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# The ‘Miracle of Coalisland’

Class and sectarianism in the Tyrone Coalfield,  
1922-26

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## **Abstract**

This article uses the forgotten prospect of an industrial revolution in mid-Ulster to examine the nature of the Unionist administration and deploys ‘history from below’ to examine and understand the tensions and contradictions at the intersection between class and sectarianism. The analysis centres on the ‘Coalisland Miracle’, when Unionist insider, Sir Samuel Kelly, purchased a coal mine and various other local businesses in East Tyrone during the consolidation of James Craig’s Protestant Parliament. Ultimately, Unionist dreams of a new industrial revolution resembled fevered delusions as the new polity endured precarious finances and interminable economic decline. The article also analyses how complex issues of class and sectarianism played out on the ground when Ulster’s leading capitalist confronted a majority nationalist workforce in an area whose constitutional future appeared to hang in the balance, demonstrating how workers struggled to secure their meagre slice of the pie, while employers, managers and the state strove to defeat organised labour. An analysis of four labour disputes linked to Kelly’s scheme reveals how sectarianism worked in employment practices, a subject much talked about but seldom supported by hard evidence. The article concludes by examining an extraordinary lockout at the Tyrone Colliery itself and a subsequent and unprecedented display of working-class solidarity in 1926, when Protestant and Catholic workers united after the much-heralded Coalisland miracle turned out to be little more than pie in the sky.

**Key words:** loyalism, Ulster Unionism, trade unionism, partition, sectarianism, discrimination

## I. Introduction

In January 1923, the *Northern Whig*, a Belfast Unionist daily, carried a piece entitled 'Ulster Coal for Ulster', in which 'Old Fogey' waxed lyrical about the potential of the Tyrone Coalfield, recently purchased by the millionaire coal importer, Sir Samuel Kelly. 'Although nibbled at for 200 years by the people of the locality, the Coalisland deposit had never been tested at a deep level ... The apparent resources of the field now owned by the firm are vast'. The piece looked forward to the enterprise 'entirely revolutionising the position as regards the fuel supply of the province. If reports speak truly, there is ample coal in this field to supply the ordinary needs of all Ulster for many years'.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere *The Whig* mused that 'Tyrone bids fair to become the Staffordshire of Ulster, and Coalisland the most important manufacturing town, next to Belfast, in the Six Counties', due to 'the prospect opened out by the wonderful enterprise and energy of one man – an Ulsterman'.<sup>2</sup> Coal fever even gripped the not long-established Unionist government in Belfast. That April, James Craig's cabinet had 'no doubt that the whole economic situation in Ulster will be changed, and ... she will become ... the home of many new industries and will be in a position to give employment on a very large scale'.<sup>3</sup>

A devolved one-party Unionist administration, Northern Ireland, emerged from the Government of Ireland Act [GOIA] which represented 'not so much a sincere attempt to settle the Irish question as a sincere attempt to settle the Ulster question'.<sup>4</sup> When Unionist politicians spoke of Ulster, they were not referring to the historic nine-county province or indeed to the truncated Six-Counties of Northern Ireland. As Andrew Horner, the Unionist MP for South Tyrone revealed in June 1914, Ulster was 'more a people than a place' and that 'imaginary boundaries between counties had nothing whatever to do with' the 'British settlers ... the forefathers of the Ulster Covenanters of today'.<sup>5</sup> Yet, Tyrone was also the largest of the two majority-Catholic counties in Northern Ireland. The 'dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone' had created problems for British statesmen intent on partitioning Ireland since before the First World War, and Churchill ruefully noted that 'the integrity of their quarrel is one of the few institutions that has been unaltered in the cataclysm which has swept the world'.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Article XII of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty anticipated the creation of a Boundary Commission, which would redraw the border 'in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants, so far as may be compatible with economic and geographic conditions'. As such, a sword of Damocles

hovered over local Unionists' heads until the Commission's ignominious collapse in December 1925. In the intervening period, Craig's government consolidated its control over the two counties, establishing the Leech Commission, which gerrymandered electoral boundaries, abolishing PR and inserting a rateable valuation clause in the Local Government Act (1922), thereby guaranteeing control of the county council and local bodies, and the crucial patronage that went with them.<sup>7</sup> When the British objected to this flagrant breach of the GOIA, Craig threatened to resign, and London averted its gaze.

Indeed, in 1924, when extremists complained that disloyal Catholics received government positions in preference to loyal Protestants, Craig ordered a full-scale investigation.<sup>8</sup> By 1969, the Cameron Commission reported that across majority nationalist areas, Unionists had consistently manipulated electoral boundaries to control local government and then 'use their power to make appointments in a way which benefited Protestants' in housing and employment.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, Unionist claims to Tyrone rested on force. As the GOIA passed through parliament the British government also sanctioned the creation of the Ulster Special Constabulary [USC], a paramilitary police force for the new jurisdiction.<sup>10</sup> In September 1920, Tyrone's three UVF commanders: Ambrose Ricardo, Robert Stevenson and John McClintock, assured the rank and file that the USC represented Carson's Army reincarnate.<sup>11</sup> On 15 March 1922, the Minister of Home Affairs (MHA), Richard Dawson Bates introduced the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Bill, which amounted to the total suspension of civil liberties. Amid this febrile atmosphere, Samuel Kelly attempted to spark an industrial revolution in Tyrone.

## II. Samuel Kelly

Kelly acquired the Coalisland [or Annagher] pit from the eccentric landlord and watercolourist, Robert Ponsonby Staples, or the barefoot baronet, who avoided footwear for fear of insulating his feet from the earth's magnetism. The land and mining rights formed part of the Castle Stewart Estate during the 1609 Ulster Plantation, eventually becoming the 'joint property of the Caulfield and Staples family'.<sup>12</sup> A Liberal Protestant Home Ruler, Staples recounted his futile efforts to attract investment from the Unionist elite: 'Would Belfast merchants help in such mineral developments at their own door? No! "Well", said to me one of them in 1911, "If as you say it's a Nationalist district, I won't touch it". Ned [Edward] Carson, as some here call him, was equally indifferent to my promoting

spirit'. Staples then turned to the revolutionary Sinn Féin government, Dáil Éireann, which confirmed the potential of the Coalisland fields but, with six-county partition on the cards, conceded that it couldn't help 'in what is to be a new Orange Free State'.<sup>13</sup>

Then, in March 1919, Staples approached Kelly, who had acquired his fortune as Ireland's leading coal merchant and the largest owner of coastal steamers in Britain. Kelly also owned coal mines at St Helens and Whitehaven in Northwest England and commissioned the Whitehaven manager, Thomas Durham, to bore for coal and plan a 'moderately extensive colliery'.<sup>14</sup> Durham predicted that Coalisland might produce '100,000 tonnes per annum over an estimated life of 40 years', speculating that the Lough Neagh basin contained 200 million tonnes.<sup>15</sup> Staples hoped that Kelly, 'a Belfast boy with a genius for finance and certainly on the business plane with wide vision,' might 'in a few years do more to help complete Irish unity than Carson, Griffith or De Valera rolled together'.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, Kelly was a leading financial contributor to the Unionist Party's secret arms' committee established in 1912, which included future Prime Minister, James Craig; his permanent secretary and then UVF quartermaster Wilfred Spender; George Clarke of the 'wee yard' Workman Clark, Belfast's second largest shipyard; the millionaire stockbroker, James Cunningham; and the aforementioned Dawson Bates.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, prior to and during the abortive General Strike of 1926, Kelly sat in on cabinet meetings and advised on policy.<sup>18</sup> As a Unionist insider, Kelly assured the Minister for Finance, Hugh Pollock, that he was 'practically sure' the Lough Neagh basin contained 120 million tonnes: 'You can appreciate what this will mean to Ulster both from an economic standpoint and in providing employment'.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the two mine shafts, Kelly planned to build three hundred houses for English and Scottish miners. He also purchased the Ulster Fireclay Works, which produced a range of kiln-fired piping products, and the Tyrone Brickyard on the road between Coalisland and Dungannon. The Unionist government provided Kelly with a guaranteed loan to build the houses and Dawson Bates pressured the local Rural District Council [RDC] to construct the necessary infrastructure, with the Minister for Labour, John M. Andrews, providing a £40,000 grant for the project, secured from the London exchequer. When the pit officially opened amidst great fanfare in July 1924, Andrews described Kelly as a 'public spirited, patriotic Ulsterman', who 'had found for them a coal supply of their own, within their own boundaries, and within the loyal county of Tyrone'. It was 'through industry and industry alone' that they could create 'that Ulster which they pictured in their dreams and prayed for in their prayers':

industry 'promoted by the energy and enterprise of their capitalists working in friendly cooperation with their industrious workers'.<sup>20</sup>

Andrew's characterisation appeared questionable on two key points. Firstly, the loyalty of majority nationalist Tyrone hardly constituted a given. While the Dungannon RDC, where Coalisland lay, had a slim enough nationalist majority, the town itself was overwhelmingly Catholic.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, under the ambiguous terms of Article XII, Tyrone nationalists widely, but wrongly, anticipated that the entire county would transfer to the Irish Free State.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the recent and subsequent history of the Coalisland area indicated little in the way of 'friendly cooperation' between capitalist and worker. Indeed, Kelly's intervention exacerbated existing sectarian tensions, which the employers often manipulated to their own ends.

The best historical treatment of the Kelly scheme has concluded that 'Northern Ireland's natural disadvantages overcame both the enterprise of its leading coal merchant and the enthusiasm of the Ministry of Commerce'.<sup>23</sup> This article seeks to further examine why the new Unionist government supported Kelly's Coalisland scheme and how complex issues of class and sectarianism played out on the ground when Ulster's leading capitalist confronted a majority nationalist workforce in an area whose constitutional future appeared to hang in the balance.

The Coalisland story sheds light on the sectarian underpinnings of Unionist rule in Tyrone and across the North more generally, wherein the elite institutionalised discrimination in the allocation of scarce economic resources and deliberately manipulated a form of reactionary Orange populism to maintain working-class Protestant support. This will involve an analysis of disputes surrounding the RDC-funded Water Scheme; a conflict between building sub-contractors and local labour over the construction of the subsidised housing at the bombastically named Newtownkelly; strikes in the Ulster Fireclay Works and, at the Tyrone Brickyard and, finally, an extraordinary lockout at the Tyrone Colliery itself. The article will conclude with an unprecedented display of working-class solidarity in 1926, when Protestant and Catholic workers united after the much-heralded Coalisland miracle turned out to be little more than castles in the air.

### III. Government assistance

Kelly's Whitehaven pit manager hinted that Newtownkelly also made sense from 'the national standpoint' as the operation will 'very shortly'

require a 'large and steady' stream of English and Scotch miners. Within the context of a sectarian electoral headcount and the impending Boundary Commission, the influx of hundreds of British workers obviously bolstered Unionist claims to this contested territory. Interestingly, Durham admitted that 'it has only been possible to obtain our existing staff because of the industrial depression in other mining areas' and that, 'if trade conditions improve in their home areas, we are very likely to lose a good many valuable men'. He, therefore, advised Kelly to 'layout a modern colliery village properly sewered and with an adequate domestic water supply'.<sup>24</sup> Subsequent events suggested that many of these Scottish miners carried significant political baggage with them that not only partially explained their unemployment at home but also rendered them peculiar candidates to colonise nationalist Tyrone in the interests of Ulster loyalism.

While Kelly invested at least £100,000 of his own money, he also lobbied hard for government assistance to build miners' homes, fund local infrastructure, and eventually subsidise coal production. Pollock wrote to Kelly that he was 'in full sympathy' regarding the housing issue since the 'enterprise presents possibilities of a wonderful mineral future for Ulster'.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Pollock warned colleagues that it 'will be well for the government to have some interest in the matter and to give some form of concrete encouragement to the enterprise and courage of a citizen who has taken great personal risks, merely, I believe, animated by a high sense of public duty'.<sup>26</sup> Pollock then petitioned the 'very sympathetic' Chancellor of the Exchequer, Stanley Baldwin, for a £1.5 million extension of Trade Facilities Act, legislation designed to enable companies to borrow money for projects which would create employment, with the state guaranteeing the capital and interest.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, while London ended its series of Trade Facilities Acts in 1926, Stormont persevered with their Loans Guarantee Act until 1934 because it helped keep Belfast's largest shipyard afloat: 'crucial not only for the industrial survival of Northern Ireland but also for the political survival of the Unionist government'.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, Andrews, Bates, and Craig formed a populist faction within cabinet which deployed a 'combination of sectarian and democratic practices' to maintain loyalist support.<sup>29</sup> With Coalisland in mind, Bates convinced the cabinet 'to include a clause in the recent Housing Bill, giving industrial centres in rural districts the same treatment as urban districts'. In effect, the government partly subsidised every house built at Newtownkelly, while the remaining finance came from the Ulster Bank under the Guaranteed Loan Act (1922).<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, water supply, sanitation, and road transport constituted areas reserved for

local government. Andrews offered Dungannon RDC a grant through the British-funded Unemployment Grant Advisory Committee to carry out the Water Scheme. Interestingly, he criticised the local RDC's 'considerable delay', adding that the MHA had 'probably gone further than they ought in putting pressure upon the local authorities to exercise their powers'.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, both sectarian populists orbiting Craig and fiscal conservatives around Pollock spoke with one enthusiastic voice on the Coalisland enterprise. By January 1923, Pollock outlined how 'a great deal was already being done to assist Sir Samuel Kelly in the development of his coal mining enterprise. He was obtaining money on easy terms under the Trade Facilities Act; he was receiving £60 for each house erected and the Minister of Labour was giving considerable assistance through his Unemployment Scheme'. In short, 'the government had done everything that was possible, taking into account the present financial position'.<sup>32</sup>

The present position referred to ongoing negotiations between Belfast and London to revise the GOIA's financial terms. As such, Craig's government did not wish to appear 'more generous than the Imperial Government in such matters and this would embarrass his negotiations with the Colwyn Committee'.<sup>33</sup> More than once, Craig threatened London with resignation and convinced Baldwin to establish the Northern Ireland Special Arbitration, or Colwyn, Committee in winter 1922 to revise the financial terms. Craig sought to secure revisions of Belfast's imperial contribution, the funding of its social services and paying for the USC. The second Colwyn report in 1925 effectively abolished the imperial contribution, which the Belfast government redeployed in the sinkhole of unemployment relief.<sup>34</sup> Westminster would provide 'ongoing financial support', but 'total public expenditure per capita in Northern Ireland' was capped 'to the average level in Britain, despite greater demands on public expenditure, particularly unemployment' in the North. This inevitably led 'to a lower standard of public services, with opportunity costs in the areas of education, housing, and industry and infrastructure'.<sup>35</sup>

Certainly, this passion for the Kelly enterprise appeared fuelled by the hope, no matter how vain, that Craig's cabinet could square the circle between its self-image as an industrious imperial province and the stark reality of his own description of the Stormont government's main function as 'to distribute the bones'.<sup>36</sup> Yet, while the threat of long-term bankruptcy receded, the Coalisland Colliery's prospects appeared less secure. Kelly soon petitioned the government 'for a subvention in aid of wages ... in order to place the colliery on parallel lines with those in

Great Britain'. As, without help, it 'would have to close down'. While an alarmed Andrews 'thought it would be disastrous if the colliery had to close', the frugal Pollock 'expressed doubt as to the view Lord Colwyn would take'. Ultimately, Craig insisted that 'we should obtain our proper proportion of' the Treasury subsidy to British mines, later adding that he 'did not want it suggested that the owners had to close down the mine owing to lack of support'.<sup>37</sup>

James Craig, his wife and son paid an unofficial visit in May 1924 by 'special train' and Kelly personally 'conducted the party ... through the various departments'.<sup>38</sup> Craig remarked that 'Coalisland had a great future, predicting that 'it would be the first town in County Tyrone'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Kelly made Craig's son, also James, 'a humble worker' at the colliery, with the Nationalist *Irish News* retrospectively sneering that young Craig was 'selected for the post on the assumption that the venture was going to be a gigantic success'.<sup>40</sup> Due to the Prime Minister's illness, Lady Craig officially opened the Colliery in July 1924 during a 'luncheon for 2000 guests' who arrived by two special trains from Belfast, Lisburn, Portadown, and Dungannon. Kelly expressed his 'gratification' at 'having done something for his native province' and promised that this day marked 'only the beginning of a great era of industry and progress'. Lady Craig described the occasion as 'a red-letter day in the history of Ulster', while the Mayor of Belfast, William Turner, claimed that the 'ceremony that day marked an epoch not only in the life of Sir Samuel but also in the history of the imperial province of Ulster'.<sup>41</sup>

A standard propaganda piece with photographs appeared in all the major Unionist dailies and weekly regional papers, proclaiming the 'Gigantic Ulster Enterprise – The Miracle of Coalisland – the Romance of Newtownkelly'. The celebratory tone portrayed Kelly as an industrial titan, who, 'by his foresight, courage, and enterprise in the face of many difficulties', had 'won through, and the colliery and town bearing his name will be looked upon by every Ulsterman as work well done by a patriotic and noble son of the province'. In short, 'Ulster's industrial life will be completely revolutionised' and, 'with a reduction in the cost of their fuel, northern manufacturer should be able to beat their foreign competitors'.<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere, Kelly strode the Ulster stage as an 'Alexander of Industry' who, 'once committed to an enterprise [,] never permits consideration of expenditure to stand in the way of successful achievement, especially when ... the desired consummation is fraught with vital influence upon the economic destiny of his native Province'. It continued that 'the successful development of the colliery is set to revolutionise the economic



life of Ulster'. The colliery would produce one hundred thousand tonnes per year and 'the value to the economic life of Ulster of a thriving and productive coalfield within her own borders is incalculable'. Likewise, the Ulster Fireclay Works exuded 'an air of prosperity and progressiveness' that generated 'infectious optimism'. Indeed, the workers' homes or 'palaces' built with government assistance boded well for a future where, in 'a few years, a population of some 25,000 should find ideal conditions in this new urban community, whose location will be marked on future maps by the new and magic name of Newtownkelly'.<sup>43</sup>

A contemporary opinion piece by the nationalist *The Irish News* avoided much of the hyperbole, however, noting that it 'is unfortunate that the houses are not yet ready for occupation, the delay being due to a wages dispute between Messrs Collen Bros [Portadown] the contractors for the water and sewage scheme and their workers'. The reporter opined that the men's 'reasonable' demands 'should have been met in a spirit of conciliation by the contractors, who apparently assumed that they had the sole right to fix the wages, and that the men are bound to take what they get'.<sup>44</sup>

#### IV. Class and sectarianism in the Coalisland coalfield

Managers across Kelly's businesses in Coalisland manipulated sectarianism to undermine the bargaining power of labour. In several instances, they locked-out Catholic workers and replaced them with strike breakers recruited from the part-time "B" Special Constabulary. Interestingly, when Craig first approached Baldwin in 1922 regarding the eventual Colwyn award, the Chancellor quickly identified the funding of the USC as the 'sole exception ... to be reserved for separate consideration'.<sup>45</sup> By 1924, England and Wales had one police officer for 699 people, Scotland one for 751, while, under Unionist rule, the ratio sat at one for every 160 inhabitants.<sup>46</sup> In 1925, one Liberal MP wryly pointed out that Craig wielded an armed force larger than the armies of Austria or Bulgaria.<sup>47</sup> While Craig lobbied hard for additional funds for 'the present magnificent system of Special Constabulary', the Treasury in London hinted that the force served as 'a means of providing for unemployment'.<sup>48</sup>

Three classes of Special Constabulary existed; the full-time "A" Specials were either attached to RIC/RUC barracks or formed independent platoons. Before the force's disbandment in December 1925, Dungannon police district contained seven mixed RUC/'A' Specials barracks with a combined strength of 150 men. In addition, the independent 'A' Special No. 7 platoon of fifty men commandeered the Ranfurly Arms Hotel in

Dungannon. By early 1922 there were nine ‘A’ platoons and twenty-eight mixed barracks in Tyrone.<sup>49</sup> Ambrose Ricardo hinted at the USC’s utility in copper fastening the Unionist cross-class alliance when he reported that ‘every man in N.I. who has lost his job or who is at a loose end has endeavoured to get into the “A”s and in many cases has succeeded’.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, unsuccessful applicants to the full-time force supplemented their existing income with a position in the “B” men. Each part-time “B” Special had a rifle and Wesley revolver and mobilised once a week and during emergencies. The local “C” Specials comprised the less physically able members of the old UVF. By 1924, Tyrone contained 3,630 “B” Specials. Constables on Full Patrol received a £10 annual bounty, while those on Half Patrol got £7 with pay of 7 s. per-day in event of mobilisation. In short, “B” Specials received an increment on their ordinary salary, funded by a British government grant of £1,250,000 for the 1924 financial year alone.<sup>51</sup>

In June 1922, Dungannon mill-owner, former Irish rugby international and local “B” Specials commander, Major Robert Stevenson wrote a scathing confidential report about the USC’s sectarianism, which came ‘right down through from the politicians on top’. Stevenson claimed that the “B” force represented ‘the ordinary Protestant countryman and in many cases corner boy’, being ‘supplied with arms and clothing by his Government and “authorised” to get “on top”, as it were, of his R.C. [Roman Catholic] neighbours’.<sup>52</sup> He concluded that:

North of Ireland Protestants are not saints, they have always been taught to hate R.C.’s and it is against all reason to expect that untrained, undisciplined, and almost wholly without supervision, they can be armed, uniformed, and entrusted with police duties – human nature cannot rise to that right away!<sup>53</sup>

After an attack on the Police Barracks in Coalisland on 3 May 1922, the IRA shot dead local “B” Special Constable Robert Cardwell.<sup>54</sup> A party of USC, two of them ‘unable to stand they were so drunk’, then killed two nationalist civilians as a reprisal.<sup>55</sup> While Stevenson published a public letter warning the Specials of their future conduct, the RIC District Inspector [DI], Henry Jordan Walshe, described USC violence as par for the course ‘until the [IRA] gunmen were banished those people [Catholics] would have to bear the consequences’.

In addition to the local religious breakdown, the Coalisland and Dungannon nexus represented one of the most republican areas in Ulster.

The Irish Republican Brotherhood [IRB] remained strong locally through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and exhibited a strong strain of working-class labourite politics. Indeed, local republicans had been central to strikes at the failed Congo Colliery on the southern side of Coalisland in the late 1890s.<sup>56</sup> More recently, local trade unions rode on the wave of industrial militancy that swept Ulster in the late war period and just prior to the post-war economic slump.<sup>57</sup> The same slump formed the background to the defeat of labour politics in Tyrone and Ulster more generally in the wake of the July 1920 shipyard expulsions in Belfast and the consolidation of the new Unionist one-party regime. Within this context of depression and demoralisation the Dublin-based Irish Transport and General Workers' Union [ITGWU] vied with the British-based Workers' Union [WU] for the fragments of local trade unionism. Ironically, many of the same activists had co-operated during Ulster's red wave, but a return to the successful militancy of 1918 and 1919 appeared a distant prospect.

Just prior to the signing of the Treaty in 1921, the local ITGWU's organiser reported that talk of an eight-hour-day or half-holiday on Saturday would be condemned as 'Bolshevik' by the local Unionist elite, concluding that, 'in Dungannon [,] the Fatherhood of God is proclaimed, although the Brotherhood of Man may be non-existent'. He continued that the 'boss is merely pulling the strings in his own interests', unconcerned 'as to whether a man is Catholic or Protestant, black or white, providing his labour is cheap; And that it is, sir, cheap in Dungannon'. In Coalisland, the organiser claimed that 'the philanthropist [Kelly] is giving local labour a chance, of course at the philanthropist's price! The men are showing signs of discontent with the pittance and before long there will be an improvement or a stoppage'. He concluded that 'while Coalisland is more hopeful than Dungannon ... with prosperous times ahead, if the workers mean to share that prosperity, they must of necessity combine'.<sup>58</sup>

At Kelly's Tyrone Brickyard, workers joined the ITGWU, while the union competed against the WU to secure members in the Ulster Fireclay Works and the large clay pit that served it. John McMahon chaired the ITGWU branch at the Brickworks and Patrick Skelton acted as secretary. Both men were republicans and very likely also members of the Old Engine branch of the IRB.<sup>59</sup> They were also the sons of local miners, who appeared to have spent considerable time working in Scotland as well as the by-then defunct Congo mine.<sup>60</sup> At a large meeting, the local 'representative of the cross channel [Workers'] union', Neal O'Donnell 'was present, but neither questions nor criticisms, although cordially invited,

were forthcoming, and a good meeting ended in the appointment of shop stewards and a committee of organisers'.<sup>61</sup> O'Donnell, however, clearly resented the ITGWU's attempts to poach members in Coalisland, especially given the much-heralded prospect of industrial revival. While the ITGWU carried the day at the Brickyard, the two unions appeared at 'loggerheads' at the Ulster Fireclay Works. The employer apparently sided with O'Donnell and the WU, however, and wouldn't 'allow any ITGWU men into the works'.<sup>62</sup>

Kelly had, therefore, set upon developing his industry in an area riven by sectarian and class divisions. At the beginning of 1923, the ITGWU's *Voice of Labour* sarcastically remarked that 'one would think the golden age at last was dawning. Alas! The facts are at present' that 'some 120 employees of Sir Samuel Kelly's clay pit, brickyard, and pipe [Ulster Fireclay] yard are out on strike against a 5 shilling [s.] cut in wages'. It continued that 'those who have toiled through the muck of a clay hole in winter, or sweated in a kiln in summer, will understand best the ideas which some people hold as regards prosperity'.<sup>63</sup> At the Ulster Fireclay Works, Patrick Quinn, Con O'Neill and Joseph Quinn 'accosted' John Davis for crossing a picket line. The magistrate and local Orangeman, Robert Newton, warned that the 'workers had been getting on shaky ground, but as the strike was now settled the magistrates would dismiss the case. Sir Samuel Kelly was a wealthy man, one of the few who had made his money in Ireland'. Newton concluded that 'they had their first taste of labour trouble in Coalisland, and the magistrates hoped it would be the last'.<sup>64</sup>

The *Voice* also reported how the fifty men at Tyrone Brick worked over fifty hours for 40s. in continuous day and night shifts producing 100,000 bricks per week. Indeed, the 'firm admits they make a profit on the brickyard, but wages must come down, although' they refused 'a proposal to accept 37s. 6d. for 48 hours' from the men. The piece continued that 'when Sir Samuel Kelly was plain Mister, we found him the best and most reasonable man amongst the hard-faced men of the Belfast coal ring. Whether the knighthood has changed him or the coal discovery, or that he has handed his power over to his managers, we cannot say, but hope to learn this week'. Nevertheless, the local ITGWU pledged to 'stand firm against an injustice, determined that if Coalisland is to be prosperous, it will be real prosperity, as found in the strong healthy bodies of free men and free women, not in the dwarfed and stunted bodies of slaves'.<sup>65</sup>

The following week, the *Voice* noted the appearance of 'imports from Belfast', a city notorious for sweated labour, which also manufactured

'the blackleg species'. Similarly, at the clay pit, 'the blacklegs were introduced under the protection of the Specials, who, to give them credit, do not relish the task, for there's streaks of loathsomeness about the scab which makes honest men shun them'. The piece noted that 'there are still a few rebels in Coalisland against attempts to exploit them in the interests of the wealthy', concluding that 'no matter who rules, the worker intends to secure a living wage'.<sup>66</sup> After a conference with Kelly himself, the firm agreed to implement a smaller reduction to be reviewed in July at the Ulster Fire Clay and Tyrone Brick yards, although the men in the clay pit held out for better terms.<sup>67</sup>

The ITGWU then alleged that O'Donnell attempted to subvert their efforts by siding with the employer for more favourable terms.<sup>68</sup> *The Voice* alleged that 'to be in the Irish Transport Union in Coalisland not only gets a man in the black books of the Unionist employers but good nationalists are also seeing to it that there's no work for the members of the ITGWU'.<sup>69</sup> After O'Donnell apparently poached back members at the Clay Pit, the ITGWU described him as the 'hidden hand of a management which hates the Transport Union', who got amongst 'members of the Transport out on strike', warning that, 'if ever a boomerang was made, the firm and the Workers Union will discover this pact as one, and it will not be long ere it whirls back with renewed force and smashes the unholy combination'.<sup>70</sup> A local republican and ITGWU supporter, John Quinn, criticised O'Donnell for protesting 'against the action of certain employers importing labour from country districts, while fifty or sixty men were signing the unemployment register in the town'. Quinn alleged that the blame lay with O'Donnell, who connived with employers.<sup>71</sup> Apparently, having marginalised the ITGWU in favour of the WU, local employers then used mostly Protestant labour from outside Coalisland to undermine O'Donnell, leading to his eventual arrest in July.<sup>72</sup>

At this point a relative of Constable Robert Cardwell wrote to the local Unionist *Mid-Ulster Mail* to challenge nationalist complaints that Kelly's firms employed too many 'outsiders'. David Cardwell, from the unionist townland of Ballynakilly, just outside Coalisland town, claimed that Protestants previously couldn't get jobs in the Fireclay Works before Kelly bought the business but now, things were gradually changing. Cardwell had 'lived in this district' and his 'forebears' before him and could never get a job in the town, but he trusted 'the time is at hand when this will be changed'. Indeed, it appeared 'near time there was a change in a class of hands' as the Catholics 'were always on strike and quarrelling with their masters'. Alluding to the dispute between the WU and ITGWU, Cardwell

mocked how 'they could not even agree amongst themselves, and were shifting from one agitator to another, whichever one would threaten the bosses the most, and it is not long since they went into the yard and threatened the manager'. He concluded that there was no 'use of complaining about bringing Englishmen over here to do work which the local men refused to do' and that 'the handwriting is on the wall' for local Catholics looking for work from Sir Samuel Kelly.<sup>73</sup>

Having displaced the ITGWU from Ulster Fireclay Works and the Clay Pit, O'Donnell then sought a standard local rate for workers employed in building miners' cottages. The main building contractors were Teggart from Belfast and Collen Bros from Portadown, both Protestant firms. After a strike and negotiations, Collen Bros agreed to the local rate, but Teggart held out, paying 2s. 6d. per week less. During a picket of the site, Teggart employed local "B" Specials as strike breakers. WU organiser, Robert McClung, alleged that the RUC acted 'in a very offensive manner' and used 'violence towards the wives and children of our members, who are on dispute there'. He wrote to Bates that members had 'the right to peacefully picket during a trade dispute, and as the police know every man, woman and child in the Coalisland area, we do not think it is necessary ... to use violence in the slightest degree'. He then warned that it would be 'very unfortunate thing for everybody if our members get out of hand owing to the violence of the RUC'.<sup>74</sup>

The local RUC denied using violence and reported that a 'crowd of about 250 persons including women were outside the works ... booing and their attitude was intimidatory'. When the sergeant told O'Donnell that they would have to move on, he replied that 'we can stay as long as we like as long as we don't assault anybody'. The police 'ordered the crowd to disperse and after some persuasion', the Constable apparently 'got them away'.<sup>75</sup> On this occasion, the workers knew the law and the Trades Disputes Act better than the police and the MHA advised the RUC 'to avoid, if possible, coming into conflict of any sort with the strikers'.<sup>76</sup> In response, the MHA directed the RUC to monitor the WU in a similar fashion to the ITGWU.

Then, on 27 July, while Teggart paid the strike breakers, O'Donnell approached him to ask for wages owed to men who had worked a partial week before going on strike. Teggart got the police to remove him, and O'Donnell then told another large crowd in earshot of the strike breakers that 'If you had the spirit of a dog you wouldn't work for Teggart. You are yellow dogs anyway'. The police arrested him for a breach of the peace. At the trial, one of the B Special strike breakers claimed that O'Donnell 'came into the building ground' and 'called him bad names for not coming out

on strike along with the rest'. When John Skeffington, O'Donnell's solicitor and a local Hibernian or constitutional nationalist leader, questioned Teggart as to his failure to pay the local rate, D.I. Walshe interjected in the proceedings shouting, 'don't answer that question'.<sup>77</sup>

Two witnesses then testified that Teggart had, in fact, assaulted O'Donnell: McClung and a local Catholic labourer, Henry Hughes. D.I. Walshe questioned Hughes as to whether he was 'a very peaceful citizen?' Hughes replied, 'I belong to Coalisland (Laughter)'. Walshe then added that 'Coalisland has a bad name (More laughter)'. Skeffington interjected: 'we will see now if the workman will get the same justice as the employer'. The JP claimed that 'it was a scandal to see so much opposition to Kelly, 'a man ... prepared to spend so much money in promoting employment. It was playboys such as they had heard about that day that were destroying trade and creating trouble'.<sup>78</sup> He then fined O'Donnell £5; a sentence overturned on appeal.<sup>79</sup> The dispute lasted four months. By October, the RUC reported that the strike was 'fizzling out' and that Messrs Teggart still 'employed' the USC 'strike breakers'.<sup>80</sup>

Nevertheless, by April 1924, the *Belfast Telegraph* reported that 'the labour dispute at Coalisland appears to be spreading'. Even before the pit officially opened, some British miners joined local workers in demanding improved conditions.<sup>81</sup> Ominously, the issue at the Colliery revolved around 'faults' and 'varying strata conditions', which meant that sinkers in Shaft 2 did not meet their quota and management docked their pay. The men in Shaft 1 then went out on sympathy strike.<sup>82</sup> The miners struck at the same time as workers, also employed by Collen Bros (Portadown), on the Coalisland Water Supply Scheme, which received a £40,000 grant from Andrews to service Newtownkelly. The Dungannon RDC hired two contractors, one working at the Coalisland end of the scheme and the other at the Washingbay on Lough Neagh nine miles to the east. A local nationalist won the Coalisland contract, while the RDC granted Collen Bros (Portadown), which had paid the local rate at Newtownkelly in 1923, the contract for Washingbay. Under the grant's terms, only workers with a 'green ticket' from the Unemployment Exchange could gain employment. Collen Bros complained that, as the strikers had not 'made any attempt to return to work', they proposed to employ 'an entirely new set of men regardless of the green ticket man and get on with the work without further today'. Nevertheless, the conditions of the grant meant that they could not employ whom they wished.<sup>83</sup>

The employer then spread the rumour that the Washingbay strike hinged on the appointment of 'a new gaffer', who alleged that his position

as ‘a member of the C Special Constabulary’ represented the real reason for the strike. Once again, the newspapers noted ‘a strong force of police has arrived under District-Inspector Walshe, Dungannon’. Collen Bros, who had previously paid the local rate, appeared emboldened by Teggart’s success at Newtownkelly, paying workers at the Lough Shore end of the scheme 25s., while men employed in Coalisland Town by the local nationalist contractor, McNally, received 33s. 6d. The WU called both teams out and demanded the local rate of 35s. Similarly, carters at the Ulster Fireclay Works and at the Colliery who received 24s. struck demanding ‘the local standard wage’. Collen Bros then informed its building workers at Newtownkelly that they would be cutting wages from 35s. to 32s. 6d. The Unionist *Newsletter* remained unmoved by the workers’ demands but lamented the inconvenience caused by the strikes, since the ‘Coalisland streets are all “up” for the laying of the water main through the town, and they are dangerous to traffic’.<sup>84</sup> It might help to note that the average weekly income of a labourer in Britain in 1905 exceeded what Collen Bros paid workers on the Lough shore in 1924 and that the average wage for a British labourer in 1925 sat at 55s. 7d., while a bricklayer could expect 73s. 6d.<sup>85</sup>

The contractor for the Coalisland end of the Water Scheme eventually paid the local rate and it was ‘expected that the laying of the line of pipes from Annagher will speedily be completed’. Collen Bros then agreed to pay the ‘the district rate of wages’ at Newtownkelly and it ‘is expected that the first eighty houses will be ready for occupation in a few weeks’. The carters at the Fireclay Works and Colliery and the thirty sinkers agreed to return to work, with ‘the final terms of pay ... left to the management and the union officials for final settlement’. This agreement was reached after face-to-face meetings between Robert McClung and Kelly at the latter’s office in Station Street, Belfast.<sup>86</sup> Negotiations ‘broke down’, however, when Collen Bros maintained its belligerent attitude at Washingbay.<sup>87</sup>

The WU headquarters in London then sent £107 strike fund at the beginning of May.<sup>88</sup> Collen Bros responded by employing three strike-breakers from Stewartstown, nine miles northwest, for the Washingbay end of the Water Scheme – each with a ‘green ticket’. One morning, three WU members armed with bludgeons held them up a mile from the works. ‘They were told that if they crossed a line that had been drawn across the road they would do so at their peril. The men thought discretion was the better part of valour and went to Coalisland by a circuitous route’ and returned to work ‘under police protection’.<sup>89</sup> After arranging an identity parade, Walshe arrested three strikers. One of the men, Peter Douglas,



described the strike breakers as 'three right blackguards to work so far. It would not be so bad had they been there before the strike'.<sup>90</sup>

At this stage, several hundred people attended another 'big labour demonstration' in Coalisland Square, which pledged 'fealty to the men out on strike'. Speaking from the back of a motor car, McClung claimed that three prisoners were only guilty of 'asserting their right in a trades labour dispute'. These men were 'working in mud and slush and dirt' for the 'miserable wage' of 6d per hour. 'The Workers Union did not advocate strikes, but sometimes, as in the case of the Water Scheme at Washingbay, they are unavoidable'. Bob Getgood said that 'it was quite evident that there was something radically wrong at Coalisland'. The employer 'was certain to have his pound of flesh while you have the bone (Laughter)'.<sup>91</sup> The RUC reported that the meeting generated 'considerable enthusiasm' and O'Donnell resolved to 'call out' Collens's workers at Newtownkelly in 'sympathy with the men' at Washingbay 'who were working for the same firm'.<sup>92</sup>

Across 1923-4, the WU alleged that the police acted under the direction of local bosses.<sup>93</sup> Sam Kyle complained to the MHA that the police were 'exceeding their duty in treating members of the Workers' Union as if they were members of a secret society' and asked that police not visit the homes of WU officials and question their relatives but rather acquire information on the union from the regional office in Belfast.<sup>94</sup> Managers and sub-contractors across Kelly's enterprises developed a policy of reducing wages, falsely claiming the Catholic workers were sectarian and then appointing part-time members of the USC to act as strike breakers, while the RUC and full-time "A" Specials backed the employers. Within this context, the earlier tension between the WU and ITGWU rapidly dissolved and trade union organisers, many of whom were Protestant socialists from Belfast, co-operated in a struggle against a deliberately sectarian policy instigated by the employers and supported by the police.

For instance, while O'Donnell and the WU struggled to gain the local rate for labourers at Newtownkelly and on the Water Scheme, conflict re-emerged at the Tyrone Brickyard. Here, forty-three ITGWU men downed tools because 'six additional men were taken on' despite an agreement with managers that Transport members who had previously been made redundant would be re-hired. The *Northern Whig* reported that the yard then continued with 'voluntary labour under police protection, and these men are being conveyed to and from their work by motor under police escort'.<sup>95</sup> The ITGWU organised large meetings in Coalisland and Dungannon addressed by William McMullen, the trade union's secretary,

and Dawson Gordon, president of the Flax Roughers' Association, both Protestants from Belfast and the latter a member and close associate of the WU leadership. McMullen rejected allegations by the employer that the strike had a 'religious and political side' as 'they were both Protestants, and strongly contended that there was nothing of a religious or a political taint in the fight for an honest wage'. Indeed, 'the 43 men who were out on strike were replaced by 50 Protestants'. Rather, the management desired to make 'it a religious quarrel' and their 'deep-rooted designs' were to divide the workers.<sup>96</sup>

The local police fully backed the employer's line, claiming that the ITGWU's 'real grievance is that the six men are imported Protestants, practically all the workers hitherto being Roman Catholics. The management have decided to take this strike to the finish, and already they have 24 strike breakers (all Protestants) engaged'. The report continued that 'the men are working under ample police protection and all precautions necessary for the protection of life and property have been taken. The works have been picketed by the strikers, but up to the present no intimidation has taken place'.<sup>97</sup>

The ITGWU branch then hired John Skeffington to demand a correction from the *Northern Whig* about its published account of the strike.<sup>98</sup> According to the workers, when management ended the night shift in March 1924 because of improved mechanisation, eight workers lost their jobs. The manager agreed that 'if extra men were required those dispensed with would get first preference'. Nevertheless, he then appointed seven Protestant workers 'without any notice whatever to the branch officials', eventually telling McMahan and Skelton of the ITGWU 'that is my business; Your business is to go on with your work'. The branch committee then apparently convinced the new workers to 'stop operations immediately until the members of the union who were paid off' gained reinstatement and that the new men would be given next preference at the yard. The seven men duly 'came out with the other 43 men' but the Unemployment Bureau informed them 'that unless they went back to work, they would not be entitled to any further benefit'. The management then sent a motor car to the seven workers' homes, and they crossed the picket line.<sup>99</sup>

The manager, Cooper, then replaced the entire workforce with 'a similar number of demobilised "Specials" – Orange and Protestant to a man'.<sup>100</sup> The ITGWU alleged that management spread a false rumour that the workers downed tools 'against the employment of Protestants – a clever, calculated perversion of the truth, told in the atmosphere where it

has most likelihood of bearing fruit'. These Orange 'scabs' were brought 'to and from their work in motors' and 'paid 5s. per week more than the old employees (dirty money) and have the company of armed protection'. It concluded that 'for crucifying their comrades, as usual, they are receiving the usual Judas fee', asserting that

religion, thank God, is never a bone of contention in the One Big Union [ITGWU] ... our members struck for the reinstatement of Protestant and Catholic alike – religion was not mentioned until the scab-hunters introduced the word. We believe that Sir Samuel Kelly would not stand for a pogrom being started in Tyrone, but we know that there are others who have not his tolerance or broad mindedness, and we know that, with the boundary question once more acute, there are many who would do much to see every Catholic cleared out of the county.<sup>101</sup>

The police noted that 'a certain amount of bitterness has now crept into this dispute' and that the ITGWU covered the area in 600 posters, labelling the strike breakers 'spineless jellyfish who live by scabbery'. When the ITGWU organiser 'attempted to address the strike breakers when entering and leaving work', he 'was subjected to much cross-examination by the workers and would have been assaulted were it not for the presence of a large posse of police'. All included, the manager employed 'eleven more men ... than before the strike. The men are brought to and from their work, under police protection, in motor cars supplied by the firm'.<sup>102</sup> The strike collapsed on 21 August 1924, with pickets withdrawn the following day. One local republican described the struggle to a comrade interned on the prison ship *Argenta*: 'The strike at the brickworks still continues and looks very blue. We are down and out all through the signing of the f\*\*king Treaty!'<sup>103</sup>

Indeed, *The Voice of Labour* declared that 'No Catholic need apply!', adding that 'when God made the earth and placed coal in the Dungannon district, apparently, He placed it there to be worked by Protestants only, this, at least, seems to be the opinion of Sir Samuel Kelly's manager at the pit'.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, the *Irish News* reported 'that a religious test was being applied to men seeking employment at the new coal mine at Coalisland and other works in the same district'. The 'overwhelming evidence' apparently proved that 'under the cloak of industrial developments the Ulster Unionist leaders are carrying out a new plantation. The Catholic majority in Tyrone has always been a bitter pill to the Unionists, and plans were made immediately after the passing of the Government of Ireland

Act to gain the balance of power'. After citing the gerrymandering of electoral boundaries as 'the first step in the conspiracy', the paper alleged that Craig's government promoted the coal industry as 'another big effort to accomplish their purpose'. The employer apparently took care that the Cumberland and Scottish miners 'were all Protestants'. However, 'two of the Scotch miners, preferring to have working by their side men whom they knew, sent to Lanarkshire for two of their old [Catholic] mates'. These men signed a statement that they were refused work on religious grounds. The article alleged that 'this was not an isolated instance but was part of a considered policy to exclude Catholics, as far as it was possible to do so, from benefiting by the industrial development'.<sup>105</sup>

## V. Lockout

Then, less than four months after its July opening, the Colliery management locked workers out twice in two months. The causes can be traced back to already apparent issues with faults in the steep seams and with the workers themselves. The manager of the pit later privately confided that the lockout's 'real object .. was to get rid of some undesirable men'.<sup>106</sup> Across Kelly's enterprises, local managers had deployed a religious test to undermine workers' demands for fair pay and conditions. Indeed, some Unionists clearly hoped that the influx of solidly Protestant miners from Scotland and northern England might even tip the demographic balance in East Tyrone. Nevertheless, the unemployed miners attracted to Coalisland contained a hard core of militant trade unionists. It is likely many happened to be unemployed in their own districts because they were already blacklisted!

The RUC reported how, due to continuing under-production, the management informed the workers that, from 27 October 1924, 'they would be paid by output (or piecework) instead of at certain rates per shift as at present'. The Scotch miners 'do not belong to any trade union in this country' and 'all necessary protection is being afforded to the police, but it is feared that further strike trouble is brewing in Coalisland and district'.<sup>107</sup> The workers faced a 25s. a week cut precipitated by the dawning realisation that 'Kelly has been greatly disappointed in the results so far of the new enterprise, the output of coal not being anything like what he expected. Several of the seams which promised to yield enormous quantities of coal stopped short, while others were gradually reduced in size until they would not pay the working'.<sup>108</sup>

The 150 men duly formed a branch of the Miners Federation 'and all those employed at the colliery, except the engine and pump engineer, left

their work'. The RUC noted that 'the owner of the colliery is prepared to make a stand against the men's demands'.<sup>109</sup> The resulting negotiations proved 'so unsatisfactory' that the management instituted a lockout on 28 October. The workers not only insisted on the old rate, a half holiday each Saturday and overtime for work on weekends but demanded that 'the management should meet a committee of the men each week, to "discuss the running of the mine"'. Regarding this 'as purely communistic', management 'refused to consider it'. The police identified 'several very doubtful characters' amongst the miners who were 'absolute Bolsheviks in their attitude and are a source of danger in the locality', including a miner named Shaw from Durham who 'is an out-and-out Communist'.<sup>110</sup>

After another meeting, the miners again 'sent a deputation to the management, who refused to negotiate unless a new deputation was appointed'. The workers duly sent a 'peace' deputation and the management laid out conditions 'that the men should return to work, and that they would discuss terms'. Most of the men decided to return.<sup>111</sup> Some of those unhappy with events worked a week's notice and returned to Scotland.<sup>112</sup> Yet, the dispute did not end there. The miners worked on for a further month but struck again in the face of further reductions. Kelly suspended all work on 29 November and many of the remaining miners 'returned to English and Scottish centres', while the RUC 'in the district has been strengthened following the closing down of the mine'.<sup>113</sup>

Kelly had clearly lost faith and locked the workers out the second time as a preliminary to deploying a skeleton staff of forty men to maintain the mine, which would now run for as long as the government coal subsidy continued. The RUC noted that 'only about ten men and their families of those who are locked out and who are not to be employed again at the colliery, remain in Coalisland'. The report concluded that 'it may also be taken that the branch of the Coalminers' Union formed at this place has been disbanded'.<sup>114</sup> The *Irish News* reported that many of the paid-off miners made a 'large claim for unemployment benefit, which was refused until the whole circumstances were investigated by the Ministry of Labour. No decision has yet been given, but it is believed to be the intentions of the Ministry to turn down the claims'.<sup>115</sup>

Clearly, estimates of daily tonnage predicted in Unionist propaganda bore little relation to the hard facts on the coal face. By March 1925, the colliery was only producing fifty tons per day – the largest daily output across the period being eighty. The miners were working in 'broken ground and then about half the places they are crossing faults and that is the cause of the reduced output'. The seams were also too steep for

conventional mining techniques and many of the Scotch and English miners quickly returned home as they were not 'accustomed to' working under such conditions.<sup>116</sup> By July 1926, the *Irish News* speculated that 'a series of roads through the mine' needed to be built to access the fragmented seams and that 'this would not only involve the expenditure of a large sum of money but would stop all mining operations at the pit'.<sup>117</sup> By this stage, the operation was under regular inspection as part of the Coal Mines Act.<sup>118</sup> That spring, the inspector did 'not think the colliery will work much longer' and Kelly's dreams appeared 'doomed to disappointment' because the seams were badly affected 'by faults and washouts' and advised against 'hanging on [while] steadily losing their money', advising that, 'if I was the owner, I should abandon the place and sell up'.<sup>119</sup>

It was with a certain *Schadenfreude* then that the *Irish News* reported James Craig junior's appointment as a director of Kelly's St Helens Colliery company in January 1927 and alluded to 'strange stories ... going about regarding the efforts made to pretend that the [Coalisland] mine was a paying proposition'. The report poured scorn on the Ulster Unionist government, who, 'as usual, made the most of the venture', and how 'glowing pictures were drawn of the mine being the first step in the industrial revolution of Ulster'. It concluded, rather acerbically, that Kelly's Coalisland Housing Company had not yet repaid its secured loan for the miners' palaces at Newtownkelly.<sup>120</sup>

The Unionist government eventually bowed to the inevitable and ceased paying Kelly the coal subsidy, which was 'three times higher than in Britain', but still meant that 'coal could be mined only at a considerable loss, which exceeded that sustained by any operative British mine. Even with the subvention, the mine's accounts could not be made to balance, and with its withdrawal the mine closed in April 1927'.<sup>121</sup> While Kelly lived, the Ulster Bank 'did not insist upon punctual payments either of interest or of principle' on the housing loan. In 1937, the Ministry of Finance noted 'a feeling of relief that' the £200,000 guaranteed loan for Coalisland Housing has been paid off without loss', noting how the Ministry had 'resisted the repeated efforts to link up the loan with this mine company and to release Sir Samuel Kelly from any other liability'.<sup>122</sup>

## VI. Postscript

By January 1926, Kelly's mine was no longer a going concern. The *Mid-Ulster Mail* wrongly speculated 'that the boundary question has something to do with the matter'.<sup>123</sup> The Unionist government could comfort itself,

however, safe in the knowledge that the failure of the Commission the previous month had secured Coalisland and all of Tyrone's place within the boundaries of Craig's 'Ulster Pale'. With the threat to the south gone, however, the British Exchequer appeared less inclined to maintain the previous extravagant level of funding on the USC. On 22 December, the MHA paid off the six hundred "A" Specials in Tyrone. Similarly, after 1 April, the Full and Half Patrol rates for the "B" Specials ended, with members now left to manage on a £3 Reserve annual bounty.<sup>124</sup> In 1926, unemployment in the North stood at 24.2% – over double the figure in Britain. Furthermore, Craig's Unionist Party had achieved a less than impressive 55 per cent of the popular vote in the 1925 elections to the Northern Parliament and Sam Kyle of the WU led the recently formed Northern Ireland Labour Party [NILP] to a respectable 4.7 per cent and three seats in Belfast. When Craig added the four independent populist loyalist MPs to the equation, the result pointed towards some fraying at the edges of the cross-class Orange alliance.

In this context, the nascent NILP held a meeting of 500 people at Coalisland Picture House in a follow-up to a similar meeting at Dungannon on 28 December 1925. Robert Brown, a Scottish coal miner resident in Newtownkelly, took the chair. Neal O'Donnell addressed the meeting as did veteran socialist, Dublin-born Quaker and recently appointed NILP senator, Bob Dorman. The WU procession, which marched through the town carrying pit lamps, 'was headed by the Coalisland Brass Band and the Coalisland Pipers Band', while the worshipful master of the Orange Lodge and president of the Ancient Order of Hibernians 'marched in the procession and IRA ex-internees marched behind "B" Special Constabulary Pipers'. The rather perplexed MHA secretaries described this as an 'extraordinary gathering', the 'composition' of which, 'must, I should think, be unique in N. Ireland'.<sup>125</sup>

At the meeting itself, Brown protested the Ministry of Labour and the Employers' Committee decision to disallow 'a large number of our members' from unemployment benefit on 7 January, since they were 'not genuinely seeking work, when there is none to be had'. Gorman then pointed to 'two members of the RUC who were present, with good clothing, and clean hands, who were guaranteed a living, so long as they behaved themselves, and their health allowed them to perform their onerous duties'. The NILP 'wanted a similar guarantee for the working man. He asked those present to sink all differences and let North and South unite – Catholics and Protestants – Union Jack and Tricolour. He hoped the audience would do nothing by force. The Labour Party were

out to do all by constitutional means – to stand together and use the vote’. The RUC Inspector General, Charles Wickham, described the meeting as ‘an extraordinary mixture, showing unanimity between Orangemen, Hibernians, and Sinn Feiners. “B” men marched with ex-internees and Scottish miners with local labourers’.<sup>126</sup>

Dawson Bates’s MHA felt particularly affronted by loyal “B” Specials attending a socialist meeting, ‘a practise which would appear to be altogether objectionable’.<sup>127</sup> Wickham claimed that the men were not in uniform and, as such, cautioned the MHA against drawing ‘a distinction between this and an ordinary political meeting, and any action taken as regards one would have to govern that taken as regards the other’.<sup>128</sup> Wickham clearly implied that if “B” men were banned from NILP meetings then they presumably couldn’t attend Ulster Unionist meetings either!

This exceptional Coalisland demonstration emerged from the collision between conditions and agency. The disbandment of the “A” Specials and reduction of the “B” Special increment partially undermined the material foundation of some working-class Protestant support for the Unionist party. The same government then refused to grant unemployment benefit to Catholic and Protestant workers alike in an area with a tradition of rock bottom wages, precarious conditions, and chronic unemployment. This corresponded with moves by the NILP ‘to pick up the pieces’ after what Sam Kyle described as the ‘perpetual strain’ of loyalist reaction after the 1920 expulsions in Belfast, when the new party formed on a Six-County basis in March 1924.<sup>129</sup>

The NILP emerged as a pragmatic response by anti-partitionist trade unionists to the reality of Unionist rule.<sup>130</sup> While nominally opposed to partition, they recognised that even the Northern workers’ poor conditions appeared preferable to their comrades’ meagre existence in the Free State. As such, they fudged the national question to attract support across the sectarian divide and operate as an opposition to Craig’s Ulster Unionists in the Belfast parliament. A pervasive argument exists that they failed because they ‘deluded themselves by believing that a persuasively argued exposé of Unionist and Orange ideology would be enough to break the sectarian cultural stranglehold in Ulster’. In short, the position of Protestant socialists like Kyle, Gordon and McClung failed to take ‘the unionism of the Protestant working class seriously’ or ‘to realize that it was not synonymous with craven loyalty to the bosses’ but resonated with Orange ‘community, folk cultures’ sprouting from deeply sunk sectarian roots.<sup>131</sup>



This analysis partly explains why the Unionist reflex was instinctively sectarian, but ultimately fails to expose how sectarianism operated in reality. By 1929, Craig abolished PR for elections to the northern parliament in favour of first-past-the-post; not to discriminate against nationalists, this had already been effectively achieved by the 1922 local government gerrymander, rather this halted electoral momentum based on working-class Catholic and Protestant support for the NILP since, as Craig admitted, the 'old-fashioned plain and simple system' returned 'men who are for the Union on the one hand, or who are against it and want to go into a Dublin parliament on the other'.<sup>132</sup> When the Great Depression further stripped the meat from Stormont's bones and the working-class temporarily combined in the Outdoor Relief Strikes, the Unionist elite doubled down on sectarianism.

In the context of permanent British-imposed dependency, baseline austerity and within the constraints of a supremacist Orange ideology, 'leading members of the Unionist political class' clearly adopted 'sectarian rhetoric' and endorsed 'exclusivist practices that actively discriminated against Catholics'.<sup>133</sup> Much of the extant historiography criticises the republican socialist tendency 'to treat Protestant working-class Unionism in the Connollyite fashion as bigotry', which dominated the thinking of twentieth-century Marxists 'from whom a serious analysis would be most expected'. Yet, according to Patterson the 'manipulated dupes' thesis 'proved incapable of even beginning an analysis of that class's political and ideological history'.<sup>134</sup>

Yet such analysis ignores the fact that working-class loyalism operated within a governmental framework based on bigotry and despite populist rumblings the Linen Lords and Big House Unionists ran the show. In a situation of near perpetual scarcity and precarity, sectarianism operated as means of maintaining elite control. Chris Loughlin suggests that the Unionist elite based their 'regime upon a moral economy and wages of loyalty', or 'the British Imperial influenced version of the "wages of whiteness" posited by D.R. Roediger'. In a situation where the nationalist third of the population automatically occupied a profane or disloyal space, Protestants either 'accepted loyalty (and its correlates of Britishness, Protestantism and Empire), or they rejected it'.<sup>135</sup> Loughlin's analysis offers a more dynamic rendering than Bew et al. who, taking a lead from Althusser, condemned James Connolly's 'pre-Marxist notion of ideology' and his classical socialist analysis of the internal forces at work within the Orange monolith. Rather, Unionist leadership ideology was 'not primarily Orange at all'. Rather it represented a 'democratic',

but 'pro-imperialist ... secular ideology'. Below this level, however, ran a 'populist strain within Protestant ideology', which the leadership struggled resolutely to control.<sup>136</sup> In this bizarre reversal of class forces, the Unionist elite constructed a gilded cage for themselves.

Loughlin is surely closer to the reality of how sectarianism operated when he argues that 'the wages of loyalty were the cultural, psychological, and material basis for UUP control of Northern Ireland. They were the twentieth century expression of a much longer history of settler colonialism'.<sup>137</sup> This study has suggested that the Unionist government gave the maximum support possible to Samuel Kelly due to his history as UVF gunrunner and his personal connections to Craig and Bates in particular. Furthermore, the government hoped that Kelly's success would alleviate their structural dependence on British subvention and chronic unemployment problem. The sectarian employment practices across Kelly's enterprises and protection they received from the police and judiciary suggests that the new industrial revolution would benefit the Protestant population at the expense of Coalisland's considerable Catholic majority. Furthermore, the enthusiasm and considerable financial support for the homes at Newtownkelly partly relied on the desire to increase the local Protestant population, adding substance to Unionist rhetoric about 'loyal' Tyrone.

Ulster Unionism's determination to retain majority nationalist areas like East Tyrone and Derry City within Craig's impregnable Six-County Pale and the Orange populist character of its discriminatory rule created the long-term conditions for its eventual demise a half century later. The Tyrone Brick yard lay on the road between Coalisland and Dungannon. On 24 August 1968, the first civil rights march went down that very road when the children and grandchildren of the striking workers analysed in this piece engaged in one of those small acts, which, when multiplied, can transform the world.<sup>138</sup> A young Bernadette Devlin joined the same march from '90% Republican' Coalisland, which descended from a carnival atmosphere to one of 'passive anger' when an RUC cordon blocked the marchers' entry into Dungannon. Afterwards in a pub not far from empty shell of Coalisland Colliery and the Fireclay Works, Devlin criticised 'out of touch' politicians who 'thought they could come down, make big speeches, and be listened to respectfully'. It was then that 'the people all got out together' and 'turned round and said in effect to the politicians, "Clear off, you don't even think the way we think"'.<sup>139</sup> Here once again for any historian willing to see, in the same place amongst descendants of the same people, 'the same aspirations, fears, and tensions are there',

but 'in a new context, with new language and arguments, and a changed balance of forces'.<sup>140</sup>

## Notes

- 1 *Northern Whig*, 20 January 1923.
- 2 *Northern Whig*, 30 March 1923.
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