



Michael O'Lehane

1873-1920

Michael O'Lehane born near Macroom Co Cork in 1873 was a very notable Trade Union organiser in the late 19th and early 20th Century. Following his education at the North Mon. in Cork he became an apprentice to the drapery Trade and as he experienced first-hand, the trials and tribulations of that time. For these engaged in this kind of business, considering that his life was very short - (His untimely death came at the age of 47 in the year 1920) he achieved notable success with his organisation (I.D.A.A) which he set up in Dublin unlike many trade unions of his time, Michael O'Lehane's organisation worked on a long varied agenda towards achieving a better life for the 'men and boys in suits' whose (partly because they wore suits) were unknown or not appreciated by many people in the outside world.

Here it's well to recall what a then well-known serial wrote of draper's assistants;

1. They have to be eternally young & infernally civic,
2. They had to dress like dukes on the wages of a dustman
3. They had to maintain the polish of a Cabinet Minister on the salary of a footman.

O'Lehane's union was again so different from other unions of that period, in so far as it was all-embracing all-caring to the social and private lives of its members, reaching out as it did not just to wages and condition of work but also to something more, namely, the dreaded 'live in' as part of the jobs - a practice operated throughout the whole country.

The traditional 'live in' as part of working at the Drapery Trade caused so much social and emotional unrest among members especially the young that O'Lehane had recognised that this was an area as important as wages on hours of work issues. Young people becoming apprentices to the trader invariably faced another social obstacle - namely that practice of imposing fines by employer on apprentices for minor transgressions of discipline such as failing to turn off gas on leaving alight on after time.

Many of the indignities and injustices suffered by drapers assistants resulted from the practice of forming staff where they could not the premises where they worked they were boarded out in specially rented houses. Either way staff were under constant suppression and were in fact subjected to the discipline of the employers for 24 hours a day. This meant living in over-crowded dormitories in draughty buildings often quite unsuited for human habitation. There was the risk to health particularly tuberculosis but perhaps the greatest danger of all was from an outbreak of fire. This often brought fatal results where in a minority of cases assistants found themselves locked in or where there were insufficient fire precautions on the number of exits were too few.

Michael O'Lehane is regarded as a pioneer of Irish-based trade unionism his whole approach was characterised by gentleness and that his diplomacy was matched by his enthusiasm for the job. Unlike the more traditional trade union O'Lehane was prepared to recruit women members to the degree that out of a total effective membership of 4,000 in 1914, 1400 were women, also, something else which was unheard of in Ireland at the time he established and edited a trade journal called 'Drapers Assistant' Michael O'Lehane maintained that a strike was the concern of the whole Trade Union Movement, He believed that a

workers responsibility towards a locked-out colleague could not be discharged by simply paying a levy towards his upkeep but the person on strike must have active support through public demonstration within the law by his fellow workers.

Although the I.D.A.A. was established in Dublin, O'Lehane went on a national recruiting tour in 1902. Branches were set up in Galway (1902) Tuam (1903) Sligo (1904) Ballinasloe (1905). Later branches were set up in many parts of Co. Mayo including Ballina, Castlebar Ballinrobe Ballyhaunis Claremorris and Westport. In Connacht at this particular time the main objective of O'Lehane was a reduction in the working hours per week, the main objective of O'Lehane was a reduction in the working hours per week, the procuring of a weekly half-holiday and the negotiation of agreed overtime pay, as stated earlier, Michael O'Lehane himself was apprenticed to the drapery trade in his native Cork. In 1898 he moved to Limerick where he worked for Canocks. He endured harsh living-in conditions which may have directly or indirectly led to his falling victim to typhoid fever which almost cost him his life.

Following his recovery from illness, O'Lehane moved to Arnotts in Dublin. In Dublin he met up with other counter hands whose experience stiffened his resolve to form a protective association for the drapery trade. Earlier attempts by others in this field had been a dismal failure.

1855 Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants with E W. Stewart as leader operated in Dublin. Six firms agreed to 6 o'clock closing in Dublin. One firm broke the agreement so the entire agreement fell.

1859 Dublin Drapers' Early closing association was formed but sadly with no success, possibly explained by the fact that, at that time older draper assistants felt socially superior to craft or general workers and were not in the least bit inclined to join 'a combination'.

1890 The Shop Assistant's Industrial League founded in Cork appears to have had as its principal aim the buying of Irish goods.

In his short lifetime Michael O'Lehane achieved much.

1909 He served as President of Dublin Trades Council.

1909 He was Kilmainham Ward member of Dublin Corporation serving on the Public Health and Technical Instruction Committees.

1912 He was made President of Congress at its meeting in Clonmel.

1920 Six and a half years after the formation of I.D.A.A. he died at the age of 47, leaving behind an organization which then had 7,000 members.