

Labour lives no. 11

Marie Johnson (1874–1974)

Marie Anne Tregay was born on Christmas Eve 1874 in Lisbbery, Truro, Cornwall.¹ She was one of ten children. Her father, from a mining family, who had lost his sight at the age of twenty-four, was a basket maker with radical political views and a supporter of Home Rule for Ireland. Marie trained as a teacher at the Church of England Whiteland's Church College, Chelsea, London, in 1894. When she qualified she secured an appointment at St. Melrose's National School near Kinsale, County Cork. By then she was a young woman with advanced social and political views.

She met Thomas Johnson (1872–1963) when he visited Kinsale in the course of his work for a Liverpool fish merchant in 1896. Marie Tregay and Thomas Johnson married at St. Philip's Anglican Church, Liverpool, on 24 March 1898 and commenced a lifelong personal and political partnership. Their only child, Thomas Frederick (Fred), was born in County Cork in 1899. In 1901 Tom Johnson secured a job as a travelling representative of a London firm with responsible for much of the northern part of Ireland. They moved to Ireland and set up home at 2 Frederick Terrace, Malone Road, Belfast. By 1903 they were both involved in trade union, labour, co-operative society, Gaelic League and non-militant Irish Women's Suffrage Society activities in Belfast.



When James Larkin (he and Tom Johnson first met in Liverpool in 1895) arrived in Belfast as National Union of Dock Labourers organiser in January 1907, it was with the Johnsons he stayed. Both Johnsons were members of the Belfast Socialist Party (BSP) and the Socialist Party of Ireland (SPI) and were contributors to the financial support of James Connolly on his return from America in 1910 to serve as SPI organiser. In March 1911 the Johnsons met Connolly and his family on their arrival in Belfast from Dublin. As the Connollys were impecunious they had to be housed and supported for a few months by Belfast comrades and two of the Connolly children, Ina and Moira, stayed with the Johnsons for six weeks. The Johnsons then lived in a six-roomed house at 13 Ranfurly Drive, Victoria.²

When Connolly was appointed as the Irish Transport & General Workers' Union (ITGWU) Ulster organiser based in Belfast in June 1911, Marie Johnson was active with him in recruiting women textile workers.³ From its inception in 1911 Marie Johnson served as honorary secretary of the Irish Textile Workers' Union (ITWU). Marie Johnson and Connolly tried without success to establish ITWU branches in several northern towns where there were mills. The membership of the ITWU was about 300 and when Marie Johnson ceased to be secretary in 1913 she was succeeded by Winifred Carney, a woman she had introduced to Connolly.

Marie and Tom Johnson, as BSP and SPI members, attended the conference at Easter 1912 at the Antient Concert Rooms in Dublin at which the SPI, BSP and all but one of the Irish branches of the (British) ILP merged to form the Independent Labour Party, Ireland.

During the Dublin lock out of 1913–1914, Marie, with Tom Johnson and D.R. Campbell, spent three weeks travelling throughout the north of England, beginning in Leeds and ending in Newcastle-

on-Tyne, addressing meetings and collecting funds to provision the food ships *Hare* and *Fraternity* for the support of Dublin's workers. On her return Marie Johnson was involved in the workings of the food depot established at Liberty Hall.

In May 1918, when Tom Johnson was dismissed from his job due to his anti-conscription activities, the Johnsons left Belfast and moved to Dublin where from 1920 they lived 63 Edenvale Road, Ranelagh. Tom Johnson was appointed Acting Secretary of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (ILPTUC) in 1919 and Secretary in August 1920.

Marie Johnson was refused membership of Cumann na mBan (the Irish Volunteers women's auxiliary) in January 1920 on the basis that members were to be 'of Irish origin'. Such was not the only occasion that her place of birth (and that of her husband) was used against them.

A suffragist all her life, Marie Johnson was a member of a deputation to Arthur Griffith and Eamon de Valera in July 1921 to insist that the constitution of the new state would include women in the electorate and provided equal status to all citizens. A year later she was also a member of a deputation of women to anti-treatyites occupying the Hamman Buildings in Dublin in early July 1922, in a vain effort to halt the growing violence of the civil war. She recalled that they were met at the entrance by Roddy Connolly and George McLay (aka George Pollock); both were armed and then bitter critics of her husband. Marie availed of the opportunity to chide McLay (a Scot who had come to Belfast as a 'conscientious objector' during the Great War) telling him that as he was not prepared to fight for his own country he had 'no business here'.

The years 1914 to 1918 were undoubtedly a time of great worry for Marie Johnson as her only child, Frederick was working as a merchant seaman, as two ships on which he served were sunk. The years 1920 to 1923 can have been little better with harassment from the authorities in 1920–1921, and from anti-treatyites in 1922–1923. In late November 1922 she was put under pressure by anti-treatyite women to prevail on her husband, as leader of the Labour Party, to withdraw from Dáil Éireann.

In the 1920s in particular Marie and Tom Johnson travelled, usually to trade union, political or co-operative summer schools, to places as diverse as Oxford, Prague, Bryn Corach and Amsterdam.

Besides the activities and organisations she was active in with her husband, Johnson was active in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and served as its honorary treasurer in the 1920s. She was the Irish delegate to the 4th WILPF congress, when it was held in Washington D.C. in 1924, at which delegations from sixteen countries were represented. She was a member of the organising committee for the 5th WILPF congress (the first international congress held in the new Irish Free State) which met in Dublin at UCD and Alexandra College, on Earlsfort Terrace, from 8 to 15 July 1926.

Marie Johnson was the first woman elected as a Labour Party councillor and served on Rathmines and Rathgar Urban District Council from 1925 to 1930. Her fellow Labour councillor was William Norton. Her term as councillor ended when the town was incorporated into Dublin City in 1930. During her term as councillor she was censured by the council for submitting an affidavit during an unsuccessful court action brought by the Irish Union of Distributive Workers and Clerks to compel the council to implement legal provisions for the regulation of shop opening hours. Marie Johnson had revealed that the council had decided not to implement the Act.⁴

In 1929 the Johnsons moved from Ranelagh to 49 Mount Prospect Avenue, Clontarf, which they named 'Ralahine' (after the co-operative colony established in County Clare in the 1820s) and lived there for the rest of their lives. After 1955, when Tom Johnson finally retired aged eighty-three, they lived in straitened circumstances⁵ as none of his employments (including thirty-three years in the public service) had provided a pension. Her son Fred Johnson was secretary of the Rathmines Labour Party organisation in the 1920s and was also secretary of the short-lived Workers' Education Institute established by the ILPTUC in 1926–27. He was later a distinguished actor with the Abbey Theatre

from the early 1930s to the early 1950s, and enjoyed an extensive career in Ireland and Britain on stage and in film and television.

Marie Johnson remained active, almost to the end of her life: she was present at the 1969 Labour Party conference. One of the last public events she attended was the unveiling of a plaque to the memory of her friend Francis Sheehy Skeffington in Portobello Barracks, Dublin in 1970.

Marie Tregay Johnson died, six months short of her hundredth birthday, at a nursing home in Howth, on 11 June 1974. At her memorial service at St. John the Baptist Church (Church of Ireland), Seafield Road, Clontarf, the theme of the address was 'well done thou good and faithful servant'. Marie Johnson left her body for medical research. Pre-deceased by her husband and son in 1963 and 1971 respectively, she had no grandchildren.

Charles Callan

Notes

- 1 J. Anthony Gaughan, *Thomas Johnson, 1872–1963, First Leader of the Labour Party in Dáil Éireann* (1980), pp. 18, 21, 35, 101–103, 139, 217; *Irish Times*, 20 June 1966, 30 October 1972 and 1 July 1974; *Irish Independent*, 9 February 1962.
- 2 Census, April 1911, *Household and Building Returns*, Marie Anne Johnson, 13 Ranfurly Drive, Victoria, Belfast.
- 3 See Donal Nevin correspondence in this issue.
- 4 (South) *Dublin Chronicle*, 23 July, 6 August 1927.
- 5 Confidential information from reliable informant.