
Trade Union Organisation in the South of Ireland in the XIXth Century

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The purpose of this paper is to examine trade union activity in the south of Ireland during the nineteenth century and, in part, to try to explain two major characteristics of modern-day Irish trade unionism. This subject and period have for the most part been either ignored or lightly treated in Irish economic history except for a few unpublished dissertations and J.D. Clarkson's excellent but rare volume published in the United States in 1925, *Labour and Nationalism in Ireland*.

Basic economic activity in Ireland at the beginning of the century was, of course, an influencing factor in determining the rate of growth in trade union activity. Although investment during the first decade was high, there was a decline in the over-all number of manufacturing firms. Prices fell from their wartime peaks after the end of hostilities in 1815, and despite an increase in the volume of exports for the next five years the monetary value of exports declined. A serious monetary crisis occurred in the spring of 1820, and its consequences were more apparent in Dublin and the south than in the province of Ulster. One reason for this was in the north specie was the principal method of monetary circulation, due in part to the landlords' insistence upon payment of rents in gold, whereas in the south the substitution of bank notes added to the monetary collapse initially caused by the rapidly falling agricultural prices.¹

The forces of industrialisation in the early years of the nineteenth century were driving influences towards specialization and consolidation. A case can be made that only the textile industry in the north of Ireland really lent itself to pro-

¹ CULLEN, L. M., *An Economic History of Ireland since 1660*, B. T. Batsford Ltd., London, 1972, pp. 102-103.

duction on a massive scale and as a mass employer of labour. With the lack of specialization and market concentration it became increasingly clear that the new processes of industrialisation allowed products to be imported from Britain for far less than they could be domestically produced. In addition, in 1823-1825 most of the trade legislation (which allowed Irish goods to be sold in the British market at a lesser rate of taxation than those domestically produced) was removed, and any price advantage enjoyed by reason of the favourable tax treatment of 1783 no longer pertained.²

More important legislation, from the standpoint of labour history, than the removal of tax advantages in 1824 was the set of Acts commonly referred to as the "Combination Laws". In 1824 the first "Combination Law" was enacted which repealed all statutes making combinations illegal from the reign of Edward I and also stated that the act of combination should not be grounds for prosecution under Common Law. With the legalisation of combinations of working men which were eventually to become known as trade unions, Ireland, and in particular the city of Dublin, was in a unique position. Although the country as a whole was not enjoying the rapid industrial expansion of Great Britain, and was recovering from a period of economic decline, the level of trade union activity in Dublin and its degree of organisation was significantly more advanced than in Great Britain. "The Dublin trades then (1824) the best organised in the kingdom, ruthlessly enforced their bye-laws for the regulation of their representative industries."³ This situation was to change significantly during the latter years of the century so that by the close of the period Irish labour organisation was adjudged to be "a generation behind" that of Great Britain.

The differences which were to develop between British and Irish trade unionism from this time were not differences of motivation, social philosophy, or indeed the achievement of their ultimate economic objectives. The differences which one may observe resulted from variations in the rate of economic growth and prosperity between the south of Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, and the alliance between the labour movement and other political causes. An argument can be made that the type of social political leader who in Great Britain eventually embraced the cause of trade unionism and led to the formation of the Labour Party was elsewhere employed in Ireland. The majority of the Irish population was agricultural, and repeated economic crises (which arose from changes in the level of agricultural prices, the great famine, relative stagnation during the following thirty-year period, and the massive fall in population) centred popular attention on these matters. The subsequent development

² See for instance McLERNON, D. S., "Irish Combinations and Economic Activity in the Latter Half of the Eighteenth Century", *The Journal of European Economic History*, Vol. 5, No. 2.

³ WEBB, S. and B., *History of Trade Unionism*, WEA, London, 1920 Edition, p. 104.

of national leaders produced men who embraced the cause of Roman Catholic emancipation, and concerned themselves with questions of the effects of the famine, landlord/tenant relations and land tenure, and finally the drive for Home Rule and political independence.

That is not to say that those people involved in the trade union movement during the nineteenth century were necessarily opposed to any of the socio-political ideals mentioned above. In fact, the trade unions were quick to call for a repeal of the Act of Union because they blamed the Union (probably wrongly, in light of subsequent historical analysis) for the decline in economic activity observed in Ireland. "From 1830 the various trades unions in Ireland began to agitate for the return of an Irish Parliament, the Repeal of the Union with England. They sought not a political objective but a socio-economic one, i.e. they thought that with the return of an independent Irish legislature, Ireland would return to an economic paradise which they believed it had been prior to 1800. By August, 1831, thirty-nine separate trades had held meetings which passed resolutions calling for the Repeal."⁴

A unique characteristic of the development of Irish trade unions was dual organisation. Competition for the same group of workmen developed between the British and the Irish societies, and the problem of dual unionism — duplication of trade union members' interests by representative bodies with headquarters in Great Britain versus those with headquarters in Ireland and giving rise to a multiplicity of unions — which one may observe plaguing Irish industrial relations until modern times, was firmly established by the 1830's. In 1838, Daniel O'Connell formed a parliamentary committee to enquire into the activities of trade unions in Ireland. In the testimony of witnesses the problem of dual unionism was quite apparent. "In some few cases, there were in Dublin two rival societies in the same trade. In addition to the regular body of carpenters, there was in 1838 a separate body, connected with the General Society of Carpenters in Great Britain and Ireland. The masters do not seem to have realised the distinction, though they understood that 'the present union of carpenters is much more general and connected with other countries and trades; before, they belonged to the city of Dublin'. The secretary of the regular society admitted that there were a large number of men 'calling themselves carpenters'. In the case of the bricklayers, too, the local body or 'Old Body of Bricklayers', seems to have been more powerful than its British rival, the Friendly Society of Operative Bricklayers. . . .

Two instances are recorded in which the connection between English and Irish societies had been severed. 'There was a union between the pipe-makers of England and Ireland, but it was dissolved owing to so many going over there, and the English now will not work with us'. 'The clubs in Liverpool

⁴ ELLIS, P. BERRESFORD, *A History of the Irish Working Class*, Victor Gollancz Ltd., London, 1972; p. 103.

were united with our club here. We were driven over there so frequently for employment, they got tired of paying a share of our expenses, and have now set their faces against *our going over there*, and will not work with us.”⁵

There is some controversy over whether the organisation of Irish members into British trade unions was undertaken to increase the general scope of the trade union movement throughout these isles, or in some instances, as has been suggested, that Irish organisation was pursued to prevent an inflow of skilled Irish craftsmen into Britain thus undercutting the prevailing British wage rate. In either event, recruitment of Irish workers into British trade union organisations continued. The Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, for instance, a British union organised in 1860, began recruiting Irish members in 1866 by establishing eight branches. In two years' time (1868), it was actively operating twelve branches in Ireland.⁶ This trend has continued into modern times, and many British-based trade unions are still active in the Republic of Ireland.

Whereas in the past the law had been used to thwart the collective activities of labouring men, new laws in the second half of the nineteenth century began to some extent to recognize their rights and offer a small measure of protection. The Friendly Societies Act of 1865 gave protection to organisations with stated benefit functions in their charter (i.e., support of widows and orphans, injured and infirm, burial of the dead, etc.) and thus presumably to trade unions. In 1859 the Molestation of Workmen Act was passed to clarify the language of the 1825 Combination Law. It clearly spelled out that peaceful picketing in trade disputes over wages and hours did not constitute molestation and obstruction as defined under the 1825 Act. In 1860 the Coal Mines Regulation Act was enacted. This law was primarily responsible for the establishment of safety standards in coal mining but also provided for the appointment of a checkweighman chosen and paid for by the miners to guarantee that the workmen were not being cheated in their wage payments computed on tonnage.

The most important law from the standpoint of trade union development was the Trade Union Act of 1871. This Act definitely asserted for the first time that trade unions as such were not illegal, and gave legal recognition to groups of workers and trade associations of employers. It formed the basic principal act concerned with the civil side of trade union activity upon which most of the judicial decisions in British and Irish courts have been based. The principal objectives of the Trade Union Act of 1871 were three in number. The first dealt with relieving trade unions and societies of traders from being held responsible for restraint of trade. In other words, trade unions per se were not illegal, and in addition contracts which trade unions entered into were

⁵ CLARKSON, J. DUNSMORE, *Labour and Nationalism in Ireland*, Columbia University, New York, 1925; p. 108.

⁶ *Parliamentary Papers 1868-1869*, xxxi.

not regarded as contracts which the law might be used to enforce. The second object of the Act was designed to ensure that inter-union matters were exempt from normal legal channels, i.e., disagreements between members and their trade unions were not subject to court action. The third purpose of the Act established a system of voluntary registration of trade unions, and embodied in trade unions approximately the same rights extended to companies under the Companies Act of 1862 which allowed registered unions and societies to buy and sell land for the benefit of their members.⁷ It is important to realize, however, that the Act did not give the same status to trade unions as it did to a limited liability company.

The 1871 law did not require trade unions to register but the majority of organisations saw advantage in registration and did so. These advantages included exemption from income tax on investments used for providential benefits, and the opportunity to transfer property to new trustees without being obligated for legal fees. Most particularly, in the Republic of Ireland (under the Trade Union Act, 1941) it is necessary for unions to register under the 1871 Act to receive a "negotiating license" from the Minister for Industry and Commerce.⁸ Insofar as industrial disputes or strike activities were concerned, the Trade Union Act of 1871 still did not extend to workmen the "right to strike" if it was in violation of their contract as opposed to the negotiation of new terms, although this "right to strike" with reference to employment, rather than an existing contract, had in principle been established as early as 1824 with the first Combination Act.⁹

While the changes in law advanced the opportunities for expansion of the trade union movement within the British Isles, in Ireland other forces were at work to, in part, suppress them. Daniel O'Connell has already been mentioned as chairing the 1838 committee on Irish trade union activity, and although many trade union leaders of his time were in sympathy with his ideas of emancipation and nationalism, and indeed supported him in the beginning, his attitudes towards the labour movement are well-documented and the "liberator" was in no way a supporter of organised labour.¹⁰ The activities in the latter half of the nineteenth century with regard to land reform involved the agrarian population, and therefore one of the major movements and attractors of political and popular support was completely divorced from the aims and activities of urban industrial labouring men.

⁷ SHILLMAN BERNARD, *Trade Unionism and Trade Disputes in Ireland*, The Dublin Press, Dublin, 1960; pp. 6-7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁹ KNOWLES, K. G. J. C., *Strikes: A Study in Industrial Conflict*, Oxford University Institute of Statistical Monographs, Blackwell, Oxford, 1952; p. 5.

¹⁰ See for instance, RYAN, W. P., *The Irish Labour Movement from the Twenties to Our Own Day*, The Talbot Press, Dublin, 1919; pp. 89-105.

Not to be ignored as a deterrent to the aims of labour organisation was the influence of the Roman Catholic Church. It is perhaps unfair to state generally that the attitudes of the Roman Catholic Church discouraged trade union activity. Examples of individual clerics, both pro- and anti-labour, can be discussed ad infinitum. However, the general attitude exhibited by the most prominent Irish Catholic churchmen in the latter half of the nineteenth century was against social change and the combinations of men formed for the purpose of dispute with the existing social order.

The different structures of trade unions continued to be important. The combinations that had formed, and were currently in operation, were for the most part individual groups of skilled craftsmen, and their goals were primarily personal economic gain and security rather than social or political objectives. The organised workers in Dublin, as early as the 1840's, were eschewing violence and intimidation because of the increased social acceptability of their organisations. Therefore, to adopt radical positions would be detrimental to their standing.¹¹ Little political activity on the part of labour can be observed in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and almost no evidence of successful industrial or general union organisation of any significant magnitude can be found. There had been several abortive attempts, however, to form combinations of all trades before 1850.

In Britain, the idea of a Trade Union Congress was formalised by a meeting in 1868, and by 1871 it had established as one of its primary aims a parliamentary committee to lobby MPs concerning trade union legislation. Additionally, the committee published a list of responses to "test questions" presented to the MPs and recommended to unionists which candidates to support. Earlier (1863) Dublin craftsmen had formed the United Dublin Trades Association but it was in no way political in nature. Its successor, the Dublin Trades Council, founded in 1880, had no interest in politics — its principal aim was to protect the interests of skilled workers. Upon its formation in 1894, the Irish Trade Union Congress excluded political matters from its annual deliberations.¹² Irish unions were asked to affiliate with the British Trade Union Congress and in fact the XIIIth Meeting was held in Dublin in 1880. Twenty-three Dublin trade societies were represented but eleven of these were branches of amalgamated unions based in England. Accounts of the meeting are filled with condescending remarks to the "Irish peasantry" and although some concession was made to the discussion of uniquely Irish problems, it was more a matter of courtesy than conviction. "At home, English trade unionists did not feel the same tolerance for Irish idiosyncrasies. Though Ireland supplied many of the

¹¹ D'ARCY, FERGUS, *Skilled Tradesmen in Dublin, 1800-50*, unpublished Master's thesis, UCD, Dublin, 1968; pp. 65-66.

¹² MITCHELL, ARTHUR, *Labour in Irish Politics, 1890-1930*, Irish university Press, Dublin, 1974; p. 14.

ablest and most energetic leaders of the British labour movement, she also poured across St. George's Channel a steady stream of unskilled labourers, whose presence constituted a serious menace to the workers native to Great Britain. It was to relieve this pressure that the British trade unions interested themselves in the organisation of Irish workers. The questions brought up by Irish delegates at English Congresses were regarded as unnecessary nuisances, to which attention need be paid only when Congress was engaged in the task of encouraging the Irish to organise in support of the interests of British labour."¹³

Attempts were made to form an independent Irish labour organisation other than the previously-mentioned United Trades Association (which had joined the British TUC in 1868). These included the Irish Democratic Labour Federation organised by Michael Davitt in 1890, whose primary purpose concerned questions of social welfare, but since it was located in Munster, it attracted only minimal support of trade unionists and lasted for less than a year. The following year, the Dublin branch of the National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers, a relatively new and militant "general" union based in Great Britain, organised the Irish Labour League. Representatives of all trade unions operating in Ireland were invited to attend the organising convention held in Dublin, but craft union delegates refused to come to the meeting because unskilled workers had also been asked to participate. Only unskilled workers made up the membership of the new organisation which adopted a programme of land and transportation nationalisation. However, this organisation failed and soon departed the scene.¹⁴

The first successful organisation of trade unions was formed in 1894 with a claimed representation of 30,000 skilled workers. Modelled on the British TUC, the Irish Trade Union Congress stated that its purpose was to supplement the parent British group rather than replace it. In 1900, the British TUC invited the Irish body to amalgamate with it. But for that one exception, the activities of the Irish body were for the most part ignored by the British TUC. Additionally, most Belfast branches of British trade unions did not participate.¹⁵

With the passage of the Local Government Act of 1898, elections were held for the first time for county and county borough council offices. Labour candidates stood in Limerick, Dundalk, Waterford and Castlebar, and in Dublin one-fifth of the corporation seats was won by Labour men. For the first time, organised trade union activity in the form of the Irish Trade Union Council endorsed political candidates and urged support of nominees approved by local trade councils, trade unions, or recognized labour organisations.¹⁶ A split,

¹³ CLARKSON, J. D., *op. cit.*, p. 181.

¹⁴ BOYLE, J. W., *The Rise of the Irish Labour Movement, 1888-1907*, unpublished Ph. D. thesis, Trinity College, Dublin, 1961; pp. 132-133.

¹⁵ MITCHELL, A., *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁶ *8th Annual Report*, Irish Council of Trade Unions, p. 56.

originating in 1904, developed in the Irish Congress as to whether an independent Irish Labour Party ought to be formed or, alternatively, whether support should be given to the British Labour Party. The political ramifications of this split (with the nationalists supporting an Irish party and the Belfast-based unions opting for the British order) are not truly the concern of this article. The important implication is that for the first time there was an indication of interest on the part of organised Irish labour in some form of political affiliation.

It is therefore possible to identify in the nineteenth century two characteristics of Irish labour which to this day differentiate it from its British counterpart: firstly, the lack of political affiliation by organised Irish labour; and secondly, the multiplicity of trade union organisation. In the first instance, the subsequent events of Irish history, the Treaty, and the Civil War, account for the most part for the varied political preference adopted by individual Irish trade unionists. In the second instance, Irish trade union organisation stems from the dual organisation of workers into British- and Irish-based unions. The acceptance from the start of more than one union being able to represent a particular body of workmen lays the groundwork for the multiplicity of small unions that prevails in modern Irish industrial relations.