The SIPTU logo of a stylized hand echoes the red hand badge – which was adopted as a symbol of the former ITGWU and subsequently by the Workers’ Union of Ireland. The badge has its origins in the 1913 Lock-Out as labour historian, Francis Devine, explains.

The most famous ITGWU badge was the red hand with the letters ITWU and the date of 1913. This was the emblem of resistance in the Lock-Out and was adopted as a cap badge by the Irish Citizen Army in later years.

The 2 main books dealing with the subject are, *The Story of the Citizen Army* by Sean O’Casey writing under the Irish version of his name and *The Irish Citizen Army* by R. M. Fox. I have included the most relevant parts from each publication below.

**The Story of the Irish Citizens Army**  
Sean O’Casey, 1919

The two first companies certainly looked picturesque and imposing in their dark green uniforms and broad slouched hats of the same hue, most of which were jauntily turned up at one side, the leaf being fastened to the side with the ever-popular badge of the Red Hand.

**The Irish Citizen Army**  
*R. M. Fox*

Page 68;
“Until the uniforms came (in 1914), the rank and file wore Irish linen armlets of a light blue colour with the letters ICA on them, while the officers wore bands of crimson. When a consignment of belts, haversacks and bayonets arrived the men were soon busy cleaning, polishing and oiling with enthusiasm. Big slough hats completed the turn out. … When the uniforms came the enthusiasm was greater than ever. They were of a darker green than those worn by the Irish Volunteers, and it became the custom among the Transport Union members to fasten up one side of the big slouch hats with the red hand badge of the Union.”

I think either of the above emblems, which were used as shoulder badges on the epaulettes, would look better than the lettering on the design I saw.
Who Dares To Wear The Red Hand Badge?

Francis Devine

The ITGWU’s red hand badge is the most evocative and immediate symbol of the Union. Its origins, however, are somewhat mysterious. Indeed, the practice of trade unionists wearing badges at all is much neglected and not well researched. What is clear, nonetheless, is that the wearing of a trade union badge has often demanded courage and has always evoked pride in the wearer.

Trade union badges first became common place with the rise of the ‘New Unionism’ of the 1890s among the previously unorganised dockers, carers and general workers in the quays and on the riversides of Britain. Among the new, vibrant, socialist organisations of this new challenging generation was the Glasgow-based National Union of Dock Labourers. The NUDL, faced with the problem of gaining preferential treatment for union members at the dock gate, overcame the difficulties of administering receipts of contributions by card-marking money stewards by hitting on the idea of using the trade union badge as a simple, effective means of membership control. The NUDL issued badges to each union member in January and withdrew these in March in exchange for a different badge issued only to those who cleared their card for the quarter. These ‘quarterly control’ badges always remained the property of the union not the member and heavy penalties attached to badge loss, sale or transfer.

Alex Mooney of our Dublin No. 7 Branch has his father-in-law’s old belt from Dublin City Quay docks that quite clearly shows that the NUDL system operated in Dublin and was maintained by Larkin after the formation of the ITGWU in January 1909. Myles Kinsella’s belt is an example of the common practice among dockworkers of displaying their badges in their belts. Coats could be lost or stolen as they were removed at work, whereas the belt was an essential item not merely to hold up the trousers but to support the small of the back in the strenuous days before ro-ro cargo handling and containerisation. The belt also shows the last NUDL badge, a fourth quarter badge from 1908, and the first ITGWU badge, a brass diamond style shape with the first quarter stamp for 1909. The number 1416 was probably the member’s number in the branch register.

So far no second or fourth quarter ITGWU badge has been discovered but the third quarter badge was a maple leaf design with the initials ITWU and the number 3. Billy O’Brien, Dublin No. 5 Branch, but for so long a porter on the desk in Liberty Hall, kept this maple leaf and many other items safe over the years and the next badge that the Union appears to have issued is the horse’s head, circular badge, believed to have been issued to the ‘Old Reliables’, the carers. The original Dublin No. 1 Branch banner is clearly the old Carriers’ Society banner painted over. Indeed, the Waterford carter’s section also joined the ITGWU, although their magnificent hand-painted banner now lies in the Waterford offices of the ATGWU.

The most famous ITGWU badge was the next one issued. It was the red hand with the letters ITWU and the date 1913. This is the badge that was the emblem of resistance in the lock out and was adopted as a cap badge by the Irish Citizen Army in later years, although none have turned up in collections so far. Like all badges, membership cards and letterheads until 1919, the Union was simply referred to as the ITWU, although registered with the Registrar of Friendly Societies as ITGWU. The four provincial emblems were now used in rotation; a blue shield and the three crowns of Munster in 1915; the Connacht arms within a blue circle in 1917; and both red and green circles for the harp of Leinster in 1918.

In 1919 the Executive issued the current style badge for the first time. The year 1919 was on the badge and the red hand of O’Neill was still the right way round, that is a right hand not, as today, a left hand. In 1920 the Executive decided to drop the year and all that appeared at the bottom of the badge was a mark but the hand had turned to the current left hand. In 1921 the date reappeared but this time inside the green circle either side of the red hand. At the bottom the initials OBU appeared for the first time. OBU has variously been said to represent ‘O’Brien’s Union’, ‘Old Bill’s Union’ and other imaginative but unprintable variations. OBU, in fact, is the international syndicalist slogan One Big Union: the idea that all workers should be in the one union, organised in strong industrial sections and capable of achieving state power at the point of production through the general strike. The date was dropped after 1923, although Seamus McNamee of Limerick

Quarterly control badges studding Myles Kinsella’s belt. On the left is the fourth quarter badge of the National Union of Dock Labourers, 1908, stamped with the branch No. 1788. On the right is the first Irish Transport Workers’ Union badge for the opening quarter of 1909.
No. 1 Branch remembers seeing a 1927 badge owned by a member called McEntee in Mullingar. In 1923 at least 'delegates' or union officials were awarded special badges to mark their status bearing their job titles in an additional green ring around the badge.

The James Connolly badge issued in silver and blue in 1921 is the only badge ever issued by the ITGWU to commemorate any individual. The origins of the badge, again rescued by Billy O'Brien, are unclear but the instruction for the issue appears to have come from the Union's President Tom Foran to remember the fifth anniversary of Connolly's death in 1921. Basically, however, the Union's badge has remained unchanged since 1921. Even the later twenty-five and fifty year membership badges were simple silver or gold versions of the ordinary badge with 25 and 50 picked out either side of the red hand. The twenty-five years service badge of the ITGWU band is a glamorous golden harp version of the ordinary badge, too.

The dockers, however, have issued whole variety of different badges over the years. These badges were still used as a means of membership control and usually have the branch or dock registration number stamped on the face or obverse side.

Paddy Lory of Dublin No. 1 Branch explained the various red and blue button badges issued to cross channel dockers by ourselves and the Irish Seamen and Port Workers' Union after the last war. The glutton labour markets were rationalised by a Joint Port Committee issuing a badge to mark the individual's place in the 'read' and therefore work queue. The Union also participated in the Dublin Deep Sea, Coal and Cargo system which again issued control badges, this time on an annual basis.

In Galway, Sligo and Kilkenny similar systems appear to have existed but more information is required before a final picture emerges. Ted Blakeney, a Galway docker, had his old brass shield badge with the words 'ITGWU Dockers' and red number and this badge seems to have been issued in all ports. In Cork, however, badges were common and very varied. The most famous was the large brass shield 'ITGWU Cork Carrier', worn on the horse's bridle. Stewards checked the horses at the dock gates and, as Brendan O'Neill, Cork No. 3 Branch Secretary, recalls being told, 'if the horse wasn't in the Union the cart didn't get in'. As this took place before 1920 when there was doubt concerning whether or not the Union organised women, due to Larkin's interpretation of the rule book 'person' to mean man — which resulted in the establishment of the separate Irish Women Workers' Union, it is worth considering that we apparently once organised men and horses but not women!

Later in Cork the dockers had the beautiful ITGWU Cork Dockers coat of arms badge and first preference men wore the white diamond, often behind their lapels. Second preference men were given different coloured shields according to the year and, as Jim O'Regan Cork No. 5 Branch recalls, any shield man being taken ahead of the first preference men would produce an angry reminder from the men that 'diamonds were trumps today'!

Belfast docks had a whole and so far not fully discovered series of badges, many bearing the logo 'ITGWU Belfast Docks'. Red and white circular badges, red shield style and the blue circle and red hand worn by Bobby Dickey at the ITGWU 75th Anniversary Dinner in Belfast were issued in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The Belfast dockers also had the ordinary badge with a crest with the word 'Dockers', known predictably among the men as the 'double stinker'.

The Union issued special gold medals in 1950 to all current National Executive Council members and all General Officers, contemporary or retired. This handsome gold medal was an elaborate heart shape containing the usual Union emblem in the centre. It is the only medal known to have been issued by the Union. No special badge was struck but all 1959 Jubilee Conference delegates received an ornate silk spun Conference hand embroidered with the Jubilee details and fixed to the lapel by a special silver badge.

The ITGWU badge once struck fear in the heart of employers. The 1923 badge was heralded in the Union paper with a fanfare of the strengths of the Union and a challenge to the employer. Members wore the badge in defiance of the challenge to the right to organise. It was a symbol of the legend of 1913, a hallmark as to the integrity and courage of the bearer. Nowadays, perhaps, the badge has lost some of its significance. Unlike many Unions we do not issue shop steward or officer badges. We have, it is true, issued various stickers for Youth, Women's Rights and Buy Irish campaigns. Newry Branch issued fund-raising stickers during the Norbrook dispute. By and large, however, like many Irish unions our badge issue has been a rather passive one. In some ways this is sad, especially when deduction at source and open recognition guarantee painless entry for most members. The badge might help reviving the trade union identity as it did in the early days. Certainly, many look forward to wearing the new 75th Anniversary badge with pride in our Union, its tradition and struggle, of challenge to the establishment, of hope for the working classes. Perhaps this short description of the Union's badges has helped establish the realisation that even the right to wear the humble badge had to be fought for and won. In certain of the new sectors of Irish industry it may have to be won again.

Our task is to make sure that the following generations inherit the same unblemished traditions that we were handed down. That we too dared to wear the red hand badge and didn't diminish its status in the process.

Four further badges from the Kinsella belt. Left to right: a third quarter ITGWU badge, shamrock design, believed to date from 1910; Irish Seamen's and Port Workers Union badge from about 1935; the horse's head emblem of the Carters' Section, ITWU, from about 1911; and the first ITGWU badge from 1919 featuring the red hand.