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# Trade Unions in Ireland

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*"In understanding Carson and the Unionist leadership in 1912-14 we must be very clear that they were risking a lot. But the stakes were high. The more economically-orientated Unionists, and there were many, well knew they were hoping to protect and improve their investments; the more socially-conscious were anxious to uphold their position. Birmingham testifies to upper-class awareness that the struggle on which they were engaged was partly viewed as a means of eroding class conflict by the exacerbation of workers' and petty-bourgeois anti-Catholic sentiment and its deployment under upper-class leadership . . . the Unionists could not make enthusiasts of their lower-class followers, they could simply channel the enthusiasm and hope to control it." (Owen Dudley Edwards, Irish Times, March 22, 1973, "Carson Agonistes").*

The trade union movement in Ireland has a very long history. Its development into a strong *national movement* was hampered especially after the full effects of the Act of Union 1801 began to bite into the economy to the advantage of industrial development in England. Industries that had been growing in the last half of the 18th century were ruthlessly sacrificed to the needs of the dominant economy and position, i.e., of British imperialism. Local trade unions, which sprang up and which offered opposition to home conditions, begot, as emigration grew, a "one-ness" of interest between trade unions in England and Ireland.

## **The Process of Division**

As the struggle for Home Rule grew, English and Irish Conservative interests took up the challenge and Randolph Churchill introduced, for the first time, the "Orange Card" to divide the workers and their organisations and to pull them behind the chariot of Conservatism and against Irish nationalism and a national trade union movement. In the 1910-14 days, when James Connolly was pointing out the dangers of a divided nation and especially so for the working class, Carson and Co., understood quite well their class interests and the "eroding of the class interests", because there was more employment of the working class in the North with the shipyards, linen industry, etc., which was not an accident.

And, as the years progressed and the big events

such as the Russian Revolution took place, the upper class in Britain and Ireland were not under any illusions that the "times were a'changing". The middle class of the rest of Ireland were willing to settle for something less than "revolution" and "the most stupid employers in Europe", as Connolly called the Dublin employers in 1913, were able to make a deal for a divided country which politically, economically, socially and culturally, cut off 26-counties from the 6-counties and Connolly's fear was realised. It is difficult for British workers to totally understand why Northern Ireland workers do not seem to fight on "bread and butter issues". After the keeping of the whole problem under the carpet by both British Conservative and Labour Governments for half a century, it was not easy for such workers to appreciate the fact that the struggle of the Irish workers could not be a duplicate of the struggle of the British workers. The unfinished business, i.e. the national question, left a weapon in the hands of reaction both in the North and the South.

In the North, the ruling class had control of central and local government, control of the industries, control of the provision of homes, education, social and cultural facilities. They had also control, in the last two decades, of the diversification of industry and the development of a new infrastructure. The plans meant favouring a "greater Belfast", i.e. taking a radius of 30 miles, and ignoring areas such as Counties Derry, Fermanagh and Tyrone where Unionist support was thin on the ground. This meant, in turn, that the trade union movement grew in the former areas and jobs were available for supporters of Unionism—and not for those in the opposition.

## **Trades Union Congress**

Despite all the difficulties, the Irish Trades Union Congress was formed in 1894 to deal "with Irish problems". It remained in existence until 1945—taking the strains of two world wars—when a number of Irish-based unions disaffiliated on political grounds. There was a fear that the progressive politics which emerged during the struggle against fascism would find a reflex in the 26-counties and Right-Wing Social Democracy resented what they called "British politics". Secondly, they put forward

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the case for "Irish-based trade unions" as against trade unions controlled from Britain.

The struggle for re-unification went on until 1959 when the two trade union centres came together to form the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and a new Constitution which emphasised the "Irish" nature of the Congress. The Congress, in its earlier formation, had been refused recognition by the Stormont Government. To help meet this difficulty a Northern Ireland Committee was set up in 1945 with powers to deal with the Government. The Committee was retained after 1959 but still Stormont refused to budge. They stated that the Committee had its headquarters in a "foreign country", i.e. Dublin. It was not until 1964, a year after the O'Neill Administration took office, that recognition was afforded and the Committee could then act on matters of legislation facing the workers.

It will be readily recognised that there are difficulties in that Congress has to deal with two Administrations bringing forth two sets of legislation.

The degree of trade union organisation in Ireland is about the highest in Western Europe. In the Republic the percentage of employees in trade unions is 52 per cent. In Northern Ireland the percentage is 54. The overall percentage for all-Ireland is 53 per cent. The problems arise when one examines the trade union base. Unions with head offices in the Republic cater for 55 per cent of the total members; with head offices in Northern Ireland, 2 per cent; and with head offices in Britain, 42 per cent. In Northern Ireland the problem of allegiances is clearly seen in the fact that 84 per cent of employees are members of British-based Unions and 15 per cent in local or Dublin-based unions. The reverse is the position in the Republic—86 per cent are members of Irish-based unions and 14 per cent in British-based unions. (All figures relate to the year 1970).

#### **Common Market and Monopoly**

The total membership at 1970 was 649,800 and in numbers and potential strength Congress represents the best base with which to face the big problems that have come to the fore. The British Government, during the O'Neill Unionist regime began seriously to work for entry into the EEC. The plan was to pull the whole of Ireland in behind imperial Britain and so strengthen her position within the Community. Already both the North and South were dependant on Britain for their export trade. British and other monopolies, by the 60's had more or less driven local enterprise off the map in the North. The task was to do the same in the Republic and, despite the problems that arose from 1966 to the present day, those plans go steadily ahead.

O'Neill's talk with the leaders of the Republic brought out the old resentments that Unionism

had thrived on. The Civil Rights struggle opened out in 1968. Nevertheless, Britain's plans gathered momentum. After the vote of May 10, 1972, in the Republic to join EEC the influx of British monopoly became a flood. This take-over or merging of industrial interests was duplicated by a growing closer of the banking systems and now there is a United Stock Exchange covering the two islands. Chambers of Commerce have found a greater identity of interests and the Confederation of British Industries and the Confederation of Irish Industries are working jointly to exploit the economy of the whole country.

The aim is to further encourage outside interests. Sir Brian Morton, chairman of the Derry Development Commission and a very rich businessman, stated recently that he hoped Northern Ireland, *which has so much to offer international companies*, would resume its prosperous position in the world. The old formula of "maximum assistance and minimum interference" to the monopolies still goes ahead. Assistance given in this way, in Northern Ireland, reached a total of £393,639,662—from 1945 to December 31, 1972. Most of this money has been paid out to big British, American, Dutch and French companies and the profits made go out of the area to the detriment of any further development.

#### **Impoverished State**

The trade union movement has played an important part in order to evolve a political policy that will best benefit the whole country. In the recent policy document which brought together 400 representatives from 95 organisations in Belfast, a call was made for the abolition of poverty, the achievement of an equitable order, human rights, the development of resources, security and liberty, greater co-operation in education, plans for employment, for housing, public enterprise, reconstruction by way of a crash programme to provide jobs and end discrimination in employment.

Much work lies ahead to achieve these objectives. In 1966, the total personal wealth in the Republic was £2,121 million and in the North, £1,552 million. But no wealth was possessed by 60 per cent of the people in the North and 65 per cent in the Republic. Latest figures for unemployment were 72,094 in the Republic and 34,624 in the North. Both sets of figures are suitably "doctored" and the hopes for the future are not good unless the trade union movement fights back. The British Government Actuary, in preparing accounts for the Social Security Bill 1972 on the Financial Provisions of the Bill relating to Northern Ireland (Cmnd. 5269) stated, in paragraph 16, page 7, "The rates of unemployment *on Government instructions* are 2½ per cent in Great Britain and 6 per cent in Northern

Ireland". (My emphasis). The calculations of the Actuary were made up for the years to 2005-06!

The Actuary stated, in dealing with his calculations, that there had to be taken into account "the lower level of earnings which, together with the effect of higher rates of unemployment and sickness, results in the expected average of annual contributions per male employee in Northern Ireland being only about three-quarters of the corresponding amounts in Great Britain". (Paragraph 17). It is clear that the British Government does not intend to bring workers here to parity of earnings, incidence of sickness and unemployment with the workers in Great Britain—our impoverished state is to continue. This means that the programme of Congress must be fought for to end this colonial approach to our people.

### Housing and Education

Programmes for housing needs are very necessary. In 1945, there were 100,000 unfit dwellings in the North. In 1973 there are still 100,000 which have been declared "unfit" and 30,000 of these are located in Belfast alone. In the Republic the position is no better and, with the high interest rates for owner-occupiers, working class families face great hardship. The housing problem in the North has been made worse with the movement of families because of intimidation and worse—a conservative estimate is that 20,000 families have changed their abode since August, 1969, the majority of whom have crowded into the anti-Unionist areas and are very much overcrowded.

There is growing concern about educational facilities. Although receiving state funds, the 81 private grammar schools with the help of successive Unionist Administrations have refused to develop any form of comprehensive education. Grammar school places are at a premium and the number available determines the number of children who go on to higher education. The segregation of the school system, since the inception of the state, has prevented efforts to end sectarianism and bigotry and the blame for this situation cannot be laid wholly at the door of the Catholic Church. The trade union movement has asked all the interests to come together on the problem and "provide full protection for all religious and cultural interests and in which the educational interests of the children will be paramount".

The problems which we face will not be overcome in a short space of time. Congress has, therefore, called on all political organisations in Northern Ireland, the Republic and Great Britain;

- (a) to reject violence, and
- (b) to accept the principle of non-discrimination, and
- (c) to accept the right of persons to peacefully

advocate political change, including changes in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland.

### New Attempts at Division

One of the problems that has arisen is that of Congress maintaining the leadership of manual and salaried workers. In the camp of ultra-Unionism, efforts are being made to subvert the allegiance of the workers with the aid of the so-called Loyalist Association of Workers and the recent call by Rogers of the Young Unionist Council and now of Craig's Vanguard Unionist Progressive (sic) Party to reform the old Ulster Unionist Labour Association which had its birth in the strike for the 44-hour week in 1919. This Association was used by the Unionists to "erode class conflict", Carson's policy, but became negligible after the last war. Rogers and Co. hope to win the workers on the basis of all the old, rotten and outworn bigotted slogans which kept Unionism in total power for over 50 years.

One cannot say that the Whitelaw regime is doing anything to curb such sectarianism and it is not in their class interests to do so. Manufacturing production increased in the North by 64 per cent between 1962-72. Productivity per employee has risen since 1963 by 55.1 per cent, as against 38.7 per cent in the UK. Per capita Gross Domestic Product as a percentage of the UK figure rose from 63.4 per cent in 1960 to 71.7 per cent in 1970. Since 1966 exports, calculated at constant prices, have risen on average by 6.5 per cent each year, and imports by 7.2 per cent. The injection of capital into the area's infrastructural services is estimated to involve a total of over £3,000 million by 1975—most of which has benefited British monopoly capital.

### Irish and British Workers for Unity

Over the recent years liaison has grown between the British and Irish Trade Union Congresses and the former have supported the call for a Bill of Rights—already the policy of the ICTU. What needs to be undertaken now is a campaign to explain the situation to British Trade Unionists. They must be made aware of history and the background of the struggle here and the real difficulties that face workers in Ireland. The demand for democratic rights touches more nearly workers in Britain as they meet the forces of the law in relation to wage struggles and picketing. The overall strengthening of democracy becomes more necessary as the Heath Government proceeds to enact *un-democratic legislation* for Northern Ireland. The outcry of the Tories—and some others—for "law and order" will not fool the British people. Tory "law and order" means that workers are underneath and the bosses are on top. Together we can rid ourselves of this most infamous Government.

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The numerical strength of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions—over 600,000 and forming 53 per cent of all employees—and its leadership are vital and would be a determining factor if the country was united. It is not in the interests of the capitalists in Britain, Northern Ireland and the Republic—

and further afield—that unity should come about. But it is in the interests of the workers of these two islands to foster that unity and on that basis build up the unity and friendship so necessary to defeat the bosses here and in the EEC.

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