

Labour lives no. 7

Thomas Foran



Thomas Foran (1883–1951) was the ITGWU's first and longest-serving president and a major labour leader at an important time. His reputation, however, has suffered because, though a competent speaker and administrator, he was neither a theoretician like James Connolly, Thomas Johnson and Cathal O'Shannon, nor a charismatic figure like James Larkin. Foran's personal authority derived largely from his senior position within the ITGWU, something he recognised and accepted.

Born on 24 January 1883, in Golden Lane, Dublin, to Johanna Foran (née Bret) and Thomas Foran, a labourer, he left school at an early age and became a dock labourer. An active trade unionist, he was an advocate of an Irish general workers' union and was one of the founders of the ITGWU.

On 4 January 1909, he became president of the newly formed union, having been nominated for the position by Jim Larkin.

In his new post, he was overshadowed by Larkin, who was general secretary, and was not delegated to the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) annual meetings of 1912 and 1913. Likewise, when Larkin named possible replacements for himself during the 1913 Lockout, Foran was omitted from a list made up of Connolly, William Partridge, P.T. Daly and Michael McKeown.¹ Foran served on the executive of the Irish Citizen Army, but intervened only to defeat Sean O'Casey's motion to expel Constance Markievicz. Steadily, however, his own authority grew in the union and he did it his most lasting service by securing the freehold of its headquarters, Liberty Hall, behind Larkin's back. Then, when Larkin was leaving for the United States, Foran helped Connolly rather than Daly to become ITGWU acting general secretary.

In 1916, Foran abstained from involvement in the rising, which saw the execution of the union's acting general secretary, its headquarters destroyed and a halt to the slow revival experienced by the ITGWU since 1914. Foran, despite his non-involvement in the Easter events, was interned until 16 June.² Once released, he started reviving the ITGWU. He won terms satisfactory for the strikers in the City of Dublin Shipping Company dispute, beginning a long partnership with William O'Brien. Indeed, O'Brien's administrative talents enabled Foran to block P.T. Daly's claim to the post of acting general secretary, which he assumed himself. He recruited O'Brien to the ITGWU in January 1917, to its executive a year later and as full-time treasurer in 1919.

Foran believed that Connolly's alliance with the Irish Volunteers had harmed the union. He followed Thomas Johnson's line, pursuing steady organisational growth, independent of the new Sinn Féin. He asserted the union's pride in the Citizen Army, but threatened to evict it from Liberty Hall in May 1917.

In 1918, he and J.J. Hughes were the only Dublin labour leaders to oppose the Irish Labour Party running parliamentary candidates on an abstentionist platform, preferring it to abstain entirely from

the general election.³ However, where state power was not challenged directly in the 1920 municipal elections, the ITGWU blocked with Sinn Féin in Dublin, Cork and Limerick in opposing the slates of those cities' trades councils. Generally, it was pressure from the membership that caused the ITGWU to intervene in the national struggle.

Foran disliked such pressure, believing that it compromised the union apparatus, which he considered to be the best defence of his members' interests. Though he published little, he wrote a recruiting pamphlet in 1918, which stated:

No power on earth but the treachery or cowardice of the Irish workers' themselves can prevent the realisation of this programme of a million workers organised under the banner of the Irish Workers' Union.⁴

This attitude inhibited Foran and O'Brien industrially as well as politically. Their one demonstrative act was parading in the third Charleville general strike on 18 June 1920.

General post-war working-class militancy, and activist organisers such as Cathal O'Shannon, Peadar O'Donnell, Sean Dowling and Sean McGrath, enabled the ITGWU, the following September, to claim a membership of 120,000, a figure not exceeded until 1951. Foran's career was at its height. He was on the executive of the Irish TUC and Labour Party from 1916 to 1918 and from 1920 to 1926, presiding at its 1921 annual meeting. The previous March, he had acted as an 'honest broker' in an abortive truce plan in the Anglo-Irish war.

The actual truce was accompanied by an employers' offensive. Foran's priority was to defend his organisation. In January 1922, he opposed Labour fighting a general election 'until the big [national] question is settled.'⁵ In February, the Irish Volunteers cleared occupying ITGWU members from Mallow's Quarters Mills. Accused of inspiring the attack, Foran denied approaching the Provisional Government, while omitting to include the Dáil cabinet that commanded the volunteers.⁶ This provoked an unsuccessful attempt by O'Shannon, McGrath and the Mallow branch secretary, Michael Linehan, to oust Foran and O'Brien.⁷ The national leadership of the ITGWU became increasingly alienated from some of its best builders.

On Larkin's return in 1923, Foran opposed him, distrusting his militancy and fearing a return to a subordinate position.⁸ In the resulting split, he lost most of his Dublin power-base to Larkin's breakaway Workers' Union of Ireland. William O'Brien became general secretary of the ITGWU, with Foran again effectively in second place until his retirement on 3 December 1938.

He had consolations. He represented Ireland at the International Labour Organisation. Presuming the 'big question' to be settled, he sat in Seanad Éireann from 1923 to 1936 and from 1938 to 1948, the last four years as a Fianna Fáil appointee. He remained unmarried. His only luxury was snuff, his nickname being 'Snuffy'. He died on 18 March 1951.

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Notes

1. *Irish Worker*, 1 November 1913.
2. National Library of Ireland (NLI), Thomas Johnson Papers, Ms. 17235.
3. NLI, William O'Brien Papers, diaries, 7 September 1918, Ms. 15705(11).
4. Thomas Foran, *Lines of Progress* (Dublin, 1918), p. 7.
5. Irish Labour Party and TUC, *Annual Report, 1922* (Dublin, 1922), p. 86.
6. *Cork Examiner*, 9 February 1922; *Cork Constitution*, 11 February 1922.
7. *Voice of Labour*, 18 February 1922.
8. Larkin's supporters maintained that there was a third reason: that Foran was having an affair with Larkin's wife, Elizabeth. Certainly, the Larkins remained separate after Jim's return. On the other hand, Elizabeth Larkin had, like Foran, a number of reasons to be disillusioned with her husband and she did not move in with Foran after the marital split.