

# Llanelli railway riots 1911

## “Workers of the world unite”

This month commemorates the centenary of the Llanelli Railway Riots in Wales when railway workers participating in a national rail strike, along with the local community, faced the guns and bayonets of Churchill's troops. 1911 was also the year of the ‘Great Unrest’ when the organised workers’ movement challenged the power of the bosses and the ruling class (see the *Socialist*, issue 658). Robert Owen narrates the momentous Llanelli strike.



A mass railway workers’ picket

The Llanelli Railway Riots of 1911 arose out of a breathtaking display of working class solidarity, which greeted the national railway strike of 1911. In the space of a few days six workers would be dead, two shot by soldiers, hundreds wounded and one young soldier would mutiny after refusing the order to fire at innocent bystanders.

One of the causes of the 1911 Great Unrest was the fall in real wages – wages had remained static since 1900 while the cost of living had gone up by 12.5%. When asked how much they earned, a worker’s typical reply was “a damn sight more than I’m paid”.

The rail strike began on Thursday 17 August. When talks between the government and union leaders broke down that evening workers began to walk out en masse, startling the employers, the media, MPs and union leaders alike. Workers in other industries started to come out in solidarity.

Over the next couple of days the strike became more solid. Winston Churchill, the then Liberal Home Secretary, in despair wrote: “The men have beaten us... There is nothing we can do. We are done!”

### Solidarity

The strike involved 500 railway workers at Llanelli. Their ranks were swelled by between 1,500 and 5,000 workers in solidarity action, mostly tinsplate workers, but including dockers and gas workers.

1,500 pickets converged on Llanelli station creating an impenetrable human barricade at the two road crossings. In preparing for the national strike, Churchill had mobilised nearly all 58,000 members of the armed forces in Britain.

The next day when troops were sent to Llanelli and subject to fraternisation, pickets successfully reclaimed one of two signal boxes and

a series of “battles” ensued for the possession of the crossings.

On Friday, nothing passed through the station. When the Fishguard Express arrived around 10am it was stopped by pickets, who made speeches from the footplate, and persuaded the driver to leave the train and extinguished the engine’s fire. At noon, two magistrates sent a telegram to Churchill: “Troops unable to cope with mob. Desire augmentation by nightfall.” By 6pm 250 more soldiers arrived.

The strike committee’s local Aslef leader then addressed the 2,000 strong pickets saying: “There is sufficient military at hand to clear the crossing tonight. Is it worth shedding blood for the sake of preventing a few trains passing through? Don’t allow the dignity of Llanelli to be dragged into the mire by having bloodshed without cause.”

The pickets did not budge. They stood their ground, but could not prevent the gates being opened. However, the reaction to this was swift and dramatic. The ranks of the pickets mushroomed to 5,000 and charge after charge was launched for possession of the crossings. After a bloody battle the authorities, finally regained the Eastern crossing using troops with fixed bayonets.

On Saturday, a train passed through the station at 2pm bound for Fishguard. It was followed by protesters along the high banks of two terraces. When the driver had to slow down because of an obstruction, workers seized the opportunity to commandeer the train and dowsed the engine. 80 Worcestershire Regiment soldiers were dispatched to protect it.

In the ensuing minutes the Riot Act was feebly and inaudibly read out, a shot discharged and the protesters warned that if they did not disperse in 60 seconds they would be fired upon – many couldn’t disperse as they were already in their back gardens. Young men bared their chests and mockingly demanded the soldiers shoot them.



Keir Hardie

John John, 21, a local rugby hero, was watching the events with his friends from his garden wall. Another, Leonard Worsell, 20, was in a state of undress. When the next shot was fired a bullet hit one man in the throat, another hit John John in the lung and a third pierced Leonard Worsell’s heart.

As news spread of the murder of John and Worsell, Llanelli erupted. Pitched battles between pickets, policemen and bayoneted soldiers intensified. A field hospital was set up at the Station Hotel for victims.

With the two crossings now firmly under the control of the protesters tracks were torn up. Trains were ransacked and gangs roamed the town looking for soldiers. A group of young people attempted to break into the Volunteers Armoury with the intention of distributing arms to the protesters!

A battalion of the Sussex Regiment

and 500 more soldiers from the Royal Lincolnshire Regiment arrived that evening as reinforcements. Crowds descended on Station Road Bridge where the Worcestershire Regiment were standing guard. Protesters shouted “assassins”; when the soldiers raised their weapons one man exclaimed: “Fire you cowards! We’re ready to meet you!”

Back towards town the riots were not chaotically random. The shops of magistrates and other dignitaries were the target. Senior magistrate Thomas Jones’s grocery shop was one.

When told to disperse otherwise the Riot Act would be read one soldier was told: “if those men had not been fired upon... none of us would be here. You shall see what the colliers can do!” Soon after the killings according to one author: “On behalf of the strike committee, Jack Bevan implored the miners of Tumble and the Amman Valley not to come to Llanelli in the light of that afternoon’s terrible events.”

The colliers had a fierce reputation for organisation and militancy. Only the calling off of the strike earlier on that day appears to have prevented the situation from escalating. Even an explosion at the station, in which several rioters were killed, did nothing to curb the mounting anger. An unsatisfactory settlement resulted against a threat of wider strike action by miners, dockers and other workers nationally.

### Desertion

But, the drama surrounding Llanelli did not stop there. On Monday 21 August, in New Radnor (nearly 90 miles away), a dishevelled soldier was arrested. When quizzed he confessed he was a deserter from the Worcestershire Regiment stationed in Llanelli. He was Harold Spiers, 22.

In his confession he told how he had been instructed to shoot a man sitting on a garden wall. When he refused to kill somebody “in cold blood” he was arrested and placed under military guard, but escaped amid all the pandemonium of Saturday night. He was accused of “desertion while in aid of the civil powers” and remanded for a district court martial.

Spiers became a hero, both locally and nationally, with the railway unions and Independent Labour Party taking up his cause and demanding his release. The workers of Llanelli paid for his defence.

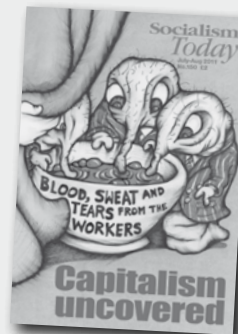
Fearing a “cause celebre” his charge was commuted to a far lesser one and in all likelihood he is the character “Dai Bach y soldiwr” in the folk song “Sosban Fach.” This verse was added to the song after the events of 1911.

The funerals of John John and Leonard Worsell were attended by over 30,000 workers who lined the streets of Llanelli. Rallies and mass demonstrations were addressed by Tom Mann and Ben Tillett among other labour and trade union leaders, continuing well into the autumn.

Keir Hardie, Independent Labour MP for Merthyr Tydfil, would champion the Llanelli cause in Parliament and publish his pamphlet ‘Killing, No Murder’. Llanelli Trades Council paid for the men’s headstones, Leonard Worsell’s reads: “Workers of the World Unite.”

Llanelli became one of the bastions of the labour and socialist movement in Britain. This year’s centenary, fittingly, reties the knot of history. Faced with a savage onslaught today, it is the example of working class solidarity, so dramatically seen in Llanelli in 1911, which is the key to defeating those attacks.

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Troops billeted at Llanelli in 1911