish self-determination, except when applied to trade union organization. Pugh was general secretary of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation. The troika finally crossed to Belfast in December. Their report largely reflected the loyalist justifications for the expulsions and was particularly critical of the ASCJ. With Belfast sliding into communal violence that would claim 500 lives and 2,000 injuries between July 1920 and July 1922, the eyes of the TUC glazed over. It now became more anxious about the dispute within the ASCJ, which was eventually resolved in favour of the renegades.<sup>72</sup>

In August 1920, Baird joined a Belfast Labour lobby in London, which met Labour MPs and Sir Hamar Greenwood, the Chief Secretary for Ireland. Whatever was said, Greenwood lost his temper and testily told Baird he 'would remember him'.<sup>73</sup> After London, Baird urged an embargo on raw materials to the Belfast shipyards at meetings in Birmingham, Barrow-in-Furness, Teesside, Bradford, Leeds, Wales, and the south of Scotland and met with 'financial success'.<sup>74</sup> Feeling that they were losing the propaganda war, the UULA sent three trade unionists in mid-September to speak to 'the loyalists of Liverpool' in Stanley Park.<sup>75</sup> The Belfast Labour Party had largely gone to ground, but Baird,

<sup>68</sup> Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, p.274.

<sup>69</sup> Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, p.273; *Belfast News-Letter*, 31 July, 2, 4 August 1920; *Church of Ireland Gazette*, 6 August 1920.

<sup>70</sup> UUMC, ITUC, *Annual Report* (1920), pp.100-6; *Annual Report* (1921), p.3.

<sup>71</sup> D.S. Johnson, 'The Belfast Boycott, 1920-22', in J.M. Goldstrom and L.A. Clarkson (eds), *Irish Population, Economy, and Society: Essays in Honour of the Late K.H. Connell* (Oxford, 1981), pp.287-307.

<sup>72</sup> TUC *Annual Report* (1920), pp.382-6; *Annual Report* (1921), pp.274-5; Kevin Morgan, *Bolshevism, Syndicalism, and the General Strike: The Lost Internationalist World of A.A. Purcell* (London, 2013), pp.46-7, 246. Geoffrey Bell, *Hesitant Comrades: The Irish Revolution and the British Labour Movement* (London, 2016), pp.85-94 includes a rare monographic study of the carpenters' dispute.

<sup>73</sup> Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, p.272-4; *Birmingham Gazette*, 5 August 1920; *Irish Independent*, 8 November 1920.

<sup>74</sup> *Watchword of Labour*, 14 August 1920; *Northern Whig*, 18 May 1921; Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, p.270.

<sup>75</sup> *Church of Ireland Gazette*, 24 September, 1 October, 19 November 1920.

Hanna, and Harry Midgley contested the first elections to the Northern Ireland parliament in May 1921 with covert funding from Sinn Féin.<sup>76</sup> ‘We are completely against partition’, declared their manifesto, ‘It is an unworkable stupidity...the interests of the workers of Ireland are politically and economically one’.<sup>77</sup> When loyalists prevented them from holding a rally in the Ulster Hall they folded their campaign. All three lost their deposits, as did a fourth independent socialist, Reverend Bruce Wallace.<sup>78</sup> Baird continued to press the case of the expelled workers. His speech to the TUC in September reflected the analysis of the expellees. It caused outrage in Belfast.<sup>79</sup>

Last July after very careful preparation and skilful organisation every worker in the shipyards and in other works who had the audacity to oppose the ‘ascendancy party’ led by Edward Carson was expelled from his work...Every man who was prominently known in the Labour movement, who was known as an I.L.P.’eer [sic] was expelled from his work just the same as the rebel Sinn Féiners...

After that outbreak we thought that the great English Trade Unions would come to our assistance. We looked with confidence to the action we hoped they would take, but the Joiners’ Union, and the Joiners’ Union alone, took strong action...

For, understand, at the back of this trouble in Belfast you have the intriguing English politicians who wish to use Ireland as a battle-cry in the future as they have used her in the past, and wish to divide you at another election, you, the English electors. They wish to divide you again on the Irish issue, that is the real reason why the trouble has been stirred up in the North of Ireland...

If Belfast intends to form a little back shop in the interests of exploiting employers I trust you will put a barbed-wire fence around it, and refuse to allow them any coal or steel or anything they require; and this will have a far reaching effect. It will go a long way, no doubt, to settle the problem at Belfast, and will be a big influence in settling what you call the Irish question.<sup>80</sup>

Back home, Baird had found work as secretary of the Belfast branch of the National Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union. It was not a congenial spot for a socialist republican as the union had gone jingo during the World War. Repeated overtures to the ITGWU bore fruit in 1922 when he was engaged as an organizer.<sup>81</sup> Over the next two years he had a lively career leading militant opposition in the south east of Ireland to the relentless wage cutting that followed the slump in 1920.<sup>82</sup> By 1924 the militancy had led him to run foul of the union leadership and he was a victim of the severe retrenchment imposed on the ITGWU by a huge fall in membership. Baird emigrated to Australia and died in the bosom of his family in Brisbane in December 1948. His death was reported in Irish newspapers.<sup>83</sup>

## Conclusion

There are serious gaps in our knowledge of Baird’s biography. Why he became a socialist and a Home Ruler, why he was scarcely active in politics or Belfast trades council before 1918, and whether his political values were influenced by his Presbyterianism or Ulster’s all pervasive sectarianism is unclear. For equally obscure reasons, he appears to have settled into a quiet life as a boilermaker in Brisbane, leaving his stormy past behind him. Baird was exceptional in the going as far as he did in embracing revolutionary socialism, militant trade

<sup>76</sup> On Midgley, a former joiner in the shipyards, see Graham Walker, *The Politics of Frustration: Harry Midgley and the Failure of Labour in Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 1985).

<sup>77</sup> *Irish News*, 21 May 1921.

<sup>78</sup> Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, pp.260-2.

<sup>79</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 7-8 September 1921.

<sup>80</sup> TUC, *Annual Report* (1921), pp.268-71.

<sup>81</sup> Francis Devine, *Organising History: A Centenary of SIPTU, 1909-2009* (Dublin, 2009), p.109; ITGWU, Annual report for 1921, pp.9-10; minutes of Resident Executive Committee, 17 October 1920, 5 November 1920, 15 June 1921.

<sup>82</sup> Emmet O’Connor, *A Labour History of Waterford* (Waterford, 1989), pp.167-200.

<sup>83</sup> State of Queensland Death Certificate, no.B19941; *Brisbane Courier Mail*, 8 December 1948; *Waterford News*, 4 January 1949, and the *Munster Express*, 7 January 1949.

unionism, vehement anti-Unionism, and adopting the republican understanding of the Ulster question. But he was typical of contemporary Belfast Labour activists in being a Protestant, in moving to the left after 1917, in being victimized, and in concluding that Labour depended on working class unity, that partition was inimical to unity, and that Unionism was an inherently reactionary force, fomenting sectarianism to smash socialism. Baird's story also reveals that whatever their political views on the Irish question, most union leaders, in London and Dublin, put the material interests of their unions first.