

*An Cumann
Staire Lucht
Saothar
na hÉireann*



Museum & Archives

Beggars Bush, Haddington Road, Dublin 4, Ireland.

**Irish
Labour
History
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IRISH CONGRESS OF TRADE UNIONS

The British Trade Union Congress (TUC), founded in Manchester in 1868, is generally regarded as the first such Congress, or central trade union organisation, in the world. Certainly, it is the longest established extant body of this type but the claim ignores previous, albeit short-lived attempts, such as the National Association for the Protection of Labour, inspired by John Doherty, the Buncrana born leader of the, Cotton Spinners, in 1832. In Ireland there had also been attempts at broad trade union federations with the establishment of the Regular Trades Association in Dublin in the 1840s and the United Trades Association that existed, again in Dublin, from 1863 to c.1877. Both these organisations, while declaring national intentions, nevertheless could more accurately be described as forerunners of the present day trades councils and once, after 1881 in Belfast and 1886, in Dublin, trades councils finally became permanently established, the logical progression to a federation of all Irish trade councils took place.

Irish delegates attended the first TUC but after that attendance was fitful despite the fact that the TUC convened in Dublin in 1880 and Belfast in 1893. Irish business was scantily covered on TUC agendas and Irish interest was reflected in the meagre attendance. Even in 1880 and 1893, delegates from venues in Ireland other than the host venue were limited. Still, predictable fears associated with differing attitudes to the national question and 'political' issues generally, meant that the Irish Federate Trades and Labour Union (1889) and the Irish Labour League (1891) joined the list abortive attempts at an Irish Congress before success was achieved at a meeting the Trades Hall, Capel Street, Dublin on 27-29 April 1894 to found the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC). Scottish brethren were urged to follow this example and this they did in 1897 with the founding of the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC). Fraternal links between the ITUC and STUC followed and persist to this day through the exchange of fraternal and sororal delegates. The decision by the British TUC to amend its rules to exclude trades council delegates in 1895 and the rescinding of special representative status for Ireland propelled even doubting Irish trade unions into the arms of the nascent ITUC. Richard Sheldon, a cabinetmaker and secretary, Belfast Trades Council, had been elected as the first Irish representative to the British TL parliamentary committee in 1894 but was now disenfranchised. The first ITUC secretary was John Simmons, a Dublin member of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners. Simmons was Dublin Trades Council secretary 1886-1915.

The ITUC was composed almost exclusively of craft workers in local unions which were mainly Irish branches of British-based 'amalgamated' unions. It saw its work as supplementary to rather than competitive with the British TUC and deliberately excluded political matters from its agendas. 119 delegates representing 66 unions attended the first Congress. These delegates represented 21,000 workers directly and up to 40,000 indirectly through the trades councils of Belfast, Cork, Drogheda, Dublin and Limerick. The founding president, elected by the host Dublin Trades Council, was Thomas O'Connell, Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners.

Annual meetings constituted virtually the entire Congress business in the early years reflecting the localised nature of collective bargaining and pointing to the absence of national industrial relations or lobbying structures. The opinions expressed reflected the moderate voice of skilled workers who dominated proceedings. Not until the affiliation of James Larkin's ITGWU in 1910 was the voice of the unskilled workers really heard. Indeed, unskilled labour had enjoyed only occasional representation on the parliamentary committee (or executive) and had never held any of the three officerships of president, treasurer or secretary. Simmons acted as secretary until 1898. He was succeeded for one year by Hugh McManus, Belfast Typographical Association and then, from 1900 to 1910, by E.L. Richardson, Dublin Typographical Provident Society.

At the 1912 ITUC in Clonmel, James Connolly, a ITGWU delegate, proposed that Congress establish its own party. Vague in its wording the resolution simply proposed that "the independent representation of Labour upon public boards be and is hereby included among the objectives of this Congress" and provided that unions contribute one shilling (5p) per member to cover the cost of setting up political machinery. Larkin seconded the motion but, because of internal problems on the parliamentary committee, preoccupation with the 1913 Lock-Out and the outbreak of war, little was done to give effect to the resolution although, in recognition of its new intent, in 1914 the ITUC added 'and Labour Party' to its title. Irish delegates had continued to attend the TUC annual conference, albeit in small numbers, but the British TUC's role was still recognised and Irish delegates had no hesitation in lobbying the Manchester TUC of 1913 (and were so successful that a Special TUC was convened in London in December 1913, simply to consider the Dublin situation). It was addressed, somewhat contro-

versially, by Larkin; TUC equivocation on industrial matters led to the establishment of the TUC Dublin Food Fund but left Dublin isolated industrially.

At the 1914 ITUC a programme was adopted committed to "the abolition of the capitalist system of wealth production with its inherent injustice and poverty." The means, as indicated by speakers to the motion, were syndicalist in orientation with industrial unions now the developing power to the eclipse of the more conservative craft organisations. The 1916 Rising created enormous difficulties for Congress in Sligo that year as divisive political attitudes lay under the surface. Congress was skilfully managed by its president, Thomas Johnson, and delegates stood in memory of those who had fallen in Dublin and those who had fallen in foreign fields. Maintaining unity across the political spectrum was to be a major concern over the next number of years but changing attitudes were reflected in the shift in the balance of power from northern to southern, from British-based to Irish-based organisations. The revolution in Ireland and the general fervour for social change that swept post-war Europe saw a new Congress emphasis on political action and in 1918 its name changed again to the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (ILPTUC). In 1926 a separate Labour Party (Northern Ireland) was formed to which most northern unions affiliated. It too affiliated to the ILPTUC. By 1930, however, many regarded the trade union structures of Congress a limitation on the Party and the two were formally severed. The Congress was perhaps, the rump. Circumstances at that time seemed to favour the Labour Party's immediate prospects as ITUC president T.J. O'Connell, INTO, hoped, unite "farmer and town-worker, wage-earner, salary-earner, professional man, shopkeeper, industrialist, housewife, in the bonds of political conviction, realist patriotism and patient enthusiasm for social progress and reconstruction."

There was an enormous growth in trade union membership in the period from 1917 to 1921. In the first year of Saorstát Éireann, 244 delegates attended Congress representing 295,000 members. Of these delegates, 102 represented the 100,000 members of the ITGWU, an indication of the influence, and perhaps consequent tensions, that this union was to exercise over Congress in the coming decades. Throughout the 1920s Congress was, effectively, a political organisation concentrating on electoral and political work and leaving industrial activity to the individual unions or local trades councils. Within Northern Ireland, Congress influence was frankly nil as the new administration refused any form of even moderate recognition of its activities, although, significantly, the ITUC retained its all-Ireland status.

The feud between James Larkin and William O'Brien also sapped much of the energy of Congress, especially after the formation of the WUI in 1924, occasioning much energy on O'Brien's part to keep the new union ostracised from Congress. The foundation of the new state had also seen a proliferation of new trade unions. Some, like those in the public and civil service were created necessarily to reflect the new Irish administrative structures, but others were created as, however mildly, a nationalistic response to independence and fragmenta-

tions from long established British-based bodies. Tensions grew as the Irish-based organisations developed and as the unions competed for a diminishing membership as depression, mass unemployment and emigration bedevilled all economies in the 1930s. The decade began with a lock-out of building workers in 1931 and was continuously marked by large scale disputes, many with inter-union connations. O'Brien, active in his pursuit of Larkin, also co-ordinated the activities of many Irish-based unions through a semi-autonomous Committee of Irish Unions and sought to effect his aspirations for 'One Big Union' through structural changes within the Congress. O'Brien first suggested major changes particularly attempted to circumscribe the role of the amalgamated unions in Ireland, by a series of still-born proposals emanating from an ITUC Commission of Inquiry, 1936. O'Brien's proposal was that all trade unions should be grouped in ten or so industrial unions, an idea first mooted in 1919, although then to be approached in a gradualistic fashion rather than, as now, in one fell swoop. The government pursued the matter and produced the contentious Trade Union Act, 1941, which suggested what was in essence O'Brien's formula in legislative terms.

The ITGWU's opposition to the Bill was slight and in contrast to the hostility by other groups. Part III of the Act, subsequently found to be unconstitutional, by the Supreme Court, in a case taken by the NUR, provided that only Irish-based unions would be given role negotiation rights by the Minister for Industry and Commerce and could determine that one union alone should be entitled to organise a particular class of workers where the union could prove they organised a majority of workers in that class. The ITUC campaign against the Bill was jointly organised with the Labour Party. To O'Brien's chagrin, Larkin attended the 1941 Congress, as a delegate of the DTC and spoke in opposition to the Bill. Larkin's readmission to the Labour Party led to the ITGWU's disaffiliation from the party and the formation of the National Labour Party in 1944. All the elements were now in place for what was to prove a disastrous split in Congress itself.

The immediate apparent cause of the split was the decision by the ITUC national executive to accept an invitation to the World Trade Union Conference held in London in February 1945. The impact was a conference of fifteen Irish-based unions, held on 21st March, that adopted a resolution to the effect that "the opinions and aspirations of Irish labour cannot be expressed by the ITUC which is controlled by British trade unions and that the Irish unions affiliated to Congress occupy an intolerable and humiliating position." The group reconvened on 25th April and decided to establish a national trade union organisation composed of unions with headquarters in Ireland and free from the control of British trade unions. Not all Irish-based unions left the ITUC to join the new centre, Comhar Ceard Éireann/Congress of Irish Unions (CIU). In July 1945, the CIU claimed 77,500 members, the bulk of which were in the ITGWU and the IUDWC. The ITUC claimed to have 72,000 members in the north and approximately the same number in the south. The

bakers, public service unions, teachers, assurance workers and women workers in the south had remained with the ITUC and the WUI, so long kept from affiliation by O'Brien, now entered its ranks.

From 1945 there were two rival Congresses. The two great protagonists were, however, about to leave the stage, O'Brien through retirement in 1946 and Larkin through death in 1947. In 1954, after inevitable early bitterness, the ITUC and the CIU established a Joint Committee which issued a Memorandum on Trade Union Unity. This led on 5 January 1956, to the formal inauguration of a Provisional United Organisation of the Irish Trade Union Movement (from 1957 known as the Provisional United Trade Union Organisation - PUTUO) which worked out a new constitution for a united Congress. The PUTUO also acted increasingly as a co-ordinator of industrial and political activity for the movement.

The Northern Ireland Committee of the ITUC, established in 1945, gained increasing autonomy and reflected the much changed social situation in Northern Ireland after the War in contrast to the Republic. The Northern Ireland economy boomed, relatively, and northern workers enjoyed the benefits of the vastly improved welfare state, while the south experienced the continued decline and mass unemployment and emigration. The Northern Ireland Committee was to retain its relative independence after reunification with its own conference and full-time officer, Billy Blease.

On 11th February 1959, the two Congresses were dissolved and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) founded. 75 affiliated unions represented 407,000 workers on an all Ireland basis. John Conroy (ITGWU) was inaugural president and was followed in the next two years by the two other major players in reunification, representing as they did the major unions, James Larkin junior (WUI) and Norman Kennedy (ATGWU). The joint secretaries were the office holders from the two dissolved bodies, Leo Crawford (CIU) and Ruaidhri Roberts (ITUC).

The ICTU quickly established itself as the central trade union authority in the Republic but it was to be another five years before the authorities in Northern Ireland gave full recognition to the ICTU Northern Ireland Committee (NIC) as the central trade union body in 1964. The NIC negotiated with Stormont and, after the imposition of direct rule in 1974, from Westminster. It achieved many legal advances for Northern workers through the Labour Relations Orders and the establishment of a Labour Relations Agency whose first director was a prominent trade unionist, Brendan Harkin. In response to the Ulster Workers' Council stoppage in 1974, Len Murray, TUC General Secretary, joined ICTU NIC officials in an organised return to work march. This controversial but courageous opposition to Loyalist political action has been matched by equally tough and uncompromising attitudes to Republican violence. Such attitudes are exemplified by the anti-sectarian campaigns 'Hands Off My Mate' and the public demonstrations against continued bomb attacks on the rail link between Belfast and Dublin. Such attitudes have also guarded the NIC from sugges-

tions of the need for a separate Ulster TUC. Finally, the NIC have consistently campaigned on jobs, improve social conditions and defence of the public sector in vigorous campaigns.

The ICTU in the south, together with employer bodies and government as both major employer and administration, have negotiated a series of national, pay settlements. These settlements have broadened steadily from the issue of pay in the National Wage Agreements of the 1970s to the wider concerns of economic and social objectives in the National Understandings of the 1970s/early 1980s. The Programme for National Recovery, introduced in 1987, has further cemented the central role of the ICTU and, in the continued absence of an effective socialist presence in Dail Eireann, won advances for Irish workers, be they trade unionists or not, across a range of targets. The ICTU led the huge popular protests for tax reform in the late 1970s/ early 1980s that culminated in the Commission of Inquiry into the Tax System and focused attention on the perception of the role of the ICTU, by the majority of workers, as the voice of the movement and a realisation of the more limited role of individual trade unions. The ICTU has thus seen more authority devolved to it by the affiliated unions in political and industrial matters.

The recession of the 1980s, coupled with the sophisticated attacks of the New Right, caused concern within the ICTU. At the 1989 Annual Conference a major discussion document, Trade Unions and Change, was put to delegates as part of a far reaching attempt to re-evaluate the ICTU role in the last decade of the century. These concerns focus on the effectiveness of workplace trade unionism, the appeal of the movement, internal democracy and accountability, the range of services offered to members, the role of women, the recruitment of new members, membership, education and training, young workers, European and international dimensions, and new concerns of the environment, public health, third world issues and morality. Parallel to these developments, a major restructuring of the Irish, and indeed British, trade union movement is taking place with, as yet, uncharted waters ahead for the ICTU, particularly as a consequence of the foundation of SIPTU, the new union emerging from the amalgamation of the ITGWU and FWUI. SIPTU accounts for nearly one half of all ICTU affiliated members in the Republic.