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Limerick Council of Trades Unions 1810-2000
By Frank Prendergast

Origins of the Trade Unions

The origins of the present day craft unions can be traced to the activities and attitudes of their parent body the ancient medieval Merchant Guilds.[1] In the second half of the 18th century, the bonds of interest, which had always existed between the Merchants and craftsmen, began to weaken. John Webb in his book, *The Guilds of Dublin,* attributes this to the neglect by the merchants, of the furtherance and preservation of their particular trades and crafts. The Guilds, he maintains had degenerated into political clubs, whose main objects were politics not business, particularly in the second half of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. Another reason he cites was the practice of admitting people to membership who had no craft training or qualifications, but sought membership "as a stepping stone to the civic franchise."[2]

The corresponding attempts by the craftsmen to seek improvements in wages and condition were resisted by the merchants who resolved, for example on 10 October 1757. "To prosecute to the utmost vigour of the law all journeymen of said trade (barber - surgeons), who shall for the future enter into any such unlawful assembly or combination". [3]

"On the 3rd of January 1770, two weavers were found guilty of forming a trade union and were whipped through the streets from Newgate Prison to College Green. The whipping was done by the public hangman while the High Sheriff of Dublin walked alongside to see that the punishment was fully carried out".[4] This predated by some 50 years the notorious Anti Combine Laws, (1799-1824) which were introduced to the Westminster House of Commons by William Wilberforce, the emancipator of the British Empires' black slaves.[5] During the 25 years that these laws remained in force, the magistrates in all parts of Britain and Ireland did their utmost with fines and floggings, to wreck the unions.[6]

The Limerick beginning

Despite those draconian laws, however, the tradesmen of Limerick founded their Council of Trade Unions in 1810. Thus began the long struggle for improvements in their working lives and the general good of society. They had some way to go! Six years later, for example, on the 25th of April 1816, the Select Committee on the state of the children employed in the manufactories of the United Kingdom, heard evidence from Mr. Archibald Buchanan, cotton mills manager in Scotland. He employed 875 persons and had six-year-old children working twelve hours a day in his employment.[7] Similar evidence was heard from Lord Londonderry, who owned the

beautiful Powerscourt Estate in County Wicklow. Speaking on behalf of the mine owners of Scotland and Wales, he defended the practise of sending children down the mines under the age of five, because it was necessary to develop the stoops on their backs for the type of work they had to do.

No longer illegal after 1825, the unions continued their campaign for better conditions, but the defensive nature of some of their mottoes, 'united to support, not combined to injure', was testimony to the realities of their times.[8] One of the oldest trades, the weavers, who had flourished traditionally in Garryowen, Thomondgate Park and Rosbrien, was decimated by the competition from the newer technology in English factories.[9] In the depths of "an unexampled depression in the working classes in the city," hundreds of the weavers lost their livelihoods and 259 of them signed a petition to the Mayor and the Corporation, who voted them £50 to send as many of them as was possible to England.[10] They had been traditionally one of the stronger guilds in Limerick.

The solidarity of the Trades Council was again called into focus, doubtless, during the years 1856-1860, when another of the city's oldest guilds, the bakers, with their colleagues throughout Ireland launched a campaign for the abolition of night work and Sunday work. Karl Marx mentioned this in his epic work *Das Kapital.* His interest in Irish affairs was stimulated presumably by his colleague Friedrich Engels, whose partners, Lizzie Byrne and her sister Mary came from Clonmel. Marx noted that the bakers won their claim in Wexford, Kilkenny, and Waterford. "In Limerick where the grievances of the journeymen were demonstrated to be excessive, a subsequent enquiry into the origins of the campaign, noted that the movement had been defeated by the opposition of the master bakers, the miller bakers being the greatest opponents".[11] But in the long run despite these initial defeats the journeymen bakers in Limerick, Cork and Dublin went on to have their working day reduced.[12]

Public campaigns

Throughout the remainder of the 19th century, the work and influence of the congregated trades grew apace in the city. They were represented amongst the 119 delegates who attended the first meeting of the Irish Trade Union Congress at Capel Street, Dublin on the 27th and 28th of April 1894. Two of their most prominent members, Jim D'Alton and Stephen Dinneen were later to become Presidents of the I.T.U.C. in 1896 and 1906, respectively, and were described as "being among the leading Irish trade unionists of the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.[13]

In the city's affairs, the Trades Council became strongly involved in a campaign of public support for the local Christian Brothers in 1895, in that Order's difficulties with the Bishop Dr. Edward Thomas O'Dwyer on the matter of weekly collections from

local industries for their schools.[14] These collections, which were used to provide food and clothing for the poorer boys, had been run by the Brothers since shortly after their arrival in Limerick in 1816. They had become an established feature of life in the city and were widely supported by many prominent local businesses as a worthy cause. But in August that year, the Bishop became aware that the Order's Superior General Brother R.A. Maxwell had had direct negotiations with the Department of Education on the establishment of an industrial school at Glin, County Limerick. There had been no consultation with the Bishop, a noted authority in the field of education and the possessor of a very strong willed personality.[15] He sent for the local Superior, Br. J. B. Welsh and told him that as a result of this incident he was ordering the stoppage of all local church and weekly collections for the Brothers, forthwith.

When this decision became known publicly, the Trades Council and other workingmen's organisations in the city rallied to the Brothers' aid. They continued the weekly collections and organised public meetings in their schools in their support under the Presidency of John Godsell from Anne Street, President of the Bakers Guild. He was a very distinguished man and was still spoken of with great reverence and affection by the bakers under whom this author served his apprenticeship in the old Croom Mills Bakery in Francis Street, now the site of the Revenue Commission, in the 1950's. The Pork Butchers Society was particularly supportive in this campaign also.[16] The Bishop relented in his stance after a letter of apology from Br. Welsh, arising from a personal argument between them and the Trades Council's standing had been enhanced in the public eye.

The First Democratic Local Government Elections 1899

The next occasion for a display of worker power in the city came with the Local Government Reform Ireland Act in 1898. This Act brought the vote to every kitchen table in Ireland. In any case, this ballot saw the first ever election of a labour Corporation in Limerick in that body's long history, as nearly all of these elected had been prominent in trade union and nationalist campaigns directed from the Mechanics Institute at Bank Place.[17] This was a triumphal and fitting end to a century of hardship and struggles and was a reflection of steady progress.

The Limerick Soviet, April 1919

Undoubtedly, however, what was to become the proudest event in nearly two centuries of organised trade unionism in Limerick, occurred in April 1919, with the establishment by the Trades Council of what became known instantly in the international press as "The Limerick Soviet". It has been described as "the first such phenomenon in these islands". For almost two weeks, the people of Limerick under the guidance of the Trades Council ran the city. They organised food and fuel supplies, issued their own currency, and published their own newspaper attracting worldwide publicity in the process.[18]

The author, and former R.T.E. political correspondent, Liam Cahill, in his major study of these events, *Forgotten Revolution, Limerick Soviet 1919,* sets them in the move towards left-wing soviet governments in Europe in the aftermath of World War One and the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1917, as well as, the nationalist struggle in Ireland, a permanent feature in Irish trade unionism.

This was particularly so in the upsurge of Sinn Fein after their huge success in the 1918 General Election. A May Day demonstration against conscription organised by the Trades Council that year in the Markets Field attracted a massive attendance of 10,000.[19] Their influence was particularly strong also in the phenomenal expansion of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (I.T.G.W.U.) the country's largest and their organisational ability was an undoubted factor in the success of the soviet.

What caused it in the first instance, was the declaration of martial law in the city by the authorities, following the fatal shooting of an R.I.C. member on Sunday 6 April, during the attempted I.R.A. rescue of Bobby Byrne, the President of the Limerick Branch of the Post Office Clerks' Association and Adjutant of the Second Limerick I.R.A. Brigade.[20] He had been dismissed from his job and arrested for possessing arms and was in custody in the City Workhouse, now St. Camillus Hospital where he went on hunger strike in protest. He was shot during the rescue attempt and he died later that day at the house of John Ryan of Knockalisheen, Ardnacrusha, where his comrades had brought him.[21]His funeral the following Thursday drew a crowd of 10,000 mourners including the Mayor and Corporation, and a cousin of the deceased, Alfie Byrne, the celebrated M.P. and five times Lord Mayor of Dublin.

The authorities in a panic measure had proclaimed martial law under the Defence of the Realm Act to take effect the following Monday throughout the city and some parts of the county. This meant that thousands of workers had to apply for permits to get to their places of work. The area worst affected by this was Thomondgate where the workers mostly women, could not get to their jobs at Cleeves Condensed Milk and Butter Company. The workers there voted to go on strike the following Monday (14th of April) in protest. Police reports blamed Sinn Fein for the strike. Batty Stack who worked there was one of the I.R.A. squad who had tried to rescue Bobby Byrnes. He was the man believed to have shot the R.I.C. man.[22]

The Trades Council met on Sunday the 13thof April, Palm Sunday, and after a 12 hour debate ending at 11:30 p.m. the delegates of the 35 affiliated unions voted unanimously for a general strike in the city, in protest at the proclamation of martial law. Within two hours, the city's walls were covered with the notice.[23]

Led by the "Three Cs", John Cronin, President, a gold medal winning carpenter, James Casey, Secretary, a printer and James Carr, Treasurer, an engineering worker, the strike committee elected sub-committees to deal with propaganda, finance, food and vigilance.[24]

The strike lasted for two weeks and was "regarded by the British authorities as a major threat to their security and as the source of potential revolution". What turned the Soviet into a major embarrassment for the British government was the fortuitous presence in Limerick of an international press corps of journalists and photographers who had come to the city. They wanted to record the attempt by Major J.G.P. Wood, formerly of the Royal Flying Corps to fly the Atlantic from east to West with the seventy acre airfield at Bawnmore, in Limerick as his starting point.[25] The *London Daily Mail* had offered a prize of £10,000 and the *State Express Gazette Company* another 2000 guineas for a successful crossing. In the event, the project had to be abandoned because Major Wood had been forced to ditch his plane 'The Shamrock', near the Anglesey Coast, disappointing thousands of excited Limerick people and no fewer than a score of cinema newsreel photographers.

There were journalists from all over the world including a big American contingent one of whom was Mr. Morris of the Associated Press of America. His reports were syndicated to 750 American newspapers.[26] They were all trapped now in the city because of the strike and used the soviet story as on hand copy largely from a sympathetic viewpoint. When an English news agency alleged that post office staff in Limerick, "were scrutinising reporters' cables and that any journalist who told the truth was a marked man", this was refuted immediately in a letter to the Limerick Postmaster, by the special correspondents of the *Daily News, Daily Express, Daily Chronicle, Manchester Guardian* and *Daily Mail.*[27]

Apart from bringing news of the soviet to a worldwide readership the presence of the international press corps was an immense bonus for John Cronin and his Trades Council colleagues. Each evening the soviet propaganda committee held very sophisticated briefings for the foreign journalists. The press could then file their copy through the U.S. cable station at Valentia Island thereby avoiding the censorship of the British authorities.[28]

However, despite the efficiency of the Strike Committee and the overwhelming support of the Limerick public and of organised labour throughout Britain and Ireland, what was described by an *Irish Times* editorial of the 23rd of April 1919 as, "a very bold and candid experiment in Irish syndicalism", came to an end, of what was probably one of the most momentous events in Irish labour history.

Liam Cahill describes the reasons for this as the division between the Trades Council officers and the T.U.C. leaders who told them that they could not respond to their call for a national strike, as their constitution did not permit of this. They already knew from their meetings in Dublin that they could not count on the wholehearted support of Sinn Fein, the I.R.A. or the Dáil. The crucial support of the National Union of Railwaymen was also in doubt because of the resistance of their head office in London and the Unionist workforces of Ulster would actually oppose it.

The appeal by the Mayor and the Catholic Bishop, Dr. Hallinan to the Trades Council to call off the strike after two weeks was also a major influence.[29] On Sunday the 27th of April, a strike committee proclamation called for a full resumption of work, so ending what was the high point in the entire history of the Limerick Trades and Labour Council.

Arguably, very few such organisations anywhere in the world would have attracted such international attention to their affairs. After the strike the Council resumed its normal role of looking after its members' interests including the collection of the weekly subscriptions each Friday night at the Mechanics Institute in pre-deduction at source times.

Its status and that of the Officer Board was hugely enhanced. Together with the Limerick Employers' Federation, it established a local joint conciliation committee to settle disputes in the city prior to the establishment of the Labour Court in 1947. This useful mechanism mooted by Council as far back as March 1918 (minutes) lasted well into the 1960's.

Trade Union Division

In the most comprehensive history of 20th century Irish Trade Unionism, *Trade Union Century* (1994), its editor Donal Nevin, the Limerick born former General Secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, has documented the tragic divisions which led to the split in the movement lasting from 1939-1958, which had its genesis in the bitter personal rivalry between Jim Larkin and William O'Brien of the I.T.G.W.U. There were now two national Trade Union Congresses, the Irish Trade Union Congress (I.T.U.C.) representing Unions of the 32 counties and the Congress of Irish Unions (C.I.U.) which was confined to the republic, most of its membership being in the I.T.G.W.U. Two of their most prominent officials locally John Conroy and Ned Browne were to become later on the National President and Vice President respectively of the I.T.G.W.U. Another name identified with that Council was that of Rev. Father Philip Murray, O.F.M. who was its Honorary President. The I.T.U.C., which included many of the amalgamated or British Unions north and south, was largely representative of craft unions. The split of course meant that there were now two trades councils in most towns and cities. In Limerick the meetings of the I.T.U.C. group were held at the Mechanics Institute and the C.I.U. affiliates, the Limerick Trades and Labour Councils met at the I.T.G.W.U. offices. The rift was healed nationally, inevitably, when in 1956 the Provisional United Trade Union Organisation initiated discussions which led to the foundation of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (I.C.T.U.) in February 1959. The following July both the I.T.U.C. (1894) and the C.I.U. (1945) were dissolved and all the local trade unions were once again re-united as Limerick Council of Trades Unions.

A major development had taken place earlier with the extension to Limerick of its courses in the Social, Economic and Agricultural Sciences by the Adult Education Department of University College, Cork. Limerick then had no university. This was a major venture by them and was greatly welcomed by many adult trade unionists and others who had not completed their second level education mainly for economic

reasons. The concept was pioneered by the eminent scholar the Reverend Professor Alfred O'Rahilly, Patrick Parfrey and Mr. Con Murphy, who was to become later Ireland's foremost Rights Commissioner. Many of the Limerick Trade Union officials and activists participated in and benefited from these two-year diploma courses.

Council officers made a major contribution to the civil and economic life of the city. One indication of this influence can be gauged from the fact that nearly all the city's Labour TD's had been Trades Council officers or active delegates viz. Michael Keyes, (N.U.R.) Mick Lipper, ITGWU, Jim Kemmy, B.A.T.U. and Frank Prendergast ITGWU. All these and others, with Trades Council backgrounds, such as, James Casey, Jim McQuane, C. P. Keyes, Patrick Kelly, Jack Danagher, Frank Leddin and Joe Harrington, were elected Mayors of Limerick, following in the footsteps of John Daly and Michael Joyce, who were elected to the first labour Trades Council Corporation in 1899.

The free trade era: New challenges

The change in government policy in the 1950's from its failed protectionist regime to free trade and Ireland's entry to the EEC, provided new problems and challenges for those involved in job creation. The failure of older protected industries in Limerick and throughout Ireland generally to adapt to the harsh winds of new foreign competition meant the loss of many jobs in the food, clothing, footwear, fabrics and engineering sectors.

On the other hand, the establishment of S.F.A.D.C.O, under the inspiration of Dr. Brendan O'Regan at Shannon Airport, made the Midwest Region the envy of all others in the country. Its establishment of the industrial estate at Shannon and its attraction of major multinational corporations there under liberal tax exemption policy, created thousands of badly needed jobs in the Region. Much credit for the phenomenal success and execution of this policy, must be given to the staff hand picked by Dr. O'Regan, his deputy manager Paul Quigley, Tom Callanan, a young Cork economics graduate and Tom Sheedy a former I.T.G.W.U. Branch Secretary an acknowledged expert in the industrial relations area.

They established a forum with the Limerick Trades Council which drew up policy guidelines on wages and conditions, and when necessary, training programmes to facilitate production needs. Part of this vision was Tom Callanan's policy when necessary to send some of the less well off trainee recruits into Todds of Limerick for new suits of clothes for them before they left to complete their training at their companies' head offices in America.

The Trades Council team consisted inter alios, of their shrewd President M.P.Finnan, N.E.E.T.U., V.P. Moran, I.T.G.W.U., T. Joyce I.T.G.W.U., P.O. Farrell, U.C.A.T.T., J. Kemmy B.A.T.U. and F. Prendergast, Irish Bakers' Union. A major upset took place in 1968, when one of the new companies
E.I Ltd., a subsidiary of the American giant General Electric, refused to recognise the constitutional right of Irish workers to join a trade union. The trade union involved the country's largest, the historic I.T.G.W.U. decided to take on the Company, in what

was up to then the country's costliest and longest strike, which they won to the relief and approval of the State's Industrial Relations Authorities.

The support of the Trades Council, affiliated unions and their members throughout Ireland was a major factor in this historic industrial relations milestone. Their resources were challenged again nine years later when in 1977,an unofficial dispute at the Dutch- owned company Ferenka Ltd. at Annacotty, developed into an inter-union row between the workers' union, the I.T.G.W.U., and the M.P.G.W.U. who sought to take them into membership. The efforts of the Trades Council and I.C.T.U. officials to resolve the issue were severely hampered by the subversive activity of some union activists along political and ideological grounds, which led to the factory's closure, with the direct loss of 1,400 jobs and indirectly of hundreds more.

The Company had previously been the subject of international publicity when its Irish Chief Executive, Dr. Tiede Herrema had been kidnapped on the 3rd of October 1975 and released unharmed, five weeks later on the 7th of November. Some Trades Council officials subscribed to the belief that the strike and the kidnap were influenced by the same underlying interests and were counter-productive to the attraction of more foreign industry to the region.

After a consequent downturn in the local employment scene, the region today is enjoying its full share of the booming national economy. The centuries old haemorrhage of enforced economic emigration has been stanched at last with some major multinational companies having to recruit foreign workers due to local labour shortages.

Trades Council Presidents 1958-2000

M.P. Finnan, N.E.E.T.U. 1958-1970
Pat King A.S.W. 1972-1973
Frank Prendergast I.B.C.A.W.A.U. 1973-1974
Jim Kemmy B.A.T.U. 1974-1975
Tom Joyce I.T.G.W.U. 1975-1979
Ger South I.P.O.E.U.1980
Bill Davoren I.T.G.W.U. 1981
Séamus Quinn I.O.P.
Peg Hansbury I.M.D.W.C. 1983
Bill Davoren I.T.G.W.U. 1984-1987
Jim Wallace T.U.I. 1987/88/89
Mick Condon I.T.G.W.U. 1992-1998
Peg Hansbury I.U.D.W.C. 1992-1998
Bill Davoren I.T.G.W.U. 1998-2000

The Trades Council has been particularly well served by its dedicated Secretaries over the years. The more exceptionally gifted of these were John Sciascia, A.R.U., John MacLoughlin T.S.S.A. and Mary Kehelly I.N.T.O., whose recent death was a tragic blow locally and nationally to the trade union movement.

As it moves toward its second centenary in 2010, the Limerick Council of Trade Unions can look back on another century of involvement in all the issues of economic

and social relevance to its members in Limerick and the Midwest region e.g. its central role in the campaign for the University of Limerick. Its horizons have widened with the country's entry into the EEC in 1973 and the beneficial impact since then of the EU social and industrial legislation.

The I.C.T.U. Trades Councils Co-ordinating Committee

These developments were in marked contrast to the relative decline in the influence of Trades Councils all over Ireland following the disastrous split in the Irish Trade Union movement in 1945. Another factor in this decline was the onset of the collective bargaining system, which replaced the traditional method of direct negotiations at local level.

Following the re-unification of the movement as the Irish Congress of Trades Unions in 1959, the positive influence of their increasing involvement in all natural fora affecting the lives and living conditions of workers and society in general has grown apace.

The I.C.T.U. is now central to all government industrial policy

The trades councils play a significant role in this development under the aegis of the I.C.T.U. Trades Councils Co-ordinating Committee, which was established following the very successful tax marches of the 1980's. The Limerick Trades Council has made an effective contribution to the work of this Committee notably through the involvement of such delegates as its late outstanding Secretary, Mary Kehelly (I.N.T.O.) R.I.P. This body nominates local Trades Council Delegates to such public bodies as P.A.U.L. in Limerick and the City and County Enterprise Board, etc. Its greatest success, arguably, was its establishment of the national network of Unemployment Centres.

Among the objectives achieved with its colleague union organisations throughout the European Union, are protective legislation covering basic minimum wages, sick pay, pension,. 39-hour week, 5-day week, holidays, redundancy, unfair dismissal, and equality. A triumphal vindication surely of its proud motto drawn up during the tyranny of the Anti-Combine Laws - "Labor Omnia Vincit, Labour Conquers All.

Footnotes

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