

TRADE UNIONISM
IN
IRELAND
TODAY

by

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IRISH TRADE UNIONISM

THERE are 123 trade unions in Ireland and 500,000 trade unionists, 320,000 in the twenty-six counties and 180,000 in the six.

These figures may look small beside Britain's 10 million trade unionists, but proportionately the Irish workers are better organised than their brothers in Britain. The Irish working class have long recognised the value of having a union card. This table compares Ireland with some other countries:

PROPORTION OF NON-AGRICULTURAL EMPLOYEES ORGANISED IN TRADE UNIONS

Ireland	53%
U.K.	48%
Germany	46%
France	41%
U.S.A.	31%

The past three decades have seen a fairly regular increase in Irish trade union membership as a result of greater industrialisation and wider awareness of the benefits of trade union membership.

Of the 320,000 trade unionists in the Republic, about 90,000 are in British-based unions which, however, organise most of the workers in the six counties. The distribution of their membership between north and south is roughly as shown in this table:

The 123 unions in the twenty-six counties range from the very small to the very large. Largest is the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, with its 150,000 members organising not far short of 50 per cent of all the trade unionists in the State. Next is the Workers' Union of Ireland—Jim Larkin's union—with 30,000 members, and the British Amalgamated Transport and General Workers and the Irish Union of Distributive Workers and Clerks, with 25,000 members between them.

Some occupations and trades are, of course, much better organised than others, as shown in the table for 1961 (column 1 above).

Rural workers, as can be seen from this table, are terribly badly organised—only three per cent of 69,000, and it is from them that a considerable number of emigrants have gone to Britain in recent years, many not having the remotest idea of what a trade union card is. This bad organisation of rural workers wasn't always the case here. In the 1920s half the members of the I.T.G.W.U. were rural workers, but since that time this union has not pressed the organisation of workers outside the towns.

THE 70 per cent organisation in Irish manufacturing industry conceals large variations from one industry to another. Thus organisation in the engineering trades is high, while that in clothing is low. Also much better unionisation is to be found in the Irish cities and large towns than in the smaller towns where many new factories are now to be found.

In building and construction, skilled men are well organised, unskilled men not so. About 15 per cent of general building workers are in the I.T.G.W.U., and union organisation in the building trade here has all the problems and difficulties that exist in Britain.

Commerce, insurance and finance is a mixed group. The average of 46 per cent organised conceals a great deal of variation. Banks in Ireland, for example, are 90 per cent organised—unlike those in Britain, where the Big Five Banks still refuse to negotiate with their employees' trade union. Large retail and department stores here are often organised, but the multitude of small shops are relatively without union members even in the main towns and cities.

The pattern of trade union organisation thus differs in many ways between Ireland and Britain. This fact naturally causes problems when workers move to and fro between the two countries. Trades that are well organised in Ireland may be badly organised in Britain, and vice versa. For example, theatres and restaurants are much better organised in Ireland than in Britain. A waitress in a Dublin cafe is as likely as not to be a member of the I.T.G.W.U. If she goes to Britain, however, quite probably her employer will show her the door if she begins to speak about the trade unions. Similarly for many girls working in the clothing trades here, for mental hospital nurses, and others.

A MATTER of vital interest to emigrants—and it should be so too to trade union organisers—is the desirability of reciprocal arrangements between Irish and British unions governing transfer of membership for workers moving between the two countries. No difficulty arises here where British unions in Ireland are concerned, for example, the A.E.U., N.U.V.B.,

**MEMBERSHIP OF MAIN BRITISH TRADE UNIONS IN
TWENTY-SIX AND SIX COUNTIES**

Union	6 Counties	26 Counties	Total Irish membership
A.T.G.W.U.	70,000	10,000	80,000
A.E.U.	21,000	5,000	26,000
AS.W.	9,000	7,000	16,000
E.T.U.	8,000	—	8,000
Tailor & Garment Workers	5,000	3,000	8,000
U.S.D.A.W.	7,000	—	7,000
N.A.T.E.	3,000	3,000	6,000
N.U.G.M.W.	5,000	—	5,000
Boilermakers	4,000	500	4,500
N.U.V.B.	—	4,000	4,000
T.S.S.A.	1,000	3,000	4,000
A.S.P.D.	2,500	1,500	4,000
Plumbing T.U.	1,500	2,000	3,500
C.A.W.U.	3,000	—	3,000
National Graphical Assn....	1,000	1,500	2,500
Insurance Officers' Guild ...	700	1,800	2,500

Printers, A.S.W., A.S.L.E.F., N.A.T.E. and the N.U.J. Their Irish members are automatically transferred to the books of the appropriate office in Britain if any of them emigrate. Some of these unions also give assistance to their Irish members in finding employment in Britain if they so wish—

much availed of during last year's building strike—and the A.S.W., for example, pays the fare to Britain of unemployed Irish members if they cannot find work here. These reasons partly explain the strength of some British-based unions in trades where there is a lot of movement between the two countries.

But few of the Irish unions have reciprocal arrangements with British unions covering the needs of members who emigrate. Thus, if a man leaves C.I.E. and goes to work in Britain for a period, as many unmarried men do, the I.T.G.W.U. here has no arrangement with the Transport Workers' Union in Britain whereby he may be automatically transferred. He may be a long time working in Britain before the local organiser becomes aware that there is a potential member there. As it is the British labour movement that mainly suffers from this, by losing many potential members among Irish immigrants, this is a matter they might well consider taking up with their Irish counterparts, whom they would probably nowadays find very willing to deal with the problem.

What differences will the emigrant trade unionist who changes his union find as between the union he belonged to in Ireland and his new union in Britain? For one thing he will probably have to pay less money weekly in subs, and his dispute benefit if he is on strike may well be lower than in Ireland—at least in the general unions. Most Transport Union members in Ireland pay 2/6 a week and get £5 a week dispute benefit when on strike, which is higher than what the Amalgamated Transport and General gives in Britain.

BRITISH unions, however, generally will have a wider range of fringe benefits for their members than the Irish unions—such things as tool money, sickness benefit, marriage and legal benefits. When on strike in Britain the Irish trade unionist may also find that there is a stronger tradition of organised solidarity from other trade unionists who are in work in the form of sympathy money, voluntary whip-rounds to help the “boys” on strike, sustenance funds organised by trades councils, etc. These are not so common in Ireland. For example, at the moment of writing there are 1,000 Jacobs Biscuit workers unemployed in Dublin as a result of the strike of a few dozen men at the Oil and Cake Mills in Drogheda. No collections have been organised by the unions among men at work to help them out. It has not traditionally been the custom here. This difference is probably due to the larger size of the British working class movement, its older traditions, and the fact that businesses and firms tend in general to be much smaller in Ireland than in Britain.

The Irish worker in Britain will also probably find that the shop stewards on his job play a much bigger role than they do in Ireland, where usually they act as no more than collectors of union dues and do not normally negotiate with management directly over the day-to-day business of the workplace. Although here too things are changing, and in some industries the shop stewards' role is becoming much more important. Compared with the British unions there is a much higher proportion of full-time officials in the Irish unions, because of the geographical distribution of their members. Also, the bulk of Irish unions appoint their officials rather than elect them, though this is also done in Britain.

Branch meetings, to which all union members may come, are less frequently held in Ireland than in Britain, and branches tend to be organised on an industrial rather than an area basis.

This is true even of the craft unions. In Ireland it is the “section”—the union members in a particular firm or job—that meets regularly and sends representatives to the branch committees, which usually meet weekly or fortnightly. This means that individual members can only raise

matters directly in the branch at its annual general meeting. There is thus little opportunity for members to bring up policy matters at branch level; nor is there any tradition here of speakers from outside organisations being invited to speak to trade union members on topics of the day—which no doubt contributes to the difficulties of those seeking to overcome the political character of the Irish trade union movement.

**NUMBER OF WORKERS AND TRADE UNION MEMBERS
IN THE MAIN BRANCHES OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITY, 1961**

Branch of economic activity	Trade		
	Employees	Unionists	%
Agriculture, Fishing, Forestry ...	69,000	2,000	3%
Mining, Quarrying, Turf	10,000	4,000	40%
Manufacturing	176,000	124,000	70%
Building and Construction	67,000	24,000	36%
Electricity, Gas and Water	11,000	9,000	82%
Commerce, Insurance, Finance ...	119,000	55,000	46%
Transport and Communication ...	53,000	38,000	72%
Public Administration	27,000	14,000	52%
Other	102,000	58,000	57%
Total	634,000	328,000	52%

THE emigrant will find the British unions more “political” than their Irish equivalent—at least in that more of them have political funds and are affiliated to the Labour Party. Only a minority of Irish unions are affiliated to the Irish Labour Party, though the recent affiliation of the Workers’ Union of Ireland, the second largest union in the twenty-six counties, will give a sizeable section of the Dublin working class a say in the affairs of that body. One eighth of the delegates at future Irish Labour Party annual conferences will come from the W.U.I. as a result of this affiliation, which should increase the strength of the urban working class voice in the affairs of the Party.

The Irish Transport Union holds aloof from the political labour movement here, however, although it has a huge political fund which it uses to finance individual members who stand in the labour interest. At present almost half the Labour Party members in the Dail are in fact members of the Transport Union.

THE Irish trade unionist in Britain will also note the role played by the various Confederations, the Shipbuilding and Engineering Workers, the Building Trade Operatives, etc. Their equivalent does not exist at all in Ireland because of the much smaller size of the labour force and the dominant role of one union, the Transport Union, on the Irish scene.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions, however, plays a major role in representing the trade union movement nationally in Ireland—probably a more important one vis-a-vis its constituent affiliates than the T.U.C. does in Britain. The major trade union problem in Ireland for years was the need for trade union unity between north and south, which was achieved when the united Congress was established in 1959. Today the Congress is seeking to “rationalise” the trade union structure and reduce the multi-

plicity of small unions. There have been even tentative discussions about the amalgamation of the Transport Union and the Workers' Union of Ireland. The old antagonisms between the two "Giants" have almost disappeared as a new generation of trade unionists has come on the scene. Mr. Jim Larkin, of the W.U.I. is said to be very conscious of the desirability of such an amalgamation, which may well come about in the next few years. If it does, it would in fact establish in Ireland the equivalent of the One Big Union about which Larkin and Connolly used to speak years ago.

The Congress has also played a vital role in negotiating the 12½ per cent national wage agreement in January, 1964, which gave every trade unionist in the twenty-six counties a uniform and automatic wage increase. This is something which has never happened in Britain. At the same time it made many Irish workers conscious of the great advantages accruing to them from union membership and led to a big influx of new members during 1964. A new agreement is due for negotiation in January, 1966, although trade unionists here are in two minds about the merits of such national agreements as against the old type "bilateral" bargaining between individual unions and employers. Most of the wage increase has to date been eaten up by rising prices and yet the unions are committed to abstaining from filing new wage demands for another year.

Congress prides itself very much on being an All-Ireland body, uniting trade unionists in the 26 and 6 Counties. This is a considerable achievement, although the price of it is a certain mealy-mouthedness on the part of Congress spokesmen regarding the political situation in the North.

The Northern Ireland Committee of the Congress, on which the unions with members in the 6 County area are represented, has considerable autonomy vis-a-vis Dublin in dealing with local matters. After a long agitation Congress won official recognition from the Stormont Government in 1964 (before that the Unionists had refused to have any dealing with a body whose headquarters were in the Republic) and now the Congress Northern Ireland Committee is represented on the usual government economic planning bodies for the area.

Through its full-time secretary, Mr. William Blease, the Northern Ireland Committee has liaison with the Northern Ireland Labour Party in the Stormont Parliament and recently held formal conversations also with Mr. Diamond's Republican Labour Group in Stormont with a view to having matters of trade union interest raised there. The initiative for this came from the Northern Ireland Committee itself, although naturally with the full support of the Congress Executive in Dublin.

In Ireland, leading officials of the main trade unions and of the Congress are sometimes appointed to Government commissions and boards, and several are directors of state and semi-state companies. This parallels the British practice of appointing trade union leaders to the boards of nationalised industries.

These appointments are made directly by the Government; the trade unionists are not nominated by their unions, although the director's fees they receive are usually handed over by them to the union funds. The theory is that these trade union members of state company boards can look after the workers' interests, although they are not nominated as representatives; but in practice all sorts of difficulties arise when, for example, there is a trade dispute in a state company where perhaps the general secretary of the union involved is himself on the company board.

These then are some of the problems of Irish trade unionism today. Many of them are common to the two movements, and there is a widespread belief that all joint discussions between the two movements on matters of common concern are likely to prove beneficial.

THE IRISH DEMOCRAT

THIS reprint which you have just read is from the "Irish Democrat," a monthly periodical of news and views published in conjunction with the Connolly Association and Irish Self-determination League.

In case you have not had it explained to you before, here is what we would like you to know about this movement.

The Connolly Association was founded in 1938, and the first issue of the "Democrat" came out in January, 1939. The very first issue appealed to all Irish workers in Britain to be sure, in their own interests, to become and remain members of their appropriate Trade Unions.

The war period saw a big influx of Irish labour and the Editor of that time, Dr. Flann Campbell made an extensive tour of East Anglian camp sites, in conjunction with the building trade unions, and was responsible for the recruitment of many thousands. Some years later the present Editor attended a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Dublin Trades Council in order to discuss measures to encourage the immigrants to become organised. Following this a conference was organised in London, under the auspices of the "Irish Democrat," sponsored by leading officials of the British Trade Union movement, and some of the many problems were aired and brought nearer solution.

The "Irish Democrat" does NOT interfere in internal trade union affairs, but urges Irishmen to become members and then sort out the various problems with their fellow trade unionists.

As well as explaining the British Trade Union and Labour movement to the Irish immigrants, so as to strengthen the unity of the working class in Britain, the "Irish Democrat" explains the Irish question to the British people.

Immigration doesn't just come out of thin air. There are social and economic causes why hundreds of thousands of Irishmen have come to Britain in the past few years. These causes are connected with changes in agricultural production, the operations of high finance, the take-over men, and Government policy.

Basically, the cause of emigration from Ireland is that given by the great Irish Trade Unionist and Socialist James Connolly fifty years ago. It is that Ireland does not belong to the Irish people, but is the private property of bankers, financiers and capitalists.

One of the principal obstacles to tackling this situation has been the partition of the country so that there is no single Irish Government able to handle Irish questions as a whole. Trade Unionists will be well familiar with the way in which the powers that be start and maintain splits among the workers.

In a free, united Irish Republic the Irish working people, in factory or farm, users of hand or brain, would have a chance to build an Ireland which nobody would be forced to leave. Such an Ireland could not possibly pursue a policy inimical to the working class of Britain. On the contrary, in a relatively short time all memory of past differences between the two peoples would disappear.

The "Irish Democrat" comes out every month, carrying news and comment about the struggle going on now in Ireland and in Britain to free both peoples from the incubus of high finance and imperialism, and bring days of permanent friendship and mutual prosperity.

It comes out on the first day of every month. Because it wishes to remain completely independent of all outside pressures, it must be the only paper that actually **refuses** advertisements. In pursuit of this policy its price was raised to ninepence last year. It was believed that our people would prefer to pay a bit more for a paper they could see for themselves was independent, rather than have a cheaper one that was compelled to print what advertisers wanted. The publishers were not disappointed. The Irish worker is a hard-headed man.

British Trade Unionists who want to understand better the background of their fellow workers from Ireland, or Irish men and women who want to find a way of fighting in Britain both for their own immediate interests and their country's freedom, which alone will enable them to return, should read the "Irish Democrat" every month. Annual subscription rate is 12/6 per year, but members of the Connolly Association (Annual subscription 25/-) receive the "Democrat" by post FREE. Write to the Editor at 374 Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C.1.

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