

They ‘never dared say “boo” while the British were here’: the postal strike of 1922 and the Irish Civil War

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines the causes and consequences of the 1922 postal strike which was the first nationwide strike to occur following the establishment of the Irish Free State. In the eyes of the government, the dispute was as much a threat to its authority as that posed by anti-Treatyites, and it was resolved to crush both. The significance of the postal dispute within the annals of Irish labour history has been obscured and overshadowed by the civil war. The strike was not only about a demand for a fair and reasonable wage: it also raised issues relating to workers’ rights, including the right to strike; government tactics, including the harassment and intimidation of workers by the military; victimisation; political propriety and probity; the abuse of government power; and the role and effectiveness of the labour movement. Furthermore, the historical collision of both the postal strike and the civil war produced strong emotions among all parties to this labour dispute – the postal workers, postal unions and the fledgling government. The coincidence of the dispute and the civil war determined the government’s attitude towards labour unrest, labour affairs and labour relations until Fianna Fáil succeeded Cumann na nGaedheal in 1932.*

The advent of independence generated a heightened level of expectation among Irish workers and within the labour movement of improved circumstances for the working classes. If expression of class divisions tended to be held in check during the War of Independence, as trade union representatives reminded the new provisional government on 10 January 1922, this was not the case during the civil war.¹ However, the labour movement’s expectation that the establishment of independence and the settling of political and constitutional matters would facilitate the promotion of workers’ rights did not, for reasons beyond their control, materialise in the manner anticipated. The postal strike, which took place between 10 and 29 September 1922, was significant for several reasons. It was the first nationwide strike to occur in independent Ireland following the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921.² In the eyes of the government, the dispute was as much a threat to its authority as that posed by anti-Treatyites, and it was resolved to crush both. J. J. Walsh, the newly-appointed postmaster general and a former postal union

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¹ J. Anthony Gaughan, *Thomas Johnson, 1872–1963* (Dublin, 1980), p. 195.

² Note: the Irish Free State came into being twelve months later in December 1922.

official, viewed the postal strike as a symptom of the general chaos then enveloping the country and later recalled that ‘at this critical juncture to smash such a well-organised strike was a salutary lesson to the general indiscipline which had then seemed to run riot through the land’.³ The significance of the postal dispute to Irish labour history has been obscured and overshadowed by the civil war. The strike was not only about a demand for a fair and reasonable wage: it also raised issues relating to workers’ rights, including the right to strike; government tactics, including the harassment and intimidation of workers by the military; victimisation; political propriety and probity; the abuse of government power; and the role and effectiveness of the labour movement. The historical collision of both the postal strike and the civil war produced strong emotions among all parties involved – the postal workers, postal unions and the fledgling government.

The coincidence of the dispute with the civil war determined the government’s attitude towards labour unrest, labour affairs and labour relations until Fianna Fáil succeeded Cumann na nGaedheal in 1932. Based on archival research in Britain and Ireland, including in the Postal Museum in London, this article offers a reassessment of the causes, consequences and significance of the postal strike. The historiography of the Irish Revolution has understandably tended to focus on political and military activity; the significance of social unrest has not received the same level of historical analysis, something which this article redresses.⁴

The Irish Free State was born into a situation of industrial strife. While wages had risen during the First World War and the boom that immediately followed, by 1922 the economy was in depression. Rising unemployment dampened consumer demand which sent the economy spiralling into long-term recession. In a period of deflation employers sought to reduce wages to remain competitive. Workers fought to retain their earnings and, in the context of unstable political conditions, industrial action was occasionally violent.⁵ Days lost due to strikes and lockouts in 1922 were 794,642, rising to 1,208,734 in 1923, before falling to 231,577 in 1925. The causes were reduced wages, working hours and arrangements, closed-shop disputes, holidays, trade union principles and sympathetic strikes.⁶ In 1922 and early 1923 a series of disputes across industry — the local authorities and the agricultural sector in particular — led to various strikes and lockouts, mainly among Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union (I.T.G.W.U.) members. Trade union strategy focused on maintaining wages at existing levels or at least

³ J. J. Walsh, *Recollections of a rebel* (Tralee, 1944), pp 62–3.

⁴ A focused account of the 1922 postal strike is contained in an article by Alexis Guilbride, ‘A scrapping of every principle of individual liberty: the postal strike of 1922’ in *History Ireland*, viii, no. 4 (winter 2000), pp 35–9. Further brief accounts can be found in Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000* (London, 2005), p. 256; Martin Maguire, *The civil service and the revolution in Ireland, 1912–1938: ‘shaking the blood-stained hand of Mr Collins’* (Manchester, 2008), pp 145–8; Emmet O’Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland, 1917–1923* (Cork, 1988), pp 104–05, 113–14, 158–59; John M. Regan, *The Irish counter-revolution, 1921–1935: treatyite politics and settlement in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 1999), pp 93–4, and Pádraig Yeates, *A city in civil war: Dublin, 1921–4* (Dublin, 2015), pp 129–32.

⁵ Donal P. Corcoran, *Freedom to achieve freedom: the Irish Free State, 1922–1932* (Dublin, 2013), pp 196–7; Emmet O’Connor, *A labour history of Ireland, 1824–2000* (new ed., Dublin, 2011), p. 119.

⁶ *Irish Trade Journal* (Dublin), May 1926, p. 152.

minimising wage reductions.⁷ The impact of the post-war economic slump meant that the pleas of workers were given little consideration at a time when retrenchment was the order of the day at central and local government level. Initially, the provisional government spent more time dealing with strikes, threatened strikes, soviets and agrarian agitation than with republican militarism.⁸

The postal strike in September 1922 was the first major industrial dispute to occur during the civil war and the first example of forceful government intervention ‘to manage the course of industrial action rather than simply respond to its excesses’.⁹ It was also significant for the fact that the employer was the state itself. The strike was provoked by the government’s decision to impose pay cuts across the civil service and to deny postal workers the right to strike. It remains an oddly-neglected episode in Irish political and labour history. In his brief reference to it, Diarmaid Ferriter suggests that the government’s response could be regarded on one hand as an indication of its determination not to be diverted from winning the civil war, while alternatively it could be seen as an expression of overt hostility to the working class.¹⁰ Both interpretations are equally applicable. The challenges facing the provisional government were daunting and would have discouraged the most competent of state-builders. It had to contend with the civil war, as well as with a range of economic and social problems. A civil war mentality pervaded the government’s response to agitation of all kinds. All were deemed anti-government and anti-Treaty and for this reason the government did not hesitate to sanction military intervention against postal workers.

I

From 1831 until 1922 the Irish postal service was controlled by the postmaster general (P.M.G.) in London. The home rule bills and the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 provided for the retention of the postal service as an imperial service. The Free State assumed control of the Irish postal service in respect of the twenty-six counties from the postmaster general with effect from 1 April 1922, while the service in Northern Ireland remained part of the British post office.¹¹ James J. (J. J.) Walsh was appointed the Free State postmaster general and from June 1924 was styled minister for posts and telegraphs, following the creation of that government department.¹² Irascible and lacking diplomacy, he did not endear himself to the British authorities during the transfer of responsibility from London to Dublin.¹³

⁷ Richard Dunphy, *The making of Fianna Fáil power in Ireland, 1923–1948* (Oxford, 1995), p. 53.

⁸ Thomas Murray, *Contesting economic and social rights in Ireland: constitution, state and society, 1849–2016* (Cambridge, 2016), p. 89.

⁹ O’Connor, *Syndicalism*, p. 159.

¹⁰ Ferriter, *Transformation*, p. 256.

¹¹ C. I. Dulin, *Ireland’s transition: the postal history of the transitional period, 1922–1925* (Dublin, 1992), p. 19. See also Claire Fitzpatrick, ‘The first step to a nation?: the Irish postal service and the home rule crisis’ in *History: the Journal of the Historical Association*, civ, no. 360 (Apr. 2019), pp 228–44; Martin Maguire, ‘Civil service trade unionism in Ireland (Part II), 1922–90’ in *Saothar*, xxxiv (2009), pp 41–60.

¹² Patrick Maume, ‘Walsh, James Joseph’, *DIB*, ix, 737–9.

¹³ Dulin, *Ireland’s transition*, p. 19.

In the first issue of *Iris an Phoist*, the official journal of the postal service, Walsh issued a circular to all staff which was a mixture of idealism and patriotism:

the aim of the new administration is to make the Staff the most contented of staffs, and to make the service as a whole the most efficient service in Europe. In its dealing with the staff the administration will be guided solely by the interest of the service ... For the first time, the Irish Staffs are working for an Irish Government; for the first time they are responsible for the providing of an efficient Service to an Irish Government alone — to the Irish people alone. And, in the providing and maintaining of an efficient service, I feel confident that I can rely upon the whole-hearted co-operation of men and women of all grades.¹⁴

The post office was the largest employer in the state with a workforce of 13,500 in 1922, comprising a range of grades at all levels, both technical and non-technical, and including a significant proportion of female workers. Unlike the British service, the Irish post office was unprofitable and needed to reduce its costs.¹⁵ A sparsely scattered rural population and lack of significant industry or commercial activity across much of the country contributed to losses. The service was labour intensive and was regarded as ‘a severely crippled beast’ when handed over to the Irish Free State.¹⁶ Financial accounting procedures were in a chaotic state in 1922 and the ‘best estimate’ for 1923 predicted that state revenue would fall short of expenditure by about £2.75m.¹⁷ At a cabinet meeting on 10 May Michael Collins forcefully demanded economy.¹⁸ Yet, some ministers sought free telephone facilities at their residences and a free telegram service, neither of which were available to British government ministers.¹⁹

A ‘cost-of-living bonus’ for civil servants, as a multiplier on basic salary, had been introduced by the British government during the First World War to compensate for high inflation. This multiplier was based on a cost-of-living index figure calculated every six months. As prices continued to rise after the war, the bonus continued to be paid. For most postal workers on low wages, the bonus was critical. In 1891 the maximum earned by a post office clerk after seventeen years’ service was £2 16s. a week, which had only increased to £3 1s by 1922.²⁰ With the fall in the cost of living after the war, particularly from September 1921, the British government imposed a cut of between ten and fifty per cent on civil service salaries in February 1922. Civil servants had, by this time, considered the combination of basic pay and bonus as real and actual employment income.²¹ When the provisional government decided to follow suit, only postal workers resisted. They had fared badly compared to others in the civil service as they had not experienced any sig-

¹⁴ *Iris an Phoist*, 1 (15 Mar. 1922), p. 1.

¹⁵ Francis Devine, *Communicating the union: a history of the Communications Workers’ Union* (Dublin, 2015) pp 18–19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁷ Ronan Fanning, *The Irish Department of Finance, 1922–58* (Dublin, 1978) p. 105; *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Post Office* (Dublin, 1922).

¹⁸ Fanning, *Finance*, pp 50–54.

¹⁹ Dulin, *Ireland’s transition*, p. 18.

²⁰ Devine, *Communicating*, p. 113; Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 144.

²¹ A. J. P. Taylor, *English history, 1914–1945* (London, 1965), pp 240–41.

nificant review of their grades and salary scales since 1870.²² The inadequate wages paid to many staff within the postal service was highlighted in the Report of the Royal Commission of Labour in 1894. In a minority report, four commissioners claimed that the wage paid to ‘sorters and letter carriers’ was at such a low level that ‘efficiency and decent family life cannot be maintained’ and violated a House of Commons resolution in March 1893 which pledged to maintain proper and sufficient wages and conditions of employment in public service departments.²³ This context explains the determination of Irish postal workers to resist wage cuts in 1922.

II

In response to the government’s decision to force pay cuts, in February 1922 postal workers took a historic decision to strike, claiming that the cuts would reduce wages to ‘starvation levels’.²⁴ J. J. Walsh approached the United Kingdom postmaster general about providing strike-breakers from the ranks of British postal workers in the event of an Irish strike. This request was repudiated by the provisional government given the optics of using ‘scab’ labour from Britain.²⁵ Joe McGrath, minister for labour, threatened to resign over Walsh’s unapproved initiative, while Collins, who had significant concerns that labour troubles might complicate the developing Treaty split, moved quickly to nullify it.²⁶ In any event the London-based Union of Post Office Workers insisted that their members would not co-operate.²⁷ It is doubtful that significant numbers of British postal workers would have been willing to transfer to Ireland during a postal dispute in a country on the verge of civil war.

In the event, a strike was averted just hours before it was due to begin on 5 March. The government reached agreement with the Irish Postal Union (I.P.U.) to establish a commission of enquiry into wages, conditions of employment and organisation of work in the postal services. It was to report by 15 May 1922 on whether the basic wage of postal workers could bear the recent bonus cut.²⁸ Senator James Green Douglas, a Dublin businessman with a reputation as ‘a practical and trusted bridge-builder’, was chosen by Collins to act as chairman.²⁹ The Department of Finance was not enthusiastic about the appointment, but Douglas acted with integrity and impartiality.³⁰ He understood the choreography of labour relations, something utterly absent from the minds of many government ministers. The commission

²² Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 145.

²³ *Fifth and final report of the Royal Commission on Labour. Part I. The report*, p. 143, H.C. [C 7421], xxxv, 151; *Hansard (Commons)* ix, cc 1109–80, 6 Mar. 1893.

²⁴ Devine, *Communicating*, p. 113.

²⁵ Provisional government meeting, 27 Feb. 1922 (N.A.I., TSCH/1/1/1); provisional government minutes, 27 Feb. 1922 (N.A.I., TSCH/S1798).

²⁶ Regan, *The Irish counter-revolution*, p. 93; Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 146.

²⁷ *Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress. Report of the twenty-eighth annual meeting ... 1922* (Dublin, n.d. [1922]), p. 124.

²⁸ *Report of commission of enquiry into the post office – interim report*; J. Anthony Gaughan (ed.), *Memoirs of Senator James G. Douglas (1887–1954): concerned citizen* (Dublin, 1998), p. 87.

²⁹ Douglas to Collins, 27 Mar. 1922 (N.L.I., James G. Douglas papers, MS 49,581/9); Brian Farrell, ‘Foreword’ in Gaughan (ed.), *Memoirs*, p. viii.

³⁰ Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 146.

was comprised of Senator Sir Thomas Esmonde and Henry J. Friel, chairman of Dublin County Council, who were government nominees,³¹ and two trade unionists, T. J. O'Connell and Luke J. Duffy, who were nominated by the Irish Labour Party.³² An attempt by Collins to insert an additional government appointee representing the Department of Finance was diplomatically resisted by Douglas lest it be perceived as breach of agreement by the labour representatives.³³

There was naivety within government about the norms of labour relations. It seems that the cabinet realised belatedly that an equally balanced commission with a fair-minded chair might find in favour of the workers. In addition, there was a sense of panic among general post office officials in Dublin who had been tasked with presenting the case of the postal service before the commission. In desperation they turned to London for advice. An official in Dublin wrote:

This will be our first experience here in a matter of this kind, and in the circumstances I shall be much obliged for any information which you can give me in regard to the procedure, and particularly the preliminary procedure, connected with such enquiries ... I am sorry to have to trouble you in this matter, but you will I am sure realise the exceptional position in which we find ourselves here. Any information or advice which you can give will be much appreciated.³⁴

The London G.P.O. duly advised. Douglas also sought advice from London and utilised a private business trip to the city to meet the secretary of the London G.P.O. about how such an inquiry should be conducted.³⁵ Despite the antipathy of British officials towards Walsh, the archives of the London Postal Museum reveal that relations between Irish and British postal officials were cordial. In fact, P. S. O'Hegarty, secretary of the Irish postal service, kept London appraised about the work of the enquiry and the Irish government's attitude to its recommendations. To gain an understanding of the working conditions and responsibilities of postal workers, Douglas took the extraordinary step of carrying out the duties of various types of postal employees in telephone exchanges, sorting centres and post offices in London. The choice of London was based on his belief that he was likely to obtain more accurate and valuable information by visiting English offices rather than Irish offices and also protected his anonymity.³⁶ The commission received representations and heard evidence from a range of people. Unsurprisingly, the Department of Finance opposed a pay increase for postal workers lest it create a precedent for other civil servants.³⁷ The commission was not concerned about the precarious financial position of the post office and suggested that its main aim 'shall be the welfare and convenience of the public rather than the making of profit.'³⁸

³¹ Before the commission concluded its business both government representatives resigned and were replaced by D. O'Connor and Councillor James Moran.

³² *Report of Commission of Enquiry into the Post Office* (Dublin, 1925).

³³ Douglas to Collins, 1 Apr. 1922 (N.L.I., Douglas papers, MS 49,482/10).

³⁴ J. Booth (G.P.O., Dublin) to Leech (G.P.O., London), 7 Mar. 1922 (Postal Museum, London (hereafter P.M.L.), Post 33/3573B).

³⁵ Booth to Bell, 14 Mar. 1922 (P.M.L., Post 33/3573B).

³⁶ O'Hegarty to Leech, 1 Nov. 1922 (P.M.L., Post 33/3573B); Gaughan (ed.), *Memoirs*, p. 88.

³⁷ *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Post Office – minutes of evidence and appendices and index for interim report* (Dublin, 1922).

³⁸ *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Post Office – first part*, 14 Dec. 1922.

The commission’s interim report on 11 May recommended a basic wage increase, ranging from 7.5 to 12.5 per cent, to compensate postal workers for the hardship caused by the forced pay cuts, particularly to married men with families. The increase was recommended as a temporary measure pending the establishment of an Irish cost of living figure to determine future pay levels.³⁹ The Department of Home Affairs deemed an Irish cost of living inquiry ‘undesirable’ and pointed to various ‘practical difficulties in the way’.⁴⁰ The reasons for this antipathy are unclear, but there may have been a fear that an Irish cost of living figure would be much higher than the British one. The government initially agreed to implement the commission’s interim report but the advent of civil war allowed it to renege on that promise.⁴¹ The outbreak of the civil war in June 1922 caused the suspension of the commission’s work until 31 October.⁴²

In September 1922 the interdepartmental committee established an Irish cost of living figure, based on information provided by a questionnaire completed by teachers in every national school in the country in relation to local rents and prices for basic foodstuffs. It was determined that the Irish cost of living was 90 per cent higher than in August 1914 — the equivalent British figure was 85 per cent — and this figure was used by the government to justify the September cut in the bonus. Consequently, Irish civil service staff still faced a cut of between 11 and 12 per cent on the bonus element of their salaries.⁴³ The government’s attempts to force the bonus reduction based on the findings of the interdepartmental committee but without consultation with either the commission or the postal unions became public on 4 September. It created doubt about the credibility of the committee’s findings and this forced the Irish Postal Union to strike.⁴⁴

Trade unions had two objections to the findings of the interdepartmental cost of living committee. First, its work was not transparent. The labour movement was refused representation on the committee. The government ‘did not want evidence tendered’ to any inquiry and would have preferred if the cost of living issue was not raised at all.⁴⁵ Secondly, the interim report of the postal commission had recommended that the cost of living figure should be ‘agreed on’ and this had not been done.⁴⁶ No explanation was provided as to how the figure was computed. To the trade union movement it was another manifestation of ‘the hole-and-corner methods’, as the *Voice of Labour* put it, which characterised the government’s approach and which derived from the chaos of the state’s birth.⁴⁷ The government publicly stated that it did not recognise the right of civil servants to strike and warned

³⁹ *Ibid.*, *interim report*; Douglas to Collins, 23 May 1922 (N.L.I., Douglas papers, MS 49,582/11); Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 146.

⁴⁰ O’Hegarty to Walsh, 15 May 1922 (N.A.I., TSCH/H2246).

⁴¹ Devine, *Communicating*, p. 117.

⁴² *Report of Commission of Enquiry into the Post Office – first part*, 14 Dec. 1922.

⁴³ Report of interdepartmental committee on the cost of living in Ireland, 4 Aug. 1922 (N.A.I., DT, S1211); *Iris an Phoist*, 14 (6 Sept. 1922), pp 151–2; Maguire, *Civil service*, pp 146–7.

⁴⁴ See Thomas Johnson’s contribution to Dáil debate on the pending postal strike and his comments on the Irish cost of living figure: *Dáil Éireann deb.*, i, no. 1, cols 44–8, 9 Sept. 1922.

⁴⁵ O’Hegarty to Walsh, 15 May 1922 (N.A.I., TSCH/H2246).

⁴⁶ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, i, no. 5, cols 305–08, 14 Sept. 1922.

⁴⁷ *Voice of Labour*, 30 Sept. 1922.

post office staff that they risked their jobs and pension rights.⁴⁸ This only added to the determination of the postal workers to strike.

The shock caused by the death of Collins on 22 August may have increased the government's intransigence when it came to dealing with the threatened postal dispute. In a flurry of activity behind the scenes, Douglas, who had adopted the role of mediator, presented proposals to the government 'for careful consideration' as he felt 'strongly that a strike should be averted' by offering terms to the union.⁴⁹ It is clear from his correspondence that Douglas, in line with his mediation role, was conducting informal negotiations with both government and union representatives, and seemed satisfied that he could secure a settlement with the union, albeit one far less than their expectations.⁵⁰ On 9 September Walsh informed the Dáil of the government's proposal to implement the pay cuts in two phases over a three-month period, provided the principle of reductions was accepted. In rejecting this proposal, the postal unions maintained that basic wages were too low to sustain any cuts to the bonus, and requested that the proposals be withdrawn and that a claim for a pay increase be referred to arbitration.⁵¹ Such oscillations between a call for the withdrawal of the bonus cuts and a claim for an increase in basic pay, led to confusion about the nature of the workers' demands and the purpose of the dispute. Thomas Johnson, Irish Labour Party leader and secretary of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (I.L.P.&T.U.C.), claimed that Walsh was temperamentally unfit for the position of postmaster general and was provoking disruption.⁵² The Postal Commission had been Collins's brainchild. Had he been alive, it is unlikely that he would have allowed matters to reach such a crisis point.⁵³ The strike began the next day.

III

The government clearly equated strike action by public servants with wrongdoing and disloyalty.⁵⁴ This attitude undoubtedly irritated the postal unions, and in the Dáil on 11 September 1922 Johnson sought the withdrawal of the government's claim that civil servants had no right to strike. He viewed interference with the right to strike as an infringement of human rights and of far greater importance than the issues at the heart of the postal dispute.⁵⁵ His intervention further complicated the confusion around the nature of the unions' demands and the purpose of the strike. Predictably, Johnson's motion was defeated by fifty-one votes to twenty-four.⁵⁶ The Dáil had effectively endorsed the government's declaration that the postal strike was illegal without any reference to existing legislation or legal

⁴⁸ *Irish Times*, 11 Sept. 1922; Irish Rate and Taxpayers' Association to [presumably] Walsh (Irish Labour History Society Archives (hereafter I.L.H.S.A.), Postal Strike 1922, Box 1, MS 10/L.P.U./1–10).

⁴⁹ Douglas to Cosgrave, 7 Sept. 1922, and Douglas to Walsh, 8 Sept. 1922 (N.L.I., Douglas papers, MS 49,481/15).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, i, no. 1, cols 43–50, 9 Sept. 1922; Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 147.

⁵² *Dáil Éireann deb.*, i, no. 1, cols 46–7, 9 Sept. 1922.

⁵³ Yeates, *Dublin, 1921–4*, p. 130.

⁵⁴ Devine, *Communicating*, p. 120.

⁵⁵ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, i, no. 2, cols 109–12, 11 Sept. 1922.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, cols 130–31; *Voice of Labour*, 16 Sept. 1922.

opinion. It had ignored the legal rights of workers to engage in peaceful picketing under the terms of the Trade Disputes Act 1906. George Gavan Duffy criticised the ‘effrontery’ of the dismissal of civil servants’ rights and accused the government of making rash decisions which would only make an eventual settlement of the dispute more difficult.⁵⁷ Kevin O’Higgins, the minister for justice, implied that the government’s attitude to picketing civil servants was driven by a concern that anti-Treaty forces might take advantage of the strike by commandeering unprotected public buildings which could be used ‘as a screen for the sniper with bomb or rifle or revolver’.⁵⁸ In his statement to the Bureau of Military History (B.M.H.), Ernest Blythe conceded that ‘the very difficulties of the time’ made it easier for the government to face up to the strike and the ‘entire dislocation’ of the postal services in a manner that would not have been possible in peacetime.⁵⁹

The strike was organised by a joint committee of three postal unions: the I.P.U., the Irish Postal Workers’ Union (I.P.W.U.) and the Irish Post Office Engineering Union.⁶⁰ It had the overwhelming support of both urban and rural members. For example, the I.P.W.U. voted 1,832 for and 214 against the strike.⁶¹ Estimates of the numbers of striking postal workers vary. Union sources claimed that 12,000 were on strike and that only two per cent continued to work.⁶² On 16 September the *Irish Times* reported 7,247 striking workers nationwide, of whom 2,650 were striking in Dublin city.⁶³ On 28 September as many as 5,000 postal workers attended a rally at the Mansion House ‘in defence’ of their rights, including the right to strike.⁶⁴ It was the intention of the postal trade unions to seek a total paralysis of postal, telegraphic and telephone services by insisting that pickets should be ‘as large as possible and maintained at all hours’. Special efforts were also called for to close those ‘few’ telephone exchanges not manned by union members.⁶⁵

The unity of purpose of the postal strike took Walsh by surprise. Yet, his dogged efforts to depict the dispute as a ‘complete conspiracy against the people’ and to ascribe political motives to it helped to undermine any swell of public support for the strikers.⁶⁶ Walsh was even more vehement than O’Higgins in his statements that the anti-Treaty I.R.A. would take advantage of the disruption, and he requested the deployment of police and the army. On 12 September the minister for defence, at Walsh’s request, issued instructions to the national army to prevent the congregation of persons ‘at such points’ that might facilitate ‘the possible rushing of any building by men operating under the shelter of a crowd’.⁶⁷ Soldiers were deployed in the immediate vicinity of the central sorting office on Dublin’s

⁵⁷ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, i, no. 2, cols 130–31, 11 Sept. 1922.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, cols 109–12.

⁵⁹ Ernest Blythe statement (M.A.I., B.M.H., W.S. 939).

⁶⁰ The leaders of these unions were: D. R. Hogan, I.P.U.; P. Parkes, I.P.W.U.; and H. H. Donnan, Irish Post Office Engineering Union. The I.P.U. and I.P.W.U. were general postal unions; the I.P.E.U. represented skilled or technical workers.

⁶¹ Devine, *Communicating*, p. 118.

⁶² *Freeman’s Journal*, 18, 28 Sept. 1922.

⁶³ *Irish Times*, 16 Sept. 1922.

⁶⁴ Devine, *Communicating*, p. 121.

⁶⁵ National executive, Irish Postal Union, to members, 3 Mar. 1922 (I.L.H.S.A., Postal Strike 1922, Box 1, MS 10/I.P.U./1–10).

⁶⁶ *Voice of Labour*, 4 Mar. 1922.

⁶⁷ Minister for defence to adjutant general, 12 Sept. 1922 (M.A.I., Department of Defence file (hereafter DOD) –A–7023).

Amiens Street.⁶⁸ Walsh also obtained military intervention in Limerick, Kilkenny and Wexford, and requested intervention in respect of local pickets in Mallow, Carrick-on-Shannon, Galway, Thurles and Bray.⁶⁹ Notably, Richard Mulcahy ordered his commanding officers to use ‘tactful handling’ and to control ‘the rising temper’ of those affected.⁷⁰

The circumstances of the civil war conveniently allowed Walsh to make persistent but unsubstantiated charges that the postal dispute had been hijacked by the anti-Treaty I.R.A. and that its leaders were ‘a body of men armed with revolvers’.⁷¹ Yet the only arms produced were those of the military and intelligence officers when intimidating union pickets. The government responded to the strike as if it had been inspired by ‘Irregulars’, even though the evidence is clear that the cause was widespread discontent about pay and that the action was mandated by union members. The charges made by Walsh underscored the weakness of Labour in the Dáil and the lack of any real political opposition to challenge such spurious claims. In September 1922, weeks before his execution, Liam Mellows wrote despondently of Irish working-class conditions and cited the postal strike as a case in point of the failure of the labour movement to champion the cause of the working classes.⁷² The I.L.P.&T.U.C. had failed to provide any effective leadership and lacked a coherent strategy for dealing with the issues at the heart of the postal dispute. Congress effectively abandoned the postal unions and their members.

The I.P.U. was conscious of the legal requirements governing picketing and advised its members that peaceful picketing should be maintained ‘no matter at what cost’, carried out in an ‘orderly well-regulated fashion’ and that no unnecessary hardship should be caused to the general public.⁷³ Conflict with the police, military and the public was to be avoided.⁷⁴ However, the cabinet and Walsh, in particular, were unwilling or unable to accept the postal dispute as a labour dispute rather than a political or military threat to the state. Numerous arrests and re-arrests of picketing workers were made, despite the fact that picketing was conducted in a peaceful manner.⁷⁵ Although peaceful picketing, in furtherance of a trade dispute, had the protection of the Trade Disputes Act (1906), the government continued to challenge the right of postal workers, as civil servants, to take strike action. O’Higgins told the Dáil that ‘[t]his is not a trade dispute and that the provisions of the Trade Disputes Act will not be applied’.⁷⁶ It is noteworthy that this challenge to the postal workers’ right to strike was not raised until after the strike had actually commenced. Furthermore, O’Higgins justified the withdrawal of the ‘recognised

⁶⁸ *Freeman’s Journal*, 12 Sept. 1922.

⁶⁹ Walsh to minister for defence, 26 Sept. 1922 (M.A.I., ‘A/’ files, DOD–A–7023).

⁷⁰ Commander-in-chief to commanding officer, 2nd Southern Command, 27 Sept. 1922 (I.M.A., ‘A/’ files, DOD–A–7023).

⁷¹ Walsh to [probably] Irish Rate & Taxpayers’ Assoc., 16 Sept. 1922 (I.L.H.S.A., Postal Strike 1922, Box 1, MS 10/I.P.U./1–10).

⁷² Mellows to ‘AS’, 11 Sept. 1922 (U.C.D.A., Desmond and Mabel FitzGerald papers, P80/298); Ferriter, *Transformation*, pp 256–7; Michael Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin party, 1916–1923* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 423.

⁷³ Secretary I.P.U. to members, 12 Sept. 1922 (I.L.H.S.A., Postal Strike 1922, Box 1, MS 10/I.P.U./1–10).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ O’Connor, *Syndicalism*, p. 159.

⁷⁶ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, i, no. 4, cols 239–40, 13 Sept. 1922.

rights’ of workers if it was necessary to protect and preserve the interests of the state.⁷⁷ Essentially, the government’s assertion that the postal workers had no right to strike allowed them to deem any attempt at picketing as an illegal assembly, thus justifying the heavy handed response of both military and intelligence officers. This was a clear indication that the prospects for workers and their rights within the new state were in extreme peril and subject to the whims of government.

Government intimidation of striking workers was pronounced from the outset. Shots were discharged over the heads of those on picket duty; picketers were arrested and detained without charge; drivers were forced to carry mail at gunpoint; an armoured car was repeatedly driven at pickets; strikers were told by various soldiers that their orders were ‘shoot-to-kill’, even though no evidence exists that this was official policy.⁷⁸ Union headquarters was raided by the military and those inside forced to vacate the building. A female striker was slightly wounded by a bullet at Crown Alley, Dublin on 17 September.⁷⁹ This type of intimidation and violent action was concentrated in, but not exclusive to, Dublin. For example, it was alleged that striking workers, including some women, were assaulted in Limerick by troops wearing knuckle-dusters and brandishing revolvers. Appeals to the minister for defence by both the I.P.U. and the I.L.P.&T.U.C. to conduct an inquiry into this incident went unanswered.⁸⁰ An internal army report claimed that ‘the lady picketers distinguished themselves’ in the fight and got what they deserved. The use of revolvers was denied.⁸¹ Joe McGrath, who had been appointed director of intelligence in July 1922, and the Criminal Investigation Department (C.I.D.) presided over the harassment, detainment and arrest of post office union officials.⁸²

The *Nationalist and Leinster Times* described the government as ‘determined to use all possible power, forces, propaganda, and means to deny postal workers their claim to a living wage and their rights to carry into operation their functions as Trade Unionists’.⁸³ In the Dáil, Labour Party T.D. and trade unionist Cathal O’Shannon decried the ‘scrapping of every principle of individual liberty’ by the government.⁸⁴ Government attempts to break the strike included offering release from Mountjoy prison to political prisoners who were ex-post office staff or had experience of postal work and who were prepared to replace striking workers.⁸⁵ There is no evidence that anyone accepted the offer. Likewise, a call for postal service pensioners and ex-postal employees ‘to volunteer their services’ did not elicit

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, i, no. 2, cols 115–16, 11 Sept. 1922.

⁷⁸ Transcript of telegrams: Martin [?] to editor *Daily News*, 11 Sept. 1922 and Martin [?] to Lionel Curtis [a colonial officer adviser on Irish affairs], 14 Sept. [1922] (T.N.A., CO 739/7); Devine, *Communicating*, p. 121.

⁷⁹ D. R. Hogan, I.P.U. to minister for defence, 24 and 25 Sept. 1922 (M.A.I., ‘A/’ files, DOD–A–06953); Ferriter, *Transformation*, p. 256; O’Connor, *Syndicalism*, p. 159.

⁸⁰ Hogan, I.P.U. to minister for defence, 25 Oct. 1922 and Tom Johnson to minister for defence, 10 Nov. 1922 (M.A.I., ‘A/’ files, DOD–A–06953).

⁸¹ Captain Clinton, South Western Command, Limerick to adjutant general, Portobello Barracks, n.d. [c.14 Nov. 1922] (M.A.I., ‘A/’ files, DOD–A–06953).

⁸² Regan, *The Irish counter-revolution*, p. 93.

⁸³ *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, 23 Sept. 1922.

⁸⁴ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, i, no. 4, cols 233–4, 13 Sept. 1922.

⁸⁵ Central strike committee to unknown recipient(s), 20 Sept. 1922 (I.L.H.S.A., Postal Strike 1922, Box 1, MS 10/1.PU./1–10).

any significant response.⁸⁶ Another strategy pursued by Walsh was to re-assign a number of non-striking post office officials to Cork in an attempt to break the strike there. This was opposed by General Emmet Dalton as it had the potential to alienate workers and the local labour organisation from the provisional government when tensions were already high after the death of Collins.⁸⁷

The irony of the government's 'forceful intervention' was that Walsh, who directed the police and military intimidation of striking workers, was a former postal worker and active trade unionist.⁸⁸ In addition, P. S. O'Hegarty, secretary of the G.P.O. and a former post office clerk who had known Walsh through their work in the postal services and their membership of the I.R.B., had little time for trade unionists and actively urged the government to break trade unions completely.⁸⁹ He regarded civil servants as 'pampered and overpaid', and the Labour Party as 'rigid and selfish' and an 'ineffective' opposition in the Dáil.⁹⁰ His memoirs are saturated in vitriol for almost every organisation other than the provisional government, which, in his view, was 'practically blackmailed by every section of the community'.⁹¹ Little wonder that Walsh and O'Hegarty proved such a lethal combination.

As the postal dispute became more entangled with the events of the Civil War it was difficult, at times, to determine which was causing greater inconvenience to the public. Andy Cope, the principal British civil servant then in Ireland, reported: 'Peace prospects military and postal are at a heavy discount this week-end. Tired of pacts and compromises that lead nowhere and fortified by the Dáil's vote of confidence, the Government appear determined to fight both battles out to the finish'.⁹² Winston Churchill's advice that 'the Provisional Government cannot do better than stand firm' was applied comprehensively.⁹³

How did the public respond to the strike which disrupted postal, telephone and telegraph services throughout the country? Predictably, business interests were concerned at the impact on trade which was described as 'being steadily paralysed'.⁹⁴ The council of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce established a voluntary postal committee 'to assist in meeting the urgent needs of business men in the present emergency'.⁹⁵ Its claims that this brought about the collapse of the strike fell wide of the mark.⁹⁶ Some businesses and individuals also made illicit use of the British army post office, the only postal service not affected.⁹⁷ The inconvenience caused to the public, many of whom depended on the post office for the delivery of financial support such as pensions and financial remittances from abroad, did not

⁸⁶ Provisional government minutes, 10 Sept. 1922 (N.A.I., TSCH/S1798).

⁸⁷ Dalton to minister for defence, n.d. [Sept. 1922] (M.A.I., 'A' files, DOD-A-06953).

⁸⁸ Ferriter, *Transformation*, p. 256; O'Connor, *Syndicalism*, p. 159.

⁸⁹ Yeates, *Dublin, 1921-4*, pp 129-30; Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 148.

⁹⁰ P. S. O'Hegarty, *The victory of Sinn Féin: how it won it, and how it used it* (Dublin, 1924), pp 177-8.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁹² Cope to Curtis, 15 Sept. 1922 (T.N.A., CO 739/7).

⁹³ Churchill to Cope, 24 Aug. 1922 (*ibid.*, CO 739/6).

⁹⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, 18 Sept. 1922.

⁹⁵ *Report of the council of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce for the year 1922* (Dublin, 1923), p. 18.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁹⁷ Memo and instruction from Captain Griggs to military units, Dublin and District, 22 Sept. 1922 (P.M.L., Post 47/1900).

generate any significant indignation. The *Irish Independent* reported that the public ‘generally take the situation stoically and evince little interest in the controversy’.⁹⁸ Other reports claimed that upwards of 2,000 people happily queued at the central postal sorting centres in Dublin each day for letters.⁹⁹ The impact may have been great but it was borne as just another inconvenience during disturbed times. The strike was also relatively short. By late September it was on the verge of collapse and there were reports that some staff had returned to work.¹⁰⁰

IV

After almost three weeks of military and police harassment and intimidation, settlement terms were agreed and the dispute ended on 29 September. The government forced through the pay cuts and the only concession won by the unions was that the cuts would be spread over three months — an offer made before the strike but rejected. Three-eighths of the reduction took place from 1 September and the balance was deducted from 1 December. Attempts by the postal unions to disguise the extent of their defeat prompted Walsh to publish the terms of the settlement in the press on 28 September and in *Iris an Phoist* on 18 October.¹⁰¹ Douglas was central to the settlement and, believing Walsh was intent on punishing ringleaders, persuaded the cabinet to give an undertaking that there would be no retribution.¹⁰² Walsh did not adhere to this and his surviving papers are silent on the postal dispute. That he remained embittered is evident in his 1944 memoir:

The Post Office staff, which had never dared say “boo” while the British were here, took strike action before we had time to get into our stride. We could scarcely help feeling aggrieved at what we considered a stab in the back, and in particular, observing that the Postal Workers’ Organisation covered the thirty-two counties, the strike was confined to the twenty-six.¹⁰³

This was in stark contrast to Walsh’s ingratiating sentiments towards his staff which appeared in *Iris an Phoist* in March 1922.¹⁰⁴ Ernest Blythe made a similar claim in his statement to the B.M.H. that no strike would have taken place if the British government had still been in power and accused the striking workers of endeavouring to take advantage of an Irish government which ‘seemed weak and likely to yield to extreme pressure’.¹⁰⁵ Walsh’s depiction of meek postal workers under British administration does not have any real foundation. While many postal workers were unable to participate in the general strike against conscription in 1918, much to the regret of their unions, most postal workers had participated in the general strike of 13–14 April 1920 in support of the release of Irish political prisoners. Walsh was one of those prisoners. That was the first ever strike by Irish postal staff

⁹⁸ *Irish Independent*, 20 Sept. 1922.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14 Sept. 1922.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 27 Sept. 1922.

¹⁰¹ *Iris an Phoist*, no. 16 (18 Oct. 1922), p. 195; Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 147.

¹⁰² *Iris an Phoist*, no. 16 (18 Oct. 1922), p. 195.

¹⁰³ Walsh, *Recollections*, p. 61.

¹⁰⁴ *Iris an Phoist*, no. 1 (15 Mar. 1922), p. 1.

¹⁰⁵ Ernest Blythe statement (M.A.I., B.M.H., W.S. 939).

and was regarded with some astonishment by the civil service as British civil servants were most reluctant to contemplate strike action.¹⁰⁶

Following the collapse of the strike, the postal commission resumed its sittings on 31 October.¹⁰⁷ It recommended that a new grade 'A' postman should get an increase of 3s. per week for undertaking changes to their duties, and a grade 'B' postman would remain on existing duties and wages.¹⁰⁸ This recommendation set in train an exchange of combative correspondence between the Department of Finance and the Office of the Postmaster General. Finance was determined to enforce financial controls over all departments. In an ironic twist, and perhaps indicative of a turf war, Walsh made strenuous efforts to enhance the commission's recommendation in respect of the Grade 'B' postman. This was in complete contrast to his belligerent attitude during the course of the strike when he steadfastly stood by the principle that the Irish government could not countenance a situation where civil servants would be paid a higher rate than their counterparts in the British civil service for doing similar work. In a Pauline conversion, Walsh now maintained that '[w]ages in Ireland must stand upon Irish conditions and not what any other country does'.¹⁰⁹

By May 1923 the relationship between Walsh and Finance had moved from fraught to the verge of collapse. Walsh was well known for his bombastic attitude.¹¹⁰ C. F. Ryan, a Finance official on loan from London, recalled how the postmaster general 'delivered salvoes of his massed heavy artillery for over half an hour' on the 3s. increase for grade B postmen and even threatened a strike.¹¹¹ However, Finance remained adamantly opposed to any increase in public spending. Exasperated and having exhausted all avenues with the Department of Finance, Walsh referred the matter to a meeting of the executive council.¹¹² The lack of any further mention of this matter in the executive council's minutes would suggest that Finance got its way.

Despite the undertaking given collectively by the cabinet and the personal assurances provided to both the Labour Party and Douglas by President Cosgrave, there were numerous instances of victimisation of workers who had gone on strike.¹¹³ The unions complained that temporary workers had been dismissed, non-striking workers had been promoted, and that striking workers had been forced to transfer or retire.¹¹⁴ This action bore similarities to the government's purge of republicans who held seats on public bodies, worked in the civil service or who drew

¹⁰⁶ Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 57; Devine, *Communicating*, p. 76.

¹⁰⁷ *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Post Office – first part*, 11 Dec. 1922.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*; Gregg to secretary, G.P.O., 26 Mar. 1923 (N.A.I., TSCH/S890A).

¹⁰⁹ Gregg to secretary, G.P.O., 26 Mar. 1923 and secretary, G.P.O. to Gregg, 18 Apr. 1923 (N.A.I., DT, S890A).

¹¹⁰ Michael Laffan, *Judging W. T. Cosgrave: the foundation of the Irish State* (Dublin, 2014), p. 171.

¹¹¹ Report by C. F. Ryan titled 'Analysis of Situation – Post Office Reorganisation', 9 May 1922 (N.A.I., DT, S890A).

¹¹² Ruani Conganta to Cosgrave, 14 June 1923 (N.A.I., TSCH/S890A).

¹¹³ I.P.U. to O'Hegarty, 18 Oct. 1922 (I.L.H.S.A., Postal Strike 1922 Box 1, MS 10/1.P.U./1–10); *An Díon* (June 1923).

¹¹⁴ United Postal Unions to Douglas, 17 Nov. 1922 (I.L.H.S.A., Postal Strike 1922, Box 1, MS 10/1.P.U./1–10).

government salaries. Suspicion of supporting the anti-Treaty side was sufficient grounds to transfer staff to another part of the country.

V

The final report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Post Office was not published until March 1925. It acknowledged that the government ‘found themselves unable to justify acceptance in full’ of its recommendations. A minority report by Labour representatives accused the government of materially altering the recommendations. In addition, it claimed that by ignoring the commission’s unanimous recommendations in its two previous reports, the government ‘stultified the action of the commission and rendered futile their efforts’ and caused the strike.¹¹⁵ In setting up the postal commission, Collins had been anxious that ‘the first Irish Commission of its kind should be done well’.¹¹⁶ In the circumstances, the members of the commission did do well, but the government’s attitude towards the dispute, the strike action and the commission demonstrated ineptitude and a lack of familiarity with the sensitivities of labour relations. Other civil service staff associations had remained aloof from the postal strike, but the government’s assertion that they did not have a right to strike was viewed as autocratic.¹¹⁷ Many public service trade unionists had not forgotten that members of the same government had applauded strikes by civil servants in support of Irish political prisoners in April 1920.¹¹⁸ However, the legal rights of civil servants to withhold their labour were subsequently curtailed by provisions within the Treasonable and Seditious Offences Act, 1925, the Trade Union Act, 1927 and the Department of Finance circular 14/1927, thus forcing civil service unions, such as the Post Office Workers’ Union, to eliminate the strike clause from their constitutions.¹¹⁹

Ronan Fanning notes that no provision had been made in the government expenditure estimates for a significant outlay on the post office arising from the recommendations of the postal commission. It appears that the government was only ever intent on introducing pay cuts.¹²⁰ The rationale for establishing a postal commission was unclear given the government’s desire for retrenchment and the sacrosanct principle of not paying wages above the levels applicable to similar grades in the British civil service. One can only conclude that it was largely an attempt to postpone industrial unrest as the Treaty split deepened. But it raised expectations for postal workers and that, as shown, had significant consequences. The events did enable the government to reorganise the postal service and to secure greater efficiencies, by staff rationalisation and enforcing new work practices, whereby its financial deficit was reduced from £1.2m in 1922 to £413,000 by 1926.¹²¹

¹¹⁵ *Final report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Post Office*, 19 Mar. 1925.

¹¹⁶ Collins to Douglas, 24 Mar. 1922 (N.L.I., Douglas papers, MS 49,581/74).

¹¹⁷ Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 147.

¹¹⁸ Yeates, *Dublin, 1921–4*, p. 130.

¹¹⁹ Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 174. See also *Dáil Éireann deb.*, x, no. 15, cols 1233–55, 19 Mar. 1925.

¹²⁰ Fanning, *Finance*, p. 50.

¹²¹ Memo by Desmond FitzGerald on ‘Activities of Post and Telegraphs since August 1923’, 1929 (N.A.I., DTTC, H10269/53).

VI

Civil war is not an environment conducive to the practice of fair and respectful labour relations and so it proved in Ireland. Notwithstanding the formidable challenges facing an inexperienced government fearful for the survival of the state, the government's response to the postal workers' strike was belligerent. This hostility mirrored its view of anti-Treaty republicans. The government's disdain for one was as strong as its contempt for the other. In the aftermath of the civil war, striking postal workers were as much casualties of political victimisation and vindictiveness as republicans. The government, wrongly, held that both political and labour unrest were driven by the same elements of society. Consequently, labour unrest was viewed as disloyalty and a danger to the interests of the state and society. This research demonstrates that the new Free State government was ill-prepared to deal with critical labour issues and that the challenges of the Civil War had rendered it incapable of responding adequately, reasonably and fairly to mounting labour and social unrest. The postal strike effectively set the tone for Cumann na nGaedheal's subsequent attitude to labour unrest. The postal strike was not, as intimated by some, central to the direction of the Irish Revolution or the possible genesis of social revolution.¹²² It did not have a political or ideological agenda. It was essentially a labour dispute about pay and conditions of employment.

While the postal dispute ended in failure, it fostered a new sense of solidarity which saw the amalgamation of the I.P.U. and the I.P.W.U. to form the Post Office Workers' Union (P.O.W.U.), mentioned above, in 1923. Unfortunately, it also reinforced J. J. Walsh's antagonism towards postal workers and their representative trade unions, which continued until he left office in 1927. His departure was universally welcomed, with the *Irish Times* describing him as 'an erratic administrator, a stormy politician, and a dangerous economist', and suggested the government's prospects would be improved without him.¹²³ Outstanding grievances arising from the 1922 postal dispute were not finally resolved until 1932, when the new Fianna Fáil administration restored increments and nineteen days' service to those who had been on strike.¹²⁴ Their predecessors' long intransigence on this issue indicated a stubbornness which undermined the development of sound employee relations. In place of nurturing any legislation aimed at advancing good labour practices, the Cumann na nGaedheal government had introduced repressive legislation in the wake of the British general strike in 1926. These measures had the effect of breaking legal strikes and threatening strikers with military conscription.¹²⁵ In addition, civil servants' right to strike was extinguished by the introduction of legislation and regulations in 1925 and 1927 that were designed to suppress any public display of civil service discontent, including 'the withdrawal of labour'.¹²⁶ This uncompromising position lasted until the defeat of Cumann na

¹²² See Guilbride, 'A scrapping of every principle of freedom', p. 37.

¹²³ *Irish Times*, 5 Sept. 1927.

¹²⁴ Secretary, Dept. Posts & Telegraphs to P.O.W.U., 19 Oct. 1932 (I.L.H.S.A., Postal Strike 1922, Box 2, MS 10/I.P.U./11–20); Yeates, *Dublin, 1921–4*, p. 132.

¹²⁵ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xv, no. 14, cols 1510–35, 13 May 1926; Arthur Mitchell, *Labour in Irish politics, 1890–1930: the Irish labour movement in an age of revolution* (Dublin, 1974), p. 230.

¹²⁶ Devine, *Communicating*, pp 141–2.

nGaedheal in 1932.¹²⁷ Its attitude to a range of issues associated with the postal dispute — the right to strike, peaceful picketing, agreed arbitration and victimisation — clearly indicated that the struggle for social justice was only just beginning. The intolerance of the new state for labour disputes, the intimidation of striking workers, J. J. Walsh’s call for support from Britain and the subsequent campaign of victimisation demonstrate that there was no new dawn for Irish workers in independent Ireland in 1922.

¹²⁷ Memo by Desmond FitzGerald on ‘Activities of Post and Telegraphs since August 1923’, 1929 (N.A.I., DTTC, H10269/53).