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John Hogan

Technological University Dublin, john.hogan@dit.ie

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## **Payback: The 1920/1921 AGIBSLTU Strike in the Dublin Building Industry**

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John Hogan  
Dublin Institute of Technology,  
Aungier Street,  
Dublin 2  
Email: John.hogan@dit.ie  
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### **Abstract**

In late 1920 a strike began in the building industry in Dublin that was to last until June of the following year. It effectively shut down building sites all across the city. The primary protagonists involved in the dispute were the Ancient Guild of Incorporated Brick and Stonelayers Trade Union (AGIBSLTU) and the building employers association, the Dublin Building Trades Employers' Association (DBTEA). Both of these bodies had fought a bitterly contested lockout 15 years before, which had almost destroyed the union. In 1920, by dint of wider economic circumstances, and a belligerent determination, the union was to have the upper hand in the dispute, having become as aggressive as the employers had been 15 years earlier. This article also provides an interesting insight into how wider economic developments on the global stage were to impact upon this dispute in Dublin, foreshadowing the future influence of the global economy upon all our lives.

### **Introduction**

The trade union that became known as the AGIBSLTU had a long history in Dublin, claiming to have been established as a guild in 1670.<sup>1</sup> During the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries it was based in a building known as the Bricklayers' Hall, at 49 Cuffe Street. After the turn of the century the union experienced rapid expansion, with new branches appearing all over the country, from Derry in the north, to Tralee in the south. This can, for the most part, be put down to the work of Richard O'Carroll, after he became union secretary in 1906. 'He set about rebuilding the union's strength and extending its influence outside Dublin.'<sup>2</sup> This growth necessitated a significant alteration in the management structures at Cuffe Street. The Bricklayers' Hall transformed from the head office of a Dublin based union, with a few outlying branches, to the headquarters of a nationwide organisation.<sup>3</sup>

In the wake of the 1916 Easter Rising, in which many trade unionists fought and died, including Richard O'Carroll, the tenor of Irish trade unionism changed.<sup>4</sup> 'In Ireland itself the [labour] movement played a wholehearted supporting role in the national struggle.'<sup>5</sup> 'The potency of nationalism among rank-and-file trade unionists was apparent in a wave of breakaway activity by the Irish branches of British trade unions during and after the Anglo-Irish War.'<sup>6</sup> For example, the Irish Engineering Industrial Union (IEIU) was a breakaway from the Amalgamated

Society of Engineers (ASE).

Nineteen of the thirty-seven affiliates to the 1916 Congress [ITCU] were British. Five years later, the number of Congress unions had risen to forty-two, but the amalgamateds had dropped to thirteen, and now represented under 25 per cent of total membership.<sup>7</sup>

On 23 April 1918 the AGIBSLTU took part in a day of national strikes against the threat of conscription to the British army being extended to Ireland.<sup>8</sup> Two years later it supported calls from the national executive of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (ILPTUC), for another general strike in support of 100 prisoners being held by the British in Mountjoy Prison without either charge or trial. Throughout the War of Independence the AGIBSLTU also assisted various other unions. For example, it gave £50-0-0 to the railwaymen's union when its members went on strike in protest at conveying munitions for the British Army.<sup>9,10</sup>

By 1920 Ireland, and its industrial relations climate, had changed utterly from the start of the century. Although the great lockout of 1913 could be regarded as a victory for the employers, it also marked the apogee of their powers. As a result of the work of James Larkin, first in Belfast, and then in Dublin, there was an explosion of unionisation amongst the unskilled, so that by 1920, union membership accounted for almost 25 per cent of all wage earners. By that time too the employers had come to accept that trade union recognition, and collective bargaining, could not be fought off forever.

### **Background to the 1920 Strike**

During the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the AGIBSLTU suffered a serious setback. In early 1905 the bricklayers were locked out of work by their employers – members of the Master Builders Association (MBA). This lockout imposed great hardships on the bricklayers, and their families, in addition to further depressing an already depressed economy in Dublin. As Callan notes, the MBA was an extremely aggressive association.<sup>11</sup> While the relationship between the AGIBSLTU and the MBA had been punctuated by various disputes over the years, the 1905 lockout was the most serious confrontation to that point.

Although the issues central to the lockout were eventually settled through arbitration, the decision at arbitration constituted a complete defeat for the bricklayers. The consequence of the lockout had long lasting ramifications for the union, and its membership, as the costs of this dispute put a severe strain upon the society's finances – resulting in all benefits to members (including pensions) being curtailed for years afterwards. Certain of its branches also collapsed, as did the discipline of members, some of whom refused to pay the higher dues required to make good the costs of the lockout. The fact that some employers kept their scabs on after the lockout ended only added insult to injury.

Fifteen years were to pass before the AGIBSLTU engaged in another large scale industrial action against the building employers, and their new association, the DBTEA. However, unlike in 1905, the union undertook this action on its own initiative, and executed it with a cool determination. An examination of this strike highlights the level of strategic thinking the union employed in its effort to defeat the employers. There was also an edge to this confrontation, born of the humiliation suffered by the union in 1905.

## The Gathering Storm

Throughout the spring of 1920 a series of meetings were held between the union and employers to discuss issues such as compensation for bricklayers during wet weather, wage rates for apprentices, and payment for working outside of Dublin.<sup>12</sup> None of these issues was very controversial. At the end of April, the Building Trades Group (BTG), of which the AGIBSLTU was a constituent, demanded from the employers a 44 hour working week, down from 47 hours, and an increase in wages of 6d. per hour.<sup>13</sup> Owen Hynes, Secretary of the AGIBSLTU, and James Litholder, president, attended a meeting on these issues with the employers, in Banba Hall, on 4 May.<sup>14</sup> At a union general meeting following Friday evening, 7 May, Owen Hynes presented the employers' offer:

*On Behalf of the Dublin Building Trades Employers Association, we accede to your demand for a 44 hour working week and make the following offer on rates existing prior to the 30<sup>th</sup> April last, ie 3d. per hour to tradesmen, and 2½d. per hour to labourers.<sup>15</sup>*

The union's representatives recommended rejection of the offer on the grounds that the wage increase was insufficient. By 12 May the employers had increased their offer to 3½d. per hour.<sup>16</sup> However, the AGIBSLTU was still unwilling to accept the deal.<sup>17</sup> This was followed a couple of days later by a letter from the employers to the effect that they could not afford to increase wages any further.<sup>18</sup> Yet, within 24 hours another offer came – a 4d. per hour increase for tradesmen, and a 3d. per hour increase for labourers. The union, in rejecting this offer, declared that if the 6d. per hour increase was not forthcoming by end of the week strike action would be initiated.<sup>1920</sup>

However, at this stage the Ministry of Labour intervened, suggesting that another conference be held to resolve the dispute.<sup>21</sup> The Council of the DBTEA met on 20 May to reconsider the union's demands. Its main argument against conceding the 6d. per hour wage increase was that it would make the Dublin bricklayers the highest paid in the whole of Great Britain.<sup>22</sup> That same day, John Gibson, Secretary of the DBTEA, sent a letter to this effect to the press.<sup>23</sup> On 21 May another meeting was held between the employers and union officials.<sup>24</sup> At this conference the employers offered a 4½d. per hour increase for tradesmen, and a 3½d. per hour increase for labourers, to take effect retrospectively from 1 May. Another conference could then be held on 1 September, to consider the conditions prevailing in the economy, in order to determine if further wage adjustments might be warranted.<sup>25</sup> Although no resolution was reached at the meeting, the bricklayers agreed to consider the offer, and to abstain from industrial action.<sup>26</sup>

The union representatives, who attended the conference with the employers, recommended acceptance of the offer at the subsequent meeting in the Bricklayers' Hall. Thereafter, a majority of union members voted in favour of the settlement, reducing their working week to 44 hours, and increasing their wages by 4½d. to 2s. 2d. per hour.<sup>27</sup> However, problems persisted into June in relation to when work on building sites should begin – 8AM or 8:30AM. This question arose due to the reduced working week resulting from the agreement. Although this issue might seem trivial, union members initially demanded a strike if the builders

kept insisting that the start time be 8:30AM instead of 8AM.<sup>28</sup> However, the union leadership eventually persuaded the members accept 8:30AM, due to the fact that 13 other trades in the city had already agreed to start work at that time.<sup>29</sup> What this highlights is the simmering belligerence present in the union.

### **The AGIBSLTU Takes Strikes Action**

On 1 September 1920, the bricklayers' union, as part of the BTG, attended a conference with the DBTEA to discuss the conditions prevailing in the industry.<sup>30</sup> The meeting was held in accordance with the terms of the settlement reached the previous May. At this conference the BTG demanded an increase in wages, as they claimed the cost of living had risen significantly over the summer. The AGIBSLTU was seeking a 4½d. per hour increase in wages, which would bring members earnings up to 2s. 6½d. per hour, while also demanding a 100 per cent pay increase for apprentices. In response, the employers obfuscated, stating that they would have to put the matter to a general meeting of their own members.<sup>31</sup>

Dublin Corporation found itself in serious financial difficulties at this time as a result of the Anglo-Irish War. The Corporation had pledged loyalty to the rebel Dail Eireann, instead of the British government, which promptly withdrew funding from the Corporation.<sup>32</sup> This resulted in a shortfall of over £200,000 in the Corporation's budget for 1920.<sup>33</sup> All employees working for the Corporation, including bricklayers, had to accept 25 per cent of their wages in post dated cheques, with the remainder in cash.<sup>34</sup> However, the AGIBSLTU did not threaten the Corporation with strike action in response. Instead, the remarks of a union member named B. Holohan capture the general attitude within the society, 'many men were making sacrifices in the national cause, and if it was necessary now, the Corporation employees should make a sacrifice.'<sup>35</sup>

On 19 September the union's general secretary, Owen Hynes, formally sent the DBTEA the union's demand for a 4½d. increase in members' wages, and a 100 per cent increase in apprentices' pay. He threatened that if these demands were not acceded to, the bricklayers would withdraw their labour on 2 October (Appendix A).<sup>36</sup> This ultimatum was forwarded as an individual demand by the AGIBSLTU, but other unions in the BTG, such as the stonecutters, and the plasterers, also forwarded their demands at the same time, as they had all agreed on a uniform stoppage date.

The employers protested the sought after increase in wages in light of the state of the economy. The global expansion of productive capacity during the Great War, and to satisfy the demands of the post-war peace-time market, led to an overproduction crises by the autumn of 1920.<sup>37</sup> A world wide economic downturn was coming. Ireland was also in the throws of its War of Independence, the economy in Dublin was depressed, and many buildings in the city, destroyed during the Easter Rising, still lay in ruins.

On 29 September, when the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Laurence O'Neill, offered to mediate in the dispute, his proposal was accepted.<sup>38</sup> However, at the conference in the Mansion House the following day, there was no movement on the either side. Nevertheless, the Lord Mayor requested that both parties keep negotiating, and working, for the following two weeks, at which time another conference would be held.<sup>39</sup> The bricklayers, under the leadership Owen Hynes, were in an aggressive mood. The day after the conference, 1 October, the AGIBSLTU held a general meeting at which the members voted their thanks to the Lord Mayor for all his help, then

voted for immediate strike action. The minutes record that ‘this motion was passed with acclamation by all present.’<sup>40</sup>

This meeting also set out how the union would finance itself during the strike. Migration money, to help members travel to England in search of work, was set at £2-10-0, while strike pay was fixed at £1-5-0. A strike levy of £0-10-0 was placed on members who managed to find work in Dublin, while the figure was set at £0-2-6 for members who found employment in England.<sup>41</sup> It should be noted that, as the dispute only involved employers who were members of the DBTEA,<sup>42</sup> over 200 bricklayers, and several hundred labourers, continued to work in Dublin.<sup>43</sup> Thus, union members could continue working for public boards, contractors, and even private firms so long as they were not associated with the DBTEA, and were willing to pay what the union demanded.

### **The Early Months of the Strike**

The first report of the strike in the media appeared in *The Irish Times* on 5 October 1920, under the headline “Thousands of men out.”<sup>44</sup> The following week the *Freeman’s Journal* reported that over 3,000 bricklayers, stonecutters, plasterers, marble polishers, and labourers were on strike.<sup>45</sup> However, a building contractor remarked to *The Irish Times* that “to concede the present demand would be to introduce a higher [wage] rate in Dublin than is paid in most places in Great Britain.”<sup>46</sup> Significantly, by the middle of the second week of the strike over 100 bricklayers had been dispatched to England for work.<sup>47</sup>

There were concerns in Dublin that if the strike lasted a long time it would significantly delay the reconstruction of buildings damaged during the 1916 Rising.<sup>48</sup> There were also worries that the strike might have the knock on effect of putting an additional 10,000 workers out of employment.<sup>49</sup> This would also impact negatively upon their dependents, as well as the wider community and economy.

On 18 October the employers’ and workers’ representatives met in the Mansion House to find a solution to the dispute. However, no agreement was reached.<sup>50</sup> The Lord Mayor, chairing the meeting, suggested that the dispute be put to arbitration.<sup>51</sup> However, the AGIBSLTU refused to consider this proposal.<sup>52</sup> By this time a great many bricklayers had made their way to England, with the intention of working there for the duration of the dispute. Union shop stewards, working in England, sent letters to the Bricklayers’ Hall, urging any unemployed members still in Dublin to make for England where work was plentiful.<sup>53</sup> The union’s president, James Litholder, appealed ‘to all who were willing to travel to do so as soon as possible and so make it possible for the union to win the strike.’<sup>54</sup> In contributing 2s. 6d. per week to the union, all of the bricklayers working in England were strengthening the society’s funds, while helping to reduce the amount of unemployment benefit being drawn from those same funds, enabling the society to remain solvent.<sup>55</sup>

In early November, the members of the union who were still drawing union unemployment benefits in Dublin, but apparently fit to travel to England, were summoned to the Bricklayers’ Hall.<sup>56</sup> In all, 40 bricklayers were questioned as to why they had not departed. During this meeting 15 of those questioned undertook to go to England within a week, while the remainder put forward a host of reasons for their remaining in Ireland, including being the sole parent of young children, and being afraid that their “house would be raided”<sup>57</sup> (supposedly by the British Army/Black and Tans). Thereafter, it was decided to suspend all strike pay to able

bodied members who refused to travel to England for work.<sup>58</sup> Only elderly members, unable to travel, were exempt from this ruling.

At this time the Corporation Housing Committee found itself caught between the competing demands of the union and the DBTEA. The Corporation, acting as a go between, informed the DBTEA that the bricklayers would return to work on some of the Corporation's public housing schemes, contracted to DBTEA employers, provided they received an increase of 2½d. per hour.<sup>59</sup> But, apart from these Corporation projects, the union insisted that it was still holding out for a wage increase of 4½d. per hour. However, the employers would not accept this, and only promised the going rate, with the possibility of pay being increased retrospectively based on a future settlement. The union rejected this, leaving the Corporation stuck in its unenviable position.<sup>60</sup>

By the middle of November 1920 the strike appeared no closer to a resolution. This was despite the fact that some of the other unions involved in the dispute had reduced their demanded wage increases from 4½d. per hour to 2½d. per hour.<sup>61</sup> John Gibson, chairman of the DBTEA, remarked that as far as the employers were concerned there was work there for the men when they were ready to take it up at the going rate.<sup>62</sup> As a result, the employers did not bother responding to the other unions' reduced demands.<sup>63</sup> The *Freeman's Journal* observed that by this time between 2,500 and 3,000 building labourers were unemployed.<sup>64</sup>

By early December the resolve of some of the unions involved the dispute was clearly weakening. Many months without full incomes had begun to take its toll on their members. On Monday 6 December a large number of building labourers and stonecutters returned to work for their pre strike wages.<sup>65</sup> However, the AGIBSLTU informed *The Irish Times* that its membership had no intention of returning to work.<sup>66</sup> In fact, by this time very few members of the AGIBSLTU were in Dublin, as the majority were working in England. Ten days later *The Irish Times* reported that the building dispute was effectively over, with majority of the building trades having given up the strike.<sup>67</sup> However, the paper noted that the AGIBSLTU was still holding out.<sup>68</sup> On 26 December, the union held a general meeting, at which secretary Own Hynes reported that despite all of their conferences with the employers since October, there had been no change in the overall situation.<sup>69</sup> This was despite the cost of living having reached its highest level since 1914. The secretary also reported that the overall cost of the strike for the union had so far amounted to almost £2,000.<sup>70</sup> Despite these expenses, and some of the other unions giving up, the bricklayers expressed their determined to continue with the struggle until the employers acceded to their demands.<sup>71</sup>

### **The Strike Widens**

In late December 1920, those bricklayers who had remained in Dublin, and on strike, had their benefits further reduced.<sup>72</sup> Although the strike had still not seriously affected the union's finances, the AGIBSLTU was acting cautiously, husbanding its resources. The last thing it wanted was to get itself into serious debt, as had happened during the lockout of 1905, which had been of shorter duration. By the beginning of the New Year *The Irish Times* was expressing concern as to the long term implications the AGIBSLTU's strike would have for the building industry in Dublin.<sup>73</sup> The impression from the newspapers is that, although other unions had give up, the AGIBSLTU's determination to continue the struggle meant that the building industry would remain stagnant.<sup>74</sup> This perseverance on the part of the AGIBSLTU came as a

surprise to many in the media. They had expected that when the bricklayers returning from England for Christmas they would be reluctant to leave their families again in the New Year. However, once the holidays were over, many AGIBSLTU members readily took the boat back across the Irish Sea.<sup>75</sup> It should also be noted that the situation was particularly hard on the building labourers who had remained in Dublin, as half had been idle since the beginning of the strike. All these men had to live on was a mere £1-0-0 per week from their own trade union. But, there were fears that by early January this source of funding would be extinguished.<sup>76</sup>

On 18 January a meeting took place between the AGIBSLTU and the DBTEA. However, no resolution was reached, with all sides agreeing to sit down again the following week.<sup>77</sup> However, both sides appeared no closer to a resolution, with the AGIBSLTU holding firm on its demands.<sup>78</sup> At this point, as if matters were not already bad enough, trouble arose on a second front. The AGIBSLTU became embroiled in a dispute with the Corporation Housing Committee. Here too it was looking for an increase in members' wages in the order of 4½d per hour.<sup>79</sup> Fighting against the building employers of Dublin was difficult enough, but for the union to take on the Corporation as well would surely prove too much. Suddenly, the long shadow cast by the 1905 lockout began to loom over the AGIBSLTU. To lose another major confrontation, after what had happened in 1905, would surely prove disastrous. Thus, becoming involved in a dispute with the corporation must have seemed to some union member a huge strategic risk, if not blunder. Yet, no indications of dissent amongst the membership were recorded in the union's minutes.

### **The Tide of the Dispute Turns in the Unions Favour**

On 7 February 1921, when things appeared as if they could only get darker, a curious incident occurred. The contract for a job at 16 Parnell Street was taken out of the hands of Messrs. Keegan, by a Mr. Kelly, the architect in charge, and given to a Messrs. Keating and Fitzpatrick. The reason was that the latter builders were not members of the DBTEA. This new arrangement meant that AGIBSLTU members could now work on this job as they would be paid at the demanded 2s. 6½d. per hour.<sup>80</sup> A short time afterwards another employer, named Shortall, also approached the union with an offer to pay its members what they demanded. This offer was also gratefully accepted.<sup>81</sup> Similar occurrences, where architects took jobs out of the hands of employers who were members of the DBTEA, or where the employers themselves left the association, occurred all across the city over the coming months, enabling those bricklayers who had remained in Ireland to obtain work where otherwise they would have had none. This also permitted some of the bricklayers working in England to filter home, and take up employment in Dublin.

In late February the union received a letter from the Corporation asking that it, and the employers, find a resolution in their dispute, so that the housing schemes for St. James's Walk and McCaffrey Street might be completed. However, the AGIBSLTU's position remained implacable. The bricklayers insisted that they would only return to work when they received their 4½d. increase from the contractors hired by the Corporation.<sup>82</sup> Subsequently, at the DBTEA's insistence, a meeting was held with the union to discuss the possible resumption of work on the Corporation's schemes. However, the union remained steadfast in insisting that their demands be met.<sup>83</sup> The fact that it was the employers who sought this meeting, and not the Corporation, indicated that they were beginning to feel the pressure of the strike, as their projects



sat idle, their companies stagnated, and their association collectively haemorrhaged members. However, caught in the middle of this dispute was the Corporation, and the many families it sought to provide public housing for.<sup>84</sup>

In early March 1921 the secretary of the DBTEA, John Gibson, spelt out the implications of the wage increase the union was seeking - bricklayers' wages would rise from £4-15-4 to £5-4-6 per week. This would make the Dublin bricklayers the highest paid workers in their trade in Great Britain. The employers, he informed the AGIBSLTU, could not countenance this.<sup>85</sup> The result was that the strike dragged on into its sixth month.

The newspapers reported these events in a largely demoralised tone, bemoaning the fact that the strike appeared as if it would never end.<sup>86</sup> *The Irish Times* recognised that a major factor in the union's favour was 'owing to the scarcity of skilled operatives in England since the war, the Dublin strikers have had no difficulty in securing employment across the Channel at much higher wages than they could get at home.'<sup>87</sup> Thus, while the DBTEA's construction projects lay idle in Dublin, the bricklayers continued to work on high paying jobs in England. During the 1905 lockout, the Dublin employers imported large numbers of scabs from England. However, the scarcity of labour in the building industry there in 1921, and the fact that the Dublin employers were unwilling to pay comparable wages, prevented them from attracting scabs. As a result of this their jobs remained idle. This also proved a significant financial benefit for the union, as combating the scab tactics in 1905, essentially sending them back across the Irish Sea, had been very costly. Thus, a series of events combined to the union's advantage in this dispute.

With the strike dragging on for more than half a year, and the AGIBSLTU appearing as determined as ever, the question as to whether the bricklayers could hold out was becoming less of an issue, as opposed to whether the DBTEA could. By this time a significant number of employers had broken with the DBTEA, in order for members of the AGIBSLTU to work on their jobs. For instance, on 9 March, the AGIBSLTU received notification from two separate builders that they had left the DBTEA, and were offering to pay union members what they were demanding.<sup>88</sup> A. R. Saunders, a foreman for Messrs. West & Co., contacted the union on 23 March to inform it that should members resume work for the firm they would be paid 2s. 6½d. per hour.<sup>89</sup> A week later a contractor names J. Dunbar informed the union that he too was no longer a member of the DBTEA. He stated that he was prepared to pay the AGIBSLTU's members whatever they wanted so long as they returned to work.<sup>90</sup>

## **Resolving the Dispute**

On 11 April, after three and a half months of dispute the Corporation Housing Commission informed the bricklayers that it was willing to accede to their demands for an extra 4½d per hour.<sup>91</sup> The Commission only asked that there should be no delay in union members resuming work at the Mount Brown and Saint James Walk housing projects. The AGIBSLTU's minute book notes, 'the union decided to comply with the request which was noted with approval.'<sup>92</sup> The sense of relief and victory in the union's minutes is clear to see. This also meant that more bricklayers were able to return from England. The AGIBSLTU had won its dispute with the corporation, as opposition to its demands amongst members of the DBTEA crumbled across the city.

Throughout the rest of April, and into early May 1921, the DBTEA continued to lose members. By mid May the employers again sought to hold talks with the AGIBSLTU.

However, the union's executive council, sensing victory, declined the invitation.<sup>93</sup> All senior union members appeared confident that not alone could they hold out, but that they could impose their terms upon the DBTEA. From the AGIBSLTU's minutes it is clear that moral was very high. Absent is the sense of panic that gripped the society during the lockout of 1905. Victory over the employers seemed close at hand.

However, the employers still insisted that they could not offer a wage increase. In England bricklayers had fallen to 2s. 2d. per hour in late spring, but by August it was predicted that their wages would be reduced to 2s. per hour. This was on account of wage agreements there which allowed for variations in earnings as the costs of living fluctuated. Ironically, even without the wage increase they so desperately sought, the Dublin bricklayers were, for the first time, going to become the highest paid members of their trade in the United Kingdom.

On 1 June the AGIBSLTU's president James Litholder, and general secretary Owen Hynes, attended another conference with the builders at the Mansion House, this arranged at the builders' behest. During proceedings a group of Black and Tans broke in on the meeting. After demanded to know who everyone was, and their business, the British troops eventually withdrew.<sup>94</sup> When the meeting resumed the representatives of the AGIBSLTU pressed for the increase in wages. The builders resisted on the ground that the standard wages in Great Britain were now 2s 2d per hour, and were likely to fall further. If the union wanted parity with the wages in Britain they already had that.<sup>95</sup> In light of this the builders offered a 1d per hour wage increase.

A general meeting of the AGIBSLTU on 10 June decided pragmatically to accept the 1d. per hour increase in wages offered by the employers.

Owing to the reductions in wages in the industry throughout Great Britain, which brought the rates in Grade A centres down to 2s. 2d. per hour, it was felt that the whole position had materially altered. As the prices of foodstuffs had also been reduced, the possibility of obtaining what had been originally demanded was very doubtful.<sup>96</sup>

This increase would bring bricklayers' hourly earnings up to 2s. 3d., and come into effect from the day they resumed work. However, as part of the deal, this increase in wages was only to remain in effect until 1 August 1921.<sup>97</sup> Thereafter, wages were to revert back to 2s. 2d. per hour until 1 January 1922.<sup>98</sup> The plasterers, who had also been on strike, accepted the same settlement.<sup>99</sup> After eight and a half months of strike work resumed at 8:30AM on Monday morning, 13 June.<sup>100</sup>

The total amount of cash the union possessed on 30 June 1921 came to £989-4-1, down only £68-13-11 from £1,057-18-0 on June 30 1920. Union receipts for that 12 month period, of which eight and a half months were spent on strike, totalled a healthy £6,530-11-11, while total disbursements, including strike pay of £2,838-3-2, came to £6,599-5-10,<sup>101</sup> the difference amounting to the aforementioned £68-13-11. An examination of the Steward's Book from the first half of 1921 clearly shows the huge volume of strike levies being submitted by the membership.<sup>102</sup> This was in stark contrast to the difficulties experienced by the union during the lockout of 1905, when many of the bricklayers who managed to find work in England refused to continue paying their dues. The absence of loans on the union's account books indicated that it had weathered the strike without needing any outside financial assistance.<sup>103</sup> Angry creditors, threatening legal action if their loans were not repaid, brought the union to the brink of

bankruptcy in the wake of the 1905 lockout, a situation that forced it to slash benefits to members for years afterwards. In 1921 the union was able to continue providing its elderly, sick, and retired members with their benefits. Under the circumstances this was a magnificent performance by the union's management, in ensuring that the society remained solvent; and by its members, in maintaining a disciplined loyalty to their society, irrespective of the hardships encountered.

## Conclusion

Having committed itself to a long running strike in pursuit of a wage increase of 4½d. per hour, the 1d. increase attained by the AGIBSLTU might be considered a pyrrhic victory. However, the strike, like all labour disputes, once initiated had quickly acquired a momentum of its own. By the time it ended there was more at stake than just wages. Thus, this confrontation, and its result, has to be examined from a number of different perspectives.

The AGIBSLTU had taken on the DBTEA, and the Corporation, and effectively forced both into seeking conciliation. The AGIBSLTU possessed the initiative throughout the dispute. At no time did the employers appear to have the upper hand. So confident was the union, that in the middle of its dispute with the DBTEA, it took on the Corporation Housing Committee. The employers were the party under the greatest pressure on account of the dispute, and consequently continually seeking a resolution.<sup>104</sup> It was the Corporation that gave in first, submitting to the union's demands in early April. While the DBTEA did not give the union all it wanted, it moved some way towards the union's position in seeking a resolution that brought the strike to an end.

The industrial/economic situation in Britain in 1920/1921, although ancillary to the dispute in Dublin, played a huge role in determining how that dispute evolved, and how it was ultimately resolved. Higher wages in Britain permitted the AGIBSLTU to justify the increases it sought. The severe shortage of skilled workmen in Britain, due to the Great War, and the higher wages they commanded, allowed the union to send its members to work there, while at the same time preventing the DBTEA from importing British scabs to Dublin. However, the falling cost of living in Britain in the second half of 1921, which led the wages of bricklayers there to fall to 2s. 2d. per hour, seriously undermined the union's claims for parity, when it was seeking 2s. 6½d. per hour. Thus, during the early months of the strike conditions in Britain favoured the union's cause, while during its latter months changes in the British economy undermined the union's position.

Unlike events during the lockout of 1905 the AGIBSLTU never displayed weakness. There was no dissent voiced by the rank and file membership to the decisions made by the union leadership throughout the strike. Once industrial action began, and most bricklayers were dispatched to England, the strain on union's funds, although still significant, never became critical. If it had not been for the world economic slump, and its impact on the British economy, the dispute would most likely have continued, and it is quite possible that the DBTEA would have suffered such a loss of membership that it would have been forced to accept the union's terms. Unlike the 1905 lockout launched on the union by the employers, the bricklayers' union had carefully chosen the conditions it fought this strike action around, and execute the strike in a thoroughly professional manner. Although the union had not achieved an unconditional victory over the DBTEA, the ghost of the 1905 defeat had finally been laid to rest.

## Appendix A

### Letter from Owen Hynes to the Dublin Building Trades Employers' Association

Ancient Guild of  
Incorporated Brick and Stonelayers' Trade Union

APPROVAL NO. 83

Head Office: 49 CUFFE STREET, DUBLIN.

TELEPHONE:  
"DUBLIN 3425."

DUBLIN BRANCH  
21 Sept 1920

Owen Hynes,  
*General Secretary.*

The Secretary  
Dublin Building Trades  
Employers' Association

Dear Sir,

The report of our representatives who attended the Conferences between your Association and The Building Trades Group was considered by this union, when the following resolution was adopted:-

"That we demand an advance of 4½d per hour on the standard rate, and an advance of 100% on the present scale of pay for Apprentices, and further that the overtime rates be fixed as follows, time and a half after leaving off time up to 9 O'C, after 9 O'C up to starting time to be double time, after leaving off time on Saturdays up to starting time on Mondays to be double time."

Kindly place this matter before your association at your earliest convenience. We will be pleased to appoint a deputation to discuss the demands of your council if a Conference is arranged.

In the event of no settlement being arrived at before the 2nd October 1920, we will withdraw our labour on that date.

Your's faithfully,

Gen Sec

*P.S. The advanced pay to be retrospective as from 1st Sept 1920*

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<sup>1</sup> Dublin Public Libraries, Gilbert Library [DPL, GL], Charter and Documents of the Dublin Guild of Bricklayers, Ms. 81, p. 1. For more on the antecedents of the union, see John Hogan and Gary Murphy, 'From guild to union: the evolution of the Dublin Bricklayers' Society, 1670-1888' in *Saothar* 26 (2000) pp.17-26

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Ward-Perkins, *Select Guide to Trade Union Records in Dublin*, (Dublin, 1996), p. 26.

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- <sup>3</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1097/21/4, Part 1 of the rules: Ancient Guild of Incorporated Brick and Stonelayers' Trade Union, 1912.
- <sup>4</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/1, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 25<sup>th</sup> February 1911 – 4<sup>th</sup> March, 1918, 3 June 1916.
- <sup>5</sup> E.Rumpf, and A. C. Hepburn, *Nationalism and Socialism in Twentieth Century Ireland*, (Liverpool, 1977), p. 25.
- <sup>6</sup> William K. Roche, 'Industrialisation and the Development of Industrial Relations,' in: T. V. Murphy and W. K. Roche, eds. *Irish Industrial Relations in Practice*, (Dublin, 1994), p. 23.
- <sup>7</sup> Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-1960*, (Dublin, 1992), p. 98.
- <sup>8</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 23 April 1918.
- <sup>9</sup> Charles Townshend, 'The Irish railway strike of 1920; industrial action and civil resistance in the struggle for independence,' *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 83, pp. 265 – 282.
- <sup>10</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 10 June 1920.
- <sup>11</sup> Charles Callan, 'If the Tradesmen do not make a Complete Surrender' - The Building Trades Lock-Out, Dublin, 1896, (2008).
- <sup>12</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 4 April, 1920.
- <sup>13</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 2 May, 1920.
- <sup>14</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 5 May, 1920.
- <sup>15</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 7 May, 1920.
- <sup>16</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 13 May, 1920.
- <sup>17</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 17 May, 1920.
- <sup>18</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 17 May, 1920.
- <sup>19</sup> The Irish Times, 20 May, 1920, p. 5.
- <sup>20</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 18 May, 1920.
- <sup>21</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 23 May, 1920.
- <sup>22</sup> The Irish Times, 21 May, 1920, p. 5.
- <sup>23</sup> The Freemans Journal. 21 May, 1920, p. 2.
- <sup>24</sup> The Irish Times, 22 May, 1920, p. 7.
- <sup>25</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 23 May, 1920.
- <sup>26</sup> The Irish Times, 22 May, 1920, p. 7.
- <sup>27</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 23 May, 1920.
- <sup>28</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 6 June, 1920.
- <sup>29</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 10 June, 1920.
- <sup>30</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 2 September 1920.
- <sup>31</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 2 September 1920.
- <sup>32</sup> Irish Independent, 30 August, 1920, p. 6.
- <sup>33</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 2 September 1920.
- <sup>34</sup> Irish independent, 7 September 1920, p. 5.

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- <sup>35</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 2 September 1920.
- <sup>36</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 19 September 1920.
- <sup>37</sup> (O'Connor, 1988)
- <sup>38</sup> The Irish Times, 30 September, 1920, p. 6.
- <sup>39</sup> The Irish Times 5 October, 1920, p. 4.
- <sup>40</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 1 October 1920.
- <sup>41</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 1 October 1920.
- <sup>42</sup> The Freeman's Journal, 11 October, 1920, p. 3.
- <sup>43</sup> Irish Independent, 8 October, 1920, p. 6.
- <sup>44</sup> The Irish Times 5 October, 1920, p. 4.
- <sup>45</sup> The Freeman's Journal, 11 October, 1920, p. 3.
- <sup>46</sup> The Irish Times, 7 October, 1920, p. 5.
- <sup>47</sup> Irish Independent, 8 October, 1920, p. 6.
- <sup>48</sup> The Irish Times, 9 October, 1920, p. 3.
- <sup>49</sup> The Irish Times, 9 October, 1920, p. 3.
- <sup>50</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 18 October 1920.
- <sup>51</sup> Irish Independent, 19 October, 1920, p. 7.
- <sup>52</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 21 October 1920.
- <sup>53</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 21 October 1920.
- <sup>54</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 21 October 1920.
- <sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, 27 December 1920.
- <sup>56</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 1 November, 1920.
- <sup>57</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 2 November, 1920.
- <sup>58</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 1 November, 1920.
- <sup>59</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 10 November, 1920.
- <sup>60</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 10 November, 1920.
- <sup>61</sup> Irish Independent, 11 November, 1920, p. 6.
- <sup>62</sup> The Freeman's Journal, 16 November, 1920, p. 5.
- <sup>63</sup> Irish Independent, 11 November, 1920, p. 6.
- <sup>64</sup> The Freeman's Journal, 16 November, 1920, p. 5.
- <sup>65</sup> The Irish Times, 7 December, 1920, p. 4.
- <sup>66</sup> The Irish Times, 7 December, 1920, p. 4.
- <sup>67</sup> The Irish Times, 16 December, 1920, p. 2.
- <sup>68</sup> The Irish Times, 16 December, 1920, p. 2.
- <sup>69</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 26 December, 1920.
- <sup>70</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 26 December, 1920
- <sup>71</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 26 December, 1920.
- <sup>72</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>73</sup> The Irish Times, 6 January, 1921, p. 4.

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- <sup>74</sup> The Irish Times, 11 January, 1921, p. 7.
- <sup>75</sup> Irish Independent, 11 January. 1921, p. 5.
- <sup>76</sup> Irish Independent, 11 January. 1921, p. 5.
- <sup>77</sup> Irish Independent, 19 January, 1921, p. 3.
- <sup>78</sup> The Irish Times, 26 January, 1921, p. 4.
- <sup>79</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 27 December, 1920.
- <sup>80</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 7 February 1921.
- <sup>81</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 23 February, 1921.
- <sup>82</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 21 February, 1921.
- <sup>83</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 28 February, 1921.
- <sup>84</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 4 March, 1921 – Letter from the Corporation Housing Committee.
- <sup>85</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 4 March, 1921 – Letter from John Gibson, Secretary of the Dublin Building Trades Employers' Association, to P. Tobin, Corporation of Dublin.
- <sup>86</sup> The Irish Times, 24 March, 1921, p. 9.
- <sup>87</sup> The Irish Times, 24 March 1921, p. 9.
- <sup>88</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 9 March 1921.
- <sup>89</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 23 March 1921.
- <sup>90</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 30 March 1921.
- <sup>91</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 11 April 1921.
- <sup>92</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 11 April 1921.
- <sup>93</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 16 May 1921.
- <sup>94</sup> The Irish Times, 1 June 1921.
- <sup>95</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 1 June 1921.
- <sup>96</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 10 June 1921.
- <sup>97</sup> The Freemans Journal, 16 June, 1921, p. 5.
- <sup>98</sup> The Irish Times, 10 June 1921, p. 3.
- <sup>99</sup> Irish Independent, 16 June, 1921, p. 6.
- <sup>100</sup> The Irish Times, 14 June 1921.
- <sup>101</sup> Statement of Accounts and Auditor's Report for Year ended 30/6/1921 - NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 10 July 1921.
- <sup>102</sup> NA, AGIBSLTU, 1097/5/14, Stewards Book, 1921.
- <sup>103</sup> Statement of Accounts and Auditor's Report for Year ended 30/6/1921 - NA, AGIBSLTU, 1034/2, Minutes of general and committee meetings, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, 10 July 1921.
- <sup>104</sup> The Irish Times, 16 June, 1921, p. 7.