
The Castlecomer Mine and Quarry Union

by Pat Feeley

Nicholas Boran, writing in the **Workers' Voice**, described the housing conditions of the miners, some of whom were living in houses which, according to his description, were nothing better than huts with broken windows and holes in the roofs. He claimed they were being exploited in a manner which was hardly without parallel in Europe and he accused the government, the clergy, and the trade union leadership of turning a blind eye to their situation.

He was in Dublin on January 10th and 11th 1931 at a national conference of the revolutionary groups which was called primarily to explore the feasibility of launching a communist party. Speaking at this gathering he described the pressures being brought to bear by Church and state on the Kilkenny communists and members of the miners' union.

In late January a branch of the union was formed in Ballyragget. Speaking at the inaugural meeting Boran differentiated between their union and what he described as the reformist union. The Mine and Quarry Union was a militant revolutionary organization, he said, having as its final aim the destruction of capitalism and it would fight the day-to-day battles of the workers on a class basis. He was accompanied by three members of the Castlecomer Branch, Thomas Walshe, John Fitzgerald, and James Byrne. A committee was elected for the new branch.

A union, Boran said, not having a revolutionary policy in what he saw as a period of capitalist decline was only deceiving the workers. A reformist policy could only lead to compromise after compromise and a general worsening of conditions. The employers were determined not to yield to demands for wage increases and only a militant revolutionary union would succeed against them. He instanced the failures of the reformist union leaders in Belfast where they had agreed to a 10% reduction for the spinners, and in South Wales where they sold out the miners. When the union was set up in Castlecomer there was total opposition by all those who saw their position threatened but the union forged ahead. He urged those present to join up and form a branch in Ballyragget. A committee was elected with 'Comrade' Thomas Dowling as chairman, 'Comrade' James Martin as treasurer and a committee composed of Michael Clear, Jeremiah Doyle, Patrick Thornton, James Kelly and Michael Thornton. Three members of the Castlecomer Branch also attended the meeting. These were: John Fitzgerald, Thomas Walshe and James Byrne. (12)

As well as his trade union activities, Boran was also involved in the sporting life of the area. In 1931 he was vice-chairman of the Moneenroe junior hurling club and a delegate to the North Kilkenny GAA Board.

In February the Castlecomer Branch decided to send a deputation to the management to discuss wages, general working conditions and pit closures. On Sunday February 15 Boran and Jim Larkin addressed an estimated one hundred and fifty miners in the cinema in Castlecomer.

Boran spoke of the reasons why the new union was formed and explained its principles. Larkin dealt with the general position of the trade union movement and urged the workers to prepare for future struggles. After the meeting thirty new members were enrolled and a town branch was established with a Chris Owens as secretary. Later that evening a second meeting was held at Ballyragget. This was not as successful, only a small number of people turned up. However, thirteen new members joined up and a provisional secretary was appointed. He was instructed to call another meeting within a fortnight. (13)

It is mentioned in the **Workers' Voice** that copies of the paper were sold at the meetings as well as pamphlets written by Connolly and others. In fact, the miners were generous supporters of the party paper, which seems to have been in constant financial difficulties.

On February 21 an election took place for a check weighman

in the mines. The candidates were: T. Campion, P. Power and Nicholas Boran. Boran went forward as a republican separatist, as a representative of the miners at the Fifth Congress of the Red International Labour Unions, held in Moscow on the previous August, and as the secretary of the miners' union. There were 210 votes cast, with a valid poll of 150 and 60 spoiled votes. Boran received 77 votes, Campion 51 and Power 22, giving Boran a majority of four over the combined vote of the other two. (14)

Campion, who had represented the men for thirteen years, was secretary of the local branch of the Transport Union and a respected trade unionist. Power was a member of the revolutionary union. This was an important victory for the union and for Boran, giving him a key position with a certain amount of independence and an opportunity to recruit and organise for the union. It was the check weighman's job to weigh the amount of coal produced by the men. This job was established by an act of parliament and the holder was paid by the men and protected from dismissal by the colliery. The company initially refused to deduct the check weighman's money for Boran and made things as difficult as possible for him.

In April, a Dominican priest, the Reverend Ambrose Coleman of Black Abbey brought a lecturer, a James Landy of Callan to Kilkenny to speak on communist rule in Russia where Landy had worked for an English industrial concern and later for the Soviet government as an adviser on the bacon industry.

Landy's talk, based on personal experiences and observations, was very interesting, and while he was undoubtedly totally opposed to communism and to the regime, he gave a balanced account of life in the Soviet Union.

He said that western governments had underestimated the Soviet rulers who were not impractical dreamers but hard-headed pragmatists. He had seen no poor people or starving children on the streets and reports in the papers about life there were highly exaggerated. Neither did he witness any religious persecutions or suppression of religion. Anybody who wished to go to church could do so; the churches were open. He himself went to Mass in a Siberian town at Easter and there was a bigger congregation present than one would find in any church in Ireland; practically the whole town turned out. During the period he spent in Russia he saw only one anti-God procession, and while it was true that no religion was taught in the schools and children were taught to despise and disparage it, nonetheless there was no persecution of religious believers. Some nuns and priests had made themselves 'noxious' to the authorities and had fallen foul of them but they were exceptions. Reports of religious persecutions were unfounded.

There was a drive to abolish illiteracy and he believed that in time everyone in the country would be able to read and write.

He was doubtful of the success of the Five Year Plan because of a lack of trained and qualified people in various sectors of the economy. In his experience all the workers were well paid and he knew of no slave labour in the country. Landy was conscious that he was not filling the role of an anti-Soviet propagandist and he said: "I hope I have not disappointed you in not painting Russia in the worst possible colours. I cannot do that conscientiously. My experience of the Russians, as I say, has been quite satisfactory." (15)

In his vote of thanks Fr Coleman indicated that he was not completely satisfied with Landy's lecture he said it was

necessary to make a few supplementary remarks as Mr Landy had not been in Russia for four or five years. In the meantime the Bolsheviks had grown more powerful and were ruthlessly persecuting religion. The present Pope said it was the worst persecution inflicted on any country at any time. (16)

There was further reaction to the lecture in the local paper the following week. 'Nikolai Othodox Bishop of London' wrote saying that he had read with amazement the report on Landy's lecture. He himself had been in Russia at different times during the twenties and had written articles for the British press on the religious persecutions.

The Bolsheviks might have changed their methods in the meantime but their basic antagonism was undiminished.

The heads of their Church had been imprisoned, exiled and executed and the lesser clergy had been deprived of their civil rights and forbidden to teach. All the seminars had been closed, and shrines and monasteries 'desecrated and destroyed', while the government encouraged and supported the anti-God League and organisations and publications hostile to religion. (17)

In June Fr Coleman brought another speaker to the town, a Russian princess, her Serene Highness the Princess Troubetskoy. The picture she painted was darker than Landy's - according to her account the peasants were without food or clothing and were suffering greatly under their new masters.

Princess Troubetskoy, who spoke to a large gathering in the Desert Hall in Kilkenny, on Wednesday evening June 24, was introduced by Fr. Coleman as an outstanding Catholic who had been deprived of everything in Russia and had been living in England for some years. She said, in an oblique reference to Landy, that people who went to Russia and couldn't speak the language were told what the government wanted them to hear.

She had been at Mass in Waterford and she wondered what the people of Waterford would think if the government closed the churches as the Soviet authorities had done in Russia.

In Russia today no one owned a house and living conditions were terrible. Up to 12 people shared a room and from 6,000 to 8,000 people ate together in community halls. Shoes and clothes were rationed as were bread and butter, while the Russians bought in machinery, engineers and industrial instructors so that the Five Year Plan would succeed. She went on to describe the old way of life in southern Russia and finished up by asking those present to pray for the children of Russia who were brought up 'without respect for parents teachers or religion'.

Fr. Coleman thanked her for her address and said it was a refutation of Mr. Landy's statements about the absence of religious persecution. (18)

Boran wrote to the **Kilkenny Journal** refuting the account given by the princess, and drawing on his three-months visit to the country, pointed to the achievements of the revolutionary government. There followed an exchange of letters in the correspondence column of the paper. A Russian countess, Olga Bennigsen, condemned the Soviets for their "ruthless tyranny" but cast doubts on the credibility of the Princess Troubetskoy as a commentator on the peasantry.

She wrote: "I wonder if the lecturer ever entered the average peasant's hut, where in a small room a family of, say, fifteen adults, children, infants, not to speak of a floating population of calves, pigs and chickens, were herded for life existing on a diet of black bread, cabbage and potatoes - at the time of famine even this frugal diet was unobtainable. Those who lived on their lands, in close touch with the peasantry, were aware that drastic reforms were imperative. The government had at last realized this and these long-needed reforms were in progress, when the war, which the country was unable to wage, broke out. It was followed by the great upheaval of the revolution which swept everything away". (19)

Fr. Coleman wrote questioning Boran's right to comment on the strength of a brief visit and pointing out that there was no religion taught in the schools in Russia. Two pseudonymous correspondents **Scrutator** and **Sagart** put forward the case that capitalism not communism was the answer to Russia's problems. Boran answered all three in a letter of July 21 which

contained an analysis of some of the contemporary political happenings and is a good example of his strong, simple style.

Boran said that he had travelled extensively in Russia visiting cities, towns, collective farms, industries and coal mines. He had seen a lot there. He had visited no prison camps nor did he believe that there were any. There was no religion taught in the schools because religion had too often been used to divide people and foment war. This did not prevent parents from having religion taught to children at home or in church. He said that communists were not responsible for unrest in Mexico and Spain, contrary to what his opponents wrote, the Freemasons were responsible for this. (20)

Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington, writing in response to Fr. Coleman's statement that only semi-literate people wrote of Russia as Boran did, gave a list of books written, she claimed, by literate non-communists, all of which were friendly, though not uncritical of the Soviets. Alderman Pattison was drawn into the debate and 'Sagart' wrote a vituperative letter attacking Boran. Pseudonymous correspondents were a feature of all the controversies on communism in the **Journal**. Boran replied to a letter-writing signing himself "A Reader" and, in a subsequent letter, 'Stalin'. After this the Editor closed the column on the subject.

Boran spoke in Dublin at the May Day rally, sharing a platform with Jim Larkin, Bill Denn, a Kilkenny carpenter, and Jim Larkin Jr., the latter two were graduates of the Lenin School in Moscow from where they had recently returned. Denn was well known in Kilkenny. He had attended the local technical school and had been employed at the Kilkenny Woodworkers, at Talbot's Inch. He was in the Volunteers and was interned after 1916. Later he went to work in Dublin. His sister, Miss Ellis Denn was a well known contralto who broadcast frequently on the radio.

At the end of the month a miner, Martin Brennan Roe, was killed and his brother James was seriously injured when a huge boulder fell on them as they were making a road in the mines. Brennan Roe was killed instantly when the stone fell on him and crushed him. The dead miner left behind a young wife and a mother, and there were scenes of anguish and grief when his mutilated body was brought home. Both of the men were members of the breakaway union.

A post-mortem was held in the house on the following day. Boran, writing in the **Workers' Voice**, said that the majority of the jury were men who had never been down a mine and had no real knowledge of miners' working conditions. He castigated Dr. Ryan, who said at the post-mortem that in his opinion death was due to heart failure resulting from shock, when the examination showed that the ribs were broken and the shoulders, collar-bone and head were crushed by the boulder which weighed about a ton. Dr. Ryan was the coal company's doctor.

The coroner did not accept Ryan's verdict either. He found that death was caused by the falling stone and was, in his opinion, an 'unavoidable accident'. Boran disagreed with this and blamed the company for their rationalism and speed-up policies which had been intensified by putting the workers on half-time. It was difficult, Boran wrote, to build roads in pits that were only 18 to 20 inches high and were not wide enough to allow for the construction of proper roads. The miners were not paid enough either to do this work, as it was not considered to be their real work, so they tried to get it done as quickly as possible. He wrote that such accidents were 'unavoidable' only for as long as the 'scandalous conditions' of work prevailed. (21)

In June, 20 members of the R.W.G. gathered in Dublin to hear a report from a member of the British Communist Party on the Eleventh Plenum of the Communist International and again the proposal for the establishment of a communist party in Ireland was put forward.

In April and May the miners were on half-time because there was no sale for the coal. In June they went back on full-time but at a reduced wage. This meant 6d a day less for colliers and 1s less for trammers. It was felt that this was especially hard on the trammers who worked hard and were not well paid at the best of times. Boran and the committee demanded a meeting with management at which they opposed the wage cuts, and

though the management were unbending, the Union's stance won support and a number of the Transport members transferred their allegiance to the Mine and Quarry Union. In an article in the party paper Boran pointed to the contradictions in the mine under capitalism: the workers had to go on half-time because of overproduction; the company claimed there was no market for coal; the people of the country needed it, and the miners were denied the quality product they produced.

The trend of bringing foreign speakers to Kilkenny was continued by the R.W.G., when in October they brought the controversial and colourful Indian, Shapurji Saklatvala, to the Town Hall to address a meeting of the Anti-Imperialist League. Saklatvala, who was described as an Indian revolutionary, had been a Westminster M.P. for Battersea but had lost his seat in the previous election.

There was a very large attendance at the meeting. Two buses, hired specially for the night, brought big contingents from the Moneenroe area. The audience was of a very mixed character, many came out of curiosity to hear and see Saklatvala.

Councillor MacSweeney, a Fianna Fail member of the Kilkenny Corporation, presided. He began by apologising for the unavoidable absence of Peadar O'Donnell, who had been billed to speak. MacSweeney said the meeting had two purposes: to discuss the new coercion act, which he said would 'stagger Hamar Greenwood' and to examine the growth of imperialist tendencies in the country.

Sean Murray, who was greeted with loud applause, said he came from the severed part of the country. The purpose of the meeting was to bring together all who believed in a united Ireland and it was good to see all parties represented. They differed on many things but were united in their opposition to imperialism. The great imperialist powers Britain, the U.S.A. and France were in a state of collapse and even the British pound, that symbol of empire, was in danger. In Ireland, where there was growing unemployment, urban and rural workers were becoming poorer. In the North the linen and ship-building industries were in trouble, and in the Republic Cosgrave believed that the cure for the economic ills was an increase in production, with each man doing two men's work. But while the labourers and small farmers were being driven into beggary by taxes and land annuities, the bankers and millionaires, who paid no taxes, were doing quite well. There was starvation and unemployment in the North and coercion in the South. Workers

North and South should unite. They would then, of course, be said to be under the influence of Moscow.

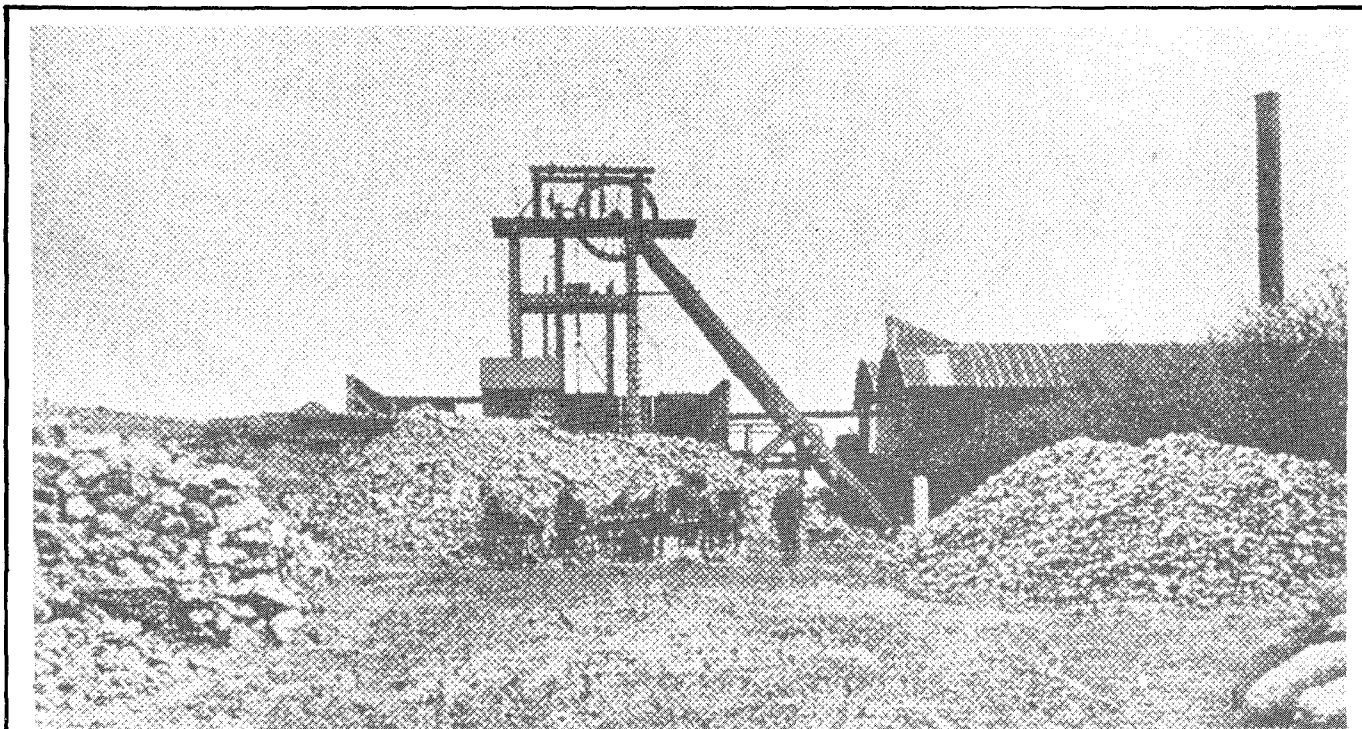
Shapurji Saklatvala said that he had been in Ireland many times before but this was his first visit to Kilkenny. When he was a member of parliament he had voted against the Free State Bill and had demanded a Workers' Republic. But he was just one man opposed by the 614 other M.P.s. In the past the conquered races had never united against the common foe while the people of India were in sympathy with Ireland's fight for freedom, ships had arrived bringing the Leinster Regiment or the Royal Irish Rifles to shoot down Indian patriots. This was now beginning to change and people were uniting in the struggle against imperialism and capitalism. The Anti-Imperialist League was open to men of all races and of every creed. Their enemies, who were shrewd and cunning, will say the League is a form of communism. "It will be said that you'll be called upon to deny you God or be false to your religion. Don't entertain any of that bunkum, nonsense and humbug".

Concluding Saklatvala said that British capitalism was staggering but would not fall until its enemies attacked it.

Nixie Boran, the final speaker, said the capitalist were looking for guarantees that the workers would accept low wages before investing their money. He forecast a wholesale attack on wages and working conditions which could only be defeated by organising internationally, and proposed a resolution calling for the release of all imprisoned revolutionaries North and South. This was seconded by Paddy Farrell.

Sean Murray concluded the proceedings by saying that he hoped that all shades of opinion would be represented on the Anti-Imperialist committee in Kilkenny. (22)

Fr. Coleman reacted quickly to the meeting, condemning it as nothing other than an attempt to set up a communist party. He said, Boran, Murray and Saklatvala were communists and supported worldwide red revolution. They were, however, afraid to preach pure communism so they dressed it up in quasi-nationalism. A pattern could be seen, he said, in some recent months, the Saor Eire congress in Dublin, Saklatvala's arrival, a conference called to co-ordinate the struggle by all sections of the labour and nationalist movements and Michael Price's speech at a Feis in Clare where he spoke of depriving non-productive sections of society for citizenship. These were laying the ground for violent revolution. Saklatvala had said that communism had nothing to do with religion. This was not so and Fr. Coleman went on to quote from the A.B.C. of communism to



The Vera Colliery at Castlecomer.

prove that communism and religion were incompatible. Finally, he said that he was amazed that the Town Hall had been given to these people for 'such pernicious propaganda'. He never heard of such a thing happening in any town in England or Scotland. (23)

In the autumn of 1931 the red scare was resurrected by the government party as they began to prepare the country for the draconian measures they were about to introduce against republicans and socialists. Speaking at a selection conference in Kilkenny the Labour T.D. for Laois, William Davin, said that the Minister for Justice, was touring the country, warning people that Irish communists, financed by Russia, were plotting the overthrow of the state. He said that as a Catholic he did not believe that the Catholic and Christian people of Ireland would support any organisation that wanted to introduce the Russian form of government, and he called on the Minister to produce proof that Russian money was being used to foment trouble. (24)

Mrs. Despard went campaigning in County Kilkenny during the general election in February 1932. In Graiguenamanagh, where Desmond Fitzgerald was addressing a Cumann na nGaedheal meeting after 11 o'clock Mass, she mounted a step-ladder and, stating that she was 83 years old, went on to hold a rival meeting, speaking for an hour against the Government and encouraging her listeners to vote Fianna Fail or Labour. Fitzgerald pointed out that she was a well known communist and on the executive of the Friends of Soviet Russia.

Mrs. Despard was just one of a large number of prominent socialists and agitators who for one reason or another came to Kilkenny in the early thirties. These included Peadar O'Donnell, the outstanding agitator of the times and ranking with Big Jim Larkin as the two greatest social agitators the country has produced, Sean Murray, Robert Stewart, already mentioned, Jim Larkin Jnr., Big Jim's son; the Indian communist and onetime M.P. at Westminster, Shapurji Saklatvala, Brian O'Neill, editor of the **Workers' Voice**, and William Joss, a prominent leader of the British Communist Party. Probably the strangest figure to come to Castlecomer was an American priest, Fr. O'Regan, who during the trammers' strike spoke to a large group of miners at Railyard from a platform bedecked with the stars and stripes, and advised the miners to support Boran and the union and to continue to fight against capitalism.

Later it was rumoured that he was a bogus priest who had had no communication with the parish priest, Fr. Grant, and had not sought his permission to address the gathering at Railyard.

In March Boran had written to the **Kilkenny Journal** in defence of the union, which was under attack in the letter columns of the paper. He claimed that the reason attacks were being made on it was because it was a workers' union controlled solely by workers but not by the Soviet Union as some of its critics would like people to believe. It was not attached in any way to Larkin's Workers' Union and had no intention of affiliating with any other body other than the Red International of Labour Unions, whose principles it shared - class war, workers against capitalists and the ultimate overthrow of the capitalist system. He said that they would co-operate with any union or revolutionary organisation that was fighting sincerely in the interests of the workers and that they did not believe in the parliamentary system, or in any party that sought to reform the system. The Union's principles were being dubbed Russian, Soviet and foreign to the country but this was being done by people ignorant of the Irish Labour movement and of the writings of Connolly. (25)

In the summer of 1932 roadworkers in the Castlecomer area came together and formed a branch of the Irish Mine and Quarry Workers' Union. James Moran was elected secretary and the other members of the committee, Patrick Moran, John Moran, Joseph Love and James Nolan, were all road workers. Their principal grievance was that County Council officials were giving work to big farmers on the roads and depriving them of a living. The farmers were operating the system against the road workers. The farmer drawing the stones gave them to another farmer or farmer's son to break. When roadworkers complained to the surveyor they were told to break after another drawer

who might not be drawing at all that day but at home working the farm, as drawing stones was only a spare time occupation with the big farmers.

At a meeting in Castlecomer James Nolan of Augnamuckey, a married man with five children, outlined his case. He had to leave his pile of stones to Keirnan Shelley, a big farmer from Uskerley with seventy acres of land, thirteen cows, three stallions and two working horses. After a deputation to the deputy manager, Shelley was told that there was no further work for him on the roads but two days later he was back on the job and Nolan was without work.

Joseph Love, married with a wife and four children, had to walk to the road for eleven days to break one box of stones, while at the same time the farmers were breaking every day. When he got a second box it was taken by a big farmer, in his absence, and Love was told to break after another drawer who had not worked on that day. The road workers complained that even when they got work they were forced to wait six or eight weeks for their money, as the overseer gave the boxing to a number of individuals and they were not paid until the stones were boxed.

The union committee said that the workers should direct their anger against the County Council and not the farmers, and that they should get an assurance from the Council officials that no farmer would be employed while workers who were dependant on stone breaking were idle. (26)

On Sunday July 3 workers from Kilkenny city, Thomastown, Johnstown, Castlecomer, Clogh, Kilderry, Brownstown and Dunbell met in the Town Hall in Kilkenny. They were addressed by young Jim Larkin, who spoke of the daily struggle of Irish workers and the fight for national freedom from imperialist domination. William Joss of the British Communist party told the delegates that they had the support of British workers in their struggle for improved conditions.

A discussion took place on road work and on preferential treatment to farmers by County Council officials. A committee of four was elected, with Patrick Farrell as secretary to organise 'a working class movement in Kilkenny with roots in every town and village'. It was decided to hold 'a mass meeting of the unemployed' in Kilkenny city to examine the question of relief work on the roads and other problems affecting the unemployed and to call similar meetings throughout the county. (27)

In August thirty roadworkers in the Castlecomer area approached one of the Council gangers and demanded work. After heated exchanges four of them were employed.

A week later there was a meeting at Moneenroe to discuss favouritism whereby men with large families were denied work in favour of big farmers. It was decided to send a deputation to meet the county surveyor, Mr. Bowen. The county surveyor, met them and said that married men with families were to get first preference, followed by single men with dependants, and that he was not in favour of farmers being given road work. (28) The pressure and publicity had paid off up to the point of at least a verbal assurance of work.

SOURCES

- (12) **Workers' Voice** 7/2/1931.
- (13) **Ibid.** 21/2/1931.
- (14) **Ibid.** 28/2/1931.
- (15) **Kilkenny Journal** 25/4/1931.
- (16) **Kilkenny People** 25/4/1931
- (17) **Ibid.** 2/5/1931.
- (18) **Ibid.** 27/6/1931.
- (19) **Kilkenny Journal** 27/6/1931.
- (20) **Ibid.** 21/7/1931.
- (21) **Workers' Voice** 30/5/1931.
- (22) **Kilkenny People** 10/10/1931.
- (23) **Ibid.** 17/10/1931.
- (24) **Ibid.** 10/10/1931.
- (25) **Workers' Voice** 11/4/1931.
- (26) **Workers' Voice** 25/7/1931
- (27) **Ibid.**
- (28) **Ibid.** 18/6/1932.