

REPORT OF THE BRITISH TRADE UNION DELEGATION TO IRELAND



PRICE 30p

COMPOSITION OF THE DELEGATION

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District Committee

HARRY COURCHA : A.C.T.T. National Executive
Committee

FRED WESTCOTT : Brighton Trades Council

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ORGANISATIONS MET IN THE SOUTH

IRISH MUNICIPAL EMPLOYEES TRADE UNION
IRISH TRANSPORT AND GENERAL WORKERS UNION
THE WORKERS PARTY
IRISH CND TRADE UNION GROUP
TRADE UNIONISTS FOR IRISH UNITY AND INDEPENDANCE
DUBLIN TRADES COUNCIL
DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST PARTY
IRISH PRINT UNIONS
LABOUR PARTY TRADE UNION GROUP

ORGANISATIONS MET IN THE NORTH

BELFAST TRADES COUNCIL
COMMUNIST PARTY OF IRELAND
AMALGAMATED TRANSPORT AND GENERAL WORKERS UNION
ULSTER DEFENCE ASSOCIATION
SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND LABOUR PARTY
NORTHERN IRELAND CIVIL RIGHTS ASSOCIATION
SINN FEIN
A.U.E.W. TASS
SHELTER
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSOCIATION OF SOCIALIST LAWYERS
REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE ULSTER PEOPLES COLLEGE

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AGREED REPORT FROM THE LABOUR MOVEMENT
DELEGATION TO IRELAND

Introduction

The delegation visited Ireland between the 14th and 20th April to try and assess the situation on the ground as well as to look at the overall question of building links between our respective trade union organisations, in the context of developing solidarity and building initiatives to what is in effect for the Irish people a British problem. Understanding Britain's role in Ireland is the key to all that we have come to know about the problems faced by the people of the 32 counties.

Our delegation met numerous trade union organisations and a cross section of party political opinion; all were forthright and to the point, illuminating for the members of the delegation, many of the day to day problems faced by a country which has to live with a distorted economic and political life as a result of partition imposed by the British Government under the threat of all out war in 1920.

Time and time again in our discussions North and South, we were reminded of the catastrophic legacy of British imposed partition. It was described as setting the foundations of paralysis in terms of attempting to raise, never mind resolve, the question of national reunification and self determination.

In this respect our delegation was struck by the enormous complexities of raising, discussing and campaigning for a change in the constitutional framework of "relations" between Ireland and Britain.

Nevertheless we believe our delegation lays the groundwork for a major initiative within the British labour and trade union movement on the basis of building popular pressure within Britain against the continuance of British involvement in Ireland.

How much will be rhetoric and how much will be practical activity producing results, will not just be the responsibility of the delegation alone, but will in fact depend on the courage, wisdom and political foresight of the British labour and trade union movement as a whole.

THE SOUTH

On arrival in Dublin we were met by Sean Redmond, General Secretary of the Irish Municipal Employees Trade Union. Arrangements were made for the delegation members to be accommodated in trade unionists' homes. We were then taken on a sight-seeing tour of Dublin and a visit to Kilmainham jail, an historical venue disclosing the imprisonment and execution of Irish people who had given their lives in the cause of Irish freedom. Standing on the spot where British soldiers, on 12th May, 1916, executed James Connolly, we were told that because of the gangrene in his wounds, he was unable to stand, was strapped in a chair and executed by firing squad, a sad reminder of the unfinished business in relation to the resolution of Irish self determination.

Later that evening we were treated to typical Irish hospitality at the Marine Port and General Workers Union Social Club, where a reception was put on for the delegation attended by many of the leading trade union figures and working class organisations in Dublin. In the informality of the reception, common experiences were discussed, exchanges of views took place leading to an illuminating insight into the lives of working class people in the twenty-six counties.

Meetings with trade union and political organisations were at the highest level, with discussions involving leading officials.

We were told of the situation facing the working people of the South. Approximately 200,000 people on the dole (16%) and expected to rise to 220,000 in the very near future; 10% inflation (these are official figures, as in Britain the real figure is probably higher). In an attempt to maintain living standards, the unions were submitting wage claims of between 10 and 15%.

The situation with regard to P.A.Y.E. is particularly severe on working people. The lowest level of tax is

set at 35% with many workers paying as much as 60%. No prizes for guessing who benefits from this situation. This issue alone has probably been responsible for more militant and industrial action than any other in recent years.

On the first demonstration called by Dublin Trades Council to protest against these intolerable and unequal tax rates, 120,000 marched through the streets; on the second, 500,000 with massive demonstrations in Cork (trades council), 60,000 and Limerick (trades council) 20,000.

In percentage terms this is the equivalent of 15,000,000 people on the streets of Britain, by any standards a phenomenal involvement of working people. Ben Kearney, President of Dublin Trades Council told us of scenes in which people were literally leaving their homes in droves as he was walking down the street. On top of these vicious tax scales which are weighted in favour of the farmers who pay no tax or rates (after a change in the constitution removing the valuation system), people pay PRSI (national insurance) ranging from 4.5% in the public sector to 8.5% in the private sector; this means that some workers are paying over sixty pence in the pound (Punt) stoppages. In fact the working class contributes eighty-eight per cent of the South's tax bill.

The heavyweight role of the Dublin Trades Council contrasts with the present lightweight role of the trades councils in Britain. Sam Nolan of Dublin Trades Council indicated to us that they were often called in to settle disputes, had access to government ministers and had the same standing as any union affiliated to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

Structurally the Trades Councils are also different with affiliations coming from whole unions rather than union branches; forty-two unions are affiliated to Dublin Trades Council. The structure of the trade

unions in the South appears to be generally different than in Britain, with less well developed shop stewards committees and greater grass roots contact with the full-time officials of the union.

As in Britain the recession in the South is having its toll on union membership and structures with the ITGWU having to contend with a loss of 16,000 in membership down to a thirty two county level of 170,000 and some amalgamations taking place between smaller unions.

We were told of some dissatisfaction by the trade unions with the Irish Labour Party. Out of sixty unions in the South only seventeen are affiliated to the Labour Party which includes the three largest. A lot of that unease appears to stem from the Labour Party's involvement in a coalition government with Fine Gael, supporting wage restraint in the private and public sector. Whilst the Labour Party is attempting to create a better relationship with the unions, they are however thwarted to some extent by the fact that the majority of trade unionists actually vote for Fianna Fail in elections.

In recent years much has been made of the alleged differences between the provision of social services in the North and the South. We were surprised to find out that old age pensioners for instance have free travel, free T.V. licences, £80 pensions for couples, 300 free units of electricity per quarter and an equivalent fuel allowance for gas; although we were reminded that in other areas of social services such as medicine, every visit to a doctor incurs a cost, with a type of means testing applying through the Blue Card system. As in British living standards, social services, education and employment are being severely undermined by a twenty-six county government following economic policies much favoured by Thatcher, leading to huge financial rewards for the largest landowners and biggest industrial concerns; in fact the Irish Development Agency boasts that return on investment

for U.S. dollars is higher than the average rate of return anywhere else in the world. It seems quite clear that as in Britain the working people of Ireland are being forced to shoulder the greatest part of the problems of the economy.

Neutrality, reunification, the armed struggle, NATO and initiatives such as the New Ireland Forum were discussed at great length. Most organisations and trade unions we met were consistent in their opposition to the armed struggle; although it would be true to say that almost unanimously the discussions we had on this most controversial of subjects revealed an understanding that the cause and responsibility for the violence lay with all previous British Governments and their role in the country.

Whilst there are differences of opinion in relation to timescales, difficulties and approaches to the issue of reunification and self determination (ranging from support for the armed struggle to initiatives contained in the final report of the New Ireland Forum) our feeling was that no-one we spoke to was prepared to accept the loss of neutrality for a deal on a thirty two county basis. The danger of such a deal being done behind the backs of the wishes of the Irish people were highlighted by Frank Koeghan and Jerry Walsh of Irish CND Trade Union Group (16 Trade unions affiliated).

They indicated to us that neutrality so far has stood on the basis that no Irish Government could enter into a military alliance with any other government which occupied Irish territory. If however some sort of constitutional deal was put together which would give the "appearance" of British withdrawal from the six counties, the more pro NATO and reactionary elements of Irish and British political circles would be given the green light to undermine neutrality, and enter into a deal with NATO on a thirty two county basis.

Recent Times and Observer editorials in Britain have indicated some support for some sort of deal; one Fine Gael MEP and two Fianna Fail MEP's have recently voted for Cruise in the EEC Parliament, both of these examples giving rise to justified alarm. CND is in the process of launching a major campaign around a constitutional referendum which would, if won, prevent in the future any military involvement of troops in Ireland other than U.N. troops. Further alarm was sounded by CND who indicated that Ballykelly in the six counties could be the site for missiles and bombers and that in recent years, there had been a high degree of standardisation of imported weapons for their small armed forces with NATO regular equipment.

TRADE UNIONISTS FOR IRISH UNITY AND INDEPENDANCE

By far the most striking development of our trip to the South was a meeting with Trade Unionists For Irish Unity and Independance, formed as an organisation comprising of mainly full time trade union officials after a successful (nearly 1,000 in attendance) public meeting held in Dublin and addressed by Ken Livingstone.

This group sees itself as the focal point for contact with Trade Union centres in other countries including Britain. Its specific purpose is to build links between the Trade Unions in the North, in the South and in Britain on the basis of introducing a trade union perspective into the campaign to end partition of their country.

The reference to Independance in the title of the organisation reveals their reluctance to accept Irish unity at the cost of a NATO dominated thirty two county country.

They feel that the British Government is wholly responsible for the present situation and that pressure should be placed on them, forcing them to come forward with a declaration of intent to withdraw

from Irish affairs, effectively undermining the Unionist veto, which in their opinion constitutes the major stumbling block to any future reunification and self determination.

In our discussions with the ITGWU a specific request was made to our delegation calling for the British trade unions to begin to apply pressure to the British Government to withdraw their support for the Unionist veto by declaring their intention to withdraw from interference in Irish affairs.

There are real problems with this course of action, precisely because of the fact that the ICTU (Irish Congress of Trades Unions) is prevented by its constitution from discussing or making initiatives on the constitutional question in relation to the six counties.

With the majority of trade unionists in Ireland members of unions affiliated to the ICTU and with Nationalist and Unionist political sympathies, the ingredients for a split inside Congress is ever present. Quite rightly, the organisational unity of the ICTU is seen as extremely important and TUIUI were adamant that their work would be conducted in such a way as not to undermine this essential unity. The responsibility for initiative in the quest for a declaration of intent to withdraw from Irish affairs, clearly resides with the British trade union and labour movement, and after detailed discussions both inside and outside of the delegation, we felt unanimously that this was precisely the key question to which we should address ourselves on our return.

THE NORTH

Meetings and discussions, formal and informal had taken place for three days in a relatively relaxed atmosphere. There were no signs of tension or

unease in raising even the most controversial questions. This was to change drastically in the next few days. Being told not to have political discussions on the Dublin - Belfast train was but the first indication of the obvious tensions that people have to live with every day of their lives.

The evidence of this unease and tension was no more graphically illustrated than by the sight of British Troops patrolling the city of Belfast or conveying down the Falls Road. We wondered how the citizens of Liverpool, Birmingham and London would feel about Irish Troops and armoured cars in their main streets. We were told that the security checks in the city area of Belfast conducted daily were not as stringent as they had been; in itself this statement is an amazing one, revealing the ability by ordinary people to continue to live their lives, refusing to be intimidated by a military presence on the street.

The difficulties, complexities and nuances of Irish politics were to reveal themselves in the most striking manner in the days to follow.

Our discussions contained not just points of view and analysis, but hard-hitting passion, partisanship, forthrightness, criticism, sharpness and above all absolute and total commitment, a reflection of the realities of social and political life, confused and distorted by the continued division of the country and the British presence.

Official figures put unemployment at 120,000 (23%). Belfast Trades Council were at pains to stress the true figures, as high as 180,000. In the jobless figures we glimpsed one of the fundamental distortions of the six counties in economic and social terms. Whilst average unemployment stands at 23% the jobless in West Belfast (Nationalist area) amounted to 60%. Out of a six county population of 1.3 million, 650,000

were working people; of those 200,000 live on wages under £60 per week. With production of electricity running at nine pence per kilowatt (average in industrial world = two pence) there is a major disadvantage in attracting new industry and therefore new jobs.

Deteriorating economic circumstances have led to the mushrooming of poverty rights groups, fuel rights groups and movements on rent and rates provision.

Poverty is further exacerbated by the operation of the Debt Act (a piece of legislation which does not apply in Britain) making provision for deduction from Supplementary Benefit Payments in respect of debts incurred either in rents, gas or electricity bills etc., or in personal debt such as hire-purchase.

This double burden of low income, combined with 'legal' reductions in that income to account for debts, intensifies an intolerable and inescapable poverty trap for many people.

Trade unions in Britain could well do with mounting a campaign against the operation of this Act.

The Fair Employment Agency set up to work against discrimination in employment, was described as largely ineffective, reflecting once again one of the realities of life on the ground in the North. It was seriously suggested and we had no reason as a result of our discussions to doubt this, that because of the inbuilt discrimination favouring Protestant workers in the six counties, any serious attempt to gain greater Catholic participation in traditional industries (Protestant dominated) would require the equivalent of bussing - Alabama style.

This discrimination against Catholic workers starts with the filling in of application forms for jobs; it being sufficient for them only to declare where

they live and what school then went to for the employer to prevent the application from being successful. Even the chairman of the UDA was forced to admit that Catholics were third class citizens in the six counties.

Time and time again this polarisation leading to paralysis of political initiative displayed itself. Discussions with Belfast Trades Council were revealing in this context. Whilst the Trades Council was very influential, mirroring ICTU policy, involvement in industrial disputes, meeting Government ministers and raising economic and social issues, it was restricted because of the sectarian divide, from making initiatives on political solutions to the problems of the North, describing itself as a catalyst of pure trade union activity.

Nevertheless, it has openly come out against the super-grass system, campaigns against all repressive legislation such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the Emergency Powers Act and has called for support for the Greenham Common Women. As with all major trade union bodies in the North, activity is directed towards maximising unity between Catholic and Protestant workers at shop floor level on basic economic issues such as wages, jobs, housing, social services, health and education.

The Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union with forty delegates to the British TGWU national conference, organising 60,000 workers in the North, 30,000 in the South and the second largest affiliated union to the Irish Labour Party, indicated that sectarianism at shop floor level was to some extent being eroded, the real problem of sectarianism exerting itself more fully outside of the factory environment.

John Freeman, Regional Secretary of the ATGWU gave a revealing insight into this when describing how "Question Time" seen regularly on British television

screens was at one stage removed from television screens in Belfast precisely because of the psychological impact of seeing opposing views discussed openly.

Whilst discussions with all trade union bodies such as the Trades Council and indeed all trade unions revealed that they were primarily concerned with what was described as an "alternative economic policy", nevertheless we were keen to press them on their attitude to initiatives such as those from the Southern based Trade Unionists for Irish Unity and Independence, and their response to this kind of initiative in the British based unions. Here views reflected the particular and very real difficulties of unions who organised amongst both Catholic and Protestant workers and those who essentially organise amongst mainly Protestant workers.

In some cases the issue of campaigning for a declaration of intent to withdraw from the British Government was seen as tantamount to splitting the union whilst in others a more relaxed view was taken.

Attempting to get to grips with the actual situation on the ground we were surprised to hear that in some cases anti-British Government feeling was developing amongst Loyalist and Unionist minded workers.

Clearly the crisis of the economy leading to rising unemployment and deterioration of living standards even in Unionist areas has begun to play a big part in exposing the cynical nature of British involvement in Ireland in the eyes of Loyalists and Unionist minded workers, who for decades were led to believe, mistakenly as it now appears, that there was a special place in the sun for them.

In our discussions with the UDA (a para-military organisation, promoting the concept of an independent six county state of Ulster) its chairman pointed out to us that in his opinion Britain quite clearly would ditch all Loyalist and Unionist opinion if it so suited their

strategic plans. Whilst we must be careful not to overestimate the strength of anti-British Government feeling amongst Loyalists and Unionist political forces, nevertheless it is an important point to take into account, both because of the developing situation and indeed in relation to the question of a declaration of intent to withdraw from interferences in Irish affairs by the British Government.

A woman in a taxi on the Falls Road on hearing our accents asked us what we were doing in Belfast - "on a trade union delegation" was the immediate reply; "you're no good to us - we have no jobs" was her retort, revealing more than a thousand words could ever say, a complete sense of hopelessness and despair.

One Sinn Fein activists dealing with social security problems in one of the Sinn Fein advice centres along the Falls Road spelt the problem out. He said that there was criticism about the fact that Sinn Fein were not more directly involved inside the trade unions, but how could it be otherwise when there was 57% unemployment in his area alone, giving no possibility of union membership never mind union activity. Further, he himself had once had a job at the Blackstaff Spinning Company employing 500 people with virtually no Catholic workers. Those including himself who had attempted to organise the ITGWU in the plant were sacked.

The face of oppression is seen in its most brutal and startling form in the Falls Road. It is seen in the squalid and substandard housing; it is seen in the huge levels of unemployment and poverty; it is seen in the convoys of British Troops and armoured cars; it is seen in the fortified barracks and police stations; it is also seen in the harassment and physical intimidation of the Nationalist population; it is seen in the use of Plastic Bullets (since 1981 30,000 Plastic Bullets have been fired by the 'security forces' killing eleven people). It dominates every day life. Below is an extract from a submission to the 1982 Northern Ireland

Civil Rights Association conference in Belfast, by Gerry Duffy :-

"The third case is that of Paul Whitters killed in Derry in April 1981. His death was investigated by Lord Gifford of the National Council for Civil Liberties who reached the following conclusions :

1. The police could easily have arrested Paul.
2. That no warning was given of the intention to fire (this is a demand if they are to be used in England).
3. Nothing in his hand resembled a gun.
4. That the shot was fired immediately, before the police could have assessed the situation.
5. That the shot was fired at the head.
6. The officers action was not self-defence or reasonable use of force. "

Lord Gifford concluded,

"Firing in those circumstances with a weapon which is known to be highly lethal at that range, was an act of murder for which I can see no defence."

Paul Whitters was on the receiving end of a Plastic Bullet.

As was pointed out in meetings with both NICRA and NIASL (Northern Ireland Association of Socialist Lawyers) the consequences of this legal and military oppression are not confined just to the six counties.

Warnings of their use in Britain have come home to roost. Not only in the extension of the Prevention of Terrorism Act but in the recent use, deployment

and techniques (some reports suggest troops in police uniform) in the NGA dispute at Warrington and the apartheid type style of police operation against miners pickets, involving phone tapping, agent provocateurs, snatch squads, search and arrest and prevention of travelling between locations, without reason. We were sharply reminded that Kenneth Newman of the Metropolitan Police served his apprenticeship in the six counties and was putting that training to use in Britain, against the organised trade union and labour movement.

The dilemma for those working in the Civil Rights movement seems to be that without any major political initiative from the British Government their work is largely confined to the production of material exposing the limitations of civil rights and fighting individual cases as they arise. In this sense we were directly requested by Kevin McCorry of NICRA to campaign as a first step for the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the Emergency Powers Act precisely because of its effect in limiting the strength of the organised British trade union and labour movement and just as importantly because any demand for a Bill of Rights was meaningless whilst these two acts remained on the statute.

It is to the political initiative demanded of the British Government by Irish progressive trade union and political circles that we address ourselves to in the concluding part of this report.

CONCLUSION

No-one should claim, nor does the delegation, that five days of discussions (hectic and intensely illuminating) gives us the right to set ourselves up as experts on the situation vis-a-vis Ireland and Irish affairs. Nor do we wish to interfere in the internal affairs of the Irish working class movement.

Nevertheless we were forced to the following conclusions by power of argument and visible confrontation with the actual situation on the ground :

1. That there is an inter-relation between political events in Ireland and Britain and that the ambitions and aspirations of the British labour movement cannot be met whilst the rights of Irish labour are denied.
2. That there is an impasse in the situation based on the institutionalisation of sectarianism via the Unionist veto requiring bold political initiative on the part of the British Government if any solution is to be found.
3. That such an initiative must be based on the fundamental demand of winning from the British Government a declaration of intent to withdraw from interference in Irish affairs.
4. That there must be the immediate repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the Emergency Powers Act.
5. That these political initiatives will not just be granted on demand but must necessarily come from a groundswell of pressure applied to the British Government from the organised trade union and labour movement.
6. As a consequence we are proposing that our delegation becomes the basis of a national organisation with increased national, regional and local affiliations; that it has a democratic structure with annual conferences and election of officers and that the campaigning points listed above are its sole terms of reference.
7. That reciprocal delegations from Ireland, North and South should be invited by the official

trade union movement in Britain on the same basis as our own trip to Ireland.

8. That the name of the organisation should be :-

"CAMPAIGN TO END INTERFERENCE
IN IRISH AFFAIRS"

In concluding the report with the above proposals we would like to place on record our profound thanks to all the people who helped make our trip an enlightening as well as an enjoyable one. There are too many people to mention, however special thanks must go to the following :-

Sean Redmond :
General Secretary, Irish Municipal Employees Trade Union.

Eddie Glackin :
Assistant Branch Secretary, Federated Workers Union of Ireland.

Tom Redmond :
Executive Committee, Federated Workers Union of Ireland.

Brian Camfield :
Secretary, Belfast Trades Council.

without whose selfless and dedicated work, this delegation and all that flows from it, would have been impossible.

We would also wish to thank the following organisations who agreed to meet us:

A.U.E.W. (E) Dublin District Committee

Derry Trades Union Council

Electrical Trades Union

Irish Post Office Engineering Union

Local Government & Public Services Union

National Union of Journalists

Union of Students in Ireland

Unfortunately time did not permit

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