

# INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN IRELAND

Betty Sinclair

**O**N September 14, 1967, the following letter was addressed to the Minister of Labour in the Irish Republic by Mr. Ruardhi Roberts, General Secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (which represents 363,000 trade unionists in the Republic, 56 per cent of the labour force):

Dear Mr. Hillery,

My Executive Council has given consideration to the reports of the Working Party on Industrial Relations and Trade Union Law. . . . It is the view of my Executive Council that the viewpoint of Congress has not been accepted by the Department . . . in respect of matters of great importance to members of affiliated unions on which agreement has not been found possible, further discussions would serve no useful purpose. . . .

We, therefore, are withdrawing from these talks with your Department and wish to make it clear that we cannot accept any responsibility . . . in the proposed new legislation, and we reserve our position in respect of any legislation . . . you propose to issue.

This letter was the culmination of talks between the Government, the Federated Union of Employers and Congress following the receipt of a letter from the Minister of Industry and Commerce (May 17, 1966) wherein he expressed his grave concern about 'the many strikes which have recently occurred or are now in progress' and stating, 'I am sure that the responsible trade union and employer leaders wish to have industrial peace'.

For many years the Irish Government has sought a pattern of industrial relations that would provide for 'a cooling-off period' for strikes, outlaw 'unofficial' strikes, end the legal protection of strike pickets and bring in 'group negotiating licences' which would take away the power of individual unions. It was hoped that 'a voluntary agreement' would be arrived at. Spokesmen for the Government and employers did not hesitate to use 'the patriot game' and, if this did not bring the desired response, dire threats were made that if the unions did not 'put their house in order', the Government would do it for them.

The 1966 (July) Annual Meeting of Congress did not look with favour on the report of the Working Party. A Special Meeting of Congress (Dublin, December 1966) ended in near-chaos as delegate after delegate rejected the further report of the Working Party and

refused to accept assurances of Congress officials and the recommendations of a very divided Executive Council—some of whom were actually members of the Working Party!

The 1967 (May) Annual Meeting of Congress was not impressed with warnings of 'what the Government would do' if Congress and the unions refused to take 'a responsible attitude' to the whole matter of industrial relations. Congress decided not to have any truck with 'negotiating licences', nor accept laws against 'unofficial strikes' and, remembering the good old trade union rule expounded by Connolly and Larkin, 'an injury to one is an injury to all', belaboured those who wanted trade unionists to 'pass the picket'.

Mr. Roberts's letter cleared the air. Congress, and its affiliated unions, will not be part of any 'voluntarily agreed' laws which would curb the unions. The first Object of Congress: 6 (a). 'To uphold the democratic character and structure of the trade union movement, to maintain the right of Freedom of Association and the right of workers to organise and negotiate, and all such rights as are necessary to the performance of trade union functions and, in particular, the right to strike' has been upheld.

In this situation it is interesting to note the appearance of a book by George F. Daly, *Industrial Relations: With Particular Reference to Ireland\**. Described by the author as an attempt to deal 'briefly' (325 pages!) with the subject, this survey appears to have the backing of the Establishment, secular and clerical, and comes as an effort to counter the rising resentment of trade unionists of government interference in their affairs. Kind words there are, in plenty, for employers who 'risk the loss of their savings' (page 187). The writer is most condemnatory of the trade union movement which, he asserts, has 'a somewhat tarnished image among the public'. The usual calls are made to the workers and trade unions for 'responsibility', 'self-discipline', and for a joint permanent body of Congress and the FUE to 'at least attempt to draft an industrial code' (page 181).

The whole trade union movement in the Republic is fighting 'the battle of the Shannon' for trade union rights on behalf of over 1,000 workers against the American-owned electronics factory of E.I. Ltd. at the Shannon Industrial Estate and where the workers are shouting such slogans as: 'L.B.J. is Here', and where trade union officials are saying: 'The mighty dollar won't buy Irish workers. Is that the way American democracy works?'

\* *Mercier*, 344 pp., 63s.