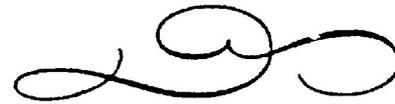


THE BIRTH AND GROWTH
OF THE
TRANSPORT WORKERS UNION



The straight story of how a dedicated few realized their dreams and built a powerful Union.

By: GERALD O'REILLY



The little coffee shop on Columbus Avenue, where the idea of a Transit Union first germinated over a half a century ago, has long since gone.

Gone, too, are almost all of the pioneers whose unselfish efforts brought our infant organization to maturity. Some day, perhaps, an honor roll in the Union will preserve their memory.

To them this brief history is dedicated and in particular to the memory of Molly Quill. She stood out in her quiet way and from her great heart and generous spirit gave to her husband, Michael, and to all of us her priceless help and encouragement in the early and difficult days.



THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF
THE TRANSPORT WORKERS UNION

By GERALD O'REILLY

Although the successful unionization of the employees of the subway and surface transit systems in New York City was the work of many people, the man who provided the aggressive leadership in the building of the Transport Workers Union was Michael J. Quill.

Gerald O'Reilly was born in 1903 and raised on a sixty-acre farm in County Meath. When he was a student in the Agricultural College in County Cavan, he joined the First Eastern Division of the Irish Republican Army, then engaged in the Black-and-Tan War against England.

When the IRA split over acceptance of the treaty which created a divided Ireland, Gerald transferred to the Fourth Northern Division under Frank Aiken which fought against the Free State during the Civil War. Although he escaped three times, he spent the final months of the hostilities in Mountjoy prison. He was again confined in Mountjoy in 1926 and on his release, emigrated to the United States.

After working for a short time in a carpet factory in Yonkers, he got a job as a conductor on the IRT, having first to join the "Brotherhood" - the company union.

Gerald transferred from the Fourth Northern Division to the James Connolly Clan-na-Gael and IRA club in New York. Through the Clan-na-Gael clubs, he met Michael Quill and the other transit workers who founded the Transport Workers Union. For several years, Gerald was a liaison man between the Union and the Communist Party.

Until the split between the Union and the Party in 1948, Gerald was a member of the Local 100 Executive Board and full-time organizer for the IRT conductors. He supported the Hogan-MacMahon-Santo group in opposition to Quill and was ousted from his Union position and returned to work as a conductor. Shortly afterwards he left the Party and within a year, with Quill's support, was restored to his office as organizer for the IRT conductor group - a position he held until his retirement in 1970.

Mike had a unique talent for public relations and his strong personality overshadowed his associates and the Union itself. As a result, the sources of his essential support are often overlooked. There are some who would now minimize or hide the help our fledgling union received and play down the vital roles of some of Mike's key associates. Michael was too big a man to need to have his reputation bolstered in such a shabby way.

As one of Michael's earliest associates, I feel I should set down some basic facts to provide an accurate picture of the circumstances under which the Union was born and grew.

The Transport Workers Union had its roots fifty-three years ago in two organizations in New York City: one fairly large - the Clan-na-Gael (also known as the Clan-na-Gael and IRA Clubs); one small - the Irish Workers Club. Michael was a member of both as was I. When a small group of us - many of whom were members of both organizations - undertook to build a union, we sought help from different sources. Only one responded favorably: the Communist Party, which Mike and I and many of the other founding members of the Union subsequently joined.

After the Civil War in Ireland had collapsed in 1923 on the acceptance of an Irish Free State and a divided country, hundreds

of its veterans emigrated to the United States where many, like Mike and myself, found employment on New York's transit lines. We had been given transfers from the Irish Republican Army to its affiliates in the United States: the Clan-na-Gael and IRA Clubs which, in New York, had their headquarters in the Tara Hall on West 66th Street. Mike was a member of the Austin Stack club and I was a member of the James Connolly club.

Some of us, including Mike, also joined the Irish Workers Club founded by James Gralton, an Irish born, United States army veteran, who had been deported from Ireland for "radicalism" - a crime which consisted of teaching the social philosophy of James Connolly to small land holders and laborers.

In Ireland's Easter Week Rebellion in 1916, Connolly had led a battalion from the Irish Citizen Army - the military wing of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. Connolly's subsequent execution was motivated as much by his militant labor background as it was by his participation in the Rebellion. James Connolly had been in the United States from 1903 to 1910 and had spent most of that time organizing for the IWW and later for the Socialist Party of America. He wrote regularly for the Industrial Union Bulletin advocating industrial unionism as the method that offered the only hope of relief for exploited workers. He explained, for instance, how craft organization had been the fatal flaw which had defeated striking transit workers in New York City and Yonkers.

Jim Gralton was a devoted disciple of Connolly's principles and he read and discussed Connolly's writings at every meeting of the Irish Workers Clubs. From then on Connolly was a major influence in our lives, and particularly in the life of Michael Quill.

Each year on the anniversary of Connolly's execution, Michael Quill and the Transport Workers Union sponsored a special Connolly Commemoration in New York to which many of Ireland's best known labor and revolutionary leaders came as guests. Invited to the 1947 Commemoration was the distinguished actor, Barry Fitzgerald, who telegraphed: "I regret I am unable to be in New York for the Jim Connolly commemoration on the twelfth of May. Please, however, accept my sincerest wishes for a successful gathering in honor of the great leader." Sean O'Casey, the world-famous author and playwright, sent me a replica of the flag of the Irish Citizen Army, "The Plough and the Stars" for use in the Connolly Commemoration. The Abbey Players later displayed it in their Broadway performance of the O'Casey play of the same name: "The Plough and the Stars" starring Barry Fitzgerald. The original flag was flying over "Liberty Hall," headquarters of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union and of the Irish Citizen Army during the Easter Week Rebellion. Liberty Hall was destroyed by English shell fire and the flag went down in flames.

Across the street from Tara Hall was a small coffee shop where some of us would gather after Clan-na-Gael meetings. It was there that we first discussed the idea of organizing a genuine union for transit workers. (There had been for a number of years a company union on the IRT - the Brotherhood - which we were required to join in order to get a job. The Brotherhood was financed by the employer to ensure a docile workforce). Before we contacted the Communist Party, we had first requested financial help from the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick. A good many transit workers at that time were Irish and Catholic. Having to work twelve hours a day, seven days a week, with no time off for Mass or any other religious observance, we felt that these organizations might be sym-

pathetic. Our small delegation had a friendly reception from both, but each explained that it could not involve itself in a controversial labor area.

Tom O'Shea was a member of the Irish Workers Club and also of the Communist Party. He suggested that the Communist Party might help us. Again I was a member, with Mike, of a small delegation which met with William Z. Foster, Israel Amter, Rose Worters and other Communist Party leaders at Party headquarters on East 13th Street, Manhattan.

Amter gave us a detailed history of the many previous unsuccessful efforts to organize transit workers in New York City; how the weakness of craft organization and infiltration by "Beakies"¹ and Pinkerton agents had resulted in broken strikes in 1906, 1910, 1916 and 1926 with the consequent firing of their leaders. We, however, were proposing an industrial union and, because the Clan-na-Gael Clubs were secret organizations we were immune from Pinkerton and Beakie infiltration. Foster and Amter, recognizing our sincerity and determination, committed the Party to provide financial support and to assign us trained organizers. The Party provided us with an office at 80 East 11th Street and assigned two men immediately: Maurice Forge, to write and edit our "BULLETIN," and Leo Rosenthal (Bubbles Lee), to prepare the leaflets we would need for distribution on the transit system. Shortly afterwards, the lawyer, Harry Sacher was assigned to handle our legal problems and John Santo and Austin DeLoughrey (Austin Hogan) as organizers.

¹ The "Beakies" were a plain-clothes security force which patrolled the transit properties as company spies. They got their name from their boss: H.L. Beakie.

Each Clan member was assigned the task of organizing in his own shop, or depot, or barn. In the early formative months, each new recruit met only with his particular organizer and only the organizers met together, usually with Santo, Hogan, and Forge in attendance. The date of the founding of the Union was fixed at April 12, 1934 when Santo and Hogan first met with our Clan group at Stewart's Cafeteria at Columbus Circle.

Union dues were initially ten cents a week which, of course, was utterly inadequate to meet organization expenses. It was my task to go to Communist Party headquarters to collect the necessary subsidy to pay our bills. The Union members who joined the Party paid Party dues and also contributed one week's pay a year to the Party.

Some of the top Party officials such as Foster, Amter, Bob Thompson, Rose Worters or Henry Winston would come to our Party meetings on the 2nd Friday of every month in Steinway Studios on West 59th Street to consider up-to-the-minute reports from Quill, Faber, MacMahon, Michael Clune and myself, and from the other workers who joined and took leading roles in those early days.

Before long it was decided that Quill, a subway change-maker on the IRT, and Douglas MacMahon, a BMT mechanic, should resign from their transit jobs to work full time for the Union. MacMahon was one of the few in the inner circle who had no Clan connections. They were paid \$18 a week which, again, was made possible by our subsidy from the Communist Party.

The subsidy was never conditioned on the number of Union members who joined the Party. When I picked up the last Party donation - a special contribution of \$1,000 in 1947 for the

Union's unsuccessful campaign to block the sale of the IRT power plants to Con Edison -- Party membership was only a couple of hundred. By that time Local 100 had grown to over 40,000 members.

While the Party's direct contributions, in money and manpower, to the building of TWU were vitally important, substantial financial support also came from various Party-controlled sources. Mike and his wife, Molly, were frequently invited as guests to the Party's summer camps and other social affairs at which the proceeds of hand collections were turned over to the Union. I was with Mike and Molly on at least one such occasion. At the TWU's 1946 Convention, Mike explained to the delegates that the invitation to Irving Potash of the Communist-led Fur Workers Union to be a guest speaker was an expression of TWU's appreciation for the financial help received from the Furriers.

During TWU's first thirteen years, while Earl Browder was General Secretary of the Party, Mike and his fellow TWU leaders maintained a close relationship with the Party. Occasional differences were of little moment until William Z. Foster replaced Browder.

TWU's growth in numbers and in strength had, of course, attracted opposition from various right-wing and reactionary forces. The obvious affinity of the Union leaders with the Communist Party made the Union's large Irish Catholic membership a susceptible target for right-wing propaganda.

Holy Name Societies sprang up, although over previous decades no one cared about the inhuman hours which made it impossible for transit workers to devote any time to religious

observance or to family life. The Association of Catholic Trade Unionist provided a school for training ambitious workers to challenge the leadership of TWU's New York Local 100.

By 1947, war-time inflation had severely depleted the buying-power of transit wages. But without a fare increase, no wage improvement was possible. Preservation of the nickel fare was a basic tenet of the Communist Party.

Browder, however, had foreseen how essential was a wage increase if Local 100 was to survive. In the publicly-owned subway and bus systems in New York, TWU operated under an open shop. His successor, Foster, was ideologically hard-nosed and arrogant. He demanded that Local 100 lead the fight against any fare increase. At that time the Henry Wallace candidacy was getting underway and Foster also demanded that TWU support Wallace along the lines he dictated. Mike rejected both directives and the ensuing split was immediate, complete and bitter. Mike quickly secured control of Local 100, ousting Austin Hogan as its president and Sacher as its lawyer.

In 1948 the subway system was operated by the Board of Transportation, a City agency under the control of the Mayor. Before the split, the Union was demanding a twenty-five cent an hour increase. After the split Mike won a twenty-four cent an hour increase from Mayor O'Dwyer on condition that he would not oppose a fare increase. Any meaningful opposition to Mike in Local 100 quickly faded away.

The Party-controlled leaders still had considerable support in the airline and other locals across the country. The struggle for control of the International Union, however, ended at the Chicago Convention in December 1948 when Quill achieved a one-

sided victory. Of the Party members in leadership positions, only Gus Faber supported Mike. MacMahon, Hogan, Forge and Santo were removed from office, and Sacher was discharged as attorney.

After Mike's split with the Party, right-wing attacks on the Union became somewhat muted but he himself never became a guest of the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists or of the management-inspired Holy Name Societies or kindred organizations.



ST. PATRICK'S DAY PARADE - 1962

In March 1962, the members of the Fifth Avenue Coach Division of Local 100 were on srike. In response to a request from Michael Quill, John C. Mullane, Sr., Grand Knight of the New York Chapter, invited TWU members to march behind the Knights of Columbus contingent in the St. Patrick's Day Parade.

200 bus drivers and many other off-duty members wearing green arm bands assembled at 12:00 noon on March 17, ready to march. Suddenly, word came through that John J. Sheehan, a New York politician who was chairman of the Parade Committee, had objected to TWU marching.

Quill spoke to our gathering --- "The fact that a few politicians don't like unions, won't make us lose faith in St. Patrick." Quill instructed us to go downtown where the parade began and as the last contingent of the official parade moved, we were to follow up the avenue. Quill led the parade, and passing St. Patrick's Cathedral, saluted Cardinal Spellman who waved his arm as we passed by.

In the 1930s and 40s the largest single ethnic group among New York transit workers was Irish and Catholic. Mike and the TWU won for them economic gains of enormous value, job security, and the restoration of their dignity as human beings. No other labor leader - no other leader in any walk of life - achieved so much for his people in such a comparatively brief span of time. Yet none of the Irish-American organizations, which regularly confer honors on those who have rendered service, ever proposed to honor Michael Quill. To many of them he remained "Red Mike" whose accomplishments they preferred to forget.

Back at the Union's beginning, as soon as its membership began attained some growth, Mike and a group of us used to invade meetings of the Brotherhood. Its President was Paddy Connelly - related neither by blood nor by ideology to James Connolly. At one meeting of the Brotherhood in Anderson Hall, Paddy Connelly yelled from the platform to our group: "Don't you know your leader, Mike Quill, sitting there is a Red?" Mike stood up and yelled back "I'd rather be a Red than a rat." The label "Red" never bothered Mike. As a matter of fact he was proud of it because it distinguished him from those who didn't have the courage, the integrity and the determination to give all he had to improve the lot of his fellow workers.

Incidentally, Paddy Connelly met his Waterloo in the Labor Board election for the employees of his IRT in May 1937. TWU swept to a ninety-two per cent victory.

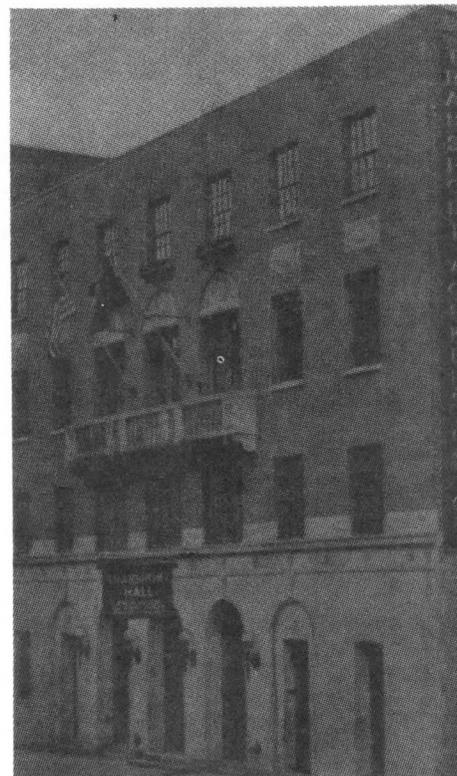
I have mentioned how Mike was accompanied by his wife Molly on his visits to the Party's summer camps and other social affairs to collect funds for the Union. Molly was Mike's capable team-mate both in his political career and in his Union work. Many a morning at 5:00 and 6:00 o'clock Molly would be with us distributing leaflets outside the shops and depots as the men were going to work, and then take a group of us to their small apartment for breakfast. She was particularly effective in winning the support of the wives of the transit workers and helped build a valuable ladies auxiliary. She enjoyed the sincere respect of the many who came to know her. The birth of their son curtailed her activities but never her support for Mike and for the Union. When she died in 1959, after 22 years of marriage, Mike was distraught, worrying over having sacrificed so much of his home life to the building of the Union.

In this brief history of the founding years of TWU, I may seem to have overemphasized the role of the Communist Party. In fact, I merely want to put the facts in proper perspective. Other publications have tried to portray the Party's role in a negative light. My purpose is solely to give a balanced picture.

As I wrote at the outset, TWU had its roots principally in the Clan-na-Gael and I.R.A. clubs and secondly in the Irish Workers Club. James Connolly gave us our inspiration. Mike Quill gave us our leadership. The Communist Party gave us the financial help and the trained organizers to put us on the road to success.



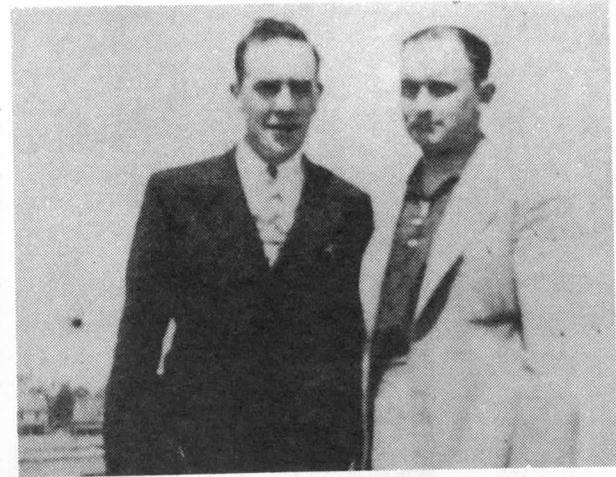
MOLLY QUILL



TRANSPORT HALL
Home of Transport Workers Union
of America and the Greater New
York Local No. 100.
Presented to the Union - 1936



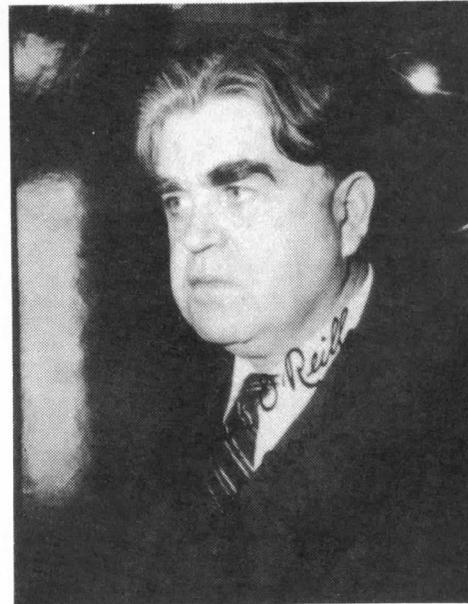
AUSTIN HOGAN



(Left to Right) GERALD O'REILLY and MICHAEL QUILL attending Clan na Gael Convention - 1937



MAURICE FORGE



JOHN L. LEWIS



PATRIOT'S FAMILY: James Connolly and his wife, Lillie, (both aged 24) with their children, Mona (left) and Nora on her mother's lap. The photo was taken in 1899.



At recess in proceedings, John Santo (left) soberly confers with Gerald O'Reilly (center) and "Red Mike" Quill.

Title: The Birth and Growth of the Transport Workers Union

Organisation: Transport Workers Union

Author: Gerald O'Reilly

Date: 1985

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