Frank says farewell to 40 years' service

By PATRICIA FEEHILY

ONE of Limerick's best-known trade unionists and political figures, Ciarán Frank Prendergast, celebrated his retirement as SIPTU district secretary, this month, with the award of an MA in industrial relations from the University of Keel.

He bowed out on July 13—his 60th birthday, after giving 20 years as a full-time official with the ITGWU and SIPTU, serving Limerick city and county, Shannon and Tipperary, and 40 years' involvement in local trade union affairs.

He will, however, continue his career as a city councillor and hopes to do a bit of writing and indulge in one of his great loves—historical research.

Frank's family background is steeped in trade unionism.

For over two centuries, the Prendergast family have been involved in the bakery trade in Limerick, and a great-uncle, Michael, became the general secretary of the first National Bakers' Union of Ireland in the last century. He was later to become one of the founders of the Bakers' Union of America.

His mother's side of the family was also prominent in the trade union movement. The Murphy's belonged to the old Limerick Pork Butchers' Society and his great-uncle, William, led the support of this society for the workers involved in the 1913 Dublin lock-out.

Their support for the workers was greater than any other trade union in the country," says Frank, "and Larkin said of them that 'their names will be written in gold'.

His own career as a trade union official began in 1954 when he finished his apprenticeship at the old Crown Mills Bakery (where Sarsfield House now stands).

He became branch secretary of the Limerick Bakers' Society and was elected to the national committee of the Irish Bakers', Confectioners' and Allied Workers' Union, and was national president from 1965 to 1968. He also served as president of the Joint Council of the Bakers' Union of Scotland, England and Ireland.

He was also, in those years, elected president of the Limerick Council of Trade Unions.

His career in the ITGWU began as branch secretary at Shannon, where he spearheaded successfully some major equality claims in Aer Rianta and Aer Lingus, and became actively involved in the campaign to preserve the Shannon Airport.

In 1977, he was promoted ITGWU Regional Secretary.

His political career took off when he was elected to represent Labour on Limerick City Council in 1974. There, five years later, he became an alderman and was elected as mayor in 1984/85.

He also served as a Dail deputy for East Limerick from 1977 to 1982, and was one of the most active in promoting the establishment of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Irish Language. He was chairman of the Oireachtas Committee on Commercial Semi-State bodies, and was one of Labour's representatives on the New Ireland Forum.

After his defeat in the 1987 election, he returned to the ITGWU as district secretary and served in Clare, Tipperary and the Limerick No 1 branch.

Now he has been nominated by the ICTU as its representative on the Limerick County Development Board. He is married to Mary, and family live at Moyross.

Earlier in the month, he was confered with an MA in industrial relations for a thesis on the attitudes of multi-national companies in the Midlands region, for which he was able to draw on more than 40 years of practical experience in the field.

"I found the relationship between the biggest of them and the workforce very good," he told the Limerick Leader, "in fact, 60% of the companies I interviewed did not have a strike in the past 10 years."

Full of optimism both for the Labour party and for the economy of the country, he believes that the jobs crisis can be solved, but a consensus will only emerge when workers see "fairness" as the basis.

"We are going through a difficult period, but there are signs of improvement," he said. He agreed that the unemployment situation had led to the exploitation of employees.

"There is a natural tendency to 'blackguard' workers at a time of recession," he said, "there is a greater need than ever for those in low-paid situations to become involved in Trade Unions."

He was happy, he said, to see that trade union membership had risen by 20,000, despite the recession.

Frank is a member of the Irish Labour History Society and has written extensively on labour and social history. He has also been a life-long activist in the language movement.

"Both of these spheres of activity have given me a very fulfilling and satisfactory experience of life," he said.

Many tributes were paid to Ciarán Prendergast at a function organised in his honour by the Limerick branch of SIPTU at the Glentworth Hotel last week.