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Re-imagining Labour:

attempts at reforming trade unionism from within, 1864-1975

In 1974 Denis Larkin, son of Big Jim, rattled an old skeleton in Labour's closet in the course of his presidential address to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU).¹

'This trade union movement of ours', he said,

owes a very great debt of gratitude to the British Trades Union Congress, the British trade union movement, and to its affiliated unions. Our movement grew out of the struggles in our neighbouring Island... Today the Irish Congress of Trade Unions receives international recognition... Would it be too much to ask the leadership of the British trade union movement whether the time has come to cut the apron strings?... Might I say, in all comradeship, that in every family a time comes when the parents realise that their children should learn to fend for themselves...²

The same Congress invited the International Labour Organization to address the question of reform through industrial unionism.

The reform theme was an old one in Congress, and had been debated since the 1890s. One might think that this would have alerted historians to a central problem of Labour history, to contradictions between the ideal and the reality of Congress, and to the possibility that a dysfunctional Congress might explanation

¹ By 'Labour' is meant trade union bodies or related political groups, or their representatives. Workers are otherwise referred to as 'labour'. The Irish Trades Union Congress was founded in 1894, added 'and Labour Party' to its name in 1914, changed the title to the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress in 1918, and to the Irish Trade Union Congress in 1930. Throughout this period it was also known simply as 'Congress' or the ITUC and will be cited here as such. The ITUC split in 1945 and merged with the breakaway Congress of Irish Unions in 1959 to become the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

² National Library of Ireland, Dublin (NLI), ICTU, *Annual Report* (1974), p.393.

the under-achievement of its political wing, the Labour Party. Yet few historians have tackled this question. It has been blandly assumed that the foundation of the Irish Trades Union Congress (ITUC) in 1894 was an important and inevitable step towards modernity. Arthur Mitchell is typical in describing it as ‘successful... a very model of the British body’.³ In reality, the ITUC had scarcely any positive impact before 1918, and like an ill-fitting hand-me-down its format would be tugged this way and that until well into the 20th century. Between 1889 and 1959 no fewer than 12 different forms of concertation were endorsed by Irish trade unionists.⁴

The root of historiographical indifference lies in the fact that reform was so often associated with the elimination of the British-based unions, or the amalgamateds as they are known euphemistically.⁵ Where historians have been compelled to note reform proposals, they have dismissed them as reactionary. Charles McCarthy, president of Congress in 1964, secretary of the Vocational Teachers’ Association, and author of the extensive survey *Trade Unions in Ireland*, caricatured reform initiatives in the 1930s and 1940s as the rise of an ‘introspective’ nationalism intolerant of the ‘internationalism’ of the amalgamateds and a sad spectre of a dark age.⁶ Those behind reform have been represented as opportunistic empire builders or nationalist fanatics. One would never suspect, from our historians, that a list of those favouring an exclusively native trade union movement would read like a ‘who’s who’ of Irish Labour and include Michael

³ Arthur Mitchell, *Labour in Irish Politics, 1890-1930: The Irish Labour Movement in an Age of Revolution* (Dublin, 1974), p.17. See also Charles McCarthy, *Trade Unions in Ireland, 1894-1960* (Dublin, 1977); and Donal Nevin (ed), *Trade Union Century* (Cork, 1994).

⁴ For the historical background see Emmet O’Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-2000* (Dublin, 2011).

⁵ For official histories with brief and hostile references to the treatment of the amalgamateds as a problem see Seán Redmond, *The Irish Municipal Employees Trade Union, 1883-1983* (Dublin, no date); Séamus Cody, John O’Dowd, and Peter Rigney, *The Parliament of Labour: 100 Years of the Dublin Council of Trade Unions* (Dublin, 1986); and Martin Maguire, *Servants to the Public: A History of the Local Government and Public Services Union, 1901-1990* (Dublin, 1998). The subject is discussed more extensively, if haphazardly, in his own inimitable way in Matt Merrigan, *Eagle or Cuckoo? The Story of the ATGWU in Ireland* (Dublin, 1989), the title referring to two contending views of Merrigan’s union, the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers’ Union.

⁶ McCarthy, *Trade Unions in Ireland*, cover page and passim.

Davitt, James Connolly, the Larkins (Big Jim, Pete, Young Jim, and Denis), R.J.P. Mortished, and Tom Johnson.⁷

So why were there so many attempts to reform Congress, why did they fail, for the most part, and what did the amalgamateds have to do with it?

Mental colonization

The influence of the amalgamateds went beyond structures. A revealing aspect of Denis Larkin's speech, cited above, is his deferential representation of Irish unions as the children of British Labour. It was an ancient and common perception. In 1908 a previous president had told Congress: 'Trade unionism is largely a thing of English growth and development introduced into this country'.⁸ In reality, Irish trade unions had evolved separately, though in parallel, with the progression of British unions from corporate medieval guilds and illegal early modern journeymen's associations to decriminalization in 1824 with the repeal of the Combination Acts. Relations between trade unionism in Ireland and Britain in the 19th century mirrored the economic, social, and cultural relationship of the two countries. Supplying food and textiles to emergent industrial Britain and provisioning the trans-Atlantic trade in the 18th century stimulated an 'economic miracle' in Ireland. A growth in population, from 2.5 million in 1753 to 6.8 million in 1821, encouraged the development of trades and trade unions. However the political union of Ireland and Britain in 1800 was followed by a customs and monetary union in 1825. Unable to compete with the 'workshop of the world', Irish proto-industries sank into decay. Economic decline, the Great Famine, and high emigration reduced the population from 8.2 million to 4.4 million between 1841 and 1911. Only in the Belfast region did capitalist colonization generate a limited industrialization, in textiles, engineering, and shipbuilding. Elsewhere, the economy became massively dependent on agricultural exports to Britain. When the Free State was established in 1922, agriculture employed over half

⁷ Texts on industrial relations – a relatively young field of scholarship in Irish academe – treat the topic more dispassionately, but underestimate its importance and see opposition to the amalgamateds as a reflex of nationalism. See Patrick Gunnigle, Gerry McMahon, and Gerry Fitzgerald, *Industrial Relations in Ireland: Theory and Practice* (Dublin, 1995), p.124; Thomas V. Murphy and William K. Roche (eds), *Irish Industrial Relations in Practice* (Dublin, 1997), pp.17, 89, 179, 238.

⁸ Ulster University, Magee College library (UUMC), ITUC, *Annual Report* (1908), p.27.

the labour force, agriculture, food, and drink accounted for 86% of exports, and 98% of exports went to the UK.⁹

Soon after decriminalization, trade unions began to support successive nationalist movements in the belief that free trade with Britain under the Act of Union was the cause of economic decline. Their logic was simple. One could not long defend wages, conditions, or employment in a declining economy; one could not reverse decline without tariff protection; one could not have tariffs without self-government. Then in the decades after the Great Famine, what unions had predicted came to pass as a falling population and de-industrialization sent them into a tailspin of decline. In their very different circumstances, British unions were becoming the strongest in the world and spreading to all the white parts of what has come to be called the Britisphere. That included Ireland, and by 1900 some 75% of trade unionists belonged to the amalgamateds.¹⁰ The amalgamateds brought with them not just their organization, but their ideas of the appropriate relationship between trade unions, society, and politics. The British influence was all the more effective for being just one part of a wider anglicization, reflected most obviously in the language shift from Irish to English, but also in theatre and popular entertainment, in sport, in the media, in the food we ate, and even how we celebrated Christmas. In so many respects, the English way was ‘the way’.

Sidney and Beatrice Webb remarked on the abject condition of Irish unions in 1897:

a marked contrast between the union of Scotland with England, and that effected between either of them and Ireland. The English and Scottish Trade Unions federate or combine with each other on equal terms. If complete amalgamation is decided on, it is frequently the Scotchman, bringing with him Scotch procedure and Scotch traditions, who is chosen to reign in England, the centre of government being shifted almost automatically to the main centre of industry. Union with Ireland invariably means the simple absorption of Irish branches, and the unconditional acceptance of English or Scottish rule and organisation.¹¹

The first attempts at confederation

⁹ Mary E. Daly, *Industrial Development and Irish National Identity, 1922-39* (Dublin, 1992), p.15.

¹⁰ John W. Boyle, *The Irish Labor Movement in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington DC, 1988), pp.125-6.

¹¹ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Industrial Democracy* (London, 1897), p.88.

Attempts to re-imagine Irish Labour might be divided into four phases. The first effort at national labour confederation came in 1864, when the Dublin United Trades Association proposed an amalgamation of unions to promote organization, encourage native industry, and maintain a benevolent society.¹² The project never came to fruition, but from the initiative may be discerned two ideas which Labour's industrial weakness and the backwardness of Irish capitalism kept simmering for the next 90 years. First, a confederation should not be representative merely: it should also organize and mobilize. And secondly, Labour policy should address the issue of economic underdevelopment.

After 1868, unions in Ireland were represented notionally by the British Trades Union Congress; notionally as the Irish engagement was minimal.¹³ Sending delegates to meetings usually held in Britain was a considerable expense, and hardly worth the bother for societies too small to figure in the reckoning. There was too, a sense of alienation on the part of Irish activists. The rise of general, unskilled, and semi-skilled unions after 1889 saw the growth of a trade union bureaucracy, in which Irish-based officers were not finding much opportunity for self-advancement. Even William Walker, Ireland's best known union leader before Big Jim Larkin and a staunch advocate of links with British Labour, remarked on Belfast trades council: 'unfortunately it seemed to be a canon of the amalgamated unions that 'Irishmen need not apply''.¹⁴

Between 1888 and 1894 there were four attempts to form a national congress, and they hovered between two contending models of progress. One was the 'Labour-Nationalist' option. Michael Davitt especially wanted unions to build a primarily political confederation, and argued that the short-cut to political influence was to form a caucus within the Home Rule movement. Now more interested in the labour than the land question, and eager to build alliances between Labour and nationalists and nationalists and British Labour, Davitt was disturbed by the assimilation of Irish workers into cross-channel unions. On more than one occasion he raised the issue with Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling, who were both prominent in promoting the London-based National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers in Ireland.

¹² Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-1960* (Dublin, 1992), pp.31-2.

¹³ Boyle, *The Irish Labor Movement in the Nineteenth Century*, pp.141-3.

¹⁴ UUMC, Belfast trades council minutes, 6 April 1905.

All I ask for as an humble advocate of the cause of Irish labour – in the matter of international relationship with the labour cause outside of Ireland – is, that we are not to be deprived of the principle of home rule in our Irish labour organizations which is conceded to us by our friends in Great Britain in the matter of the future government of our country.¹⁵

One reflection of the popularity of Davitt's position was the return of four Labour Nationalist MPs in the 1892 general election.¹⁶ A complication was that the Irish Parliamentary Party had just been rent asunder in the Parnell split, and while most workers mourned the ivy leaf, Davitt himself went anti-Parnellite. Moreover, Davitt was unwilling to be the leader Labour so badly needed in the 1890s, preferring to champion various radical causes across the globe.

The alternative was to copy the British TUC, an option which had the advantage of a real, existing tried and tested model, and of being underpinned by the increasingly influential values of the amalgamateds. After various false starts, the issue was settled, formally at least, in 1894 when Dublin trades council launched an Irish TUC, modelled on its British namesake. What this meant was that Labour would build on its industrial strength, where it was weak, rather than in politics, where it had some leverage. It is true that the rationale of the British TUC was to realize political influence, and to that end its executive was called the parliamentary committee. But the basis of its power was its trade union organization, not a special relationship with a political party, and the idea was that convening an annual 'parliament of labour' would enable it to turn its industrial muscle into political currency. Despite its lack of sinew, the ITUC followed this path and foreswore any connection with the Home Rulers. Though most delegates were themselves Home Rulers, they embraced the British idea that Labour and nationalism were dichotomous. And it was a British idea as far as the ITUC was concerned, despite the fact that socialism generically had a problem with nationalism. Irish unions had traditionally called for Repeal of the Act of Union. By contrast, British trade unionists were uncomfortable with nationalism. In England, the Tories were the party of the flag and empire, and Scottish and Welsh

¹⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 2 April 1890, quoted in Fintan Lane, *The Origins of Modern Irish Socialism, 1881-1896* (Cork, 1997), pp.167-8.

¹⁶ O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-2000*, p.62; Boyle, *The Irish Labor Movement in the Nineteenth Century*, pp.137-9.

nationalism were seen as a threat to the integration of the emerging British Labour movement. While most of the British left believed that Home Rule for Ireland had to be accepted as the will of the people, they nonetheless regarded the demand as misguided, futile, and divisive.¹⁷

This design fault in the ITUC would have disastrous consequences. The ITUC was founded on the basis that Ireland needed its own Congress with its own political agenda. Exceptionally, the founding manifesto even drew a parallel with the constitutional situation.

Like the Imperial Parliament, the Congressional machine has become overladen with the multifarious duties and interests committed to its care...they cannot be expected to understand the wants of a community largely agricultural, nor can we hope that they would, so to speak, cut their own throats, by assisting in reviving the languishing manufactures of Ireland.¹⁸

That the mask slipped on occasion to reveal the real feelings of Congress delegates makes their formal aspiration to fostering a strictly Labour politics detached from nationalism all the more impressive in its discipline and all the more unnatural and contradictory. Ignoring the big issue of the day did not lead to the politicization of a social agenda. It led to the de-politicization of the Labour movement. When the ITUC finally considered the possibility of entering a general election in November 1918, it lacked the confidence, the cadres, and the machinery to do so. More importantly, the prevailing attitude in the special conference that withdrew Labour from the election was that it wasn't Labour's business to lead on the national question.¹⁹

The calls for reform

The movement the ITUC purported to represent organized about 5% of the waged workforce up to 1911. So small a pool had many minnows: usually about 40 unions and five trades councils. The biggest society at the 1901 Congress, for example, was the Irish National Federal Union of Bakers, with 3,200 members.²⁰ Size and de-

¹⁷ See Emmet O'Connor, 'British Labour, Belfast, and Home Rule, 1900-14', in Laurence Marley (ed), *The British Labour Party and Ireland* (Manchester, 2015), pp.55-68.

¹⁸ These points were repeated in the presidential address to the second annual congress. UUMC, ITUC, *Annual Report* (1894), pp.3-5; ITUC, *Annual Report* (1895), p.12.

¹⁹ UUMC, Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report* (1918).

²⁰ NLI, ITUC, *Annual Reports* (1894-1901).

aggregation would be constant drivers for reform, and the ITUC was hardly in being before the first motions appeared on the agenda. It was, admittedly, the fashion. Now that uniting trades on a national basis was well advanced in Britain, the logical next step was to unite different sectors.²¹ Early Irish reform proposals coincided roughly with cognate discussions in Britain in the 1890s, but differed in the emphasis they placed on reform of Congress itself. The British were much more comfortable with their TUC. The first calls avoided the national question. In 1895, 1897, and 1898, the ITUC urged affiliates to federate for ‘defensive purposes’.²² But from 1906, similar motions became bound up with the contentious question of whether the federation should be on an Irish or a United Kingdom basis. In reality, the debates were a waste of time as Congress lacked the finance, the will, and the leadership to effect reform. That would change with the arrival of Big Jim Larkin.

Larkin had landed in Ireland in 1907 as an agent of the Liverpool-based National Union of Dock Labourers. He soon concluded that Irish employers were more anti-union than their British counterparts and that British unions would never commit the resources necessary to confront them. After increasing friction with his general secretary and union executive, he founded the breakaway Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union (ITGWU) in 1909 on the principle that Irish workers should be in Irish unions. Its phenomenal success would reverse the long retreat of Irish unions into British Labour. The ITGWU was also to be an industrial unionism, committed to the ideal of uniting all workers in One Big Union (OBU). On the eve of the 1912 Congress, Larkin declared:

Tomorrow we are going to advocate one society for Ireland for skilled and unskilled workers, so that when a skilled man is struck at, out comes every unskilled man, and when an unskilled worker is struck at, he will be supported by the skilled tradesmen.²³

While a few officials of the amalgamateds were equally sympathetic to industrial unionism, they were compelled to note that an Irish OBU entailed the elimination of the British based unions. Others had attacked the ITGWU on the ground that it

²¹ See Logie Barrow and Ian Bullock, *Democratic Ideas and the British Labour Movement, 1880-1914* (Cambridge, 1996).

²² UUMC, ITUC, *Annual Reports* (1895-8).

²³ Emmet O’Connor, *James Larkin* (Cork, 2002), p.38.

advocated republicanism or industrial militancy, and now all of Larkin's critics combined to defeat his resolution by 29-23 votes.²⁴

In 1919, with the British unions now in a minority, Congress endorsed a motion to transform itself into a single 'Irish Workers' Union'. However, the decision was not put into effect. There seemed no urgency about reform. The economy was booming. Trade union membership was rocketing. When the Congress executive again referred to the question of amalgamation of unions in its annual report for 1921, all had changed. The economy had slumped, employers were demanding wage cuts, unemployment was heading towards 25%, and unions were starting to fight among themselves.²⁵ The slump led to years of decline and unions sank into a suicidal sectionalism. In a feeble attempt at recovery, a special ITUC conference in 1927 addressed two problems: the multiplicity of unions and the amalgamateds. Both were related as in some cases British unions had duplicated Irish societies in the 19th century, and Irish unions then emerged subsequently as alternatives to British unions. Aside from multiplicity, the ITUC executive believed that having some 25% of members in unions with their senior officials, head offices, and resources outside the state was in itself a source of weakness. Ineffectually, the conference commended mergers of cognate unions and urged the amalgamateds to appoint an 'Irish organiser or secretary' and 'in addition some form of representative body for the consideration of matters of peculiar or special concern to the Irish membership'.²⁶

Restructuring acquired an urgency in the 1930s as the Fianna Fáil government's industrialization programme and union recovery led to renewed internecine conflict. The cockpit was transport, where 16 unions operated, 12 of them British based. In 1936 the government suggested that unions reform or be reformed. Accepting the case for rationalization, and afraid that the government intended to further industrialization through a cheap wages policy, Congress responded with a high-powered commission of inquiry into trade union organization. The only serious proposal came from ITGWU general secretary William O'Brien, the most powerful,

²⁴ UUMC, ITUC, *Annual Report* (1912), pp.61, 77-9.

²⁵ O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-2000*, pp.116-17, 119-20; UUMC, Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Annual Report* (1921), p.17.

²⁶ J. Anthony Gaughan, *Thomas Johnson, 1872-1963: First Leader of the Labour Party in Dáil Éireann* (Dublin, 1980), pp.363-4.

and feared, union boss between 1917 and his retirement in 1946.²⁷ O'Brien submitted a plan for the dissolution of all 48 ITUC affiliates and their replacement with 10 industrial unions. To avoid accusations of empire-building, he declined to press for an 83,000 member marine, transport, and general union, opting instead for three unions to cater for these workers. Congress encoded the plan as memorandum one. O'Brien's argument was that industrial unionism would nullify the government's criticisms and lead to a big increase in membership 'from a general re-organization of all workers', and a bluff ultimatum that 'all within the industry must be in their respective union or out of the job' by a certain date. Memorandum one seemed to have secured sufficient support until the amalgamateds tendered an alternative proposal, known as memorandum two. Their contention was that memorandum one was impractical and it would be more realistic to encourage mergers of cognate unions. Of course, memorandum one would have led to the end of the amalgamateds. Aware of the growing consensus for reform, they had been boosting their affiliation from Northern Ireland, and United Kingdom unions now accounted for 48% of ITUC membership. It had also become more common for British officials to attend annual congresses. They made up 9% of delegates in 1937, for example, and usually being senior officers exerted a disproportionate influence. There was also a memorandum three, tendered by William Norton. As head of the Post Office Workers' Union, Norton did not want memorandum one; as head of the Labour Party, neither did he want to offend O'Brien or the ITGWU.²⁸

The ITUC now faced a dilemma. Most Irish unions wanted reform, but just a few defections from the more sectionally-minded among them, like the Post Office Workers' Union, would scupper O'Brien's project. To discuss the memorandums would certainly be divisive; to shelve them might invite the government to impose reform through legislation. When the ITUC finally met to consider the reports of its commission of enquiry in 1939, John Marchbank, general secretary of the British-based National Union of Railwaymen, deftly got the chairman, P.T. Daly, to put memorandum two to a vote first. An old antagonist of O'Brien's – who had no shortage of enemies – Daly was happy to thwart him at every step in the proceedings.

²⁷ The definitive biography is Thomas J. Morrissey, *William O'Brien, 1881-1968: Socialist, Republican, Dáil Deputy, Editor and Trade Union Leader* (Dublin, 2007).

²⁸ McCarthy, *Trade Unions in Ireland*, p.149.

After taking the motion under debate at face value to begin with, speakers increasingly touched on the glaring breach between Irish and amalgamated unions. In a card vote, 21 unions, representing 85,211 members, voted for memorandum two: 18 unions, representing 70,836 members, voted against. Daly decided that that settled the matter and refused to allow a ballot on memorandum one. O'Brien was furious and walked out.²⁹ He then led the formation of a specifically Irish lobby, the Council of Irish Unions.

Enter the state

From this point onwards, the question of reform focused on the British influence in Congress and on Labour-state relations. O'Brien decided that if Labour could not reform itself, it would have to turn to Fianna Fáil. ITGWU collusion with the Fianna Fáil increased during the Emergency, when the government's emergency powers, combined with the acute economic and social problems facing neutral Éire, induced the state to become highly interventionist in the economy and industrial relations. The first significant attempt at legislative reform of industrial relations since independence followed with the Trade Union Act (1941). O'Brien had secretly encouraged the introduction of the Act and the original bill was designed to rationalize trade unionism by discriminating against the small fry. When it encountered a storm of protest, from unions that were small, and Irish, in the main, the discrimination was re-directed against the amalgamateds.³⁰

The Act failed in its chief objective. Even before its key provision was judged unconstitutional, unions were reluctant to invoke something so associated with the government's perceived assault on trade union freedom and workers' living standards during the Emergency. O'Brien watched for other means of pursuing his quest for reform. It came in 1944 when the amalgamateds won a majority on the ITUC executive for the first time since 1918, thanks mainly to the growth of the North's war economy. As the bulk of their membership lay in the six counties, there was no real threat to Irish domination in Éire. The true outcome of the wartime trade union surge

²⁹ NLI, ITUC, *Report of the Trade Union Conference, 1939 with Terms of Reference and Memoranda of the Commission of Enquiry* (Dublin, 1940).

³⁰ See Finbarr Joseph O'Shea, 'Government and trade unions in Ireland, 1939-46: the formulation of labour legislation' (MA, University College, Cork, 1988), pp.81-123; McCarthy, *Trade Unions in Ireland*, pp.207-43; O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-2000*, pp.155-8.

in the North was the creation of the Northern Ireland Committee to activate the ITUC where it had been scarcely a presence since partition, and arguably since the conscription crisis of 1918. But for all who hoped for a new departure in Labour-state relations, the rise of the amalgamateds was deeply frustrating. When the incoming ITUC executive reversed an earlier decision and agreed to send two delegates to a British TUC sponsored conference on post-war reconstruction, the Council of Irish Unions protested at what it regarded as a breach of Irish neutrality and withdrew to form the Congress of Irish Unions (CIU). The schism is remembered the way the ITUC would have it, as one between the right-wing ‘nationalism’ of the CIU and the left-wing ‘internationalism’ of the ITUC. Superficially, this is valid. The CIU was close to Fianna Fáil, the Catholic Church, and Cold War America, whereas the ITUC was a little more internationalist, secular, and liberal in outlook. But look at the composition of the two Congresses. The CIU was made up almost entirely of private sector Irish unions. In addition to the amalgamateds and a few Irish unions with a particular animus towards the ITGWU, the ITUC retained the support of public sector unions, many of whom had a strong Gaelic and nationalist ethos. The split wasn’t about ideology. It was about relations with the state.³¹

The ITUC favoured the inherited, British mode of Labour-state relations, exemplified in the Trades Disputes Act (1906), which remained the basic statutory instrument in Irish industrial relations up to 1990, with free collective bargaining and minimal state intervention in labour law. That suited the amalgamateds, who had filleted the labour force in the 19th century and represented workers better placed for wage militancy. It also suited Irish public sector unions. The ITUC’s role model was the British TUC, based on a strong trade union movement, in a strong economy, allied to a powerful Labour Party capable of implementing its political agenda in a parliament based on the class divide. None of these conditions existed in Ireland, and yet ITUC values took no cognisance of this.

Private sector Irish unions on the other hand, representing low-paid workers in sectors of low union density, and operating in a fragile economy beset by chronic high unemployment, were coming increasingly to take a positive view of Labour-state collaboration. The CIU’s founding manifesto stressed that unions must be part of ‘a new machine for new times’, alive to ‘a newer and greater power and status’ which

³¹ O’Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-2000*, pp.166-8.

they would enjoy through a more productive engagement with the state. A foreign controlled Congress, it argued, could not expect to secure influence over state policy. At the heart of the manifesto was a desire to dispense with the delusions, both nationalist and anglocentric, that had spangled Labour historically.

So long as two separate Governments exercise jurisdiction in two different areas in Ireland, as they have done since 1919-20, the Trade Union movement must operate machinery that will be completely effective in all relations with both of these Governments and their Parliaments and Departments. To persist in any other course would be fatal self-deception and folly.³²

The CIU has been vilified in Labour memory for promoting a corporatist collusion with government, but two state initiatives in 1946 vindicated its thinking. The Labour Court enabled employees to pursue pay claims without first establishing a combative bargaining power. Moreover, to avail themselves of the court, workers had to be in a recognised union. A further advantage to low paid workers and recruitment was the introduction of the national pay rounds. Between 1945 and 1950, union membership in Éire rose from 172,000 to 285,000, and the CIU accounted for the lion's share. General unions accounted for 80,000 members, or 46.7% of trade unionists in 1945 and 163,000 members, 57.2% of trade unionists in 1950. The ITGWU was the main beneficiary, whereas the amalgamateds expanded marginally, and their proportion of Éire membership fell from 22.9% to 16.6%.³³

By 1953 the post-war recovery was over, the economy was near stagnation, and it was clear that the CIU had shot its bolt. Seán Lemass, as Minister for Industry and Commerce, had concluded that having two Congresses was more trouble than it was worth, and urged a reconciliation. And no government was going to legislate the amalgamateds out of Ireland, as the CIU wanted. Unity talks opened, a Provisional United Trade Union Organization was founded in 1956 as an umbrella body for the two Congresses, and the terrible twins merged as the ICTU in 1959.³⁴

That rationalization was the product not merely of antipathy to the amalgamateds, but of a genuine desire to modernize, is evident from the fact that it

³² The manifesto is reprinted in Fergus A. D'Arcy and Ken Hannigan (eds), *Workers in Union: Documents and Commentaries on the History of Irish Labour* (Dublin, 1988), pp.207-12.

³³ McCarthy, *Trade Unions in Ireland*, pp.302, 622-3, 635.

³⁴ O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-2000*, pp.178-87.

remained a thread in Congress deliberations in the 1960s and 1970s. Successive governments too sustained a tempo for union rationalization. The ICTU appointed a Committee on Trade Union Organization in 1963, and its findings were the subject of regular and ineffectual debate until the International Labour Organization was invited to address the question in 1974. Its report noted that:

this gap between, on the one hand, the expression of a general desire for change and, on the other hand, an apparent inability or unwillingness to translate this desire into practice, has become a matter of serious concern to many Irish trade unionists.

It also observed that ‘there seems to be a consensus among Irish trade unionists that any new structure of the trade union movement should be on an industrial basis’.³⁵ The ‘apparent inability’ persisted up to the 1980s and 1990s, when unions were gripped by a merger mania, one not led by the old ideal of industrial unionism, but driven by adverse market forces.

Conclusion

Ireland’s greatest Labour leader, Big Jim Larkin, liked to imagine a future in which trade union headquarters would be people’s palaces on the continental model, offering social centres, cultural activities, and sports clubs for members and their families. And trade unions would run newspapers, libraries, health schemes, and manufacturing and distributive co-operatives. Not even Big Jim himself could realise that vision. By contrast, industrial unionism and the OBU idea were returned to again and again by lesser men who were often far from visionary, and the persistence of the reform theme is evidence of a broad recognition that the structure of Irish trade unionism was dysfunctional. That condition might well have existed without the amalgamateds, but they certainly added to the confusion and stood as an obstacle to progress. In one sense the story of Irish trade unionism in the 20th century was one of grappling with the colonial legacy.

Reform proposals initially followed cross-channel examples, but under the influence of Larkin and Connolly they were driven by syndicalism and anti-colonial thinking on the left in Ireland. After 1922, there was a broad view in Congress that it was anomalous that the British-based unions should remain in independent Ireland,

³⁵ NLI, ICTU, *Annual Report* (1975), pp.364-5.

and a feeling that it was a strategic weakness to have up to one quarter of members headquartered in another jurisdiction. Up to the 1930s, Labour thought of reform as an entirely Labour controlled process. In the 1940s, the inability of the ITUC to reform itself led O'Brien and the ITGWU to turn to the government – secretly at first, for inviting the government to meddle in union affairs was regarded as treachery – and pursue change through a new Labour-state relationship, one that would be based less on a British liberal conception of industrial relations and more on corporatism. But that too had its limits, as would become evident after the Emergency. When a national wage bargaining system was created, the ITGWU decided it preferred free collective bargaining to a statutory mode of industrial relations, though it still wanted legislative reform, and successive governments decided that they did not want to outlaw the amalgamateds, though they did want pay restraint. After stuttering and ham-fisted initiatives in the 1960s and 70s, the next major wave of change in industrial relations would not come until social partnership and a merger-mania, when unions feared that if they did not embrace a neo-liberal 'Celtic tiger', the alternative was a 'Celtic Thatcher'.

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