

**THE ORIGINS OF TRADE UNIONS
&
THEIR ROLE IN MODERN IRISH SOCIETY**

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

Address to Ógra Shinn Féin, BÁC, 11-3-20

Let me begin by asking the simple question: what is a trade union? As we encounter it in modern Ireland, it is an organisation which is designed to deal with the immediate economic needs and conditions of employment of its members. The most immediate economic need is of course to obtain a just remuneration for the work which is done. Obviously, there are other more wide-ranging factors in society which affect the economic situation of an employee, for example taxation. But these remain to be mainly addressed through a political party. As for conditions of employment, one thinks, for example, of a spectrum ranging from as little as coffee breaks through to annual holidays and, more crucially, the likes of health and safety. Again, more widely, conditions of life *in general* have to take into account matters such as the environment, for instance air pollution. Also again, one must look beyond the trade union and towards a political party for significant progress in such matters.

That being said, I want to start my story as far back as no less than the Roman Empire! At that time, outside of the State and religious society, combinations of economic actors began to emerge in a form called the Collegium. This was an organised association of trades people, who would of course often control persons that worked for them who might either be freemen or slaves. Collegia were designed to protect and advance the economic interests of their members, such as merchants, and were rather like what has sometimes been called an *employers'* trade union, such as the Construction Industry Federation today.

There was no analogy of an *employees'* trade union at that time, although there would have been a certain amount of informal fraternity at that level, and sporadic manifestations of discontent. Sometimes, resistance from the underling led to actual revolt, such as that famously led by Spartacus which, not surprisingly, inclined in the

last century towards the description of some revolutionary socialist efforts as 'Spartacist', given the propensity which humanity seems frequently to have for seeking a primordial precedent for dramatic action.

The model of the Collegium may be seen to have endured into the post-Roman period with the medieval Guild. In the cities of the Middle Ages, master craftsmen tended to come together to form Guilds which codified the talents of their professions and sought to maintain standards. They also took on apprentices who were gradually initiated into these skills, and some of them could in time become master craftsmen themselves, although this depended on the property and tools at their disposal. (Some of these Guilds acquired the character of a secret society and, when they were no longer strictly needed to serve the interests of a particular craft, they remained as a kind of privileged club whose members favoured each other in business transactions. One of the most notable lingering illustrations of this is to be found in the famous Freemasons.) However, staying with the medieval for the present, it should be observed that the Guilds also assumed a role in protecting their members' interests vis-à-vis the State and the laws that it enacted.

The Guilds, comprised of master craftsmen as they were, employed journeymen who could become apprentices and eventually, on occasion, as we have noted, master craftsmen. While journeymen did often have to travel around somewhat, 'journey' did not primarily imply that activity, but rather being paid on a daily basis, with the insecurity attached thereto. The title in fact derived from the word *journée* in Norman French, meaning, as it does to this day in modern French, simply 'day'. In some of the smaller and less influential Guilds, those employed were termed 'piecers' insofar as they were even less secure in employment than the journeymen to the extent that they were not even definitely paid on a daily basis, but rather for each separate piece of work done. While one has not had 'piecers' in the recent historical experience of the trade union movement, it is within living memory that some workers, while having a certain security of employment, were paid 'piece rates', which was a form of productivity reward.

Loose associations of journeymen or piecers were formed, from time to time, but they were fairly loose and lacked proper organisation and continuity. When these phenomena did occur, they were often subject to brutal repression.

Lest we neglect rural society, we should remember that the peasantry from time to time combined and offered resistance to the oppressive conditions which they had to experience. There are many instances in the medieval and early modern period of actual peasant revolts. In some cases, the resistance was not merely of a social nature, but also reflected the *colonialist* oppression to which people were subjected. Instances which one thinks of in Ireland include the Defenders and the Whiteboys.

But getting back to the origins of trade unions, it was with the arrival of industrial capitalism that the modern trade unions began to emerge. They were immediately preceded by the post-feudal agricultural enclosures which eliminated common land and transformed the 'subsistent peasant-lord of the manor' relationship into one of the tenant farmer paying rent to the land owner, arising from the proceeds of selling on a market while also retaining a living income. The market was further developed by cottage industry whereby usually the women would weave cotton and perhaps make garments which were supplied to the middleman for sale on the market. All this was capitalism in gestation.

However, full-blooded capitalism, as one might say, arrived with the sophisticated machine and the factories, which were set up in the 18th century, particularly England, and thrust ahead in the 19th century. Technology and mass production required the building of factories and the employment of work forces dedicated to them. This coincided with depopulation of the rural community as a result of the enclosures and an influx to urban centres. The situation which developed was one of the owners of land, factories and machines making profits and employing labour on the basis of weekly wages. This came to be summed up as an interaction between capitalists and workers. In Marxian terms, it was characterised as the bourgeoisie versus the proletariat.

Not surprisingly, the workers or employees began to combine in associations in order to protect and advance their interests. Being herded together in one place, for both living and working purposes, helped in this regard. In this process, one of the inspirations came from memories and traditions of how the underprivileged had combined in previous situations, deriving from the experience of the guilds and peasant revolts which, as we have noted, had precedents going back to ancient society.

There were also fraternal associations which sought to assist people in need of support with the likes of simply bearing the costs of burying the dead, so on. These were the voluntary predecessors of the welfare society.

However, the other associations of workers in the plant, or 'combinations' as they were known early on, were primarily to do with making representations and engaging in negotiations concerning wages and conditions of employment. Thus, there began to come into being the trade union as we know it today.

Trade unions went through various phases of development. These might be generally termed as craft, skilled and general. In Ireland, the history of modern trade unions goes back to the 18th century. Then, local societies were established in the cities to represent craftsmen such as bricklayers, butchers and printers. From about 1889 onwards, a new type of union started to emerge, aimed at organising the mass of skilled workers throughout the country, such as dockers and railwaymen.

In 1894, the Irish Trade Union Congress was founded whereby the various trade unions came together to identify interests common to all of them. A particularly significant development took place in 1909 with the establishment of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, the leading light of which was the famous James Larkin. A division in the Irish trade union movement occurred in 1945 whereby another organisation was formed called the Congress of Irish Unions. This reflected the different Irish and British-based unions. It also took place in the context of a split in the Labour Party, whereby a National Labour Party operated from 1944 to 1950, resting on, among other things, an antagonism towards communism anticipating McCarthyism in the US. However, the two congresses came together again in 1959 to form the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (or '*ICTU*' for short).

Naturally, socialists of various sorts were active in trade unions throughout the Western world in the 19th and 20th centuries. In the case of some, trade unions came to be seen not merely as instruments concerning wages and working conditions, but also as agents of transformation generally in society and, indeed, revolution.

As a consequence, a tendency was formed which was called syndicalism or, in some cases, more fully, anarcho-syndicalism. We are back to French here, insofar as the basic term derived from the word in that language for trade union, namely *syndicat*, and reflected the influence of French ideologues such as Proudhon. There were

various tendencies within syndicalism, but the general approach tended to be that the trade unions should not only achieve immediate protections and improvements in the workplace, but also instigate the overthrow of the capitalist order by means of industrial action and, in particular, the general strike. Syndicalists were opposed to socialist political parties, especially of the vanguard type, and were also wary of conventional trade unions, which they saw as being run by reformist bureaucrats who were selling out the revolution. Trotskyists came to be of the latter view as well. As for the State, they tended to be against this also and believed that the workers in some spontaneous indeterminate way would be able to govern themselves without the usual kind of administrative structures that have been evident in society ever since civilisation emerged.

Subsequent to the Russian Revolution of 1917, another tendency came about which was somewhat redolent of anarcho-syndicalism. This was called council communism. It took its inspiration from the workers and soldiers' soviets (the Russian for 'council' being sovet) which had sprung up in Russia in 1905 and '17 and were the launchpad for the revolution in that country. As the USSR developed, council communists saw the soviets as being undermined and a structure of bureaucratic socialism directed from above taking their place. This, the council communists were determined, would not occur in the kind of revolution that they were trying to build in their own countries, and this tendency was manifest particularly in Germany and the Netherlands. Once more, the dangerous demons were the trade union bureaucrats and the vanguard socialists. Workers' councils were to be the instrument and fulfilment of social liberation. The closeness to syndicalism is obvious.

In summary, syndicalism and council communism both went beyond the general understanding of worker association to either see trade unions as political forces or as being superseded altogether by more efficacious forms of worker organisation and self-administration.

We should also recall briefly guild socialism which had an influence on socialist political activists in the 20th century, although it is not generally recognized as to the extent it did so. The very term of 'guild socialism' revealed the continuing inspiration of aspects of the medieval guilds. But adherents to this creed were not concerned with the interests of employers, only with the employees. There is an obvious similarity to

craft unions here, the difference being in the perspective of guild socialism that national associations of craftworkers would take democratic control of industry and that *industrial* guilds would be formed on this basis. These were then to create a federation of such guilds in order to constitute a State. In some writings, it was envisaged that consumers' organisations, local government bodies, and other social structures would be involved in the new State formation as well.

Finally, before returning to the perspective of trade unionism in Ireland today, it is worth considering developments in Germany, particularly since the Second World War. There, a system of what has been called codetermination (otherwise termed 'worker participation') has been Instituted. At the most basic level, and to some extent depending on the size of the firm, work councils are created within enterprises to allow for structured consultation of the workforce. The larger the firm, the more it is provided that there should be actual worker members of the Board. While this can be done on the basis simply of employee votes, such involvement usually takes place through established trade unions. This is an approach which has been increasingly looked at in Europe, but it is not something which has become the norm, including in Ireland. However, I think that it is something that we in Sinn Féin should scrutinise more.

So what of the situation today in Ireland as regards trade unions? Overall, there is the Irish Congress of Trade Unions which has 44 affiliates with a total membership of just short of 725,000, around 528,000 of which are in the Republic and 197,000 in Northern Ireland. There are also 27 Trades Councils, representing groups of unions at local or regional level.

As for union density, 55% of public sector employees were union members in 2014, compared with 17% of the private sector. Overall, union density was about 25% in 2014 compared to 46% about twenty years previously, but such a decline is not unique in industrial society to Ireland.

Internationally, the ICTU is affiliated to the International Trade Union Confederation and individual unions are affiliated to various International Trade Secretariats such as the ITF or International Transport-workers Federation. ICTU is also affiliated to the European Trade Union Confederation and, likewise, individual unions have European linkages as well (e.g. European Trade Union Committee for Education). These are particularly relevant vis-à-vis the European Union.

The traditional mode of operation of a trade union in Ireland and Britain, influenced by being in the same jurisdiction during the 19th and early 20th centuries and thus subject to the same influences at work therein, was largely confined to collective bargaining vis-à-vis an employer or, sometimes, employers at the level of industry. However, between 1987 and 2009, a series of national partnership agreements came into operation. The crash of 2008 put an end to these and bargaining returned to company level in the private sector, while general agreements continued to be reached in the public sector between the unions concerned and the government. It should be noted that the partnership agreements did cover, to a degree, not only remuneration and conditions of employment, but also broader social and economic issues.

It may be seen, however, that Irish trade unions are not normally perceived as being the vehicle for socio-political transformation in the country. While occasionally political issues are raised within them, the general attitude is that the principal vehicle for advancing these is a political party. In Britain, this has usually meant the Labour Party. But, in Ireland, while there is also a Labour Party, only seven unions are affiliated to it.

As a member of Sinn Féin, I would assert that the only real socialist and anti-imperialist party on this island now of significance is Sinn Féin. As our constitution states, we are committed to the establishment of national democratic socialism in Ireland. We are distinguished from the Labour Party by being an all-Ireland organisation and through being adherent to policies of genuine and radical social change. The Labour Party is not only not a national party, it is an anti-national party in its distorted view of democratic nationalism, deriving to some extent, even if unbeknownst to many of its members, from the deleterious influence of Austro-Marxists such as Otto Bauer and the German Spartacists such as Rosa Luxemburg in the early 20th century. It has betrayed the inheritance of James Connolly and his commitments both to Irish national freedom and the construction of a truly socialist republic.

To conclude, we in Sinn Féin have a task to pursue in developing links with trade unions, links that are much too underdeveloped at the moment. We must encourage all our members to be members of and active in their trade unions. And I am glad to see that, at the end of this month (March 2020), the Cúige BÁC of Sinn Féin will elect a Trade Union Officer. This is an example which should be followed by other Cúigí. We should also have a national Trade Union Officer and a National Trade Union

Committee which reflects our involvement in the trade union movement (hopefully growing) and helps to co-ordinate it. Lastly, I believe that we should amend the constitution of Sinn Féin in order to allow for unions to affiliate to the party.

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