



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Irish citizens campaign against conscription by the British Government, 1918

14 April

1918

to: 18 July

1918

Country: Ireland

Location Description: *Took place effectively in every population center in Ireland*

Goals:

To prevent the conscription of Irish citizens

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements › Oath that Irish will resist by all means against British conscription
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books › Flyers with the oath against conscription at every Catholic church in Ireland
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 117. General strike
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 123. Boycott of legislative bodies

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 123. Boycott of legislative bodies

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 123. Boycott of legislative bodies

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements › Oath that Irish women will not take jobs of conscripted men
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 123. Boycott of legislative bodies

Methods in 5th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 6th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 048. Protest meetings

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

National/Ethnic Identity

Peace

Group characterization:

- Catholics
- Irish nationalists
- Labor unions
- clergy

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

anti-conscription conference

Partners:

Catholic Church

Sinn Féin

Irish-for-All

Irish Parliamentary Party

Irish Labor Party and Trade Union Congress

Irish Women Worker's Union

Involvement of social elites:

Éamon de Valera

Ignatius J. O'Brien

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Catholic Church
- Irish Labor Party and Trade Union Congress
- Irish Parliamentary Party
- Irish-for-All Party
- Sinn Féin
- Éamon de Valera

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Ignatius J. O'Brien

Groups in 3rd Segment:**Groups in 4th Segment:**

- Irish Women Worker's Union

Groups in 5th Segment:**Groups in 6th Segment:**

Segment Length: 0.5 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Ulster Unionists

British Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Ulster Unionists wrote letters against Home Rule and for conscription

Campaigner violence:
No campaigner violence.

Repressive Violence:
No repressive violence.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

While the Act remained legally in effect, the Irish managed to prevent the enforcement of conscription. Furthermore, the campaign managed to build solidarity across millions of Irish nationalists, and those newly forged alliances aided Irish nationalists in their post-WWI independence efforts.

World War I broke out on 28 July 1914, pitting an alliance spearheaded by Germany and Austria-Hungary against the forces of the United Kingdom (UK), France, Russia, and their allies. Due to paradigm shifts in military technology, the war quickly turned continental Europe into a charnel house. Nations soon found themselves requiring more manpower than ever before to maintain their war efforts.

On 27 January 1916, the UK adopted the Military Service Act. The Act enabled conscription of all men aged 18 to 41 unless they were married, widowed with children, a religious minister, a part of the Royal Navy, employed in a war essential industry, or Irish. Despite the exemption from the draft, thousands of Irish, both Catholic and Protestant, volunteered to serve in the war.

The exemption of Irish citizens was the result of centuries of building tensions on the island and British fears of sparking greater conflict. England began to subjugate Ireland starting in the twelfth century during the reign of Henry II, and their efforts only intensified over time. The Act of Union, which the Irish and British Parliaments passed in 1800, constituted an attempt to permanently bond Ireland with the rest of the British Isles. Throughout the 1800s, Irish nationalists started to build their strength and corrode English control. (Nationalists tended to be the Catholic majority, while Unionists were mainly Protestants from the six counties of Ulster.)

By the turn of the 20th century, the central demand of Irish nationalists was devolution to home rule and eventual independence. The Home Rule Act was passed in 1914, but its implementation was suspended for the duration of World War I.

In the Spring of 1918, the German army launched a major offensive on the Western Front with the objective of breaking the front before the United States could establish a strong presence on the front. The offensive started off as a success for the German forces, and it revealed a massive shortage of manpower in the British Army. UK Prime Minister Lloyd George pushed a new Military Service Act that extended the maximum age of conscription to 51, allowed the clergy to be conscripted to non combat roles, shortened the call up time from 14 days to 7 days, and put Ireland under the same conscription conditions as the rest of the UK. Furthermore, PM Lloyd George tied the enacting of the Home Rule Act desired by Nationalists with the implementation of conscription in Ireland.

As Parliament discussed the new act, Irish nationalists, including both union members and politicians, immediately began to oppose the new measures. The Irish Labor Party and Trade Union Congress (ILP&TUP) organized a rally on 14 April against conscription at the customs house in Belfast. In addition, on 16 April, residents of Cork gathered at the Grand Parade to rally

against conscription. Both events drew thousands of supporters.

On 16 April, Parliament approved the new Military Service Act. The same day that Parliament voted for the changes, the IPP withdrew from Parliament and returned to Ireland to help the fight against conscription. The following day, Irish labor activists tried to launch another rally against conscription in Belfast; however, Unionist shipyard workers broke up the rally.

Irish nationalist leaders quickly coordinated to unite their different parties and factions against conscription. On 18 April, members of Sinn Féin, Irish Parliamentary Party, All-for-Ireland, and Labor met at the Mansion House at Dublin to discuss how to oppose conscription. Simultaneously, the Irish Catholic Clergy met at Maynooth University to deliberate on their course of action around conscription. Towards the end of the day, representatives from the parties meeting at the Mansion House went to Maynooth University to meet with the clergy members. At the end of the day, the clergy declared their support for the anti-conscription campaign. The parties that met that day, while not officially named at that moment, would become the leaders of the anti-conscription campaign and would be known as the anti-conscription conference.

While the clergy and political parties unified their efforts, the Irish labor unions still had not coordinated their efforts. On 20 April, 1,500 delegates met at the Mansion House for the All Ireland Trades Conference. They decided to have a general strike the following week on 23 April. The next day, as devout Irish Catholics went to mass, they found flyers outside of churches that presented the oath against conscription. The oath stated, "Denying the right of the British government to enforce compulsory service in this country, we pledge ourselves solemnly to one another to resist conscription by the most effective means at our disposal."

Over two million Irish took the oath that Sunday in a country with a population of around three million people. Many congregations had those taking the oath write their name on a piece of paper to the presiding clergy member. During service, the clergy member would then state the oath, and then all those taking the oath would repeat. Some parishes chose more public methods for taking the oath. In Galway, seven different congregations marched to Eyre Square after mass. They then took the oath together in the square. In Cork after mass, Bishop Cohalan took the oath with thousands of people outside of the cathedral. Meanwhile, Bishop Ross administered the oath to 3,000 people outside the cathedral in Skibbereen.

In addition, starting on 21 April and for the following weeks, there were collection boxes at the church gates for the Irish Defense Fund. Over £250,000 were raised in the first few weeks. Also, anti-conscription leaders established local Defense Committees mandated to advise local communities on how to passively resist British conscription efforts.

Two days later, on 23 April, the Irish population held a general strike against conscription. It paralyzed almost the whole country except for certain parts of Ulster. No goods entered Dublin, and its public transit was paralyzed. The Irish Independent endorsed the strike. In an editorial the paper stated, "Sincerely we hope that Irish Labor will stand solid in this crisis, and follow faithfully the advice and directions of its leaders...Any sign of wavering or half-heartedness would wholly destroy the effect of the 'demonstration of fealty to the cause of Labour and Ireland.'"

The editorial was of particular importance because the Independent and its owner William Martin Murphy were notoriously anti-labor and tried to undermine the efforts of workers during the 1913 Lock Out Strikes. The only part of the general strike that was not enacted was the demand that all those with deposits in banks withdraw their funds for the day. In addition to the strike, people organized rallies in over 59 towns and villages, including major centers such as Cork, Limerick, and Dublin. Observers noted how sober and peaceful the strikes and corresponding rallies were. In Dublin, the police only arrested three people in the whole city that day.

World War I had empowered women's political movements as their cooperation became vital to the maintenance of the home front. In the UK, women found themselves taking jobs traditionally held by men. The cooperation of Irish women would also be essential for conscription to work. On 27 April, IWWU and Cumann na mBan (Irish Women's Council organized) another meeting at the Mansion House. At this meeting, women discussed how they could most effectively support the anti-conscription efforts.

A few days later, on 5 May, Eamon de Valera (the future first president of Ireland) and James Dillon, leaders of Sinn Féin and IPP respectively, held a major rally in Ballaghaderreen in County Roscommon against conscription. Unionist forces did not let the anti-conscription campaign move forward unopposed. Edward Carson, a prominent Unionist, wrote an open letter that published on 7 May calling Sinn Féin traitors. The anti-conscription conference continued to plan and held another meeting on 9 May in the Mansion House.

Members of the British government began worry about the growing strength of the anti-conscription campaign and its ability to unite Ireland, ranging from radical nationalists to moderate reformers and the Catholic Church. While some members of the government wanted to coerce conscription, Henry Duke, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, stated that “it will be impossible in the teeth of the opposition of bishops and politicians to enforce conscription.”

The government decided to accuse Sinn Féin of communicating and cooperating with Germany against the United Kingdom. British officials arrested 69 leading Sinn Féin leaders on 17 and 18 May. The arrested leaders included de Valera, all Sinn Féin MPs, and the majority of the Sinn Féin National Standing Committee. Despite being tipped off about the impending arrests, de Valera and other leaders decided to be arrested as they believed it would generate good press for their cause. They were all imprisoned without trial or charges.

The incident came to be known as “The German Plot,” and general opinion in the US, Ireland, and the UK was that the arrests were based on fabricated claims. As a result, Irish confidence in the British judicial system was deeply damaged, and the British government only strengthened support for Sinn Féin and the anti-conscription movement.

The anti-conscription conference quickly organized a response to the arrests by the British government. They held another conference on 21 May during which they passed resolutions condemning the arrests of Sinn Féin members. Ignatius J. O’Brien, the Lord Chancellor of Ireland (the highest judicial officer in Ireland and holder of the Great Irish Seal), who represented the Labor Party, also signed the resolutions. The British government removed him from his post shortly thereafter on 4 June.

The British government tried other approaches to acquire the needed manpower. The Hay Plan, designed by Captain Stuart Hay, called for Irish volunteers join the French army and serve in non-combat roles. The anti-conscription conference met again on 7 June, and they released a letter that stated that the Hay Plan would not provide enough manpower, and conscription would still have to be enacted. They declared instead that solidarity in the anti-conscription movement should be maintained; the plan was not enacted due to political disagreements in Parliament. Furthermore, the conference sent Laurence O’Neil, the Lord Mayor of Dublin, to the US to advance the anti-conscription agenda and explain their situation to the US government.

Two days later, anti-conscription women pledged that they would not take the jobs of men who were conscripted. Two thirds of Ireland’s women took the pledge. Over 2,400 members of the Irish Women Worker’s Union marched to Dublin City Hall, where they signed the pledge.

The need for manpower also started to decrease as German lines began to falter, and Irish unity against conscription was not weakening. On 3 July, the anti-conscription conference sent an open letter to US President Woodrow Wilson explaining their actions. They talked of England’s historical crimes against Ireland and framed the sacrifices of Irish soldiers on the Western Front: “the spot on the earth they loved best and which they hoped their sacrifices might help to freedom lies unredeemed under age-long thralldom” On 18 July, the conference declared victory against conscription; however, they stated that “all preparations made for dealing with the conscription menace should be carefully kept in existence.”

World War I ended later that year with the armistice on 11 November 1918 ending the threat of conscription. The campaign against conscription helped unite different threads of Irish nationalists, and the anti-conscription conference and its efforts served as both a model and inspiration for the actions of Sinn Féin when they established Dáil Éireann, the Assembly for Ireland.

Research Notes

Influences:

The anti-conscription campaigns of Australia (1916-1917) and of Canada (1917) may have provided influence to Irish leaders (1)

The use of the anti-conscription Conference influenced the actions of Sinn Féin in their establishment of Dáil Éireann, the Assembly for Ireland, in 1919.

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