

Irish craft workers in a time of revolution

By Padraig Yeates

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On Sunday, May 9th, 1920, a public meeting was held in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, for craft workers interested in setting up an Irish based trade union. Fitters, turners, boiler makers, electricians, moulders ‘and kindred workers’ packed the hall to hear the debate. It was a time of great change and political turmoil in Ireland. Political prisoners in Wormwood Scrubs, were starting their 19th day on hunger strike demanding political status. Police barracks in Armagh and Cork were attacked that day and in Dublin Detective Sergeant Richard Revelle was shot in Phibsboro, on his way to work.¹

Revelle would have been well known to many of the trade union activists meeting in the Abbey Theatre as a member of G Division, the special branch of the DMP. The detective had been a note taker at trade union rallies and Sinn Fein meetings for years. In 1913 he had been the main prosecution witness against Jim Larkin when the labour leader received seven months for making seditious speeches during the lockout. After surviving four bullet wounds that Sunday morning Revelle retreated to the safety of Dublin Castle, where he remained until the Truce in 1921.

Members of the Dublin Metropolitan Police were not the only people having difficulty adjusting to the changes wrought by the Troubles. Most craft unions were British based and these had little sympathy with or understanding of the problems faced by Irish members. They were reluctant to support what they regarded as ‘political’ strikes, such as the boycott of Motor Permits by transport and engineering workers and the blacking of British troops and munitions by dock and rail workers. Motor Permits were intended to ensure only loyal subjects had access to motorised transport but Irish workers refused to service, repair or drive vehicles whose owners applied for them. These issues came to a head after an assassination attempt on Lord French in December 1919. In January the executive of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the largest British craft union, withdrew support for the boycott of Motor Permits and other unions followed suit.²

There was also resentment among Irish craft workers at the ease with which union cards were being issued in England. In large part this was because of the ‘dilution’ of many crafts between 1914 and 1918, when women, semi-skilled and unskilled workers were employed in engineering to meet the demands of a war economy.³ It proved impossible to turn the clock back when the war ended. There were complaints that these temporary men and even ex-soldiers were arriving in Ireland with union cards to take engineering jobs. Mutual incomprehension and very different political

¹ *Freeman's Journal and Irish Independent*, May 10th, 1920.

² Ministry of Labour Report on Disputes June 1920. *Dail Eireann* DE2/5.

³ Wolfe, H. *Labour Supply and Regulation*. Part II. Oxford 1923

and economic conditions therefore fuelled the growing breach between British craft unions and their Irish members.⁴

The mood was well reflected at a meeting in the Dublin Trades Hall on Sunday, November 30th, 1919, over the Motor Permit boycott, when Eamon McAlpine of the Automobile Drivers said no British government would turn his union into ‘a semi-spy organisation’ by coercing members to co-operate with the authorities.⁵

Countess Markievicz had been calling for a consolidated Irish craft union, along the lines of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU), since her release from prison in 1917. Her appointment as Minister for Labour in the First Dail was a catalyst in the debate among craft workers themselves, many of whom appear to have been politically active. A good example was Thomas Leahy of the Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders Union. He had returned from England to avoid conscription and fought in 1916 as a member of the Irish Citizen Army. Another activist was Thomas Maguire of the Irish Stationary Engine Drivers Society who was a long standing member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and had also fought in 1916, as a member of the first Battalion of the Irish Volunteers. Later Leahy and Maguire recalled the idea of an independent Irish craft union for the engineering and technical trades being mooted in 1918 and 1919⁶. Leahy would become a trustee of the new union and Maguire would serve on its executive, although neither is listed among the members of the initial organising committee.

One man who played a very public role in the formation of the new union from the beginning was John (Jack) James Redmond. He was born in Dublin but served his time with Camel-Laird on Merseyside. He was subsequently employed in a Dublin United Tramway Company workshop and lived in Lord Edward Street. Redmond developed a critical attitude towards his own union, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, even before the First World War imposed strains on cross-channel solidarity. Although he had risen to District Secretary of the union by 1914 he criticised the ASE’s lack of support for the Irish Trade Union Congress at that year’s post-Lockout annual conference in Dublin. He told fellow delegates that Irish engineers were being represented at the ITUC at their own expense.⁷

Redmond headed a list of leading craft trade unionists who sponsored the Abbey Street meeting. The others were:

- Patrick McIntyre, iron moulder, Arbour Hill.
- Joseph Toomey, fitter, Ballybough,
- Michael Slator, brass moulder, Ballybough Road,
- Rory Bent, engineer, Saville Place.
- Thomas Leahy, boilermaker, Lower Buckingham Street.
- John Rooney, Coach builder
- Christy Farrelly, iron moulder,

⁴ Report *Dail Eireann* 2/116. National Archives.

⁵ *Irish Times*, December 1st, 1919.

⁶ Thomas Leahy *Witness Statement* 660, Bureau of Military History. Thomas Maguire, submission for Military Service Pension, May 13th, 1938 and *Comment*, a SIPTU Dublin Bus Branch publication.

⁷ Family memoir by Sean Redmond, grandson of Jack Redmond sent to TEEU, December 17th, 2007.

- Michael Doyle, shipwright.
- Seamus O'Donohue, electrician.

McIntyre was a Sinn Fein Councillor, while Toomey and Slator had been unsuccessful candidates for the party in the Dublin municipal elections. Toomey was another 1916 veteran and almost certainly in the IRB. Along with Maguire he was part of a group within the Volunteers who used their specialist skills to manufacture hand grenades and ammunition during the War of Independence.⁸

The aim of the organising committee was no less militant. It was 'to make a start to break this connection with the British trade unions as it was considered most important to the industrial side of the march of independence'.⁹ This was arguably the most important single initiative undertaken by the Government of the Irish Republic in the industrial relations arena.¹⁰

The political climate was certainly favourable. Dail Eireann was highly receptive to any developments that strengthened its ties with labour in ways that did not unduly alarm business or church leaders. Not just the Countess, but many leading figures in the new Government subscribed to a vague vision of Ireland as a co-operative commonwealth spurning the worst excesses of capitalism. National unity was the priority in the struggle for independence and the policy was to 'discourage the exploitation of Irish Industries by Foreign Capitalists by every means in their power', as the Industry Minister Ernest Blythe told Dail Eireann in June 1919.¹¹

The establishment of the Dail's Labour Arbitration Tribunal in September 1920 was a product of this policy and a precursor of the current Labour Relations Commission and Labour Court. The Tribunal operated in situations where both sides agreed to be bound by the outcome and the collapse of the British civil administration made it appealing to unions and employers alike. The IRB also appears to have played a part by ensuring members such as Thomas Maguire were appointed to the arbitration tribunal panels.¹²

⁸ Thomas Maguire, Op Cit.

⁹ Memorandum of Discussion at Conference of Representatives of Joint Committee Re Scheme for the Formation of One Irish Union Comprising all branches of Engineering Trades in Ireland. *Dail Eireann* DE2/116. Leahy, T. *Witness Statement* 660. Bureau of Military History. *Irish Times*, January 4th and 19th, 1920.

¹⁰ The Technical Engineering and Electrical Union can trace its origins to the May 9th, 1920, meeting and still holds the minute books from the period.

¹¹ Dail Eireann. *Minutes of Proceedings*. Page 120.

¹² Thomas Maguire said in his claim for a Military Service Pension that he was 'appointed by the IRB to the Labour Board... The purpose of the Board was to seek to influence the trade unions so that they would assist the IRA engaged in active opposition to the Army of Occupation'. However he gives the date of his appointment variously as 1918 and 1919 instead of 1920. Maguire, T. Op Cit. See also Dail Eireann. *Ministry of Labour files* DE 2/5. National Archives. Marreco, A. Op Cit. Pages 251-2. Mitchell, A. *Labour in Irish Politics, 1890-1930*. Page 116. Van Voris, J. *Constance de Markievicz: In the Cause of Ireland*. Page 285. Mitchell, A. *Revolutionary Government in Ireland: Dail Eireann 1919-1922*. Pages 161-2. Conciliation Boards were also established to mediate between local authorities and unions. However these proved less successful as Sinn Fein dominated councils and trade union militants had exaggerated expectations of each others capacity to see the other side of the argument. Thomas Maguire in his claim for a Military Service Pension said the

Meanwhile the task of liaising with the dissident craft workers fell to Joe McDonagh, a strong defender of radical action on both the political and military fronts, and one of the neglected work horses of the Irish revolution.¹³ He met representatives of the organising committee early in 1920 and they subsequently put their views in writing to him in a letter dated March 9th, 1920. They asked him to bring their concerns ‘before An Dail at the earliest opportunity’.

The letter stated that:

‘For some years it has been the opinion of a great number of members belonging to Amalgamated Societies, particularly in the Engineering Trades that it was advisable to have one large Irish Union for these trades. There have been great difficulties in the way of forming such a Union, financially and otherwise, and we believe that this is a favourable opportunity for starting such a project. This is due to the fact that for some time past the attitude of the English Executives has been one in keeping with the attitude of the English Government towards this country.

‘For instance the attitude taken up by the Executive of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers in Easter Week was in keeping with the policy of the Government of the day. Again their attitude on the Conscription Act, and quite recently they have adopted a policy towards their members with reference to the Motor Permit Order pointing out that this was a political question, and refused to grant their members any strike pay or benefits of any kind.

‘This continued policy has created in the minds of a great number of our members that the time had arrived when we should have a Union of our own, governed and controlled in Ireland by Irishmen. The same dissatisfaction exists among the Iron Founders.’

The letter concluded:

‘There are ten sectional unions in the Engineering Industry in Ireland, who are all Amalgamated Societies, and our proposal is to bring about a fusion of members of those ten different trades into one big Irish Engineering Union.’

The thorny issue of funding was then raised. The letter pointed out that ‘as members grow older in these Amalgamated Societies so their benefits become greater, and unless we are prepared to offer some of these men immediate benefit in the new Union... we would not be able to break up the influence of the English Societies in this country’.¹⁴

¹³ McDonagh was a tax consultant, as well as Sinn Fein Alderman for Rathmines and a TD for North Tipperary. He was in charge of the Belfast boycott and helped set up the Labour Arbitration Tribunals. He was one of the most outspoken defenders of the IRA’s guerrilla war, including the assassinations on Bloody Sunday. He opposed the Treaty and took the Republican side in the Civil War.

¹⁴ Letter to Alderman J McDonagh TD on behalf of Joint Committee. *Dail Eireann* 2/116. National Archives.

A loan of £2,000 was requested to create a reserve fund 'able to offer immediate and equal benefits'. McDonagh was told that over the previous four or five years no more than five per cent of craft union members had claimed benefit.¹⁵ He was assured that the majority of engineering craft workers would join the new union, 'not only in Dublin, but throughout the whole of Ireland, with the exception of Belfast'. Although break away unions had had a poor track record in the past, the committee believed the current political crisis had transformed the situation and the new organisation 'will spell the death knell for English Unions in this country'.¹⁶

The Secretary of the Ministry of Labour, Diarmaid O hEigeartaigh, forwarded the request for funding to the Minister for Finance, Michael Collins, on April 13th, 1920. Two thousand pounds was an enormous sum for the Ministry of Labour, more than double its own running costs for the year. Again the relatively positive response of Collins to the question of funding is further evidence of IRB involvement in the engineering trades' initiative. O hEigeartaigh was an IRB member and Thomas Maguire, who was now working in the Dublin Corporation's power station, later claimed that the Brotherhood had ordered him to become more involved in his union's affairs in order to expedite its amalgamation with the new union because this gave the IRA headquarters staff 'possible control over the power and lighting stations in Dublin and suburbs and almost the whole of its industries'.¹⁷

Even if the new union was an IRB inspired project further information was required by Collins before funding could be sanctioned. The Countess¹⁸ met with the craft workers organising committee on May 5th, 1920, along with Sean Etchingham and Art O'Connor, who had both worked with her on establishing the new Republic's rudimentary mediation and arbitration structures.¹⁹ Besides guaranteeing the loan, the craft workers wanted an advance £100 to finance the Abbey meeting.²⁰ They spoke with some authority. As we have seen Redmond was District Secretary of the ASE and Toomey was District Delegate. McIntyre was Secretary of the Southern District of the Moulders 'from Dundalk to Cork' and Slator was President of the Dublin Branch of the Founders and Brass Finishers. They accepted that the 22,000 ASE members in the North would remain loyal to the British connection, but were confident at least 1,000 of the 8,000 ASE members in the south and west of Ireland would join the new union immediately and others would follow, not least because the centralisation of funds in Britain caused delays in unemployment and sick benefit payments.²¹

Branches in Dublin, Cork city, Passage West, Queenstown (Cobh), Waterford, Wexford and Dundalk were expected to defect from the ASE. A number of small

¹⁵ This figure may have been artificially low as there was full employment during the First World War and the post-war boom.

¹⁶ Letter to Alderman J McDonagh TD on behalf of Joint Committee. *Dail Eireann* 2/116. National Archives.

¹⁷ Maguire, T. Op Cit.

¹⁸ The only person we can definitely rule out from IRB membership in the whole business was Countess Markievicz, as the organisation did not admit women.

¹⁹ These included mediation structures to deal with land disputes as well as industry.

²⁰ Ministry of Labour Report on Disputes. June 1920. *Dail Eireann* DE2/5.

²¹ Ibid and Memorandum of Discussion at Conference of Representatives of Joint Committee Re Scheme for the Formation of One Irish Union Comprising all branches of Engineering Trades in Ireland. *Dail Eireann* DE2/116.

engineering craft unions, including the oldest, the Dublin United Brassfounders, Finishers and Gasfitters Society, were expected to affiliate and the committee had the support of other Irish unions, including the ITGWU. A key contact here was Thomas Foran, president of the ITGWU and incoming President of the Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party (ITUC&LP) in 1921.²²

The Committee stressed to the Countess its commitment to Dail Eireann's industrial relations structures. Members would use 'every means in their power to induce their members and employers to accept ... arbitration'. The only reservations were about lodging funds with an Irish bank. Bank failures had dampened their faith in native finance capital.²³

On a more positive note the committee estimated that even 1,000 defections from the ASE would generate revenue of £3,900 a year and running costs would only be £500. The request for the £2,000 loan was based not just on the need to reassure older members afraid of losing benefits in the switch from their old unions, but the possibility of expensive recognition disputes if British unions decided to black the new organisation in the workplace.²⁴ On May 7th the Ministry of Labour approved the £100 advance for the public meeting.

The work of the dissidents did not go unnoticed in Britain and, when over 700 men gathered at the Abbey Theatre on May 9th, 1920, officials attended from the parent organisations to warn members against joining what they characterised as a 'political' trade union. But there was also support from several left wingers, including Willie Gallacher, chairman of the Clydeside shop stewards committee during the war. He travelled to Dublin to speak at the Abbey in favour of the new union.²⁵

But the main speaker was Joseph Toomey, who said the interests of Irish workers clashed increasingly with those 'across the channel'. The Irish and English were 'two separate and distinct peoples and could not always view matters from the same standpoint. Some people might say that the interests of all workers were common. That might be so but workers in different countries often saw things in a different light. They were progressing in the labour movement in Ireland far quicker than the men in England were, and the question was whether they were going to be held back by the people in England because the latter were not progressive enough'. Jack Redmond told the meeting that funds sent to England far exceeded the amount spent by amalgamated unions in Ireland, while Patrick McIntyre said they were not out for trouble but warned British unions to recognise the new union or 'they would start fighting them here on Irish soil'. The meeting agreed to the organising committee continuing as a provisional committee, to draw up rules for the new union and to co-opt members from the new districts. The name Irish Engineering, Shipbuilding and Foundry Trades Union (IES&FTU) was adopted. It was to be 'an exclusively Irish

²² *Irish Times*, December 1st, 1919. See *Minutes of the Provisional Committee of the IES&FTU* for numerous references to consultations with Foran on various disputes.

²³ Memorandum of Discussion at Conference of Representatives of Joint Committee Re Scheme for the Formation of One Irish Union Comprising all branches of Engineering Trades in Ireland. *Dail Eireann* DE2/116.

²⁴ Memorandum of Meeting. Report to Dail *Dail Eireann* 2/116. National Archives.

²⁵ Gallacher was an engineer and the son of Irish immigrants. Besides chairing the Clyde Workers Committee during the First World War, he led the campaign against conscription in Scotland. He supported the Republican side in the Civil War and later became Britain's first Communist MP.

trades union' and would include fitters, turners, pattern-makers, boilermakers, blacksmiths, brass finishers, iron and brass moulders, electricians and machinists'.²⁶

The inaugural meeting of the Provisional Committee of the IES&FTU took place on the day after the Abbey Theatre rally. A deputation of ETU members in Ireland attended, seeking support for a strike by cinema operators. The IES&FTU was free enough with advice but declined to become directly involved. Some cinema operatives were already members of the ITGWU and its support was vital if the IES&FTU was to secure recognition from the ITUC&LP.²⁷

The committee ordered 1,000 contribution to be printed cards and held 'a financial meeting' the following Saturday in the National Foresters Hall at 41 Parnell Square, a popular meeting place for the IRB and Irish Volunteers, to start signing up members.²⁸

In the meantime activists in the provinces were asked to organise meetings of engineering workers and to inform apprentices they would be admitted 'on the same terms as journeymen'. The English craft unions were put on notice of the new union's intentions and the committee sought support from ITUC&LP for the battle ahead.²⁹

Other important decisions taken over the coming weeks included setting the weekly subscription at 1s 6d, agreeing to admit semi-skilled members of British based engineering unions, appointing McIntyre as 'a whole time General Secretary' on a salary of £6 a week, and opening a 'vacant' list for unemployed members. The Colmcille Hall in Blackhall Street was made available to the new union as a temporary office, once more emphasising strong links with the Republican movement. Other tenants included the 1st Battalion of the Dublin Brigade of the IRA, to which some members of the IES&FTU executive belonged, and the local unit of Cumann na mBan.³⁰

The £2,000 loan guarantee from Dail Eireann proved more difficult. The Ministry of Labour wanted additional information on the union's financial viability. The Countess undertook to obtain the information herself³¹ and she appears to have been satisfied

²⁶ The union was given various names in its first couple of years, including the Irish Engineering and Industrial Union, and the Irish Engineering and Shipbuilding Union. The title Irish Engineering Shipbuilding and Foundry Trade Union was the one adopted at the inaugural meeting and subsequently reported in the *Irish Independent*, *Freeman's Journal* and *Irish Times* after the conference. See *Minutes of Inaugural Meeting*, May 9th, 1920. TEEU, *Irish Times* and *Irish Independent*, May 10th, 1920. It is also the title inscribed on the first page of the IES&FTU's first *Minute Book*, containing the proceedings of the Provisional and Executive Committees.

²⁷ Similar considerations may have affected the decision not to admit electricians' helpers to the union in July 1920, by which time Irish ETU members had indicated they wished to join the IES&FTU en masse.

²⁸ *Minutes of the Provisional Committee of the IES&FTU*, May 10th, 1920. TEEU. Re. the uses of the Foresters Hall, see Connell, JEA. 'Where's Where in Dublin: A Directory of Historic Locations'. Page 101

²⁹ *Minutes of the Provisional Committee of the IES&FTU*, May 11th, 1920. TEEU

³⁰ Connell, JEA. Op Cit. Page 15. *Minutes of the Provisional Committee of the IES&FTU*, May 11th, 17th and June 1st, 1920. TEEU.

³¹ *Dail Eireann* Note on Irish Union for Engineering Trades. DE2/116.

with assurances from Redmond, when they met shortly afterwards.³² She reported that, ‘The men were sincere republicans and capable of the work that they were undertaking’. Despite earlier misgivings the committee even agreed to put their funds into the Irish National Land Bank.³³

Leahy later recalled ‘bitter opposition’ from British unions, but support from Sinn Fein branches and Irish Volunteer units helped secure recognition in most workplaces. The spectre of a strike over recognition did not materialise, although there were cases of isolated members of the new union being blacked. The most determined attempt to block the union was at the Inchicore works of the Dublin United Tramway Company. This collapsed when the IES&FTU threatened to pull out members at the Ringsend and Ballsbridge depots of the company in support of the Inchicore men.³⁴

The ASE organised a meeting in Dublin to dissuade members from defecting to the new union. It was held on June 6th, 1920, when the legendary ASE General Secretary Tom Mann said, ‘Men should be prepared to forget the county or country in which they were born and look to the international question of organised labour’. But it was the wrong message for the times in Ireland and contributions from other British ASE leaders denouncing nationalism and reminding their audience that members in Belfast were remaining loyal were counter-productive.³⁵

The ASE moved quickly to replace Toomey as District Delegate with James Freeland. Freeland predicted in the Irish section of the 1920 *Annual Report* that the new union was ‘foredoomed to failure’, while the ASE’s prospects in Ireland were ‘reassuring, and it is to be hoped... that matters will continue as heretofore’. However a breakdown by branches showed there were no members left in Arklow and there were incomplete returns for the ASE in Dublin, where the state of the union was classified as ‘Bad’. The situation in Queenstown (Cobh) and Cork was also categorised as ‘Bad’. Drogheda was the only centre outside Ulster with a ‘Good’ accreditation, although the state of the Limerick and Passage West branches was described as ‘Moderate’ and Wexford as ‘Fair’. Altogether the ASE had 1,762 members in the South.³⁶

Freeland’s optimism was ill-founded in large part because the IES&FTU appears to have been particularly successful in recruiting younger craft workers and apprentices, who were in tune with the political radicalism sweeping the country. As we have seen, some of them were active in the Irish Volunteers, IRB and ICA. The one sector where the union met strong resistance was the ship repair yards of Dublin, Cork and Passage West, where many men were originally from Belfast and the Clyde. Nevertheless the public tide was running very much against these relatively isolated groups. Terence McSwiney, the local IRA commander and Sinn Fein Lord Mayor of Cork, encapsulated the mood when he presided at the organising meeting of the IES&FTU

³² Correspondence from Jack Redmond to Countess Markievicz, May 18th, 1920. *Dail Eireann*. De2/116.

³³ Ministry of Labour Report on Disputes. June 1920. *Dail Eireann* DE2/5. *Minutes of the Provisional Committee of the IES&FTU*, May 17th, and June 18th, 1920. TEEU.

³⁴ *Minutes of the Provisional Committee of the IES&FTU*, November 10th, 1920. TEEU.

³⁵ *Irish Independent*, June 7th, 1920.

³⁶ *Annual Report for 1920*, ASE. This was the last Annual report of the union, which amalgamated with other craft unions to form the Amalgamated Engineering Union.

in the city. It was ‘the duty of all Irish trade union men to be able to manage their own affairs and way of life... by joining and strengthening the union they were also helping on the work of Irish independence.’ By June 1, 151 men had joined and there were branches in Dublin, Cork, Dundalk, Drogheda, Cobh, Passage West, Limerick, Wicklow, Galway, Sligo and Wexford. By 1921 the IES&FTU had 4,500 members.³⁷

Although the IES&FTU had fought shy of giving direct support to the cinema operators strike in May, the Provisional Committee continued to meet Irish leaders of the ETU on a regular basis. On June 20th these discussions bore fruit when a mass meeting of ETU members in Dublin decided to join in a body. This made the IES&FTU the main electricians union, with 99 per cent of electricians in the Dublin Corporation power station at Ringsend signing up. The union was also accepting plumbers, blacksmiths and iron machinists, as well as the Brassfinishers, who came over in a body in June. The Vehicle Builders Union members joined in August and the members of Irish Stationary Engine Drivers’ Society joined the IES&FTU in November.³⁸

Meanwhile the union secured a number of pay increases through Dail Eireann’s industrial relations structures and by direct negotiation. The IES&FTU liaised with the ITGWU on recruitment and industrial relations strategy, as well as with left wing craft leaders on Clydeside, where headline rates for shipbuilding were struck.³⁹

On July 24th, 1920, the union held a rules conference in the Council Chamber at City Hall, courtesy of the Lord Mayor, Alderman Tom Kelly. This was followed by the production of the union’s first Rule Book, closely modeled on that of the ASE. Allowing the union to use the Dublin Corporation Council Chamber was an important acknowledgement of its legitimacy by the independence movement.⁴⁰

The leading activists on the union’s Provisional Committee now had their positions regularised. Redmond became President, McIntyre General Secretary, Toomey Vice President and Slator Treasurer. Thomas Leahy was confirmed in his position as a trustee, along with Rory Bent and John Rooney. They were reconstituted, with some additional members, as the Executive Committee.

³⁷ Leahy, T. WS660 and Ministry of Labour Report on Disputes. June 1920. Dail Eireann DE2/5. Clarkson, J D. *Labour and Nationalism in Ireland*. Page 323.

³⁸ *Minutes of the Provisional Committee of the IES&FTU*, May 29th, June 18th, June 21st, July 12th, August 17th and September 11th, 1920. *Minutes of the Executive Committee of the IES&FTU*, November 6th and November 17th, 1920.

³⁹ This was particularly true in shipbuilding and repair. The Dublin Dockyard Company had a long standing agreement with craft unions that Clydeside rates would automatically apply in the yard. These provided a benchmark for the Engineering industry in most of what would become the Irish Free State. The Dublin Dockyard was also one of the companies where British based unions managed to maintain a strong hold, although the IES&FTU also secured recognition. When Clydeside rates began to fall at the end of 1920, because of the post-war recession, it led to a series of disputes in Dublin, where workers resisted the pay cuts and the ultimate closure of the yard. See Smellie, J. *Shipbuilding and Repairing in Dublin 1901-1923*. Glasgow.

⁴⁰ *Minutes of the Provisional Committee of the IES&FTU*, July 26th, 1920. The British Government suspended all elections in 1915 for the duration of the War. A general election was called in December 1918 but municipal elections were not held until 1920.

The acquisition of Gardiner Row and the Collins connection

The question of acquiring premises had become urgent. Desultory negotiations with the Boilermakers Union about purchasing their hall in Lower Gardiner Street proved unsuccessful.⁴¹ The delay was affecting plans to organise up to five branches in Dublin.⁴² At the Executive meeting on September 16th, the President, Jack Redmond, undertook to assist Toomey in finding a suitable head office and two days later, on September 18th, they came back with a proposal to acquire the Plaza Hotel at 6 Gardiner Row.

The executive promptly agreed and a mass meeting of members in Dublin agreed to pay a levy to help meet the costs. By October 1st, negotiations had progressed to the point where the Executive sought a loan of £2,500 from the National Land Bank to close the sale. Part of the cost of the Plaza Hotel was met by transferring the deeds of 10 Upper Abbey Street to the Union's solicitor, James O'Connor.⁴³

10 Upper Abbey Street was leased but not owned by the Stationary Engine Drivers Society (SEDS), whose members were in the process of joining the IES&FTU en masse, thanks in part to the efforts of IRB members such as Thomas Maguire in its ranks. It was also the building where Michael Collins's private army, The Squad, was based. The Squad operated under the cover of 'George Moreland, cabinet makers' at the Abbey Street premises. Moreland did not exist but some Squad members were craft workers and some IES&FTU members used the premises as well as the SEDS. This helped maintain the pretence that it was a legitimate business. As Collins was Minister for Finance as well as the founder and controller of The Squad, it suggests that funds to acquire the Plaza Hotel, or at least provide security for the purchase, came from him. Details of the transaction do not appear to have been discussed at any point at the IES&FTU Executive or, if they were, were not committed to writing. Nor did the minutes ever mention that among the tenants the union inherited at 6 Gardiner Row were the headquarters staff of the Dublin Brigade.⁴⁴

The IES&FTU closed the deal on November 7th, 1920, and took possession of the Plaza Hotel next day. The Executive Committee held its first meeting in the newly designated 'Irish Engineering Hall' on November 13th. It directed the General Secretary, Patrick McIntyre, 'to take tables from 10 Upper Abbey Street and bring them to Gardiner Row'. A roll top desk and other furnishings were purchased for £35. A caretaker, Tom Hannigan, was appointed to look after the new head office.⁴⁵

The acquisition put significant financial pressure on the IES&FTU. A mass meeting of Dublin members on November 7th passed a motion, 'That in view of the amount of

⁴¹ *Minutes of the Provisional Committee of the IES&FTU*, May 29th, 1920. TEEU.

⁴² *Minutes of the Provisional Committee of the IES&FTU*, June 21st, August 31st and September 11th, 1920. TEEU.

⁴³ James O'Connor also worked for Sinn Fein, collecting evidence and witnesses to testify before the American Commission on Irish Independence. Mitchell, A. *Revolutionary Government in Ireland: Dail Eireann 1919-22*. Page 199.

⁴⁴ *Minutes of the Executive Committee of the IES&FTU*, October 1st and 5th, November 1st and November 17th, 1920. TEEU. Dwyer, T R. *The Squad*, Pages

⁴⁵ *Minutes of the Executive Committee of the IES&FTU*, November 7th and 10th, 1920. TEEU.

levies being paid by our members at present we find it would hardly be wise for EC to decide on any amount to be paid to Belfast Victimised [sic] Fund, but we strongly recommend all members to subscribe to same'. The Fund had been set up to help Catholic workers unemployed due to the Orange pogroms of 1920. However the following night the EC decided to continue paying levies, at least in respect of craft workers driven out of their jobs in the Belfast shipyards. Within a week it reinstated the Belfast Victims levy in full. Members also contributed to the fund to help transport workers laid off for refusing to carry troops and munitions.⁴⁶

The leadership of the IES&FTU was obviously more committed to supporting the Belfast levies and following the policy of Dail Eireann than the general membership. Of course the Executive would have been mindful that, if Collins was funding the Hall, or even acting as guarantor, it was important not to alienate him or his colleagues. The real story of how the Hall was funded will probably never be uncovered. As with so many secrets of the Irish revolution, especially the financial ones, the full details were probably known only to Collins and died with him when he was killed at Beal na mBlath less than two years later.

The War of Independence and Truce

As the War of Independence heightened and a curfew was introduced by the military authorities in Dublin, meetings of the Executive were brought forward to 3 pm and financial meetings to 5pm to ensure members could get home before the military deadline. Despite the Troubles the union grew rapidly and by the end of 1920 six branches were meeting in Gardiner Row, three branches in 10 Upper Abbey Street and one in Inchicore.⁴⁷

The industrial scene was dominated by the munitions strike and a major new strike by boilermakers. The ASE and the IES&FTU were both involved in these disputes, although the ITGWU bore the brunt of munitions dispute and blacking of troop movements. The munitions strike lasted from June 1920 to the end of the year and the boilermakers' dispute lasted from the end of August until the end of January 1921. Both caused severe disruption to the railways and economy at large. The boilermakers had little to show for their efforts. They had sought an increase of 23s 6d a week and were forced to accept a British Industrial Tribunal award of 1s 9d after being out for over five months.⁴⁸ It was a significant sign that the employers' stance was hardening, as the post-war boom ended and unemployment rose.

The advent of the Truce on July 11th, 1921, gave the union an opportunity to review developments over its first twelve months. It had been 'a very trying time, almost since its inception', Jack Redmond told the Executive on July 21st. Debts stood at £3,500. There had been £600 paid out 'to entitled members', the munitions and boilermakers' disputes had cost the union over £1,000 and Gardiner Row had cost £2,583, when professional fees and renovations were taken into account. But Redmond added that the house was now worth £3,500 as a result of the

⁴⁶ *Minutes of the Executive Committee of the IES&FTU*, November 10th, 13th and 20th, 1920. TEEU.

⁴⁷ *Minutes of the Executive Committee of the IES&FTU*, November 27th, 1920.

⁴⁸ *Irish Times*, January 3rd and February 18th, 1921. Apprentices do not appear to have won any increase. The IES&FU had sought 3d an hour for them.

improvements, so that the union's position 'was not by any means a hopeless one'. The position had been explained to the Dublin membership the previous evening and they had agreed unanimously to pay an extra 1s a week in contributions. The provincial delegates agreed to the levy later that day.

Despite straitened circumstances the meeting agreed to appoint the Vice-President, Joe Toomey as full time Acting Assistant General Secretary. However a decision on whether to make the General President's position full time was deferred for three months 'in view of present financial difficulties'. Redmond may well have felt he was being passed over because at a meeting of the Executive Council on July 29th, he complained that the new Assistant General Secretary had not informed him of an important meeting with the Irish Glass Bottle Company which they had both been mandated to attend. Others came to Toomey's defence and said they did not want Redmond to lose too much time off work. It would also save on expenses. Redmond accepted the explanation but added that 'if at any time the [Executive] Council required him to do work of this nature without expense being incurred, he was prepared to meet their wishes in every way possible... No man in the Union had done more than him to avoid expenses being incurred'.⁴⁹ Just how parlous the situation was had been made clear the previous Saturday, when benefit payments to unemployed members had to be suspended.⁵⁰

In spite of these difficulties the union appeared to be establishing itself with major engineering employers in the city. It was particularly assiduous in ensuring agreements were adhered to by employers and demarcation lines were observed. Nor were demarcation disputes always external. It took six months to resolve a row between the electricians and plumbers sections about who could carry out cable jointing.⁵¹

The engineering strike - the employers' offensive

A far more serious problem raised its head at the end of July, 1921. On the 27th the British based Engineering Employers Federation told the engineering unions, including the IES&FTU and ITGWU, that they wanted a 6s cut in pay, plus the elimination of a 12.5 per cent bonus scheme only agreed the previous year. Nor was the EEF prepared to accept negotiation on the cuts at company level, because of 'the unsettled political situation'. The move was simply an extension of the policy of wage cuts already implemented by the Federation in Britain. The only real surprise was that the move was so long coming. On 'Black Friday', April 15th, the British coal mine owners had locked out employees and forced across-the-board wage cuts. A widespread offensive followed in the rest of British industry.

⁴⁹ *Minutes of the Executive Committee of the IES&FTU*, July 21st and *Minutes of the Resident Executive Committee of the IES&FTU*, 29th, 1921. TEEU. Joe Toomey's term as Assistant General Secretary was set at three years.

⁵⁰ *Minutes of the Resident Executive Committee of the IES&FTU*, July 25th, 1921. TEEU. Funds were provided by the British Ministry of Labour on Saturday night and unemployed members were paid the following Monday.

⁵¹ *Minutes of the Resident Executive Committee of the IES&FTU*, July 25th, 1921 and 23rd January and February 2nd and 27th, 1922.

In Dublin the main engineering firms aligned themselves with the Federation and made it clear that they regarded themselves as ‘an integral part of the United Kingdom’. Employers in Cork and other centres followed suit. Reporting back to the EC on talks with the Irish employers, Jack Redmond said those who had been prepared to consider localised negotiations at earlier meetings had been superseded by hardliners committed to the British strategy. The Dail’s Ministry of Labour said that if the men accepted the cuts the employers had indicated a willingness to engage in localised bargaining on any further changes, once the political crisis was resolved. The IES&FTU ordered an immediate strike. The British based craft unions were in a dilemma as their parent organisations had already accepted the pay cuts in the rest of the UK, but some of their shop stewards pledged to support the strike, even if they had to do so on an unofficial basis.⁵² It was in some ways a defining moment for the new Irish craft union, providing a concrete example of the implications of self-determination. The union based its rejection of the pay cuts on the fact that it did not accept Ireland was ‘an integral part of the United Kingdom’.

Jack Redmond was elected secretary of the strike committee and Thomas Foran, as president of the ITGWU and the ITUC&LP, endorsed the craft workers contention ‘that the negotiations for a settlement in England, without the workers of Dublin being consulted, were not going to be accepted in this country.’ He added that employers in the shipping, flour milling and chemical industries were planning to cut wages from August 1st and Congress would help all its affiliates ‘stand together in the coming attack’.⁵³

Worse was to come, with the railway companies announcing that they would cut pay once wartime Government controls ended in a few weeks time. The start of the engineering strike almost coincided with the IES&FTU changing its name to the Irish Engineering and Industrial Union on August 1st, in accordance with a new Rule Book. The union also proceeded to seek nominations for a National Executive Council. In the meantime a Resident Executive Committee (REC) would be in charge, comprising the general officers and delegates based in Dublin.

Stronger liaison arrangements with the ITGWU were agreed to deal with the employers’ offensive in sectors such as the railways and docks, as well as engineering. The dispute could not have come at a worse time financially and the REC decided it would be strict about ensuring strike pay only went to members in benefit. Even these would not be paid for the two summer holiday weeks.⁵⁴

⁵² *Minutes of the Resident Executive Committee of the IES&FTU*, July 29th, 1921. TEEU. *Irish Times*, July 29th and 30th, 1921.

⁵³ *Irish Times*, August 2nd, 1921.

⁵⁴ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, August 4th, and August 8th, 1921. TEEU. *Irish Independent*, July 30th, 1921. The joint approach to the industrial crisis in Dublin did not prevent the IEIU and ITGWU having serious differences of opinion in various employments, of which over who should do what jobs. The most intractable proved rows over who should operate a steam lorry in the Dublin Steamship Company and which union should represent fitters in the Waterford Gas Works. Both were referred initially to the ITUC&LP arbitration committee when agreement was not reached bilaterally. The steam driver dispute ended up in the courts and both disputes were still in process in 1922.

Despite public displays of solidarity, tensions ran high behind the scenes between the IEIU and some of the British craft unions, including the Amalgamated Engineering Union, which had succeeded the ASE. Generally speaking the British unions remained reluctant to escalate a dispute when they had accepted the wage cuts already across the water. The dockyards, where British unions remained strong, were excluded from the strike. The REC itself was divided on tactics and the Joint Strike Committee came in for strong criticism. Despite the challenges the union faced, or perhaps because of them, the REC decided to press ahead with plans to recruit clerical staff to assist union officers. The REC also decided to keep a float of £60 at head office for emergencies after the family of a member who died called only to find no death benefit funds available to pay for the funeral.⁵⁵

Divided we fall

Meanwhile the railway companies carried out their threat to seek a 6s reduction in pay. The shipping companies then sought 2s, having first mooted a cut of 4s a week. The AEU threatened to break ranks in the railways and accept the proposed reduction, while relations with other unions were frayed because of a stream of defections to the IEIU.⁵⁶ The AEU retaliated by promising strike pay to men who returned to the fold and the IEIU was obliged to give strike pay to apprentices and journeymen to keep them in the new fold.⁵⁷

In August a national executive was elected under the new rules. Redmond and McIntyre were not opposed and Toomey easily saw off a challenge from a Waterford candidate for the post of Assistant General Secretary.⁵⁸ Other members of the outgoing executive were re-elected to the enlarged body, which was more representative of all the trades.⁵⁹

Unity was maintained in the engineering and railway disputes, despite serious demarcation problems with the ITGWU.⁶⁰ Giving control over pickets to the Joint Strike Committee eased tensions in the engineering dispute and it was agreed to

⁵⁵ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, August 10th, 1921. TEEU.

⁵⁶ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, August 17th and 18th, 1921. TEEU.

⁵⁷ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, August 19th and 24th, 1921. TEEU. There are two sets of minutes dated August 24th, 1921. These references are to the first set.

⁵⁸ There was no requirement on the General President, Jack Redmond or the General Secretary, P J McIntyre to run again.

⁵⁹ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, August 22nd, 1921. TEEU.

⁶⁰ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, August 24th, 1921. TEEU. Set 1 and *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU* September 30th, 1921. The Steam lorry dispute was referred by the IEIU to the Department of Labour and Cabinet of Dail Eireann for consideration. When it failed to elicit a response it threatened legal action and the Department of Labour offered a hearing in a Republican Court, which was accepted. Hearings in both disputes were heard by the Court at the end of 1921 and appear to have ended badly for the IEIU, although no details are given in the IEIU minutes.

increase IEIU representation to more accurately reflect the strength of its growing membership in the sector.⁶¹

In September 1921 the IEIU decided to affiliate to the new Dublin Workers Council (DWC). This was probably due in part to its need to keep in with Foran and William O'Brien, the leaders of the dominant faction within the ITGWU. Another important consideration was that the DWC was recognised by Dublin Corporation as the nominating body to the Arbitration Board for skilled employees in the city. The success of the DWC probably reflected the closeness of many trade unionists to Sinn Fein, the largest party on the City Council. William O'Brien and the 'Labour Republican' councillors were effectively junior partners in a Sinn Fein-Labour coalition that controlled the Corporation. As noted already, Patrick McIntyre, was himself a Sinn Fein Councillor.⁶² A further indication of the republican leanings of the REC came in early September when it referred a demand for £2 3s 5d in respect of income tax from the British Collector of Taxes 'to the responsible official of Dail Eireann for advice'.⁶³

None of this did anything to resolve the engineering dispute, which now involved about 1,000 craft workers, mostly IEIU members.⁶⁴ It was not deflected however from seeking good working relations with British unions such as the ETU or continuing talks with small Irish craft unions on possible amalgamations.⁶⁵ In some cases, such as the Irish Automobile Union, the IEIU took mechanics into membership while recommending that drivers join the ITGWU.⁶⁶

A more serious problem was the intense rivalry emerging between craft sections of the IEIU. At the Inchicore works of the Great South Western Railway the iron moulders' section objected to being represented by a brass moulder. They 'desired no trouble at the Inchicore foundry but they were determined to see that the moulders acted according to rule'. They were particularly concerned because 'for over 20 years the moulders had been scab proof and were probably the only section which had proper control over their apprentices'. Ironically in many workplaces, including Inchicore, relations between the warring sections had been better when they were represented by separate unions.⁶⁷

While the engineering trades' dispute remained deadlocked, there was one dramatic development in Drogheda during September. IEIU members seized a small factory and declared a 'soviet'. Similar seizures took place in Dublin, but there was no

⁶¹ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, August 24th, 1921. TEEU. Set . The Waterford dispute threatened the existence of the local branch, as many members said they would leave if the fitters were forced to rejoin the ITGWU. Eventually the IEIU allowed the fitters to remain, as neither union formally signed off on the agreement.

⁶² *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, August 24th, 1921. No. 2. TEEU. The references here are to the second set of minutes dated August 24th, 1921. The decision to affiliate to the DWC was taken at the second meeting. Unfortunately they contain no details of the debate, if any, that preceded the decision. For the background to the DTC/DWC split see Cody, S, O'Dowd D and Rigney P. *The Parliament of Labour: 100 years of the Dublin Council of Trade Unions*. Pages 126-135. *Irish Times*, January 4th and 19th, 1920.

⁶³ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, September 2nd, 1921. TEEU

⁶⁴ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, August 24th and September 2nd, 1921. TEEU

⁶⁵ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, September 5th, 1921. TEEU

⁶⁶ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, September 7th, 1921. TEEU

⁶⁷ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, September 7th and 9th, 1921. TEEU

strategy for running the factories or for spreading the action. It soon fizzled out. At no stage did the REC consider supporting, let alone taking over the direction of these 'soviets'. The REC was in the business of defending members pay and conditions, not seizing state power.⁶⁸ However the General Secretary, P J McIntyre, did use his position as a Councillor to raise the issue of the engineering strike at a Corporation meeting on October 3rd. The Lord Mayor, Alderman Tom Kelly, agreed to call a conciliation conference but this failed to break the deadlock.⁶⁹

Trouble at Inchicore

There was more progress on the railway dispute, where the Dail Minister for Economic Affairs, Robert Barton, called a conference, again under the auspices of the Lord Mayor and a settlement was reached.⁷⁰ Although settled more quickly than the engineering dispute, the railway strike caused serious damage to the internal cohesion of the union. Many of the members, particularly in the GSWR works at Inchicore, believed that they were being forced into accepting a settlement and vowed to continue the struggle.⁷¹ They mounted pickets on the Midland and Great Western Railway works at Broadstone, calling on the men there 'not to mind the REC' and 'come out'. A mass meeting of railway workers in the Banba Hall on September 18th proved so acrimonious that on the following night two founder members of the union, Christy Farrelly representing the iron moulders and John Rooney, representing the coach builders, proposed the REC expel the GSWR men. This was rejected but it bade ill for future. One of leading Inchicore dissidents, Joe Quinn, was suspended from the REC, and from his position as General Treasurer.⁷²

The situation was so bad that Redmond suggested the REC should consider resigning en bloc over the railway crisis. It took a three day meeting of the full National Executive Council from September 24th to 26th, to adjudicate on the issues. Eventually it came down strongly on the side of the REC⁷³ and instructed all dissidents to return to work. It withdrew strike pay from those on the picket line and unemployment benefit from those laid off as a result of the continuing dispute.⁷⁴

The sense of betrayal among the Inchicore men ran deep over the decision of the union nationally to accept a wage cut they were prepared to resist. It was one of the provincial delegates who told them bluntly that 'reductions [in pay] at the present time

⁶⁸ Another factor which discouraged union leaders, including those of the ITGWU, from supporting soviets was that they were patently illegal and could leave the union concerned opened to civil damages as well as criminal charges.

⁶⁹ *Irish Times*, October 5th, 1921. *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, October 7th, 1921.

⁷⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, October 1st, 1921. *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, October 7th, 1921. TEEU. Although the terms provided for the 6s a week cut in pay to apply to everyone, members of those unions attending the talks would receive the old pay rates up until September 19th, if they were at work on that date.

⁷¹ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, September 15th, 1921. TEEU

⁷² *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, September 19th, 1921. TEEU.

⁷³ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, September 21st, 1921. TEEU

⁷⁴ *Minutes of National Executive Council of the IEIU*, September 24th to 26th, 1921.

were inevitable and therefore if the shop men go on strike they will be attempting the impossible, and in the process... ruin the future of the union.’⁷⁵

Of course the same analysis could be applied to the engineering trades and the climb down on the railways did nothing to help the union campaign on that front. But the engineering firms were far more numerous and their economic circumstances varied more than those of the railway companies. At least some were profitable enough to continue paying existing rates, or implement less drastic cuts than the 6s a week demanded by the Employers’ Federation. That was why the basic demand of the craft unions remained local bargaining; as the REC tried to explain to the Inchicore men, without much success.⁷⁶

Financial crisis

While the IEIU leadership was determined to continue the fight on the engineering front, the financial position of the union was deteriorating by the week. On September 16th, the day after the railway settlement, the REC decided to stop paying benefits to members who were interned by the British authorities.⁷⁷ Jack Redmond, described the situation as ‘extremely critical’ and said, ‘It would need all the care possible, if they were to pull through the present crisis.’⁷⁸

The engineering strike finally ended on October 22nd, when agreement was reached at yet another conference in the Mansion House under the auspices of Alderman Tom Kelly, the Lord Mayor. The unions were forced to accept the 6s a week wage cut but were given guarantees there would be no victimisation.⁷⁹ The failure to secure workplace bargaining was a major setback and, although they had fought much harder than their British counterparts, the outcome for the IEIU and ITGWU was probably inevitable, given the severe economic downturn. John Smellie, one of the owners of the Dublin Dockyard, traced the closure of his business in 1923 to constant disputes and the unwillingness of workers to accept pay cuts as quickly as shipyard workers on Clydeside.⁸⁰ Pay cuts in other sectors followed.⁸¹

One IEIU casualty of the downturn was Jack Redmond, who had decided to become self-employed rather than unemployed. He told the Executive that, as ‘he was about to

⁷⁵ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEI*, September 16th, 1921.

⁷⁶ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, September 10th, 1921

⁷⁷ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, September 16th, 1921. TEEU. The British authorities continued to hold large numbers of Republican prisoners against the eventuality of a resumption of hostilities until the Treaty was signed on December 8th, 1921. The stopping of benefits by the IEIU may have been influenced by the fact that prisoners’ families would also have received assistance from Dail Eireann and various republican relief organisations.

⁷⁸ *Irish Times*, October 4th and 11th, 1921. *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, October 7th, 1921. TEEU

⁷⁹ *Freeman’s Journal*, October 24th, 1921.

⁸⁰ Smellie, J. *Shipbuilding and Repairing in Dublin, 1901-1923*. Chapter XI.

⁸¹ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, October 24th, November 4th, 9th and 28th, December 7th and 12th, 1921; and January 10th, February 2nd, and March 6th, 1922. The motor trade employers settled for 3s a week initially but forced through a second cut of 3s from January 1922. Dublin Corporation eventually froze wages and salaries for six months, except where they were regulated by outside agreements. Unfortunately this latter condition probably impacted disproportionately on IEIU members.

enter into business on his own account ... it would not be at all fitting for an employer to occupy that position [of General President].'⁸² He was a significant loss to the union leadership, having held the line with the Inchicore men, maintained good relations with Dail Eireann and the ITGWU, found a suitable headquarters for the union and overseen union finances. He was typical of a generation of trade unionists whose instincts were separatist regarding all things English, rather than socialist.

A General retreat – and some victories

The union's finances were now so bad that the REC had to postpone discussion of a testimonial for their departing general president.⁸³ Strenuous efforts were made to eliminate arrears and keep contributions up to date, as well as chase arrears from commercial tenants. The Dublin Brigade of the IRA moved next door to Barry's Hotel during the Truce, where they remained until evicted by the Free State forces in July 1922. Financial strains were so great that the union resorted to bingo sessions and even enquired about a bar licence from the Ministry of Home Affairs.⁸⁴

Much of the next NEC meeting was taken up with the discussion of victimisation cases. It was agreed to regularise procedures so that benefit would only go to:

- a) Members dismissed while engaged on union work
- b) Members dismissed over non-recognition of a union card
- c) Members prevented by an employer or employers' association from obtaining work.

The NEC insisted on proof of victimisation and one member who claimed he was unemployed because he had been 'on the run' in Clonmel was amongst those whose application was rejected. A hard nosed executive decided that being 'on the run' did not, in itself, constitute victimisation or prevent a member looking for work.

While the IEIU was in general retreat, like other unions, there were some victories. The Richmond, Hardwicke and Whitworth hospitals agreed to give boiler men an increase of 15s a week and their assistants 10s.⁸⁵ Nor did trouble on the railways

⁸² *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, October 28th, 1921. He subsequently established a successful business making metal bed frames. Sean Redmond family memoir, 2007.

⁸³ Redmond was not replaced immediately. The role of chairing NEC and REC meetings rotated among the members of both bodies. The General Secretary, P J McIntyre also served notice on the union but was prevailed upon to continue in office.

⁸⁴ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, November 14th, 15th and 22nd, 1921. Among the tenants was the James Connolly Labour College, which rented the top floor at 12s a week for lectures. Ironically it was a commercial tenant, Hampton Leedon Ltd that was always in arrears. *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, November 25th, 1921. Robbins, F. *Under the Starry Plough: Recollections of the Irish Citizen Army*. Page 211. *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, November 26th and December 12th, 1921. A request for the free use of a room by the International Workers Famine Relief Fund was refused. Nor could the union afford to pay a donation. *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee*, December 10th, 1921 and January 10th, 1922. Bingo did not prove profitable, producing income of £18 8s 9d against expenditure of £21 4s 4d for the year ending December 31st, 1921. *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee*, January 3rd, 1921.

⁸⁵ The three hospitals are now incorporated as part of Beaumont hospital, Dublin. The health services seem to have been the one area where significant increases continued to be secured for IEIU members,

always augur badly for the union. The workshops of the Cork-Bandon, Cork-Macroom and Cork-Muskerry railways were not parties to the national settlement. Members of the NUR and NUVB, unhappy with the support from their British leadership joined the IEIU when the dispute ended. The arbitrator removed the 12.5 per cent bonus won the previous year but reinstated the 6s deduction in basic pay. It was a significant victory at a time when cutbacks seemed the order of the day. The union's determined stance boosted morale and helped gain members in Cork.⁸⁶

Straitened finances meant a decision on forming a branch in Belfast was put on the long finger,⁸⁷ but events in the North soon made themselves felt in Dublin. Workers in the foundries had adopted a policy, with the support of the REC, of refusing to give a union card to, or work alongside craftsmen not already in the IEIU. The aim was to ensure employers recruited locally. It was a policy fraught with pitfalls and eventually sparked a lockout when a man from Belfast was given a job in late 1921 at Ross and Walpole. He was one of 7,500 Catholic workers (1,800 of them women) driven from their workplace in the Orange pogroms. The firm agreed to take him after representations from the Belfast Victims Committee, which the IEIU helped fund. Unfortunately he was a member of the British based Amalgamated Iron Dressers Society and local men refused to work with him, although he was willing to join the IEIU. Instead they wanted the job to go to a local man who, as it happened, was also in the Amalgamated Society but a Dubliner. The REC was determined to fight for the principle of ensuring employment priority for local men.⁸⁸ It even appealed to Dail Eireann to intervene on the basis that the Dail, 'was out to stop emigration, but to succeed in that it must be prepared to provide employment for all at a decent living wage'.⁸⁹

The call to the Dail for assistance showed poor judgement as it was the main sponsor of the Belfast Victims Committee. In reality the Dail could only offer mediation, which helped ensure the men resumed work before Christmas. In a post mortem on the dispute the General Secretary of the IEIU, P J McIntyre, said he thought 'that a rather narrow view had been taken by members of the Iron Dressers Section and their decision [to reject the Belfast man] would not be likely to assist us when we set out to organise further north than Dundalk or Greenore'.⁹⁰

see for instance the settlement at Stewart's Hospital, in *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee*, IEIU, March 2nd, 1922.

⁸⁶ *Freeman's Journal*, December 2nd, 1921, *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee*, December 7th, 1921. *Minutes of the National Executive Council*, December 31st, 1921.

⁸⁷ *Minutes of National Executive Council of the IEIU*, November 16th, 1921.

⁸⁸ As normally applied, the principle was that the member who had been on the 'idle' list longest in the relevant trade received first offer of a vacancy. This clearly did not apply in this instance as the man union members were insisting should receive preference was not in the IEIU. See *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee*, January 10th, 1922, for application of the principle at the Pigeon House Power Station. The IEIU also lobbied the departments of Labour and Trade and Commerce over firms and 'Catholic Institutions' giving contracts to Belfast firms. See for instance *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee*, March 23rd, 1922.

⁸⁹ *Minutes of National Executive Council of the IEIU*, November 30th, 1921.

⁹⁰ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of the IEIU*, December 21st, 1921 and March 23rd, 1922. *Minutes of the National Executive Committee of the IEIU*, December 31st, 1921. Details of the terms of the return to work are vague, suggesting the union had to accept cutbacks. However they did provide for 'wages in the future to vary in accordance with any general alteration of wages in the foundries, either upward or downward'. This at least provided a flexible basis for negotiation and seemed to rule out any further arbitrary reductions in pay and conditions by the employers.

Turning the corner

In the meantime the REC had to deal with the continuing financial crisis. A meeting was called for New Year's Day, 1922, in the Abbey Theatre. Jack Redmond agreed to preside in the absence of an elected successor. All NEC and REC members attended. Members agreed to pay 2s 6d a week in January provided benefits to unemployed and sick members were continued. They further agreed to a voluntary levy of between 10s and £10, to be recorded on special cards.⁹¹ The response of the membership was generous and showed faith in the officers, especially as the latter could not supply a proper set of accounts because Joe Quinn, the former General Treasurer and leader of the dissident Inchicore members, 'absolutely refused to give any of the necessary information in his possession'.⁹² It was part of an ongoing process of mutual alienation that made secession seem inevitable. However craft workers in other railway workshops strongly opposed the Inchicore stance and the IEIU leadership unanimously supported a motion to the next ITUC&LP conference calling for the nationalisation of the railways.⁹³

A new strategic alliance proposed and its fate

Another important initiative undertaken by the REC meeting that proposed nationalising the railways was a request for a conference with the ITGWU on the possibility of forming a joint 'Governing Executive'. This would consist of delegates drawn from both executives.

The proposal was very much in line with the thinking of William O'Brien and Thomas Foran, and while some NEC members were unhappy at the prospect of closer links with a general workers union, others saw it as their best chance of survival in a difficult economic environment.⁹⁴ Already some members in the railway workshops were defecting to the NUR and ITGWU because they offered subscription rates of 6d a week with no questions asked about arrears.⁹⁵

Meanwhile IEIU lobbying over the loss of jobs and transfer of work to cheaper British plants yielded some results.⁹⁶ The Minister for Trade and Commerce, Ernest Blyth, conducted an investigation into the state of the engineering sector where

⁹¹ *Minutes of Mass Meeting*, Abbey Theatre, Dublin, January 1st, 1922.

⁹² *Minutes of National Executive Council of the IEIU*, December 31st, 1921.

⁹³ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee*, January 17th, 1922.

⁹⁴ *Minutes of National Executive Council of the IEIU*, December 31st, 1921. The good relations in Cork were reflected by a decision of the NEC to adjourn their meeting on November 16th, 1921, as a mark of respect for the death of Alderman Tadgh Barry, who had been shot at Ballykinlar internment camp.

⁹⁵ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee*, January 10th, 19th and 23rd, and February 2nd, 10th and 22nd, 1922. A dispute at the Dublin Shipbuilding Company that caused heavy demands on funds during this period carried modern overtones as work was being carried out with cheap labour on a public contract from the Port and Docks Board. It was supposed to comply with accepted trade rates and practices.

⁹⁶ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee, IEIU*. January 25th, 1922 re MGWR sending contract on metal castings to England and Scotland. See Smellie, J. Op Cit. for a discussion of the problems implementing the 'Clydeside' rate in the Dublin ship building and repair sectors when it was going down rather than up. There was some evidence of deliberate bad workmanship as well at the yard The

unemployment was now running at over 20 per cent. He received a submission from the IEIU and met with P J McIntyre and Joseph Toomey. They reported back to the REC that they ‘mentioned particularly the positions existing in the Railway, Irish Glass Bottle Works, Wexford Engineering (Agricultural) Shops, Dublin, Passage West, Rushbrooke Dockyards and Haulbowline Dockyard.’⁹⁷

Members of the IEIU leadership also met with the leadership of ITGWU in early 1922. Progress appears to have been made to the extent that a Joint EC was under active consideration and headings for an agreement were to be drafted. However negotiations foundered when it emerged that the ITGWU delegation of William O’Brien, Thomas Foran and Thomas Kennedy, would only consider one proposition – that the IEIU join the Transport Union as a craft section.⁹⁸

They misread the situation, probably prompted by rumours that the railway men were planning to leave the IEIU and that the union faced imminent bankruptcy. After the breakdown of talks with the IEIU, the ITGWU established a National Section for railwaymen in February and an Engineering Branch in March.⁹⁹ However the IEIU was strong enough to survive such defections and the financial crisis passed. In fact the REC was already feeling financially confident enough to organise a collection for the Dublin Destitute Children’s Committee and appoint a southern organiser on a trial basis.¹⁰⁰

A craft union in time of revolution

The next meeting of the REC was convened to discuss the union’s position on the forthcoming general election. Delegates to the ITUC&LP Congress, to be held next day, were mandated to vote against Labour contesting seats. As we have seen, the politics of the IEIU leadership was much closer to Sinn Fein than Labour. Even Thomas Leahy, who considered himself a committed socialist, saw Sinn Fein as the premier party of the Irish revolution. Like most of the IEIU leadership he probably felt the forthcoming election should be about acceptance or rejection of the Anglo-Irish Treaty rather than complicated by other issues. As it happened the ITUC&LP conference, while bitterly divisive came to a very clear cut decision, with delegates voting by 104 to 49 to contest the forthcoming election on social and economic issues.¹⁰¹

Of more immediate concern was news that the special levy had enabled the union to turn the corner financially. By the end of January it had a balance of £578 13s 4d against outstanding debts of £433 13s 7d. It was an outstanding performance for a small, newborn union by any standards, but especially so in the midst of economic

⁹⁷ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee of IEIU*, January 19th, 1922.

⁹⁸ *Minutes of National Executive Council of IEIU*, February 4th, 1922.

⁹⁹ This information courtesy of Francis Devine.

¹⁰⁰ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee, IEIU*, February 13th and 20th, 1922.

¹⁰¹ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee, IEIU*, February 20th, 1922. *Freeman’s Journal*, February 23rd, 1922 and *Irish Independent*, February 22nd, 1922. Mitchell, A. *Labour in Irish Politics: 1890-1930*. Page 154.

recession. In its first burst of largesse for some time the REC agreed to allow the General Secretary to put down linoleum in his office.¹⁰²

Despite difficulties elsewhere, the IEIU also achieved a major breakthrough with the negotiation of the first working rule agreement with the Dublin Master Building Trade Employer's Association. This became the precursor of the National Joint Industrial Council for the Electrical Contracting Industry, which has negotiated minimum rates for the sector ever since. The first rate, negotiated on March 31st, 1922, was 1s 10d an hour, or £4 0s 8d for a basic 44 hour week.¹⁰³

When the NEC met on April 21st, to review progress ahead of the next Rules Conference in June, the state of the organisation at the GSWR works in Inchicore remained a major issue. The branch, which had been suspended because of its activities in the rail dispute, continued to meet without notifying the IEIU and no contributions were being forwarded to head office. The NEC decided to take legal action to recover the funds and offered every member who began paying contributions to head office within two weeks credit for money paid to the maverick branch.

However some NEC members were more concerned at decisions being taken by the REC on its own initiative, including the appointment of a southern organiser. Although the organiser, Patrick Fitzgerald had increased membership, reduced arrears and was working for £1 a week less than the salary offered, it was decided to dispense with his services. James Carr, representing Limerick, said Cork should pay its own organising expenses and it was agreed, after sacking Fitzpatrick, that the Cork district could appoint another organiser if it wished – provided it was at their own expense and subject to a submission to the Rules Revision Conference in June.¹⁰⁴

On the wider political front the NEC endorsed the decision of the REC to participate in the ITUC&LP general strike of April 24th, 1922, against militarism. The strike was in protest at the increasing lawlessness ordinary people were being subjected to during the Truce. In accord with an ITUC&LP request that essential services be maintained, the NEC directed members in the main pumping works and power stations to remain at their posts, otherwise its members participated fully in the stoppage.

However the IEIU continued to oppose plans to put forward Labour candidates in the coming general election. When James Carr proposed at the NEC that the IEIU donate £50 to the Dublin Labour Party's election fund and £50 to any union member who ran

¹⁰² *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee*, IEIU, February 13th, 1922. Even the bingo sessions were showing a healthy profit after initial losses. By the end of March income was £64 14s and expenditure was £22 8s. It was also decided to post the names of those persistently in arrears on a notice board in Gardiner Row, see *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee*. IEIU, March 15th and 27th, 1922. The purchase of the linoleum sparked a strong reaction from one member of the REC, J Maguire, who described it as a 'ridiculous' decision and went on to attack the General Secretary 's conduct of the union's finances. He described the other members of the REC as 'duds', which somewhat isolated him.

¹⁰³ *Minutes of the Provisional Committee of the IES&FTU*, September 16th and 25th, 1920 and *Minutes of the Residential Executive Committee of the IEIU*, April 10th, 1922. At the time of writing the ENJIC Registered Employment Agreement is facing a legal challenge from a number of employers.

¹⁰⁴ *Minutes of National Executive Council*, IEIU, April 21st, 1922. Immediately after the vote was taken James Carr announced his resignation from the NEC to take up a post with the Distributive Workers Union.

for the Dail and signed the Labour Party's election pledge, he could find no seconder.¹⁰⁵

End of an era

Perhaps wisely, the IEIU executive did not allow civil war politics to intrude on its business. The only reference to the conflict in the minute books was when the REC agreed that members who joined the Army (diplomatically, it does not specify which army) would only have to pay 9d a week in contributions instead of 1s 6d until their return to civilian life.¹⁰⁶

The one reference we have to the Civil War is from Thomas Leahy, the boilermaker, founder member and trustee of the union, in his witness statement to the Military History Bureau. 'I will never forget the day at 6, Gardiner's Row, when the news came through on the [Treaty] vote', he wrote. 'Our [R]EC had arranged a meeting that evening on other matters and advantage was taken after business to test members' feelings on it. When introduced one could feel the cold and fear of a lost soul departing when the result was declared by John Redmond. Most of them supported the decision of Collins and Griffith on the vote: those of us who thought of ourselves as a Labour Union within the Republic came away with sad hearts, but determined to carry on as Connolly, Pearse, Tom Clarke and company would like us to have done – carry on to the complete separation of our country from England.'

Leahy, who had failed to secure election as a Dublin delegate to the NEC, was appointed Intelligence Officer of the Irish Citizen Army and, like most members of that body fought on the Republican side in the Civil War. He continued his work for the union until his arrest and imprisonment in Mountjoy. Jim Larkin, recently returned from America, helped Leahy's family while he was in prison.

On his release Leahy was forced to look for work in Britain. He found that his IEIU card was not recognised there and eventually had to rejoin his old union, the Boilermakers. He became a senior shop steward in the shipyards on the Clyde and represented the union in national negotiations at industry level during the Second World War. But he never forgot the 'men or events in those stirring and glorious years, and [I] trust that God in his mercy and own time will spare all those who fought the good fight for the Republic to meet again with all our people, north, south, east and west, under the flag of a United and Gaelic Free Ireland'.¹⁰⁷

Fragmentation and renewal

At the time Leahy emigrated not alone had Ireland 'united and free' become a fast receding prospect but the union had split. During 1922 the GSWR men became the core group within the new Irish General Railway and Engineering Union. The

¹⁰⁵ *Minutes of National Executive*, IEIU, April 21st, 1922.

¹⁰⁶ *Minutes of Resident Executive Committee*, IEIU, March 3rd, 1922.

¹⁰⁷ Leahy, T. WS 660.

following year the majority of electricians, who continued to have demarcation disputes with plumbers, brass finishers and other trades, left to form the Electricians Union (Ireland), to distinguish themselves from the British ETU. However a significant minority of electricians remained in the IEIU.¹⁰⁸

The splits were perhaps inevitable. The idea of a dedicated Irish craft union might never have emerged but for the national revolution and the work of enthusiasts ranging from Countess Markievicz to shop floor activists such as Thomas Leahy and Thomas Maguire. By 1923 it may well have appeared premature but the most striking aspect of the splits is not the wrangling over demarcation lines, internal power struggles nor accusations of poaching, but the fact that the members of these various warring groups did not return to the British amalgamated bodies. Having once tasted freedom they did not intend to relinquish it and over the next sixty years they gradually regrouped and ultimately reunited to form the Technical Engineering and Electrical Union.

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Padraig Yeates

¹⁰⁸ TEEU Submission to the ICTU Disputes *Committee Re: Attempt by the AEEU to Transfer 41 Electricians into its Membership*. Date? *Minutes of the Provisional Committee of the IES&FTU*, May 29th, June 18th and June 21st, 1920. TEEU.