

REFLECTIONS ON IRISH HISTORY — PART FIFTEEN

The fight for the sixty-hour week

By JOHN SWIFT

DURING MY STAY in the hospital of the South Dublin Poor House in 1915 I learned enough about the operation of the British Poor Laws to have left a lasting impression on me.

For years after leaving the James Street institution I avoided that thoroughfare, so upsetting were my experiences in the institution's hospital. For me the street was the *Via Dolorosa*—the way or road of sorrows.

Yet it was to prove the way or road to membership of my trade union. The medical superintendent, Dr. Cremin, who discharged me from the institution, gave me a letter to an official of the Dublin No. 1 Branch of the Bakers, Confectioners' and Allied Workers' Union, recommending me for membership.

He suggested as well that I be given the chance of early employment at the trade. The pre-occupation of a job, he thought, would hasten my recovery to normal health.

The official of the Branch was its treasurer, Frank Moran. His work in the Branch was part-time, his whole-time employment being as head baker in the bakery of the North Dublin Poor House.

Under the poor laws the institutions were made as self-supporting as possible, so as to minimise their running expenses for the ratepayers. The head baker, tailor or other craftsman would usually have the help of able-bodied paupers in the institutions to do the manual part of the work concerned.

The post of head or master craftsman, as it was designated, was better paid than in outside employments and was pensionable, for which it was regarded as a plum in the craft unions at the time.

Several union officials in Dublin at the time held such positions. A notable case was William O'Brien. Before he became a member of the IT&GWU, in 1917, he held a post as tailor in the North Dublin Poor House, and was a member of his craft union.

Another link, a much more comprehensive and formal one, linking unions and public authority at the time was in the operation of the National Health Insurance Provisions.

Under this British legislation of 1911 the benefits were dispensed through what were termed Approved Societies. Because of their

previous experiences in administering friendly benefits, unions were recognised by the authorities as approved societies for purposes of the Act.

Many of the unions, including my own, had had long experience in paying out benefits for sickness, unemployment and mortality, for which they became designated as Friendly Brother Societies.

The early "Friendly Brother" activities of the unions had been forced on them not merely by the absence of any social service or welfare state provision, but also by the anti-trade union Combination Laws.

Those laws, which operated here up to the middle of last century, made it illegal and punishable by transportation or other severe penalty, for workers to combine to raise wages or pursue other claims in what was termed "restraint of trade".

Thus the early unions, including my own, found it prudent to mask their activities as Friendly Brother Societies. Throughout the last century my union was well known as the Friendly Brothers of Saint Anne, the title having its origin in the earlier Dublin Bakers Guild.

When I joined the Dublin Branch of the union in 1915, the extent of its organisation in the city was poor. It had suffered a severe set-back four years earlier.

Up to 1911 the bakers in Dublin were paid on output; calculated on the amount of flour they manufactured into bread daily, or rather nightly, as night-baking was then universal in the trade.

The machinery the employers proposed

introducing in 1911 would greatly increase productivity, and therefore reduce employment among the operatives.

The stoppage went on for some weeks, and in some of the larger bakeries it was broken by recruiting non-union labour. The union's action received certain support from the Dublin Trades Council. Both Larkin and William O'Brien were then prominent on the executive of the council and were active in support of the bakers.

It proved an ill-judged Luddite action on the part of the union, and after several weeks, during which more and more non-union labour was recruited, the action collapsed.

Out of over 600 permanently employed bakers, members of the union in the trade in Dublin before the dispute, about half of them were left without work.

My first job as member of the union was in Johnston, Mooney & O'Brien's bakery in Ballsbridge. Only a few of us of the hundred or more staff were members of the union.

I was working in the confectionery department, which was an old underground house, with the old-fashioned coal and coke-fired ovens and bad ventilation in the place the discharge of smoke and sulphurous heat made working conditions quite onerous.

It was night-work, with no prescribed working hours, which could run to well over fifty hours for the six-night week, including Sunday night. My wages were £1 a week.

There had been a tradition of long working hours in the baking trade. At this time the last agreement on working hours was

that negotiated with a few Dublin bakeries in 1889. This provided for a working week of 50 hours. Weekly working hours much in excess of that were being worked in the trade at that time.

At a meeting of Dublin and provincial bakers held in the city in May 1891 reports were made of what would seem now unbelievably long working hours.

In connection with this there was current at the time a circumstance in the trade which some put forward as partly accountable for the bakers' long hours on the job.

In most of the provincial bakeries the new fermenting agent, yeast, had not yet been introduced. In those cases the bakers themselves had to brew or distill the fermenting agent from hops or other alcohol bearing or producing plant.

This, of course, along with the thirst-inducing fumes of the old-fashioned ovens, was likely to have an effect on the drinking habits of the operatives, with the tendency, perhaps, to prolong hours on the job.

Among the reports of long working hours made at this meeting in 1891 those of the Dundalk bakers seemed the worst. They amounted in some cases to over a hundred hours a week. Perhaps it was as much in the interests of temperance as for the more obvious reasons for reducing their working hours that the Dundalk bakers called for a drastic reduction to sixty hours a week.

They quoted verses composed by the president of the Dundalk Bakers' Society. It was a stirring demand for a 60 hour working week. Among the verses quoted were the following:

WE'LL BE THEIR SLAVES NO MORE
 Awake! arise to freedom's call!
 You men who overtoil
 And cast side that yoke of gall
 Which long did round you coil.
 Your hours of labour now shall be
 But ten in twenty-four.
 Get ready, then, stand up like men,
 And we'll be slaves no more!
 The work-house and the early grave
 Has been the end too long
 Of many a weary brother slave
 who sank beneath his wrong.
 Whilst others, too, have passed away
 'Ere manhood's days were o'er,
 And sank beneath the tyrant's sway
 To be their slaves no more!