

Labour relations, government and trade unionism in independent Ireland, 1922-1946

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DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of PhD is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASW	Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers
ATGWU	Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union
BMH	Bureau of Military History
BTUC	British Trade Union Congress
CAR	Congress Annual Report
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
DCA	Dublin City Archives
<i>DD</i>	<i>Dáil Debates</i>
DDA	Dublin Diocesan Archives
<i>DIB</i>	<i>Dictionary of Irish Biography</i>
DF	Department of Finance
DJ	Department of Justice
DT	Department of An Taoiseach
ESB	Electricity Supply Board
<i>FJ</i>	<i>Freeman's Journal</i>
GC	Garda Commissioner
GPO	General Post Office
IFS	Irish Free State
IFU	Irish Farmers' Union
<i>II</i>	<i>Irish Independent</i>
ILHSA	Irish Labour History Society Archives
ILP&TUC	Irish Labour Party & Trade Union Congress
IMA	Irish Military Archives

INUW	Irish National Union of Woodworkers
IPU	Irish Postal Union
IPWU	Irish Postal Workers' Union
<i>IP</i>	<i>Irish Press</i>
IRA	Irish Republican Army
<i>IT</i>	<i>Irish Times</i>
ITGWU	Irish Transport and General Workers' Union
ITUC	Irish Trade Union Congress
IWWU	Irish Women Workers' Union
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
NLI	National Library of Ireland
PMG	Postmaster General
PML	Postal Museum, London.
POWU	Post Office Workers' Union
<i>SD</i>	<i>Seanad Debates</i>
SIC	Special Infantry Corps
SVP	St Vincent de Paul Society
TD	Teachta Dála
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union
TNA	The National Archives, London
UCDA	University College Dublin Archives
UWMRC	University of Warwick, Modern Records Centre
WFA	Waterford Farmers' Association
WS	Witness Statement to Bureau of Military History
WUI	Workers' Union of Ireland

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this dissertation there are numerous references to the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) and the Irish Labour Party and Irish Trade Union Congress (ILP&TUC). The ITUC was established in 1895. The Irish Labour Party was formed in 1912 and the conjoint body became known as the Irish Trade Union Congress and Irish Labour Party. In 1917 the title of the organisation was changed to the Irish Labour Party and Irish Trade Union Congress (ILP&TUC). That body split in 1930 into the separate components of the Irish Trade Union Congress and the Irish Labour Party. In this dissertation the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) and the Irish Labour Party and Irish Trade Union Congress (ILP&TUC) are often referred to as 'Congress'.

The term 'labour movement' is used to describe the trade union movement and the political labour movement, while the term 'trade union movement' refers to the trade union movement only.

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ABSTRACT

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Thesis title: Labour relations, government and trade unionism in independent Ireland, 1922-1946.

This dissertation examines the nature and development of labour relations in Ireland from the turbulent birth of the Irish Free State in 1922 to the enactment of the Industrial Relations Act and the establishment of the Labour Court in 1946. It focuses on the evolving relations between the labour movement (for the purpose of this study this comprises both the Labour Party and trade unionism) and the government of the day. Four broad thematic questions inform this study. First, to what extent did the government and the trade unions engage effectively with one another? The dissertation explains how a Civil War mentality dominated the Cumann na nGaedheal government's approach to labour relations during the first decade of independence when trade union protest could be deemed a threat to the security of the state. This is illustrated using as case studies the postal dispute of 1922 and the farm labourers' strike of 1922-3. Second, what were the aspirations of the labour movement as Ireland gained its independence and to what extent did divisions within the labour movement inhibit the fulfilment of these ambitions? Relatively little historical attention has been placed on the ill-suited organisational structures of the labour movement, its inability to implement effective reform and its noted tendency to splinter over matters of ideology, policy and personality. A third objective is an assessment of unemployment in the 1920s and 1930s. There was a marked disparity in how this social ill was perceived by government on one hand and the labour movement on the other. Lastly, the contrasting approaches of Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil to both social and labour issues are assessed. Changing political circumstances explain some of the difference but of more significance after 1932 was Fianna Fáil's desire to industrialise. This in turn forced it to facilitate a more workable labour relations environment. This

dissertation makes a significant contribution to the sparse historiography of Irish labour relations in the first two decades of independence.

Introduction

Apart from some fleeting references in a number of general political and labour histories, the role, development and nature of trade unionism and labour relations in early independent Ireland and its relationship with government has not been the subject of any dedicated academic study. This dissertation aims to rectify this by assessing trade unionism and labour relations between the foundation of the Irish Free State (IFS) in 1922 and the establishment of the Labour Court under the Industrial Relations Act of 1946. This is an obvious bookend for this study as it was the first enactment of labour law in Ireland which recognised the role of the state, trade unions, employers and workers in the resolution of trade disputes. For the purpose of this study 'labour relations' means the nature of the relationship between the government and the labour movement, the economic, social and political factors surrounding it, and the political decisions and laws that affected both that relationship and the conditions of the working-class. It is essentially about how government and trade unions interact with each other in respect of issues of mutual interest. The role of private sector employers is outside the scope of this dissertation. Based on rigorous research of Irish and British archives and utilising a host of private papers, state records, trade union archives, official records and newspapers, many of which have not been fully utilised to date, this study analyses the challenges for a labour and trade union movement that generally found itself confronted by an often unsympathetic native government.

The struggle and aspirations of both the urban and rural working-class in pre-independent Ireland were curtailed by the predominance of the nationalist question. Despite the efforts of a small number of advocates for the working-class, Irish nationalism was consistently hostile to class politics. The catch-phrase 'Labour must wait' was an apt representation of how trade union, labour and working-class activists were regarded by Sinn Féin in the 1917-21 period. It was not prepared to allow the labour movement undermine its ambition of toppling the Irish Parliamentary Party in the 1918 general election and it was in this regard that de Valera promised labour 'its

share of its patrimony' in an independent Ireland.¹ While the labour movement had contributed greatly to the attainment of national self-government, labour and the trade union movement had to continue to wait in post-independent Ireland.

This is the first comprehensive examination of labour relations, in the context of political, social and economic developments, during the early decades of Irish independence. The dissertation is thematic in its approach and a number of prominent labour disputes and issues are used as a lens to analyse how the relationship between government and the labour movement developed following the establishment of the IFS. The key research questions focus on the nature of that relationship and how it influenced the development of labour relations. Three dominant and interrelated themes are addressed herein. The first explores how the experience of Civil War shaped the government's generally hostile response to labour demands. For example, the army was used to break up picketing by postal workers in 1922 and deployed during the farm labourers' strike in 1923. Two years later, government contempt for the rights of workers emerged once again on the construction site of the Shannon Hydroelectric Scheme at Ardnacrusha. These disputes – two from the Civil War and one in peace time – are utilised as case studies to examine the nature of labour relations in the early 1920s.

The second major theme is unemployment which played a significant role in shaping the development of labour relations in Ireland. As both a labour and a social issue, and due essentially to the efforts of the labour movement, unemployment became a recurring issue on the order of Dáil business. The problem of unemployment in the early decades of the IFS has not received sustained historical analysis. Furthermore, the full extent of joblessness was disguised by faulty unemployment statistics. The contrasting approaches of Cumann na nGaedheal from 1922 to 1932 and Fianna Fáil from 1932 until 1945 to unemployment and to labour relations are assessed.

The third theme concerns the development, or lack thereof, of Irish trade unionism. Rather than witnessing a new dawn, political independence signalled the

¹ *Irish Opinion*, 1 Dec. 1917 as cited in Arthur Mitchel, *Labour in Irish politics, 1890-1930: the Irish labour movement in an age of revolution* (Dublin, 1974), p. 84.

advent of ‘a quarrelsome and unhappy time’ for the trade union movement.² Surprisingly, attempts to reform trade unions and labour relations in Ireland have received little attention from historians. This is rectified herein. By resisting attempts to reform its own structures and engaging in constant internecine strife Irish trade unionism contributed to its own weakness and that of the Labour Party. Moreover, as will be shown, this sorry state of affairs was a major factor in the delayed development of an appropriate model of labour relations during the first two decades of the IFS. In the event, Fianna Fáil forced trade union and labour relations reform. In a paper on ‘Labour in Ireland’ in 1923 Ronald J.P. Mortished, the assistant secretary to the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, attempted to describe the perplexed nature of the Irish labour movement:

Radical, but not “Red”, strongly Nationalist, opposed to the Republicans, Separatists, yet largely organised in British Unions, the Irish labour movement presents all those apparent contradictions which the outside observer expects in all things Irish and condemns because he is not familiar with the history and conditions that explain them.³

The historiography of the Irish labour movement has remained narrow in focus. The general tendency has been to focus on the politics of labour, the histories of certain trade unions and biographies of key leaders. Issues such as labour relations, labour disputes and workplace issues during the early decades of independent Ireland are barely considered. Most early works on Irish labour history originated outside of Ireland itself. *Labour and nationalism* was written by an American, J. Dunsmore Clarkson.⁴ Emmet Larkin, another American, produced the first scholarly biography of Jim Larkin in 1965.⁵ Irish labour history also attracted the interest of British writers, notably R.M. Fox who, among other works, wrote biographies of James Connolly, Jim Larkin and Louie Bennett.⁶ These were generally outline histories and were written from a sympathetic position. These and the works of other British writers such as

² Charles McCarthy, ‘From division to dissension: Irish trade unions in the nineteen thirties (Part one), *Economic and social review*, 5:3 and 4 (1974), pp 353-4.

³ Ronald J.P. Mortished, ‘Labour in Ireland: the rising influence of the party’, n.d. [c. 1923] (NLI, Mortished papers, MS 50,132/4); Bridget Hourican, ‘Mortished, Ronald James Patrick’ in *DIB*. (<http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a5999>) (accessed 20 Aug. 2018).

⁴ J. Dunsmore Clarkson, *Labour and nationalism in Ireland* (New York, 1925).

⁵ Emmet Larkin, *James Larkin: Irish labour leader, 1876-1947* (London, 1965).

⁶ R.M. Fox, *James Connolly: the forerunner* (Tralee, 1946); *Jim Larkin: the rise of the underman* (London, 1957); *Louie Bennett: her life and times* (Dublin, 1958).

Peter Berresford Ellis and C. Desmond Greaves tended to focus on a simplified historical narrative of a struggle between nationalist socialism and imperialism.⁷ The 1970s brought a significant change to Irish labour historiography. Andrew Boyd's *The rise of Irish trade unions, 1729-1970* is a useful non-academic survey of Irish trade unionism. The first scholarly studies of labour politics and trade unions in Ireland were Arthur Mitchell's *Labour in Irish politics, 1890-1939* and *Trade unions in Ireland, 1894-1960* by Charles McCarthy.⁸ Since the 1980s a growing number of histories of individual trade unions has appeared and much work has been completed on prominent figures, particular moments (such as the 1913 lockout) and on radical political movements such as those motivated by socialism and left-wing republicanism.

A gradual accumulation of valuable, broader and well researched works on labour and working-class history have appeared since 1990. Emmet O'Connor's important *A labour history of Ireland, 1824-1960* provided a much needed overview of Irish labour history. A new edition which extended the scope of the study up to the year 2000 was published in 2011 and is intended as 'an introduction for the general reader and a synopsis for the specialist.'⁹ O'Connor is the foremost labour historian in Ireland at present and his works on syndicalism, Waterford and a comprehensive biography of Larkin were of particular value to this dissertation.¹⁰

The relationship between the main political parties and the labour movement is fundamental to this study. With the significant exception of Niamh Puirseil's *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* and Paul Daly, Rónán O'Brien & Paul Rouse (eds), *Making the difference?: The Irish Labour Party, 1912-2012* there is an absence of a developed historiography of the Irish Labour Party, particularly in respect of the time-frame covered by this dissertation.¹¹ Radical working-class politics and attempts at radical

⁷ See Peter Berresford Ellis, *A history of the Irish working class* (London, 1972); C. Desmond Greaves, *The life and times of James Connolly* (London, 1961); Liam Mellows and the Irish revolution (London, 1971) and *The Irish Transport and General Workers' Union: the formative years, 1909-1923* (Dublin, 1982).

⁸ Andrew Boyd, *The rise of Irish trade unions, 1729-1970* (Tralee, 1972); Arthur Mitchell, *Labour in Irish politics, 1890-1960: the Irish labour movement in an age of revolution* (Dublin, 1974); Charles McCarthy, *Trade unions in Ireland, 1896-1960* (Dublin, 1977).

⁹ Emmet O'Connor, *A labour history of Ireland, 1824-2000* (revd. ed. Dublin, 2011), p. xii.

¹⁰ Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland, 1917-1923* (Cork, 1988); *A labour history of Waterford* (Waterford, 1989); *Big Jim Larkin: hero or wrecker?* (Dublin, 2015).

¹¹ Niamh Puirseil, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007); Paul Daly, Rónán O'Brien and Paul Rouse (eds), *Making the difference?: the Irish labour party, 1912-2012* (Cork, 2012).

change seem to have caused more excitement among historians than attempts to encourage measured reform within the mainstream labour movement. Fianna Fáil's relationship with the labour movement and the working-class is well documented by Kieran Allen's *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour* and Richard Dunphy's *The making of Fianna Fáil power in Ireland, 1923-1948*.¹² Notwithstanding the fact that the appeal of Cumann na nGaedheal and Fine Gael to the working-class was far less attractive than that of Fianna Fáil, to date no published study has emerged of the labour movement's relationship with Cumann na nGaedheal/Fine Gael.

The first collection of academic essays on the history of the Irish working-class, *Politics and the Irish working class, 1830-1945* concentrates specifically on the intersection of politics and the working-class. It not only broadens the focus of Irish labour history but also redresses an imbalance in Irish political history and adds to the international historiography of the working-class.¹³ Since 1975 *Saothar*, the annual journal of the Irish Labour History Society, has provided a new forum for scholarly articles and local studies on working-class history. Although it has helped to promote and sustain an interest in labour history, it has failed to develop sufficiently in that it remains too closely associated with the formal labour movement. Fintan Lane, a former editor of *Saothar*, has suggested that 'a strong argument could be made for dispensing altogether with the term 'labour history', which seems to exclude rather than include, and replacing it with the term 'history of the working-class' or 'working-class history'.'¹⁴ The term 'working-history' may also be restrictive depending on one's definition of that term. What is important is that the history of Irish labour and workers is approached by historians in a manner which develops a more holistic understanding of the Irish working class, its evolution, and social, economic and political relations. Its relationship with other social classes is also central to that understanding. Other political, social and economic texts which were valuable references for this study include J.J. Lee's *Ireland, 1912-1985: politics and society*,

¹² Kieran Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish labour: 1926 to the present* (London, 1997); Richard Dunphy, *The making of Fianna Fáil power in Ireland, 1923-1948* (Oxford, 1995).

¹³ Fintan Lane and Donal Ó Drisceoil (eds), *Politics and the Irish working class, 1830-1945* (Basingstoke, 2005).

¹⁴ Fintan Lane, 'Envisaging labour history: some reflections on Irish historiography and the working class' in Francis Devine, Fintan Lane and Niamh Puirseil (eds), *Essays in Irish labour history: a festschrift for Elizabeth and John W. Boyle* (Dublin, 2008), pp 22-3.

Diarmaid Ferriter's *The transformation of Ireland* and Brian Girvin's *Between two worlds: politics and economy in independent Ireland*.¹⁵ The uniqueness of Lee's and Ferriter's texts is that both touch on hidden social histories that have heretofore been under-explored and occasion a curiosity about other unlit areas.

This dissertation is based on extensive primary research conducted in Dublin, Cork, Waterford, London and Coventry. The primary source material is varied and vast and presented an intriguing challenge. Major collections of relevant material are held in the National Library of Ireland with the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU), Thomas Johnson and William O'Brien being the largest among many others examined. The National Archives of Ireland hold a range of material pertaining to the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress and governmental papers. It is, however, unfortunate that the cataloguing of much of the Irish Trade Union Congress papers is incomplete thereby rendering access difficult. The archive also holds a large body of material pertaining to labour issues on the Shannon Scheme. The papers and correspondence of a wide range of political figures held at the UCD Archives were examined. While the Bureau of Military History was of limited use to this study, other material at the Irish Military Archives, such as Civil War operational and intelligence reports provided valuable material regarding both the 1922 postal strike and the 1922-3 farm labourers' strike in Waterford. The papers of Archbishops Edward Byrne and John Charles McQuaid in the Dublin Diocesan Archives along with the annual reports of the Society of St Vincent de Paul and material in the Representative Church Body Library provided valuable insights on unemployment, poverty and social distress in the 1920s and 1930s.

The annual reports of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress were indispensable to this study. These along with ITGWU annual reports contain, among other material, significant analysis of economic and social data as part of their critique of government policy and to support their own alternative strategies. However, economic and social historians have tended to ignore the trade union movement's contribution to such matters. Dáil and Seanad Éireann debates were, along with

¹⁵ J.J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912-1985: politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989); Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland: 1900-2000* (London, 2005); Brian Girvin, *Between two worlds: politics and economy in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 1989).

regional and national newspapers, a significant source of material and extensively utilised.

A number of smaller collections in both public and private hands were also examined. These include the papers of J.J. Walsh, the first postmaster general in the IFS, in the Cork City and County Archives and the papers of The Mount Street Club in Dublin City Archives. The recently available private papers of Sir John Keane at Cappoquin House, County Waterford provide valuable insights on the farm labourers' strikes in County Waterford in 1922-3. The National Archives and the Postal Museum in London provided extraordinarily insightful material regarding the 1922 postal strike as did the University of Warwick on divisions between Irish and British-based trade unions in the 1930s.

This dissertation is set out in seven chapters. Chapter 1 examines the political factors which gave rise to trade union and workers expectations and the prevailing economic and social conditions which undermined those conditions. Due to the prominence of agriculture in Ireland at this time and the growth of trade unionism among farm labourers the nature of the relationship between farmer and worker is examined. The chapter also provides an outline of labour relations structures and practices which at the time were not significantly advanced.

Chapter 2 utilises the 1922 postal strike and the 1922-3 farm labourers' strike in County Waterford as case studies to explore the role of government and trade unions within the context of labour relations against the background of the Irish Civil War. Both disputes demonstrate the government's readiness to use military intervention in trade disputes where the merits of the workers case were given little consideration. These disputes also illustrate how the first major labour challenges for the IFS government set the framework for government response to subsequent labour unrest and how any unrest, political or otherwise, was seen as a threat to state security. The juxtaposition of both of these disputes provides a unique opportunity to compare and contrast the characteristics of urban and rural labour unrest and the impact of labour agitation on the lives, welfare and livelihoods of two different classes of workers.

The Shannon Scheme was hailed as a milestone in the industrial, economic and social development of Ireland. However, the ugly nature of labour relations associated with the Scheme has not yet received adequate historical attention. This chapter remedies that omission by delving into the darker history of the Shannon Scheme and scrutinising the nature of labour relations on the Scheme and the various roles of government, employer and trade unions. Unemployment and the demand for a fair wage were integral to the dispute. The outcome marked a watershed in the future of the Irish labour movement. This and the impact of this dispute on the development of labour relations and the labour movement are examined in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 identifies and analyses the factors which gave rise to unemployment and labour unrest and the response of the labour movement and the Cumann na nGaedheal government during the period 1922 to 1932. Although widespread unemployment and the rising cost of living were constant themes in Irish working-class life during the 1920s and beyond, the political turmoil following the Anglo-Irish Treaty has generally been the dominant theme in the historiography of the early years of the IFS. The annual reports of the Society of St Vincent de Paul are utilised in this study to challenge the government's under-representation of the extent and impact of the unemployment problem. This chapter also demonstrates how increasing unemployment and poverty assisted the rise of Fianna Fáil and helped to define the specific ideological outlook of both that party and Cumann na nGaedheal during the first decade of independence.

Chapter 5 examines the nature and extent of unemployment in the aftermath of the Wall Street crash and how this issue affected the development and nature of labour relations in Ireland from 1932 to 1945. This period witnessed a time of significant change nationally and internationally which had a major influence on the direction of government policy and attitudes to social issues, including unemployment. Fianna Fáil brought a new dynamic to government following its election in 1932. However, its enthusiastic programme of economic and social reform, which was expected to generate employment, was challenged by the continuing fall-out from the global economic depression and by local factors such as the economic war with Britain, the rising cost of living and the fall in agricultural prices. Unlike Cumann na

nGaedheal's term in office, this government acknowledged its responsibility for unemployment and there was a strong sense that Fianna Fáil was willing to use the resources of the state to ameliorate the effects of unemployment.

Chapter 6 appraises the three principal causes of labour disunity between 1922 and 1939. First, the organisational structure of the labour movement witnessed an unwieldy combination of political and trade union blocs under a single governing body, the Irish Labour Party & Trade Union Congress. This ultimately proved unworkable. Second, the cause of labour was gravely damaged by destructive personal animosities among trade union and labour leaders, in particular the vendetta between James Larkin and William O'Brien, the leading Irish trade unionists of the era. Third was a misplaced Anglophobic nationalism within trade unionism which occasioned a breach between Irish and British-based unions. The three fault lines compounded one another with the result that the prospect of a thriving labour movement was always remote during the opening decades of independent Ireland.

This dissertation closes on the theme of 'reform'. Chapter 7 focuses on the attempts to reform the trade union movement and, secondly, on how the nature of labour relations in Ireland was altered radically by the enactment of the Industrial Relations Act 1946. This established the Labour Court, ushered in dispute resolution machinery and marked a new beginning for labour relations in Ireland.

Unfulfilled expectations: Labour relations on the eve of independence, 1922

During the Irish Revolution independence had been portrayed as a panacea for resolving all manner of political and social problems and as a foundation for economic stability and greater equality. Initial euphoria quickly gave way to inevitable disappointment. The new state was born into the most unfavourable circumstances. This chapter sets the scene by examining the political factors which gave rise to inflated trade union and working-class expectations and how these hopes were dashed. The post-war economic slump set in motion a pattern of bitter labour conflict and unrest between 1921 and 1923. Practically everybody – from civil servants to coal workers – wanted better working conditions and were prepared to strike to get them. The ITGWU took full advantage of the situation to unseat many of the British trade unions. It appeared to be Labour's opportunity. But the power of economic self-determination was used, of necessity, in the service of austerity budgets and the reduction of benefits.¹ Trade unions fought to resist forced wage reductions by government and employers not only to protect the standard of living of their members but to safeguard their own survival. In the wake of independence a 'brutal reality was dawning on Labour' as it realised its peripheral position.² Labour relations practices and machinery were rudimentary when the IFS was established. This chapter surveys how those structures developed as well as the extent and nature of trade disputes in the immediate aftermath of independence. Particular emphasis will be placed on the growth of trade unionism among farm labourers. This led to widespread rural labour unrest which often adopted the tactics of earlier agrarian agitation and, as will be demonstrated, dominated the battle for wage control at this time.

The labour movement wasted no time in reminding the new Provisional government that sizeable and growing socio-economic issues posed a serious threat to the lives and living conditions of many of its citizens. Arthur Griffith and his ministers

¹ Jason Knirck, *Afterimage of the revolution: Cumann na nGaedheal and Irish politics, 1922-1932* (Madison and London, 2014), p. 127.

² Mitchell, *Labour in Irish politics*, p. 144.

met a Congress delegation led by Thomas Johnson on 10 January 1922. This was the first deputation from the labour movement received by a native government. With a view to tackling the unemployment problem Congress demanded the introduction of a compulsory tillage order, the employment of trade union labour only on the construction and repair of roads, the use of Irish made materials, the introduction of seasonal work, a temporary prohibition order on the importation of foreign milled flour, funding for housing schemes and a materials exchange programme between Russia and Ireland. The outcome of the meeting would give some indication of how socio-economic issues might be addressed. The delegation subsequently reported that Griffith 'demonstrated courtesy, understanding and a readiness to act', and accepted that 'the workers of Ireland have taken their full share in the fight for Irish freedom'.³ But the challenges facing the new government were immense. Kevin O'Higgins, the future Minister for Home Affairs, was despairing of the political, social and economic conditions facing the new government. He questioned what lay ahead – whether Civil War, a social revolution, re-occupation by the British, or each one of these possible scenarios. In a telling remark he claimed 'The position is so grave that there is at least this advantage – nothing we may do, no desperate bid we may make, is likely to make it worse'.⁴

I

The post-industrial period in Britain was one in which increasing numbers of unorganised workers sought to persuade employers to concede improvements in pay and working conditions. Similar developments took place in Ireland. Where employers unilaterally chose to determine such conditions, employees resorted to strike, or at times, more violent action. Such events throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led to the formation of trade unions, which at the outset were deemed illegal by the state. This process represented the commencement of the development of the employer-employee relationship. The reform of the Combination Acts in 1824 and 1825 removed some of the restrictions on trade unionists, which could now meet legally to discuss wages and conditions of employment and thus present demands on

³ ILP&TUC Annual report (hereafter CAR) (1922), p. 17.

⁴ Memo by O'Higgins on 'the social and economic state of Ireland', 1922 (University College Dublin Archives (hereafter UCDA), O'Higgins papers, P197/108).

their employers. It also facilitated a more active participation of Irish workers in public life.⁵ The Trade Union Act (1871) further acknowledged the legal respectability of trade unions. The right of workers to picket within certain limits was legalised in 1875 and in 1906 the Trade Disputes Act removed the risk of being charged with illegal conspiracy. Under its provisions the courts and government were to pursue a non-interventionist policy in labour relations.⁶

Significantly, in 1891 the Royal Commission on Labour recommended that a government department should undertake the promotion of joint negotiating machinery in all industries and this resulted in the Conciliation Act of 1896. This empowered the Board of Trade to inquire into the causes of a dispute; to bring the parties together under an impartial chairman; to appoint a conciliator, if required by either party; and to appoint an arbitrator, if required by both parties.⁷ The final report of the Royal Commission on Labour in 1894 noted that notwithstanding occasional conflicts, the existence of well-organised workers assists in the maintenance of harmonious relationships between employers and workers and that strong trade union organisation is 'almost a condition precedent' to the establishment of joint boards of conciliation and arbitration with the effect that strikes are unlikely to be embarked upon.⁸ Consequently, labour relations were conducted through an emerging process of collective bargaining by employers and trade unions. The state played a limited role by setting basic ground rules. All of the aforementioned legislation was incorporated into the new Irish code of law on the establishment of the IFS in 1922. Similar to Britain, the Irish labour relations system may be described as comprising various institutions such as trade unions, employers' associations and specialist state agencies.

Joint committees and schemes providing for the resolution of disputes by way of conciliation and arbitration procedures were mainly confined to unionised industry and were established by voluntary agreement between employers and workers, usually represented by their trade union. Unskilled workers were usually unorganised

⁵ John W. Boyle, *The Irish labour movement in the nineteenth century* (Washington D.C., 1988), pp 36-41; Stokes Kennedy Crowley & Co, *Industrial relations in Ireland* (Dublin, 1981), pp 5-13.

⁶ Boyd, *The rise of Irish trade unions*, pp 7-14.

⁷ *Report of the commission on vocational organisation* (Dublin, 1943), p. 63.

⁸ *Fifth and final report of Royal Commission on Labour* (London, 1894), c7421, pp 35-6.

and had no facilities available for resolving grievances or disputes. However, as well as facilitating agreement on levels of wages, wage boards, a number of which covered some unskilled workers such as farm labourers, also served the purpose of facilitating the resolution of labour disputes.⁹ The Royal Commission on Labour formed the conclusion that many of the difficulties between employer and worker could not be remedied by any legislation and identified the absence of an 'intimate relation between the employer and the workman' as the main reason for many workplace conflicts.¹⁰

Following independence the Irish government made no attempt to develop industrial relations machinery or to enhance British legislation for the protection of workers. Labour relations practices and procedures remained rudimentary. In most cases, there was no regular contact between employers and unions in the workplace. Pay bargaining arrangements were not formalised and there was no agreed procedure for conducting negotiations. Pay negotiations were localised and the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) took no role in the process. If collective bargaining failed to produce a settlement to a dispute, both sides could avail of informal and non-binding conciliation and arbitration services. The settlement and the method by which it was reached were the responsibility of the parties to the dispute. However, the government did have powers to intervene in disputes of major importance which might cause significant public inconvenience and in such cases a court of inquiry, the nearest approach to compulsory arbitration, was established.¹¹

Responsibility for labour laws rested with the Department of Industry and Commerce following the abolition of the Ministry of Labour in September 1922. This signalled that the development of labour relations practices and procedures was low on the list of government priorities. It went against the advice of Henry Clay, a British expert on industrial relations during the 1920s, who maintained that a specialist department was essential for a successful government policy on labour relations and wage disputes.¹² The abolition of the Ministry of Labour was indicative, as will be

⁹ Ibid., pp 43-50.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 112.

¹¹ *Report of the commission on vocational organisation*, pp 208-10.

¹² Henry Clay, *The problem of industrial relations and other lectures* (London, 1929), pp 198-9.

demonstrated, of the government's attitude and lack of interest in labour issues and labour relations. It represented, according to Joe Lee, the 'institutionalised ... neglect of labour'.¹³ Its abolition attracted little attention or criticism. Bizarrely, the Labour Party welcomed the abolition. Speaking on its behalf, William O'Brien, a member of the national executive of ITUC and the dominant figure in the ITGWU, opposed a separate Labour Ministry because it replicated 'the English model'.¹⁴ It was a spurious argument given the degree to which the ITUC was modelled on its British equivalent. This is discussed in chapter 6.

II

The IFS was born into a situation of industrial strife. Wages had risen during the First World War and the boom years afterwards but by 1922 the economy was in depression. Rising unemployment depressed consumer demand which sent the economy spiralling into long-term recession. In a period of deflation employers sought to reduce wages to remain competitive. Workers fought to retain their earnings and in the unstable political conditions industrial action was occasionally violent.¹⁵ Days lost due to strikes and lockouts in 1922 were 794,642, rising to 1,208,734 in 1923 and falling to 231,577 in 1925. The causes were reduced wages, working hours, closed-shop disputes, working arrangements, holidays, trade union principles, and sympathetic strikes.¹⁶ A raft of disputes across a range of local authority services, industry and the agriculture sector, in particular, led to strikes and lockouts, mainly among ITGWU members, in late 1922 and early 1923. The government gave strong backing to the cuts in farm labourers' wages – a policy which was aimed at maximising farmers' incomes. Cuts in the wages of urban workers soon followed.¹⁷ The focus of the trade union strategy was to retain wages at existing levels, if possible, or to keep wage reductions to a minimum.

In Britain wages had been reduced to 'normal levels' following the collapse of the Triple Alliance of railway, mining and transport unions against wage cuts on 'Black

¹³ Lee, *Ireland*, p. 126.

¹⁴ *Dáil Éireann Debates* (hereafter *DD*), 9 Sept. 1922, vol. 1, no. 1, cols 36-7.

¹⁵ Donal P. Corcoran, *Freedom to achieve freedom: the Irish Free State, 1922-1932* (Dublin, 2013), pp 196-7; Emmet O'Connor, *Labour history*, p.119.

¹⁶ *The Irish Trade Journal*, May 1926, p. 152.

¹⁷ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 53.

Friday', 15 April 1921.¹⁸ Displaying a remarkable but groundless defiance, Thomas Foran, ITUC president, pledged that there would be no 'Black Friday' in Ireland because the Irish labour movement was far better prepared to resist. There was nothing unique about the plan which the Irish labour movement had devised to resist wage cuts and for which Foran received applause from Congress delegates. Unions in any trade or industry threatened by wage cuts were advised to form a joint committee to resist cuts regardless of the outcome of the negotiations and even if a strike or lock-out was inevitable.¹⁹ The strategy was weak, meaningless and generally ineffective. In reality, the labour movement was ill prepared to resist the demands of employers, including public service employers, and eventually 'emerged from the crisis with its credibility in tatters'.²⁰

III

Farmers, in common with industry generally, also suffered severely as a result of the post war economic slump. Their position was aggravated by the years of political and civil strife which had affected transport and markets. Wages were a significant contribution to the escalating cost of agricultural production, forcing many farmers into bankruptcy and others out of the industry altogether. The average wage of general agricultural labourers in 1914 ranged from 11s. to 13s. per week. By 1922 wages had increased by at least 100 per cent. In many counties the average wages had almost trebled and in County Dublin the rate had increased to 43s. per week as opposed to a general wage ranging from 25s. to 30s. in England.²¹ Convinced that national prosperity depended on agricultural exports rather than a programme of industrialisation, the government believed that the best way of reducing farmers' costs was through reducing farm labourers' wages, which fell by more than twenty per cent during the period 1922 to 1932.²² The advance of the farm labourers was brought to a halt by the downward wage pressure exerted by the post-war slump, thus shifting the balance of power decisively in favour of farmers. As will be shown in the next chapter with critical backing from the new state's coercive machinery the farmers

¹⁸ W. Hamish Fraser, *History of British trade unionism* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp 152-5.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 119.

²¹ Irish Farmers' Union Annual report (1922), (NLI, IFU papers, MS 43,567/1).

²² Maurice Coakley, *Ireland in the world order: a history of uneven development* (London, 2012), p. 156.

dealt rural labour a comprehensive defeat in the Waterford farm labourers' strike in 1923.²³

An Agricultural Wages Board (AWB) was established in September 1917 to determine minimum pay and conditions.²⁴ The AWB and the security of a statutory minimum wage for farm workers in the 1917-20 period provided the ITGWU with the steady receipt of weekly subscriptions.²⁵ Although the establishment of the AWB reduced the likelihood of conflict between farmer and labourer, labourers sought to ensure that legal minimums did not become legal maximums. The opportunity to organise farm labourers was grasped by the ITGWU. By 1920 it had organised 60,000 such members, mainly in the twelve tillage counties of the southeast.²⁶ But only a little over half were fully paid up members; the remainder was temporarily out of work for the winter months. This compared with a total of 9,643 farm workers in the union on 30 June 1918.²⁷ By overcoming the traditional barriers to organising rural workers, such as their isolation from urban centres, the ITGWU's success in unionising so many farm labourers represented a significant achievement.

Farmers who experienced wartime prosperity followed by post-war recession quickly moved to organise themselves so as to protect their wealth and social status. Accordingly, the growth of the ITGWU in rural districts at this time was matched by the remarkable spread of the Irish Farmers' Union (IFU).²⁸ By the spring of 1919, the IFU and the ITGWU were already at odds over wages and conditions for agricultural workers in Counties Meath and Kildare. Organised farmers were forced to re-assess their attitude towards farm workers. Their choices, according to David Fitzpatrick,

²³ Tony Varley and Chris Curtin, 'Defending rural interests against nationalists in 20th – century Ireland: a tale of three movements' in John Davis (ed.), *Rural change in Ireland* (Belfast, 1999), p. 59.

²⁴ The Agricultural Wages Board was established under the provisions of the Corn Production Act, 1917. It had a total of 18 members of which 14 were elected and representative of employers and workers. Four members were appointed based on their technical expertise. The Board first met on 18 Sept. 1917 and held 47 meetings up to September 1921, making nine orders mainly pertaining to the fixing of minimum wage rates. See: Agricultural Wages Board, *Report on the operations of the Agricultural Wages Board for Ireland during the period Sept. 1917, to Sept. 1921* (Dublin, 1921), pp 1-3.

²⁵ Dan Bradley, *Farm labourers Irish struggle, 1900-1976* (Belfast, 1988), p. 58.

²⁶ O'Connor, *Labour history*, pp 104-5.

²⁷ Bradley, *Farm labourers*, p. 43.

²⁸ Ibid.

were 'to fight, or to negotiate.'²⁹ By 1920 the IFU claimed 60,000 members.³⁰ It was no coincidence that Farmers' Associations had rapidly developed in parishes where the ITGWU existed.

On the abolition of the AWB in October 1921, the chairman noted that, despite some shortcomings, the Board had assisted in stabilising labour relations within the agriculture industry. He acknowledged the 'good spirit' of the working relationship between employer and employee representatives on the Board and hoped that 'this tolerant atmosphere' would continue.³¹ This did not transpire. By 1922 the post-war economic slump forced workers to fight wage reductions. Retrenchment and cutbacks were the order of the day as employers sought to reduce their costs. Trade union strategy was focused on minimising the rate of reductions, particularly in the case of agricultural workers, and defending hard-won gains. While the trade union movement lamented the abolition of the AWB, it was welcomed by many of the county farmers' associations. Clashes, sometimes violent, between the two sides were inevitable.³² Thomas Wibberley, professor of agricultural research at University College Cork, described the ensuing conflict between workers and farmers as similar 'to that of two hungry men tugging at an uncooked leg of mutton'.³³ He was concerned that a dangerous vacuum had been created by the abolition of the AWB.

In the changed economic circumstances and with the elimination of the statutory minimum wage, responsibility was placed on the trade union movement to maintain wage rates by securing voluntary agreements with employers.³⁴ During the course of these wage negotiations and settlements, the ITGWU national executive was concerned by a 'lack of the sense of solidarity and generous comradeship' amongst farm workers and claimed that 'men will fight all out for themselves and fellow-workers in their immediate neighbourhood but cannot see further than that'.³⁵ Many

²⁹ David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish life, 1913-1921: provincial experience of war and revolution* (2nd ed, Cork, 1998), pp 221-3.

³⁰ O'Connor, *Waterford*, p. 145.

³¹ *Report on the agricultural wages board for Ireland for the period Sept. 1917 to Sept. 1921* (Dublin, 1921), p. 12.

³² *Voice of Labour*, 29 Oct. 1921; Bradley, *Farm labourers*, p. 59; O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 121.

³³ Article from 'The Irish Farmer', dated 21 Jan. 1922 and re-printed in *Voice of Labour*, 28 Jan. 1922.

³⁴ Bradley, *Farm labourers*, pp 58-9.

³⁵ ITGWU, annual conference, May 1923, (NLI, ITGWU papers, MS 27,061(3)).

ITGWU organisers viewed agricultural worker members as opportunists who had no loyalty to either the trade union movement or the Labour Party and contended that as soon as the conditions of those workers improved, they became 'bitter opponents of Labour'.³⁶ Whether their circumstances improved or not, the loyalty of farm labourers to trade unionism was fickle.

IV

Between 11 January and 18 April 1922 the intervention of the Department of Labour terminated fifty-one labour disputes.³⁷ This demonstrated the significant level of industrial and social unrest but did not capture the totality of labour disputes, only those which had been settled. The cabinet approved the formation of conciliation boards which settled unrest over employment conditions and pay disputes in printing and dairying, and sponsored commissions of enquiry into the railways, canals, tailoring and the postal service.³⁸ Any satisfaction by the Provisional government and its Department of Labour at these successful interventions in labour relations was short-lived. As the next chapter indicates, the postal dispute in 1922 was a nationwide strike almost entirely of the government's own making. But the Civil War conditions allowed the government to use draconian measures to end it.

During his address to the 1922 Annual Congress, Thomas Johnson advised delegates that the labour movement had entered discussions with the government from a position of strength due to its support for the 'national struggle'.³⁹ Johnson warned that if a positive response was not forthcoming in relation to social reform, including the problem of unemployment, 'the people would rise and sweep them away'.⁴⁰ This was more an attempt to rouse his audience than any serious challenge to the government. It was probably born out of a euphoria created by the extraordinary response by workers to the labour movement's 'anti-militarism' strike on 24 April 1922 and also to the 'glorious but small-scale triumph' for Labour at the June 1922 general election, when 17 of the 18 Labour Party candidates were elected. Labour's 21 per

³⁶ CAR (1922), pp 126-7.

³⁷ Report on the activities of the Labour Department during period 11 Jan. to 18 April 1922 (UCDA, Blythe papers, P24/39 and P24/49).

³⁸ O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 121.

³⁹ CAR (1922), pp 14-5.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

cent of the poll surpassed anti-Treaty Sinn Féin in term of votes but not seats.⁴¹ Two factors were evident in Labour's electoral success - support from farm labourers in the large farming constituencies and the lack of any alternative candidate in other constituencies.⁴² The response to the call by Congress for the anti-militarism strike on 24 April was described by one newspaper as 'more impressive than ... many remarkable demonstrations' which had previously been witnessed in Dublin.⁴³ However, this may have been wrongly interpreted as an indication of trade union strength and support as the demonstration 'was not confined to the ranks of organised Labour; all classes took part in it'.⁴⁴ Furthermore, despite the widespread appeal of the strike, it had little effect on those it had hoped to sway.⁴⁵

Essentially a parliamentarian and totally committed to democratic principles, Johnson believed that a democratic parliament was dependent on an effective opposition. While the Labour Party played this role to the best of its ability, Johnson also believed that anti-Treaty Sinn Féin had abandoned its responsibilities in this regard.⁴⁶ In his opening address to the Dáil, following the ratification of the Treaty, the Labour leader recognised the political courage of the pro-Treaty government given the difficulties it encountered, and while seeking progress on socio-economic problems, he acknowledged that the labour movement would make allowances for the government's political difficulties.⁴⁷ Johnson's optimism that the Dáil would not only be a political forum but would also facilitate Irish labour relations and foster socio-economic progress was misplaced. It could be argued that Johnson coalesced to an inordinate degree with the government and at the expense of socio-economic issues which the ILP&TUC regarded as paramount. However, as the official opposition in the Dáil Labour had little or no option to engage with constitutional issues and the preservation of the state.

⁴¹ Mitchell, *Labour*, p. 161; Puirseil, *Labour Party*, pp 12-13; Lee, *Ireland*, pp 94-5.

⁴² Richard Sinnott, *Irish voters decide: voting behaviour in elections and referendums since 1918* (Manchester, 1995), p. 97.

⁴³ *IT*, 25 April, 1922.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Puirseil, *Labour Party*, p. 11.

⁴⁶ *DD*, 10 Jan. 1922, vol. T, no. 17, cols. 411-2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, cols. 413-4.

The growing unemployment problem was the subject of significant discussion at the 1922 Congress with Johnson describing it as the most important problem facing country.⁴⁸ The protracted discussions on the Anglo-Irish Treaty had absorbed all political attention and Johnson endeavoured to keep socio-economic issues before both government and Congress. In March he sought government action on a range of social issues, including unemployment, housing and the breaking up of large ranches. The tone and nature of Griffith's response indicated both the burden of his responsibilities and his awareness of the extent and the range of issues of 'grave social and national importance' which demanded government attention and undertook to address them all 'at the earliest possible moment'. Referring to the forthcoming general election in June, he added that work on these issues was dependent on 'the people's decision whether there shall be war or peace, anarchy or stability, confusion or destruction'.⁴⁹ Griffith's response could be interpreted as being dismissive of any sense of urgency in addressing social issues, but it gives an indication of the delicate nature of the political situation and the threats which challenged the future of the new state and its democratic values. The adoption of the 1922 Constitution clearly indicated that the government had rejected calls for the inclusion of economic and social issues on the basis, according to Cosgrave, that the principle of economic sovereignty was un-necessary window dressing, while Kevin O'Higgins declared that it would be unwise to embody in the constitution anything which might resemble communistic doctrine.⁵⁰

V

The birth of the IFS did not address the inflated hopes of Irish trade unionism. A number of critical factors forcefully shattered those expectations to such an extent that the strength and viability of the trade union movement, especially the ITGWU, was imperilled. These factors included the political chaos associated with the terms of the Treaty and the Civil War, militarism, the economic slump, the economic primacy of agriculture and the farming class, and the weakness of the labour movement and its

⁴⁸ CAR (1922), p. 132.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 45.

⁵⁰ DD, 18 Sept. 1922, vol. 1, no. 6, cols 327-8; Thomas Murray, *Contesting economic and social rights in Ireland: constitution, state and society, 1849-2016* (Cambridge, 2016), p. 103.

leadership. The first years of the IFS were dogged by intense economic difficulties which may in part account for the conservatism of the economic policies adopted by the new Irish government. A battle for the control of wages which followed the economic slump demonstrated the fractious nature of Irish society and the development of deepening divisions between disparate economic classes. Labour relations structures were not sufficiently developed or robust to assist in the resolution of labour conflict which had both the capacity to destabilise the government and to threaten the survival of the trade union movement. It soon became clear to the working-class that political independence did not necessarily mean social and economic independence and that the 'wait' for the labour movement was destined to continue.

Threats to the state?: Labour relations, Civil War and labour unrest, 1922-23

By 1922 the IFS was in 'a strange and dangerous mood'.¹ Not only was there growing militarism and violence but there was also a sudden epidemic of soviets and workers councils which took over both industrial and agricultural undertakings. They were suppressed by the government and caused embarrassment to the labour movement.² Radical socialist republicans, such as Peadar O'Donnell, promoted the notion of an unfinished Irish revolution which required a class struggle to bring it to a conclusion.³ A fear of social revolution and the overthrow of the capitalist class explain, at least in part, the government's heavy-handed response to social and labour unrest. A social revolution around working-class interests always remained remote. The size of the industrial working-class was small. Second, the discontented rural working-class, though numerous, was easily marginalised. Third, a workable partnership between the Communist Party of Ireland and republicans never materialised.⁴ Lastly, the social, economic and political infrastructure inherited by the IFS remained much as before. Essentially the Irish revolution 'did not contain the seeds of any socio-political changes despite ... the Democratic Programme and the social unrest that was an integral part of the War of Independence and the Civil War'.⁵

Much of the historiography surrounding Ireland's revolutionary era tends to focus on political and military activity while at the same time downplaying the significance of social unrest. It too has its own importance and is worthy of analysis. Class struggle featured as predominantly as the other ingredients. The Irish Revolution, to quote Ferriter, was a melting pot of 'motivations, expectations and opportunities'.⁶ Throughout 1922 and 1923, class relations, without overlapping

¹ McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 61.

² Ibid.

³ Fearghal McGarry, 'Radical politics in interwar Ireland, 1923-1939' in Fintan Lane and Donal Ó Drisceoil (eds), *Politics and the Irish working class, 1830-1945* (Basingstoke, 2005), p. 214.

⁴ Emmet O'Connor, *Reds and the green: Ireland, Russia and the communist internationals, 1919-43* (Dublin, 2004), pp 1, 56.

⁵ Oliver Coquelin, 'Politics in the Irish Free State: the legacy of a conservative revolution', *The European Legacy*, 10:1 (2005) p. 29; McGarry, 'Radical politics', p. 209.

⁶ Diarmaid Ferriter, *A nation and not a rabble: the Irish revolution, 1913-1923* (London, 2015), p. 231.

directly with national divisions, were simultaneously at stake in the Civil War. Initially the Provisional government spent more time dealing with strikes, threatened strikes, soviets and agrarian agitation than with republican militarism.⁷

This chapter examines labour relations and unrest during the Civil War. Two significant disputes – the 1922 postal strike and the 1922-3 farm labourers' strike in County Waterford, one of the most prolonged and bitter farm strikes ever fought in Ireland's dominant economic sector – are utilised as case studies to explore the role of government and trade unions within the context of labour relations. The impact of the post-war economic slump meant that the pleas of workers were given little consideration at a time when retrenchment was the order of the day at central and local government level. The postal strike in September 1922 was the first major industrial dispute coinciding with the Civil War and the first example of forceful government intervention 'to manage the course of industrial action rather than simply respond to its excesses'.⁸ The strike was provoked by the government's decision to impose pay cuts across the civil service and to deny postal workers the right to strike. It remains an oddly neglected episode in Irish political and labour history. In his brief reference to it, Ferriter suggests that the government's response could be regarded, on one hand, as an indication of its determination not to be diverted from winning the Civil War, while alternatively it could be regarded as overt hostility to the working-class.⁹ This dissertation argues that both interpretations should be applied. The challenges facing the Provisional government were daunting and would have discouraged the most competent of nation-builders. It had to contend with the Civil War as well as with a range of economic and social problems. A civil war mentality pervaded the government's response to agitation of all kinds. All were deemed anti-government and anti-Treaty and for this reason the government did not hesitate to use military intervention against postal workers or farm labourers.

⁷ Murray, *Contesting*, p. 89.

⁸ Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland, 1917-1923* (Cork, 1988), p. 159.

⁹ Ferriter, *Transformation*, p. 256.

From 1831 until 1922 the Irish postal service was controlled by the Postmaster General (PMG) in London. In 1922 the IFS took over operations in respect of the twenty-six counties, while those in Northern Ireland remained part of the British Post Office. Following the Treaty there was intensive consultation between relevant government departments in London, Dublin and Belfast on the separation of the post office services in the respective jurisdictions. This complex process involved operational procedures, legal issues and staffing arrangements.¹⁰ The IFS assumed control of the Irish service on 1 April.¹¹ James J. (J.J.) Walsh was appointed PMG for the IFS and in June 1924 his title became Minister for Posts and Telegraphs following the creation of that government department.¹² Irascible and lacking diplomacy, he did not endear himself to the British authorities during the transfer of responsibility from London to Dublin.¹³ In the first issue of *Iris an Phoist*, the official journal of the postal service, Walsh issued a circular to all staff which was a mixture of idealism and patriotism:

the aim of the new administration is to make the Staff the most contented of staffs, and to make the service as a whole the most efficient service in Europe. In its dealing with the staff the administration will be guided solely by the interest of the service ... For the first time, the Irish Staffs are working for an Irish Government; for the first time they are responsible for the providing of an efficient Service to an Irish Government alone – to the Irish people alone. And, in the providing and maintaining of an efficient service, I feel confident that I can rely upon the whole-hearted co-operation of men and women of all grades.¹⁴

Little did Walsh realise that a bitter trade dispute would soon destroy his idealistic expectations.

The Post Office was the largest employer in the state with a workforce of 13,500 in 1922. Unlike the British service, the Irish Post Office was unprofitable and

¹⁰ H.W. Trotter (Customs and Excise, London) to Irish under-secretary, 10 June 1921; G.E.P. Murray (Office of PMG) to under-secretary, 7 Oct. 1921 (The National Archives, London (hereafter TNA), HO 351/51).

¹¹ C.I. Dulin, *Ireland's transition: the postal history of the transitional period, 1922-1925* (Dublin, 1992), p. 19.

¹² Patrick Maume, 'Walsh, James Joseph' in *DIB*.

(<http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a8847>) (accessed 10 May 2016).

¹³ Dulin, *Ireland's transition*, p. 19.

¹⁴ *Iris an Phoist*, 1, 15 Mar. 1922, p. 1.

needed to reduce its costs.¹⁵ A sparsely scattered rural population and lack of significant industry or commercial activity across much of the country contributed to losses. The service was labour intensive and was regarded as 'a severely crippled beast' when handed over to the IFS.¹⁶ Financial accounting procedures were in a chaotic state in 1922 and the 'best estimate' for 1923 predicted that revenue would fall short of expenditure by about £2,750,000.¹⁷ At a cabinet meeting on 10 May Michael Collins forcefully demanded economy.¹⁸ Yet, some ministers sought free telephone facilities at their residences and a free telegram service, neither of which was available to British government ministers.¹⁹

A 'cost-of-living bonus' for civil servants had been introduced by the British government during the First World War to compensate for high inflation and was based on the British cost-of-living index figure. As prices continued to rise after the war, the bonus continued to be paid. For most postal workers on low pay wages the bonus was critical. In 1891, the maximum earned by a Post Office clerk after seventeen years' service was £2 16 s. a week, which by 1922, had only increased to £3 1 s.²⁰ With the fall in the cost of living after the war, the British government imposed a cut of between ten and fifty per cent on civil service salaries in February 1922.²¹ When the Provisional government decided to follow suit only postal workers resisted. They had fared badly compared to others in the civil service as they had not experienced any significant review of their grades and salary scales since 1870.²² The inadequate wages paid to many staff within the postal service was highlighted in the Report of the Royal Commission of Labour in 1894 where four of the Commissioners, in a minority report, claimed that the wage paid to 'sorters and letter carriers' was below a level 'which efficiency and decent family life cannot be maintained' and as such it violated a House of Commons resolution in March 1893 which pledged to maintain proper and

¹⁵ Francis Devine, *Communicating the union: a history of the Communications Workers' Union* (Dublin, 2015) pp 18-19.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁷ Ronan Fanning, *The Irish Department of Finance, 1922-58* (Dublin, 1978) p. 105; *Report of the commission of enquiry into the post office* (Dublin, 1922).

¹⁸ Fanning, *Finance*, pp 50-4.

¹⁹ Dulin, *Ireland's transition*, p. 18.

²⁰ Devine, *Communicating*, p. 113.

²¹ A.J.P. Taylor, *English history 1914-1945* (London, 1965), pp 240-1.

²² Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 145.

sufficient wages and conditions of employment in public service departments.²³ This context explains the determination of postal workers to resist the wage cuts.

In February 1922 postal workers, in response to the government's decision to force pay cuts, took a historic decision to strike, claiming that the cuts would reduce wages to 'starvation levels'.²⁴ J.J. Walsh asked the British PMG to provide strike-breakers from the ranks of British postal workers in the event of a strike. This request elicited a positive response.²⁵ The British government was concerned that successful agitation by postal workers in Ireland, at a time when both civil services were closely linked, could have repercussive effects on the British civil service. Realising the impact of the utilisation of 'scab' labour from Britain, the Provisional government repudiated Walsh's request.²⁶ He had apparently not consulted cabinet colleagues and Joe McGrath, Minister for Labour, threatened to resign. Collins had significant concerns that labour troubles might complicate the developing Treaty split and he moved quickly to deal with it.²⁷ In any event the London-based Union of Post Office Workers insisted that their members would not co-operate with such an arrangement.²⁸ It is doubtful that significant numbers of British postal workers would have been willing to transfer to Ireland during a postal dispute in a country on the verge of Civil War.

In the event, a strike was averted just hours before it was due to begin on 5 March. The government reached agreement with the Irish Postal Union (IPU) to establish a commission of enquiry into wages, conditions of employment and organisation of work in the postal services. It was to report by 15 May 1922 on whether the basic wage of postal workers could bear the recent bonus cut.²⁹ Senator James Green Douglas, a Dublin businessman with a reputation as 'a practical and

²³ *Final report of the Royal Commission on labour 1894*, c7421, p. 143; *Hansard (Commons)* 6 March 1893, vol 9, cc 1109-80.

²⁴ Devine, *Communicating*, p. 113.

²⁵ Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 146.

²⁶ Provisional government meeting, 27 Feb. 1922 (National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NAI), TSCH/1/1/1); Provisional government minutes, 27 Feb. 1922 (NAI, DT, vol. 1, 1922-1937, S1798).

²⁷ Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 146.

²⁸ CAR (1922), p. 124.

²⁹ *Report of commission of enquiry into the post office – interim report*; J. Anthony Gaughan, (ed.), *Memoirs of Senator James G. Douglas (1887-1954): concerned citizen* (Dublin, 1998), p. 87.

trusted bridge-builder', was chosen by Collins to act as chairman.³⁰ The Department of Finance was not enthusiastic about the appointment but Douglas acted with integrity and impartiality.³¹ He understood the choreography of labour relations, something utterly absent in the minds of many government ministers. The commission comprised Senator Sir Thomas Esmonde and Henry J. Friel, chairman of Dublin County Council, who were government nominees, and the trade unionists, T.J. O'Connell and Luke J. Duffy who were nominated by the Irish Labour Party.³² An attempt by Collins to insert an additional government appointee from the Department of Finance was diplomatically resisted by Douglas lest it be perceived as breach of agreement by the labour representatives.³³

There was naivety within government about the norms of labour relations. It seems that, belatedly, the cabinet realised that an equally balanced commission with a fair-minded chair might find in favour of the workers. In addition, there was a sense of panic among GPO officials in Dublin who had been tasked with presenting the case of the postal service before the commission. In desperation they turned to London for advice. An official in Dublin wrote:

This will be our first experience here in a matter of this kind, and in the circumstances I shall be much obliged for any information which you can give me in regard to the procedure, and particularly the preliminary procedure, connected with such enquiries ... I am sorry to have to trouble you in this matter, but you will I am sure realise the exceptional position in which we find ourselves here. Any information or advice which you can give will be much appreciated.³⁴

The London GPO duly advised. Douglas also sought advice in London and utilised a private business trip to meet the Secretary of the GPO about how such an enquiry should be conducted.³⁵ Despite the antipathy of British officials for Walsh, the archives of the London Postal Museum reveal that relations between Irish and British postal

³⁰ Douglas to Collins, 27 Mar. 1922, (NLI, James G. Douglas papers, MS 49,581/9); Brian Farrell, 'Foreword' in J. Anthony Gaughan (ed.), *Memoirs*, p. VIII.

³¹ Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 146.

³² *Report of commission of enquiry into post office* (Dublin, 1925); Note: Before the Commission concluded its business both government representatives resigned and were replaced by D. O'Connor and Councillor James Moran.

³³ Douglas to Collins, 1 April 1922 (NLI, Douglas papers, MS 49,482/10).

³⁴ J. Booth, GPO, Dublin to Leech, GPO, London, 7 Mar. 1922 (Postal Museum, London, (hereafter PML) Post 33/3573B).

³⁵ Booth to Bell, 14 Mar. 1922 (PML, Post 33/3573B).

officials were cordial. In fact, P.S. O'Hegarty, secretary of the Irish postal service, kept London appraised about the work of the commission of enquiry and the Irish government's attitude to its recommendations. An indication of the government's lack of nous in labour affairs was a demand by Walsh that Douglas provide a report on the attendance and contribution of Thomas Esmonde. By 23 May he had attended eleven of the sixteen meetings and the government feared that its own nominee's fitful attendance might lead to an outcome not to its liking.³⁶ In his customary diplomatic style, Douglas declined and suggested that Walsh consult Friel.³⁷

To gain an understanding of the working conditions and responsibilities of postal workers, Douglas took the extraordinary step of carrying out the duties of various types of postal employees in telephone exchanges, sorting centres and post offices in London; the choice of London was based on his belief that he was more likely to obtain more accurate and valuable information by visiting English offices rather than Irish offices and also to protect his anonymity.³⁸ The commission received representations and heard evidence from a range of people. The Department of Finance, unsurprisingly, opposed a pay increase for postal workers lest it create a precedent for other civil servants.³⁹ The commission was not concerned about the precarious financial position of the post office and suggested that its main aim 'shall be the welfare and convenience of the public rather than the making of profit.'⁴⁰

The commission's interim report on 11 May recommended a basic wage increase of 12½ per cent to compensate postal workers for the hardship caused, particularly to married men with families, by the bonus reduction. It also recommended that an Irish cost of living figure be prepared by the government to help calculate the bonus rather than rely on the British figure.⁴¹ The Department of Home Affairs deemed an Irish cost of living enquiry 'undesirable' and pointed to the 'practical

³⁶ Douglas to Walsh, 23 May 1922 (NLI, Douglas papers, MS 49,582/11).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ O'Hegarty to Leech, 1 Nov. 1922 (PML, Post 33/3573B); Gaughan, *Memoirs*, p. 88.

³⁹ *Report of the commission of enquiry into the post office – minutes of evidence and appendices and index for interim report* (Dublin, 1922).

⁴⁰ *Report of the commission of enquiry into the post office – first part*, 14 Dec. 1922.

⁴¹ Ibid., – *interim report*; Douglas to Collins, 23 May 1922 (NLI, Douglas papers, MS 49,582/11); Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 146.

difficulties in the way'.⁴² The reasons for this antipathy are unclear, but there may have been a fear that an Irish cost of living figure would be much higher than the British one. The government initially agreed to implement the commission's interim report but the advent of Civil War allowed it to renege on that promise.⁴³ The Civil War caused the suspension of the commission's work until 31 October.⁴⁴

In September 1922 the interdepartmental committee on the Irish cost of living found that it was 90 per cent higher than in August 1914; the equivalent British figure was 85 per cent. Consequently, Irish civil service staff still faced a cut in salaries of between 11 and 12 per cent on the bonus element of salary.⁴⁵ The government's attempts to force the pay reduction based on the findings of the interdepartmental committee but without consultation with either the commission or the postal unions became public on 4 September. It created doubt about the credibility of the committee's findings and this forced the Postal Union to strike.⁴⁶

Trade unions had two objections to the findings of the interdepartmental cost of living committee. First, its work was not transparent. The labour movement was refused representation on the committee. The government 'did not want evidence tendered' to any enquiry and would have preferred if the cost of living issue was not raised at all.⁴⁷ Secondly, the interim report of the Postal Commission had recommended that the cost of living figure should be 'agreed on' and this had not been done.⁴⁸ No explanation was provided as to how the figure was computed. To the trade union movement it was another manifestation of 'the hole-and-corner methods', as the *Voice of Labour* put it, which characterised the government's approach and which was born out of the chaos of the state's birth.⁴⁹ The government publicly stated that it did not recognise the right of civil servants to strike and warned

⁴² O'Hegarty to Walsh, 15 May 1922 (NAI, DT, H2246).

⁴³ Devine, *Communicating*, p. 117.

⁴⁴ *Report of commission of enquiry into the post office – First part*, 14 Dec. 1922.

⁴⁵ Report of interdepartmental committee on the cost of living in Ireland, 4 Aug. 1922 (NAI, DT, S1211); *Iris an Phoist*, 14, 6 Sept. 1922, p. 151-2; Maguire, *Civil service*, pp 146-7.

⁴⁶ See Thomas Johnson's contribution to Dáil debate on the pending postal strike and his comments on the Irish cost of living figure. *DD*, 9 Sept. 1922, vol 1, no. 1, cols. 44-8.

⁴⁷ O'Hegarty to Walsh, 15 May 1922 (NAI, DT, H2246).

⁴⁸ *DD*, 14 Sept. 1922, vol 1, no 5, cols. 305-8.

⁴⁹ *Voice of Labour*, 30 Sept. 1922.

post office staff that they risked their jobs and pension rights.⁵⁰ This only added to the determination of the postal workers to strike.

The shock caused by the death of Collins on 22 August may have increased the government's intransigence when it came to dealing with the threatened postal dispute. In a flurry of activity behind the scenes, Douglas, who had adopted the role of mediator, presented proposals to the government 'for careful consideration' as he felt 'strongly that a strike should be averted' by offering terms to the union.⁵¹ It is clear from his correspondence that Douglas was conducting informal negotiations, as is required in the art of mediation, with both government and union representatives and seemed satisfied that he could secure a settlement with the union, albeit one far less than their expectations.⁵² On 9 September Walsh informed the Dáil of the government's offer to implement the pay cuts in two phases over a three-month period, provided the principle of reductions was accepted. The postal unions maintained that basic wages were too low to sustain any cuts in the bonus and requested that they be withdrawn and that a claim for a pay increase be referred to arbitration.⁵³ Tom Johnson claimed that Walsh was temperamentally unfit for the position of PMG and was provoking disruption.⁵⁴ The Postal Commission had been Collins's brainchild. Had he been alive, it is unlikely that his hands-on approach would have allowed matters to reach such a crisis point.⁵⁵ The strike began the next day.

In the Dáil on 11 September 1922, Johnson sought the withdrawal of the government's claim that civil servants had no right to strike. He viewed the government's interference with the right to strike as an infringement of human rights and of far greater importance than the issues at the heart of the postal dispute.⁵⁶ The government clearly equated strike action by public servants with disloyalty.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ *IT*, 11 Sept. 1922; Irish Rate and Taxpayers Association to [presumably] Walsh (Irish Labour History Society Archives (hereafter referred to as ILHSA), Postal Strike 1922, Box 1, MS 10/I.P.U./1-10).

⁵¹ Douglas to Cosgrave, 7 Sept. 1922, and Douglas to Walsh, 8 Sept. 1922 (NLI, Douglas papers, MS 49,481/15).

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *DD*, 9 Sept. 1922, vol. 1, no. 1, cols 43-50; Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 147.

⁵⁴ *DD*, 9 Sept. 1922, vol. 1, no. 1, cols. 46-7.

⁵⁵ Pádraig Yeates, *A city in civil war: Dublin 1921-4* (Dublin, 2015), p. 130.

⁵⁶ *DD*, 11 Sept. 1922, vol 1, no 2, cols. 109-12.

⁵⁷ Devine, *Communicating*, p. 120.

Predictably, Johnson's motion was defeated by 51 votes to 24.⁵⁸ The Dáil had effectively endorsed the government's declaration that the postal strike was illegal without any reference to existing legislation or legal opinion. It had ignored the legal rights of workers to engage in peaceful picketing under the terms of the Trade Disputes Act 1906. George Gavan Duffy criticised the 'effrontery' of the dismissal of civil servants' rights and accused the government of making rash decisions which would only make an eventual settlement of the dispute more difficult.⁵⁹ Kevin O'Higgins implied that the government's attitude to picketing civil servants was driven by a concern that anti-Treaty forces might take advantage of the strike by commandeering unprotected public buildings which could be used 'as a screen for the sniper with bomb or rifle or revolver'.⁶⁰ In his statement to the BMH, Ernest Blythe conceded that 'the very difficulties of the time' made it easier for the government to face up to the strike and the 'entire dislocation' of the postal services in a manner that would not have been possible in peacetime.⁶¹ The legal rights of civil servants to withhold their labour were subsequently curtailed by provisions within the Treasonable and Seditious Offences Act, 1925, the Trade Union Act 1927 and the Department of Finance circular 14/1927.⁶²

An offer by the postal unions to provide sufficient staff to maintain 'humanitarian services' was rejected by the Post Office as it would not engage in dialogue with the strike organisers.⁶³ After two weeks on strike, the union indicated that it was prepared to accept the terms outlined on 9 September. Efforts by Douglas to re-engage with government representatives on these lines were rebuked by Walsh who displayed a steely determination not to capitulate to the striking workers. His government colleagues were, according to Blythe, bemused by his antics as he spent every morning 'doing a round of the other Ministers and gingering them up for fear that they should weaken and make a settlement which would be equivalent to a

⁵⁸ *DD*, 11 Sept. 1922, vol 1, no 2, cols. 130-1; *Voice of Labour*, 16 Sept. 1922.

⁵⁹ *DD*, 11 Sept. 1922, vol. 1, no. 2, cols. 130-1.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, cols. 109-12.

⁶¹ Ernest Blythe (Irish Military Archives (hereafter IMA), Bureau of Military History (hereafter BMH), Witness Statement (hereafter WS) 939), p. 163.

⁶² Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 174. See also *DD*, 19 Mar. 1925, vol. 10, no. 15, cols. 1233-55.

⁶³ *FJ*, 14 Sept. 1922.

Government surrender'.⁶⁴ He bears responsibility for needlessly prolonging the dispute. Douglas warned Cosgrave of the public reaction should the government's unwillingness to renew its original offer become known.⁶⁵

The strike was organised by a joint committee of three postal unions – the IPU, the Irish Postal Workers' Union (IPWU) and the Irish Post Office Engineering Union.⁶⁶ It had the overwhelming support of both urban and rural members. For example, the IPWU voted 1,832 for and 214 against the strike.⁶⁷ Estimates of the numbers of striking postal workers vary. Union sources claimed that 12,000 were on strike and that only two per cent continued to work.⁶⁸ On 16 September the *Irish Times* reported 7,247 striking workers nationwide of which 2,650 were striking in Dublin city.⁶⁹ On 28 September as many as 5,000 postal workers attended a rally at the Mansion House 'in defence' of their rights, including the right to strike.⁷⁰

The unity of purpose of the postal strike took Walsh by surprise. Yet his dogged efforts to depict the dispute as a 'complete conspiracy against the people' and to ascribe political motives to it helped to undermine any swell of public support for the strikers.⁷¹ Walsh was even more vehement than O'Higgins that the anti-Treaty IRA would take advantage of the disruption and he requested the deployment of police and the army. On 12 September the Minister for Defence, at Walsh's request, issued instructions to the army to prevent the congregation of persons 'at such points' that might facilitate 'the possible rushing of any building by men operating under the shelter of a crowd'.⁷² Soldiers were deployed in the immediate vicinity of the central sorting office on Dublin's Amiens Street.⁷³ Walsh also obtained military intervention in Limerick, Kilkenny and Wexford and requested intervention in respect of local pickets

⁶⁴ Ernest Blythe (IMA, BMH, WS 936, p. 163); Douglas to Cosgrave, 18 Sept. 1922 (NLI, Douglas papers, MS 49,481/15).

⁶⁵ Douglas to Cosgrave, 18 Sept. 1922 (NLI, Douglas papers, MS 49,481/15).

⁶⁶ The leaders of these unions were – D.R. Hogan, IPU; P. Parkes, IPWU; and H.H. Donnan, Irish Post Office Engineering Union.

⁶⁷ Devine, *Communicating*, p. 118.

⁶⁸ *FJ*, 18 and 28 Sept. 1922.

⁶⁹ *IT*, 16 Sept. 1922.

⁷⁰ Devine, *Communicating*, p. 121.

⁷¹ *Voice of Labour*, 4 Mar. 1922.

⁷² Minister for Defence to Adjutant General, 12 Sept. 1922 (IMA, DOD-A-7023).

⁷³ *FJ*, 12 Sept. 1922.

in Mallow, Carrick-on-Shannon, Galway, Thurles, and Bray.⁷⁴ Notably, Mulcahy ordered his commanding officers to use 'tactful handling' and to control 'the rising temper' of those affected.⁷⁵

The circumstances of the Civil War conveniently allowed Walsh to make persistent but unsubstantiated charges that the postal dispute had been hijacked by the anti-Treaty IRA and that its leaders were 'a body of men armed with revolvers'.⁷⁶ The only arms produced were those of the military and intelligence officers when intimidating union pickets. Some postal workers were certainly sympathetic to the anti-Treaty position, but they were quickly identified. In Donegal, for example, the National army put a stop to the activities of a striker whose brother was a member of the anti-Treaty IRA.⁷⁷ The government responded to the strike as if it had been inspired by 'Irregulars', even though the evidence is clear that the cause was widespread discontent about pay and that the action was mandated by union members. The charges made by Walsh underscored the weakness of Labour in the Dáil and the lack of any real political opposition to challenge such spurious claims. In September 1922, weeks before his execution, Liam Mellows wrote despondently of Irish working-class conditions and cited the postal strike as a case in point of the failure of the labour movement to champion the cause of the working-classes.⁷⁸ The ILP&TUC had failed to provide any effective leadership and lacked a coherent strategy for dealing with the issues at the heart of the postal dispute. Congress effectively abandoned the postal unions and their members.

The cabinet and Walsh, in particular, were unwilling or unable to accept the postal dispute for what it was – a labour dispute arising from a grievance in relation to pay and conditions of employment – and not a political or military threat to the state. O'Higgins told the Dáil that '[t]his is not a trade dispute and that the provisions of the

⁷⁴ Walsh to Minister for Defence, 26 Sept. 1922 (IMA, 'A/' files, DOD-A-7023).

⁷⁵ Commander in Chief to Commanding Officer, 2nd Southern Command, 27 Sept. 1922 (IMA, 'A/' files, DOD-A-7023).

⁷⁶ Walsh to [probably] Irish Rate & Taxpayers Assoc., 16 Sept. 1922 (Irish Labour History Society Archives (hereafter ILHSA), Postal Dispute 1922, Box 1, MS 10/I.P.U./1-10).

⁷⁷ Commander in Chief to Commanding Officer, 1st Northern Division, 22 Sept. 1922 (IMA, 'A/' files, DOD-A-06949).

⁷⁸ Mellows to 'AS', 11 Sept. 1922 (UCDA, Fitzgerald papers, P80/298); Ferriter, *Transformation*, pp 256-7; Michael Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin party, 1916-1923* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 423.

Trade Disputes Act will not be applied'.⁷⁹ Numerous arrests and re-arrests of picketing workers were made until the right to picket peacefully was made clear by the courts in accordance with the Trade Disputes Act (1906).⁸⁰ Government intimidation of striking workers was pronounced from the outset. Shots were discharged over the heads of those on picket duty; pickets were arrested and detained without charge; drivers were forced to carry mail at gun-point; an armoured car was repeatedly driven at pickets; strikers were told by various soldiers that their orders were 'shoot-to-kill', even though no evidence exists that this was official policy.⁸¹ Union headquarters was raided by the military and those inside forced to vacate the building. A female striker was slightly wounded by a bullet at Crown Alley on 17 September.⁸² It was alleged that striking workers, including some females, were assaulted in Limerick by troops brandishing knuckle-dusters and revolvers. Appeals to the Minister for Defence by both the IPU and the ILP&TUC to conduct an inquiry into this incident went unanswered.⁸³ An internal army report claimed that 'the lady picketers distinguished themselves' in the fight and got what they deserved. The use of revolvers was denied.⁸⁴ Joe McGrath had been appointed director of intelligence in July 1922. He and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) presided over the harassment, detainment and arrest of Post Office Union officials.⁸⁵

The *Nationalist and Leinster Times* described the government as 'determined to use all possible power, forces, propaganda, and means to deny postal workers their claim to a living wage and their rights to carry into operation their functions as Trade Unionists'.⁸⁶ In the Dáil, Cathal O'Shannon decried the 'scrapping of every principle of individual liberty' by the government.⁸⁷ Government attempts to break the strike

⁷⁹ *DD*, 13 Sept. 1922, vol. 1, no. 4, cols. 239-40.

⁸⁰ O'Connor, *Syndicalism*, p. 159.

⁸¹ Transcript of telegrams: Martin [?] to *Daily News*, 11 Sept. 1922 and Martin [?] to Curtis, 14 Sept. 1922 (TNA, CO 739/7); Devine, *Communicating*, p. 121.

⁸² D.R. Hogan, IPU to Minister for Defence, 24 and 25 Sept. 1922, (IMA, 'A/' files, DOD-A-06953); Ferriter, *Transformation*, p. 256; O'Connor, *Syndicalism*, p. 159.

⁸³ Hogan, IPU to Minister for Defence, 25 Oct. 1922 and Tom Johnson to Minister for Defence, 10 Nov. 1922, (IMA, 'A/' files, DOD-A-06953).

⁸⁴ Captain Clinton, South Western Command, Limerick to Adjutant General, Portobello Barracks, [c. 14 Nov. 1922], (IMA, 'A/' files, DOD-A-06953).

⁸⁵ John Regan, *The Irish counter-revolution 1921-1936: treatyite politics and settlement in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 1999), p. 93.

⁸⁶ *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, 23 Sept. 1922.

⁸⁷ *DD*, 13 Sept. 1922, vol. 1, no. 4, cols. 233-4.

included offering release from Mountjoy prison to political prisoners, who were ex-Post Office staff or had experience of Post Office work and who were prepared to replace striking workers.⁸⁸ There is no evidence that anyone accepted the offer. Likewise, a call for postal service pensioners and ex-postal employees 'to volunteer their services' did not elicit any significant response.⁸⁹ Another strategy pursued by Walsh was to re-assign a number of non-striking Post Office officials to Cork in an attempt to break the strike there. This was opposed by General Emmet Dalton as it had the potential to alienate the support of workers and the local labour organisation when tensions were already high after the death of Collins.⁹⁰

The IPU was conscious of the legal requirements governing picketing and advised its members that peaceful picketing should be maintained 'no matter at what cost' and carried out in an 'orderly well-regulated fashion' and that no unnecessary hardship should be caused to the general public.⁹¹ Conflict with the police, military and the public was to be avoided.⁹² The irony of the government's 'forceful intervention' was that Walsh, who directed the police and military intimidation of striking workers, was a former postal worker and active trade unionist.⁹³ Walsh viewed the strike as a symptom of the general chaos then enveloping the country and subsequently recalled that 'at this critical juncture to smash such a well-organised strike was a salutary lesson to the general indiscipline which had then seemed to run riot through the land'.⁹⁴ In addition, P.S. O'Hegarty, secretary of the GPO, also a former Post Office clerk who had known Walsh through their work in the postal services and their membership of the IRB, had little time for trade unionists and actively urged the government to break trade unions completely.⁹⁵ He regarded civil servants as 'pampered and overpaid' and the Labour Party as 'rigid and selfish' and an 'ineffective' opposition in the Dáil.⁹⁶ His memoirs are saturated in vitriol for almost every

⁸⁸ Central Strike Committee to unknown recipient(s), 20 Sept. 1922 (ILHSA, Postal Strike 1922, Box 1, MS 10/1.P.U./1-10).

⁸⁹ Provisional government minutes, 10 Sept. 1922 (NAI, DT, S1798).

⁹⁰ Dalton to Minister for Defence, [Sept. 1922] (IMA, 'A' files, DOD-A-06953).

⁹¹ Secretary IPU to members, 12 Sept. 1922, (ILHSA, Postal Strike 1922, Box 1, MS 10/1.P.U./1-10).

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ferriter, *Transformation*, p. 256; O'Connor, *Syndicalism*, p. 159.

⁹⁴ J.J. Walsh, *Recollections of a rebel* (Tralee, 1944), pp 62-3.

⁹⁵ Yeates, *Dublin, 1921-4*, pp 129-30; Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 148.

⁹⁶ P.S. O'Hegarty, *The victory of Sinn Féin: how it won it, and how it used it* (Dublin, 1924), pp 177-8.

organisation other than the Provisional government, which, in his view, was 'practically blackmailed by every section of the community'.⁹⁷ Little wonder that Walsh and O'Hegarty proved such a lethal combination. One government TD, William Magennis, sought 'the absolute and unconditional surrender of the Postal Servants'.⁹⁸ It was clear that the normal labour relations process of negotiation and mediation would not be used.

As the postal dispute became more entangled with the events of the Civil War it was difficult, at times, to determine which was causing greater inconvenience to the public. In the eyes of the government the postal dispute was as much an attack on its authority as the Civil War and it was resolved to crush both. Andy Cope, the principal British civil servant then in Ireland reported: 'Peace prospects military and postal are at a heavy discount this week-end. Tired of pacts and compromises that lead nowhere and fortified by the Dail's vote of confidence, the Government appear determined to fight both battles out to the finish'.⁹⁹ Churchill's advice that 'the Provisional Government cannot do better than stand firm' was applied comprehensively.¹⁰⁰

How did the public respond to the strike which disrupted postal, telephone and telegraph services throughout the country? Predictably, business interests were concerned at the impact on trade which was described as 'being steadily paralysed'.¹⁰¹ The council of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce established a voluntary postal committee 'to assist in meeting the urgent needs of business men in the present emergency'.¹⁰² Its claims that this brought about the collapse of the strike fell wide of the mark.¹⁰³ Some businesses and individuals also made illicit use of the British army post office, the only postal service not affected.¹⁰⁴ The inconvenience caused to the public, many of whom depended on the Post Office for the delivery of financial support such as pensions and financial remittances from abroad, did not generate any

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 177.

⁹⁸ *DD*, 14 Sept. 1922, vol. 1, no. 5, cols. 315-6.

⁹⁹ Cope to Lionel Curtis [A colonial office adviser on Irish affairs], 15 Sept. 1922 (TNA, CO 739/7).

¹⁰⁰ Churchill to Cope, 24 Aug. 1922 (TNA, CO 739/6).

¹⁰¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 18 Sept. 1922.

¹⁰² Report of the Council of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce for the year 1922 (Dublin, 1923), p. 18.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁰⁴ Memo and instruction from Captain Griggs to military units, Dublin and District, 22 Sept. 1922 (PML, Post 47/1900).

significant indignation. The *Irish Independent* reported how the public ‘generally take the situation stoically and evince little interest in the controversy’.¹⁰⁵ Other reports claimed that upwards of 2,000 people happily queued at the central postal sorting centres in Dublin each day for letters.¹⁰⁶ The impact may have been great but it was borne as just another inconvenience during disturbed times. The strike was also relatively short. By late September it was on the verge of collapse and there were reports that some staff had returned to work.¹⁰⁷

After almost three weeks of military and police harassment and intimidation settlement terms were agreed and the dispute ended on 29 September. The government forced through the pay cuts and the only concession won by the unions was that the cuts would be spread over three months – an offer made before the strike but rejected. Three-eighths of the reduction took place from 1 September and the balance was deducted from 1 December. Attempts by the postal unions to disguise the extent of their defeat prompted Walsh to publish the terms of the settlement in the press on 28 September and in *Iris an Phoist* on 18 October.¹⁰⁸ Douglas was central to the settlement and, believing Walsh was intent on punishing ringleaders, persuaded the cabinet to give an undertaking that there would be no retribution.¹⁰⁹ Walsh did not adhere to the undertaking.

Walsh’s surviving papers are silent on the postal dispute. That he remained embittered is evident in his 1944 memoir:

The Post Office staff, which had never dared say “boo” while the British were here, took strike action before we had time to get into our stride. We could scarcely help feeling aggrieved at what we considered a stab in the back, and in particular, observing that the Postal Workers’ Organisation covered the thirty-two counties, the strike was confined to the twenty-six.¹¹⁰

This was in stark contrast to Walsh’s ingratiating sentiments towards his staff which appeared in *Iris an Phoist* in March 1922.¹¹¹ Ernest Blythe made a similar claim in his statement to the BMH that no strike would have taken place if the British government

¹⁰⁵ *II*, 20 Sept. 1922.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 14 Sept. 1922.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 27 Sept. 1922.

¹⁰⁸ *Iris an Phoist*, no. 16, 18 Oct. 1922, p. 195; Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 147.

¹⁰⁹ *Iris an Phoist*, no. 16, 18 Oct. 1922, p. 195.

¹¹⁰ Walsh, *Recollections*, p. 61.

¹¹¹ *Iris an Phoist*, no. 1, 15 Mar. 1922, p. 1.

had still been in power and accused the striking workers of endeavouring to take advantage of an Irish government which 'seemed weak and likely to yield to extreme pressure'.¹¹² Walsh's depiction of meek postal workers under British administration does not have any real foundation. While many postal workers were unable to participate in the general strike against conscription in 1918, much to the regret of their unions, most postal workers participated in the general strike of 13 – 14 April 1920 in support of the release of Irish political prisoners. Walsh was one of those prisoners. That was the first ever strike by Irish postal staff and was regarded with some astonishment by the civil service as British civil servants were most reluctant to contemplate strike action.¹¹³

Following the collapse of the strike, the Postal Commission resumed its sittings on 31 October.¹¹⁴ It recommended that a new Grade 'A' postman should get an increase of 3 s. per week for undertaking changes to their duties, and a Grade 'B' postman would remain on existing duties and wages.¹¹⁵ This recommendation set in train an exchange of combative correspondence between the Department of Finance and the Office of the PMG. Finance was determined to enforce financial controls over all departments. In an ironic twist, and perhaps indicative of a turf war, Walsh made strenuous efforts to enhance the commission's recommendation to the Grade 'B' postman. This was in complete contrast to his belligerent attitude during the course of the strike when he steadfastly stood by the principle that the Irish government could not countenance a situation where civil servants would be paid a higher rate than their counterparts in the British civil service for doing similar work. In a Pauline conversion, Walsh now maintained that '[w]ages in Ireland must stand upon Irish conditions and not what any other country does'.¹¹⁶ By May 1923 the relationship between Walsh and Finance had moved from fraught to the verge of collapse. Walsh was well noted for his bombastic attitude.¹¹⁷ C. F. Ryan, a Finance official on loan from London, recalled how the PMG 'delivered salvoes of his massed heavy artillery for over half an hour' on the

¹¹² Ernest Blythe (BMH, WS 939, pp 162-3).

¹¹³ Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 57; Devine, *Communicating*, p. 76.

¹¹⁴ *Report of the commission of enquiry into the post office – first part*, 11 Dec. 1922.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*; Gregg to Sec., G.P.O., 26 Mar., 1923 (NAI, DT, S890A).

¹¹⁶ Gregg to Sec., G.P.O., 26 Mar., 1923 and Sec. G.P.O. to Gregg, 18 April 1923 (NAI, DT, S890A).

¹¹⁷ Michael Laffan, *Judging W.T. Cosgrave: the foundation of the Irish State* (Dublin, 2014), p. 171.

3s. increase for grade B postmen and even threatened a strike.¹¹⁸ However, Finance remained adamantly opposed to any increase in public spending. Exasperated and having exhausted all avenues with the Department of Finance, Walsh referred the matter to a meeting of the Executive Council.¹¹⁹ The lack of any further mention of this matter in the Executive Council's minutes would suggest that the Department of Finance got its way.

Despite the undertaking given collectively by the cabinet and the personal assurances provided to both the Labour Party and Douglas by President Cosgrave, there were numerous instances of victimisation of workers who had gone on strike.¹²⁰ The unions complained to the government that temporary workers had been dismissed, non-striking workers had been promoted, and that striking workers had been forced to transfer or retire.¹²¹ This action bore similarities to the government's purge of republicans who held seats on public bodies, worked in the civil service or who drew government salaries. Suspicion of supporting the anti-Treaty side was sufficient grounds to transfer staff to another part of the country. In May 1927 Walsh caused consternation by appointing his brother to the post of assistant superintendent and promoting his private secretary to the position of superintendent over long-serving staff.¹²² Walsh's actions went against the government's obsession with probity in matters of public appointments for which reason a Civil Service Commission had been established in November 1922.¹²³ Although Cosgrave insisted that appointments should be based on merit, efficiency, and suitability, there is no indication that Walsh was rebuked for his flagrant violation of this.

In May 1927 Walsh accused the postal staff in Dublin of incompetence and indiscipline and of having become 'completely out of hand' under the British administration.¹²⁴ Little wonder that the Post Office Workers' Union (POWU) called for

¹¹⁸ Report by C.F. Ryan titled 'Analysis of Situation – Post Office Reorganisation', 9 May 1922 (NAI, DT, S890A).

¹¹⁹ Ruani Conganta to Cosgrave, 14 June, 1923 (NAI, DT, S890A).

¹²⁰ IPU to O'Hegarty, 18 Oct. 1922 (ILHSA, Postal Strike 1922 Box 1, MS 10/1.P.U./1-10); *An Dón*, June 1923.

¹²¹ United Postal Unions to Douglas, 17 Nov. 1922 (ILHSA, Postal Strike 1922, Box 1, MS 10/1.P.U./1-10).

¹²² Gavin M. Foster, *The Irish civil war and society: politics, class and conflict* (Basingstoke and New York, 2015) p. 181; Devine, *Communicating*, p. 134.

¹²³ Laffan, *Cosgrave*, pp 180-2.

¹²⁴ *DD*, 4 May 1927, vol. 19, no 20, cols. 2142-3.

his dismissal at its annual conference two weeks later. Walsh retaliated by vindictively withdrawing official recognition from the POWU due to 'its association with the scurrilous attacks' made on his department.¹²⁵ This action was authorised by the Executive Council.¹²⁶ The *Irish Times* accused Walsh of having dishonoured his office and expressed concern that his behaviour might indicate a fall in professional standards within the IFS government.¹²⁷ His departure from office was universally welcomed. The *Irish Times* described Walsh as 'an erratic administrator, a stormy politician, and a dangerous economist' and suggested the government's prospects would be improved without him.¹²⁸ Ernest Blythe, his successor, proved just as contemptuous of staff and unions.¹²⁹

The final report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Post Office was not published until March 1925. It acknowledged that the government 'found themselves unable to justify acceptance in full' of its recommendations. A minority report by Labour representatives accused the government of materially altering the recommendations. In addition, it claimed that the government, by ignoring the commission's unanimous recommendations in its two previous reports, 'stultified the action of the commission and rendered futile their efforts' and caused the strike.¹³⁰ In setting up the Postal Commission, Collins was anxious that 'the first Irish Commission of its kind should be done well'.¹³¹ In the circumstances, the members of the commission did do well, but the government's attitude towards the dispute, the strike action and the commission demonstrated ineptitude and a lack of familiarity with the sensitivities of labour relations. Other civil service staff associations had remained aloof from the postal strike, but the government's assertion that they did not have a right to strike was viewed as autocratic.¹³² Many public service trade unionists had not forgotten that members of the same government had applauded strikes by civil

¹²⁵ Decision of Minister for Posts & Telegraphs to withdraw official recognition from POWU, 20 May 1927 (NAI, DC, vol. 1, D189/41).

¹²⁶ Unsigned Dept. of Posts & Telegraphs memo [probably by P. O'Hegarty], 19 May 1927 (NAI, DC, vol. 1, D189/41); *IT*, 21 May 1927.

¹²⁷ *IT*, 21 May 1922.

¹²⁸ Ciara Meehan, *Cosgrave party: a history of Cumann na nGaedheal, 1923-33* (Dublin, 2010), p. 133; *IT*, 5 Sept. 1927.

¹²⁹ Devine, *Communicating*, p. 91.

¹³⁰ *Final report of the commission of inquiry into the post office*, 19 Mar. 1925.

¹³¹ Collins to Douglas, 24 Mar. 1922 (NLI, Douglas papers, MS 49,581/74).

¹³² Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 147.

servants in support of Irish political prisoners in April 1920.¹³³ The government did subsequently reorganise the postal service and this secured greater efficiencies whereby its financial deficit was reduced from £1.2m in 1922 to £413,000 by 1926.¹³⁴

Ronan Fanning reveals that no provision had been made in the estimates for a significant outlay on the post office arising from the recommendations of the Postal Commission. It appears that it was only ever intent on introducing pay cuts.¹³⁵ The rationale for establishing a postal commission was unclear given the government's desire for retrenchment and the sacrosanct principle of not paying wages above the levels applicable to similar grades in the British civil service. It was largely an attempt to postpone industrial unrest as the Treaty split deepened. But it raised expectations for postal workers and that, as we have seen, had significant consequences.

While the postal dispute ended in failure, it fostered a new sense of solidarity which saw the amalgamation of the IPU and the IPWU to form the Post Office Workers' Union in 1923. Outstanding grievances arising from the 1922 postal dispute were not finally resolved until 1932 when the new Fianna Fáil administration restored increments and nineteen days' service to those who had been on strike.¹³⁶ Cumann na nGaedhael intransigence on this issue indicated a stubbornness which undermined the development of sound employee relations. In place of nurturing any legislation aimed at advancing good labour practices in 1926 the government proceeded to introduce repressive legislation, in the wake of the British general strike, which had the effect of breaking legal strikes and threatening strikers with military conscription.¹³⁷ In addition, any doubt about the right of civil servants to strike was extinguished by Civil Service (Approved Associations) Regulations in 1927 which were designed to suppress any public display of civil service discontent including 'the withdrawal of labour'.¹³⁸ This uncompromising position lasted until the defeat of Cumann na nGaedheal in 1932.¹³⁹

¹³³ Yeates, *Dublin, 1921-4*, p. 130.

¹³⁴ Memo by Desmond Fitzgerald on 'Activities of Post and Telegraphs since August 1923', 1929, (NAI, DC, H10269/53).

¹³⁵ Fanning, *Finance*, p. 50.

¹³⁶ Sec. Dept. Posts & Telegraphs to POWU, 19 Oct. 1932 (ILHSA, Postal Strike 1922, Box 2, MS 10/I.P.U./11-20); Yeates, *Dublin, 1921-4*, p. 132.

¹³⁷ *DD*, 13 May 1926, vol. 15, no. 14, cols 1510-1535; Mitchell, *Labour*, p. 230.

¹³⁸ Devine, *Communicating*, pp 141-2.

¹³⁹ Memo by Desmond Fitzgerald on 'Activities of Post and Telegraphs since August 1923', 1929, (NAI, DC, H10269/53).

Its attitude to a range of issues associated with the postal dispute – the right to strike, peaceful picketing agreed arbitration and victimisation – clearly indicated that the struggle for social justice was only just beginning. The intimidation of striking workers, its intolerance, Walsh's call for support from Britain, and its campaign of victimisation challenge the narrative that 1922 was the birth of Irish democracy.

II

Agriculture was profoundly affected by the post-war slump which ended a period of extraordinary prosperity due to the demands of the First World War. Production had contracted severely and farming overheads had increased by between 80 and 100 per cent.¹⁴⁰ In November 1922 a Commission on Agriculture was established to enquire into the causes of depression and suggest remedies. At this time it was estimated that three-quarters of the wealth generated in the IFS was farm produce.¹⁴¹ Notably, farm labourers were excluded from the terms of reference even though they were central to the industry. In his evidence to the commission, T.P. Gill, secretary of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (DATI), suggested that a significant factor in the strained relationship between farmer and labourer was that each was 'shut up in a caste – the farmer locked into one, the labourer locked out in one'.¹⁴² Whereas farmers and businessmen had generally achieved much of what they had aspired to, the quest for material improvements and even personal dignity continued for many workers in the early years of independence.¹⁴³

Social unrest, particularly in rural Ireland, gradually turned into struggles against wage cuts imposed by farmers and these circumstances undoubtedly fostered further hard-line stances among labourers and farmers.¹⁴⁴ The purchase of a holding was beyond the means of a farm labourer, no matter how industrious. In such circumstances the farming class carved out its own special place in Irish society but

¹⁴⁰ *Report of the commission on agriculture* (Dublin, 1924), pp 27-8; Brian Meehan, *The Irish economy since 1922* (Liverpool, 1970), p. 92.

¹⁴¹ *Report of the commission on agriculture*, pp 5, 26.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Marilyn Silverman, *An Irish working class: exploration in political economy and hegemony, 1800-1950* (Toronto, 2001), p. 280.

¹⁴⁴ Olivier Coquelin, 'Class struggle in the 1916-1923 Irish revolution: a reappraisal', *Études Irlandaises*, 42:2 (Automne-hiver 2017), p. 31.

condemned agriculture to 'a species of in-breeding.'¹⁴⁵ The land question burned brightly in post-independent Ireland and land agitation had the potential to damage its social fabric. Farm labourers and small farmers felt extreme dissatisfaction with existing conditions, not only with their employer's attempts to cut wages and the slow pace of land distribution but also with their failure to win concessions through strike action, negotiations and land seizures.¹⁴⁶

The report of the Commission on Agriculture which was not endorsed by the commissions' labour representatives, was accepted by Patrick Hogan, the Minister for Agriculture, and it became the basis of Cumann na nGaedheal policy on both agriculture and the economy generally. As Professor George O'Brien, himself a member of the commission later put it: 'The principal aim of agricultural policy in the Free State should ... be the maximization of farmers' income and not ... the provision of food for the urban population or the solution of the unemployment problem'.¹⁴⁷ So it proved under Hogan who did nothing to improve the pay and conditions of farm labourers who made up a large section of the industry. His priority was the exportation of as much agricultural produce as possible for the best price.¹⁴⁸ Critical of the high wages paid to local authority labourers which pushed up agricultural wages, Hogan was adamant that the government should assist farmers by reducing farming costs.¹⁴⁹

As one of four counties with more than two labourers for every farmer, Waterford ranked as a relatively favourable location for trade unionism in agriculture. The ITGWU re-established a branch in Waterford city in 1917 and formed its first county branch in Dungarvan in February 1918. From there the number of branches in the county increased rapidly but in an uncoordinated manner. Liberty Hall had little effective control over rural branches. Many small branches with a motley membership posed problems for wage bargaining and strike policy. However, it promoted a class solidarity that was underpinned by parish loyalties. Ranged against the labourers was the Waterford Farmers' Association (WFA) chaired by Sir John Keane. He told the 1922

¹⁴⁵ *Report of the commission on agriculture*, p. 70.

¹⁴⁶ Coquelin, 'Class struggle', p. 34.

¹⁴⁷ O'Connor, *Waterford*, pp 180-1.

¹⁴⁸ Joan M. Cullen, 'Patrick J. Hogan, T.D., Minister for Agriculture, 1922-1932: A study of a leading member of the first government of Independent Ireland' (PhD. DCU 1993), p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ Mary E. Daly, *The first department: a history of the department of agriculture* (Dublin, 2002), p. 126.

AGM that by treating labourers generously the WFA had bought peace but called on farmers to be united 'if labour raises the Red Flag of Revolution again'.¹⁵⁰ Keane's papers reveal a determined, industrious and outspoken businessman and landowner eager to maintain the privileges of his class.¹⁵¹ Post-war syndicalist trade unionism among rural labour had sent shock waves through the Irish Farmers' Union (IFU) leadership as the prospect of radical land distribution surfaced.¹⁵² Calls by Congress for 're-establishing workers on the land now enjoyed by the bullocks' only intensified farmers' anxieties.¹⁵³

The determination of the WFA to force wage cuts led to a short-lived strike in 1922 and to a wave of thirteen strikes in 1923, involving more than 3,000 workers, in Waterford city and county.¹⁵⁴ In 1922 a strike among farm labourers was triggered when Keane and other landowners in west Waterford reduced wages from 33s. to 30s. per week. The dispute lasted from 23 May to 5 August 1922. Liberty Hall's advice that a reduction of 3s. be accepted was viewed as a betrayal by local union organisers in Waterford and revealed significant tensions between headquarters and rural branches. During the dispute, farmers in Waterford complained of 'outrageous intimidation' by the striking labourers, including the theft and destruction of property.¹⁵⁵ The aggressive tactics of the farm labourers combined with the lawlessness of the Civil War affected many relatively isolated landed families. For example Emily Usher complained that farm labourers in Dungarvan were 'terrorising all the farmers' and she believed, as many landlords did, that the agitation had been organised by communists and that a demand for higher wages was cover for land grabbing.¹⁵⁶ While there is some evidence that anti-Treaty elements took advantage of agrarian unrest, the dominant issue in Waterford was wages.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁰ O'Connor, *Waterford*, p. 169.

¹⁵¹ See Sir John Keane papers, Cappoquin House.

¹⁵² Tony Varley, 'The politics of 'holding the balance': Irish farmers' parties and the land redistribution in the twentieth century' in Fergus Campbell & Tony Varley (eds), *Land questions in modern Ireland* (Manchester, 2013), p. 242.

¹⁵³ CAR (1922), p. 125.

¹⁵⁴ Pat McCarthy, *Waterford: the Irish Revolution, 1912-23* (Dublin, 2015), p. 121.

¹⁵⁵ Windygap Farmers' Assoc., Waterford to Provisional government, [c. 29 May 1922] (NAI, DJ H156/2).

¹⁵⁶ Kevin O'Sheil to Éamonn Duggan, 14 June 1922 (NAI, DJ, H156/4).

¹⁵⁷ O'Connor, *Waterford*, p. 171.

As the public persona of the large landowners in Waterford, Keane's holdings attracted much unwanted attention. In June thirteen bullocks and some prime dairy cows were removed from his farm. Keane reported the matter to the local IRA.¹⁵⁸ He informed his solicitor of the challenges that he faced: 'All my men are out on strike, the whole place is surrounded by pickets, my cows are being milked and the proceeds confiscated, no food is allowed into the house and one is wondering what will happen'.¹⁵⁹ The lack of government and police control in the Waterford area facilitated the spread and development of lawlessness among striking labourers. In response to a request from the Department of Home Affairs to provide police protection for the Duke of Devonshire's land agent on the Lismore Castle estate, the Chief of Police regretted that he was unable to do so as 'the police in that district refuse to recognise my authority'.¹⁶⁰ Keane's diary recorded that his staff returned to work on the Cappoquin House estate on 3 July without any settlement.¹⁶¹ While political circumstances enabled a labour victory in parts of the county, the strike was a wake-up call for the farmers who lacked organisation and unity of purpose. They were better prepared for the next wave of agitation in 1923 which saw the coming together of landowners and tenant farmers, classes whose interests were often antagonistic.¹⁶²

As was the case during the postal dispute, the government became increasingly concerned that if labour unrest went unchecked, its authority would be undermined and its electoral base among larger farmers would be imperilled.¹⁶³ The government was predisposed to support the farmers in their dispute with the labourers and to deploy military force to protect trade and property. This was all the more pertinent in

¹⁵⁸ Keane to Moloney & Son, Solicitors, 16 June 1922 (Cappoquin House, Sir John Keane papers, Box 12; Folder 1); Emmet O'Connor, 'Agrarian unrest and the labour movement in Waterford 1917-1923', *Saothar*, 6 (1980), p. 52; Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland: popular militancy, 1917-1924* (2nd ed. Cork, 2009), p. 202; McCarthy, *Waterford*, p. 103.

¹⁵⁹ Keane to Moloney & Son, Solicitors, 10 June 1922 (Cappoquin House, Keane papers, Box 12; Folder 2).

¹⁶⁰ Dept. of Home Affairs to Chief of Police, 10 June 1922 and Chief of Police to Dept. of Home Affairs, 19 June 1922 (NAI, DJ, H156/5).

¹⁶¹ Keane diary entry, 3 July 1922 (Cappoquin House, Sir John Keane papers, Box 19; Item 4).

¹⁶² M.B. McAuliffe to Minister for Agriculture, 27 May 1923, (NLI, DJ, H156/16); C. Desmond Greaves, *The Irish Transport and General Workers' Union: the formative years, 1909-1923* (Dublin, 1982), p. 322.

¹⁶³ Terence Dooley, *The land for the people: The land question in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2004), p. 50.

a dispute in which the concept of property ownership was being challenged.¹⁶⁴ For some trade unionists, the Waterford dispute represented the social partition of a country that had been 'divided into a nation of property and a nation of no property' as Luke Duffy, acting ITGWU president, put it. In the case of Waterford, Duffy lamented the fact that the traditional support for agricultural workers - 'the nationally minded small employers' - no longer prevailed.¹⁶⁵

In May 1923, the Department of Agriculture's conciliator, M.B. McAuliffe, found it impossible to bridge the gap between the WFA's desire to reduce labourers' wages by at least 5s. per week and the union's demand to hold wages at 1920 levels. In addition, the WFA also insisted on the abolition of all bonuses. This was a crucial issue for farm labourers who depended on the harvest bonus each year to maintain their frugal living conditions.¹⁶⁶ Liberty Hall initially pressed the labourers to make concessions but subsequently agreed to support the strike which began on 17 May 1923 and was mainly confined to east Waterford where 'practically every farmer and farm labourer' was affected.¹⁶⁷ Reflecting a decline in union membership, a total of 1,500 went on strike compared to 2,352 in 1922. The first phase of the dispute was marked by union aggression and confidence. The strike quickly spread through the sympathetic action of dockers, railwaymen, shop assistants, carters, creamery and factory workers who withdrew their services from farmers.¹⁶⁸

A volatile situation developed in Waterford. When farm labourers affiliated to the ITGWU became more militant the farmers banded together and engaged in vigilantism against labour activists. In June 1923 a WFA deputation to Kevin O'Higgins expressed their frustration with the government's failure to deal effectively with acts of intimidation and destruction by the strikers. The Minister for Home Affairs was supplied with details of harassment including assaults, boycotting, holding up cars, cattle driving, destruction of crops and hay, the prevention of deliveries of coal,

¹⁶⁴ Fergus D'Arcy and Ken Hannigan (eds), *Workers in union: documents and commentaries on the history of Irish labour* (Dublin, 1988), p. 175.

¹⁶⁵ CAR (1923), p. 51.

¹⁶⁶ O'Connor, *Waterford*, pp 181-3; Greaves, *The ITGWU*, p. 322.

¹⁶⁷ O'Connor, *Waterford*, p. 183.

¹⁶⁸ O'Connor, 'Agrarian unrest in County Waterford', pp 48-9.

manure, butter and milk, and the intimidation of shopkeepers.¹⁶⁹ The local judiciary refrained from imposing harsh sanctions lest they inflame the situation. This formed a further complaint by the WFA who warned O'Higgins that if the National army was not deployed 'young impulsive' members of the WFA would take matters into their own hands.¹⁷⁰ There was a steely determination by farmers 'to fight the dispute to the end' and the general secretary of the IFU claimed that Waterford farmers had received offers of financial and manpower support from across the country.¹⁷¹

With the Civil War winding down, the government came under sustained pressure from business and farming interests to take action. The expectation of a poor harvest generated fears of additional strikes.¹⁷² To send a strong message to other pending labour disputes within the farming community, the government's response to the Waterford unrest was swift and determined. The CID was redirected against 'agrarian irregularism' and the Special Infantry Corps (SIC) was established to act as a type of military police. Thus the IFS government decided, similar to the postal strike and under the pretext of the Civil War, to utilise strong-arm tactics to suppress the strike. In June, 250 SIC were dispatched to Waterford to replace regular troops and a total of 600 SIC were eventually deployed.¹⁷³ Military intervention, which doomed the Waterford strike and facilitated the demise of the postal strike, was not unusual in labour disputes. The IFS government followed the example of British governments which deployed police and military resources in certain trade disputes, particularly those which posed a threat to the supply of critical goods, such as coal or railway infrastructure and threatened the economy.¹⁷⁴ The legal and military power of the state was also regularly used against workers in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁷⁵ The Waterford dispute presented new challenges for an army with little experience of militant labour conflict and little

¹⁶⁹ Foster, *Politics, class and conflict*, p. 138.

¹⁷⁰ WFA to Kevin O'Higgins, 25 June 1923, (NAI, DJ, H156/16).

¹⁷¹ *IT*, 19 June 1923.

¹⁷² Intelligence report no. 5 for week ending 23 June 1923 (UCDA, Mulcahy papers, P7/B/139).

¹⁷³ Eunan O'Hallpin, *Defending Ireland: the Irish State and its enemies since 1922* (New York, 1999), p. 44; O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 121.

¹⁷⁴ On this see Fraser, *History of British trade unionism*; Roger Geary, *Policing industrial disputes; 1893-1985* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 44.

¹⁷⁵ Frances Fox-Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor people's movements: why they succeed and how they fail* (New York, 1977), p. 102.

appetite for maintaining civil order. The army was also concerned at the likelihood that the strike could spread to other areas if an early and satisfactory settlement could not be reached.¹⁷⁶

The SIC manned a chain of outposts throughout the affected areas, protected farmers' property and 'scab' labour from attack, escorted goods and conducted arms and ammunition searches. By the end of June the SIC had a firm grip on the county but no settlement was in sight. What began as an industrial dispute had gradually evolved into outright class conflict.¹⁷⁷ A special meeting of the Waterford Workers' Council pledged full support for the farm labourers and regarded the deployment of SIC as an attack on the working-class. Senator Michael Duffy, a trade union official and member of the Labour Party, met striking labourers in mid-June and urged restraint, in the face of provocation by farmers, and the avoidance of conflict with the military.¹⁷⁸ These meetings had a calming effect on the striking labourers.¹⁷⁹

The government's backing of farmers, implicit in the intervention of the SIC, was, according to O'Connor, the signal to other employers to join in the conflict. On 5 June employers in Dungarvan formed a Protection Association, pledging support for the WFA and warned employees who refused to handle 'tainted' goods that they would be dismissed. By mid-June employers throughout the county coordinated their efforts and supplied labour to one another for essential purposes. Alarmed at the mounting cost of supplying strike pay, Liberty Hall accepted the necessity of a compromise on the reduction of wages. The WFA refused Minister Hogan's suggestion that the matter be sent to arbitration.¹⁸⁰

By June intelligence reports suggested that a significant proportion of farm labourers had become disillusioned with the strike and were anxious to return to work.¹⁸¹ The WFA took advantage by demanding that returning employees sever their connection with the ITGWU and accept a weekly wage lower than that offered at

¹⁷⁶ Secret army report No. 3 for week-ending 9 June 1923 (UCDA, Fitzgerald papers, P80/727(6)).

¹⁷⁷ O'Connor, 'Agrarian unrest', p. 49.

¹⁷⁸ Waterford Workers' Council to O'Higgins, 5 June 1923 (NAI, DJ, H156/16); *IT*, 19 June 1923.

¹⁷⁹ Military daily operations report, 18 June 1923 (IMA, CW/OPS/10/11).

¹⁸⁰ Report of conference between Ministry of Agriculture and the ITGWU, 3 July 1923 (NAI, DT, S 3119); O'Connor, *Waterford*, 186-7; O'Connor, 'Agrarian unrest', pp 50-1.

¹⁸¹ Chief Superintendent, Waterford to Garda Commissioner (hereafter GC), 6 June 1923 (NAI, DT, H156/16).

the beginning of the strike. Privately, a majority of the WFA accepted the unconditional return to work of employees.¹⁸² This was a significant step in collapsing the strike.¹⁸³ The threat of reprisals by farmers against continuing attacks on property prompted the government to introduce curfew orders and martial law on 4 July.¹⁸⁴ So too did military intelligence reports that suggested that the Irregulars in the county were 'of the labouring community themselves'.¹⁸⁵ National army intelligence reports from Waterford for May and June 1923 contained dire warnings of republicans and strikers combining their efforts.¹⁸⁶ As with the 1922 postal dispute, the drawing of spurious connections between republicans and striking workers gave legitimacy to a heavy-handed approach to troublesome labour disputes which had the potential to increase political instability. Hugh Kennedy, the government's senior legal advisor, argued that disorder would have to be overcome by 'utterly ruthless action'.¹⁸⁷ One commanding officer in Waterford was instructed to: 'Use no half measures. Make an example of the place'.¹⁸⁸ The number of convictions handed out by military courts overwhelmed Waterford jail and a temporary prison camp was set up in the grounds of the courthouse. Over an eight-month period, 371 men had been arrested and detained, 173 for agrarian offences. The police and SIC were intent on conducting whole scale arrests of striking labourers on the slightest of evidence.¹⁸⁹

While the government did not publicly condone the extreme actions of the WFA, the trade union movement was convinced that state agencies sided with the farmers.¹⁹⁰ Labourers who returned to work were intimidated by union members who remained on strike; some were forced to return to the picket lines.¹⁹¹ An intensified campaign of outrages saw the burning of homes and winter fodder, the spiking of fields, the maiming of animals and the issuing of death threats against farmers. This

¹⁸² WFA to Branch Chairman, Secretary, and delegates of Co. Executive and strike leaders, 12 July 1923 (NAI, DJ, H156/16).

¹⁸³ McAuliffe to Minister for Agriculture, 13 July 1923 (Ibid.).

¹⁸⁴ Secret army report No. 6 for week-ending 30 June 1923 (UCDA, Fitzgerald papers, P80/727(9)); Executive Council minutes, 18 June 1923 (NAI, DT, S 3110).

¹⁸⁵ Secret army report No. 6 for week-ending 30 June 1923 (UCDA, Fitzgerald papers, P80/727(9)).

¹⁸⁶ McCarthy, *Waterford*, pp 125-6.

¹⁸⁷ Tom Garvin, *1922: the birth of Irish democracy* (Dublin, 2005), p. 171.

¹⁸⁸ McCarthy, *Waterford*, p. 123.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., pp 123-4.

¹⁹⁰ O'Connor, *Waterford*, p. 190.

¹⁹¹ Chief Garda superintendent, Waterford to GC, 18 July 1923 (NAI, DJ, H156/16).

reflected a growing sense of desperation among the striking labourers.¹⁹² Some young farmers took to carrying arms and threatening labourers; others matched fire with fire. On 18 August the home of the ITGWU branch secretary in Dunmore was set alight by eight men, two of whom carried revolvers.¹⁹³ Personal assaults and the destruction and arson of property belonging to local ITGWU organisers intensified during the months of August and September.¹⁹⁴ By the end of the dispute, outrages had turned full circle as attacks on farmers had practically ceased but those on the property of labourers had increased. The burning of labourers' cottages only began after the arrival of the CID in Waterford, leading to claims by locals that 'government forces' were involved in the attacks and that some of the perpetrators had been 'seen in uniform'.¹⁹⁵ The local Garda superintendent described the CID in the county as 'a law unto themselves'. Their efficiency was questionable as they had failed to discover information which might have led to legal prosecutions. Yet, the commanding officer in Waterford spoke highly of the conduct of CID officers, leaving the Department of Justice to conclude that 'farmers' sons must be responsible for the burning of labourers' cottages'.¹⁹⁶

The arrival of the SIC facilitated the farmers in organising the 'White Guards', a local vigilante group, who also robbed, raided and burned the cottages and homes of strikers and union activists throughout the Waterford countryside. At least one victim, the son of a striking labourer, was shot, though not fatally.¹⁹⁷ Even though the deployment of the SIC was mainly directed at the protection of the landowners and large farmers, there was a growing awareness by government officials that labourers were as much, if not more, in need of military protection as farmers threatened reprisals if 'any outrages' were committed against their property.¹⁹⁸ The WFA consistently ignored any illegalities perpetrated by farmers and by so doing only encouraged this type of activity. The authorities were increasingly uncertain as to how

¹⁹² Report on 'The Waterford farm strike' by the WFA, 18 Oct. 1923 (Ibid.).

¹⁹³ Chief Garda superintendent, Waterford to GC, 18 July and 25 Aug. 1923 and P. Courtney, Organiser, Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS) to R.A. Anderson, Secretary, IAOS, 3 Aug. 1923 (Ibid.).

¹⁹⁴ Chief Garda superintendent, Waterford to GC, 26 Oct. 1923 (Ibid.).

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 4 Oct. 1923.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Report from Comdt. Hetherington to Col. P. Dalton, 10 Sept. 1923, (IMA, CW/OPS/10/10).

¹⁹⁸ Confidential report on Waterford farm strike by M.B. McAuliffe, Dept. of Agriculture, 29 June 1923 (NAI, DT, S3110).

best to deal with the violence from both sides and viewed the ensuing struggle as a miniature civil war in which both sides were fighting for economic survival.¹⁹⁹

The strike ended without resolution. In October the WFA rejected settlement terms made by the Minister for Agriculture on behalf of the ITGWU. Labourers were reported to be in 'a semi-starving condition' and most had returned to work by November.²⁰⁰ The ITGWU could no longer afford the strike and it officially ended on 8 December 1923. In addition, the local ITGWU organisation ceased to exist in County Waterford.²⁰¹ The Waterford strike had a number of reverberations. First, the dispute led to substantial reductions of agricultural workers' wages across the country. For example, the County Dublin Farmers' Association sought a reduction in wages from 43s. to 32s. per week.²⁰² Second, the national membership of the ITGWU declined from a peak of 100,000 in 1922 to 51,000 in 1925, mainly due to the loss of agricultural workers. Third, the dispute left psychological scars and the ITGWU never again organised farm labourers.²⁰³ This also had political implications. Labour's failure to appeal to the rural poor allowed anti-Treaty Sinn Féin to consolidate its support in those areas.²⁰⁴ It represented not only a huge loss for the labour and trade union movement but also a significant weakness within its organisation. Fourth, a majority of large farmers in the area became supporters of Cumann na nGaedheal, which had been launched on 27 April 1923.²⁰⁵ While claiming the party was national, non-class and open to all, Cumann na nGaedheal ministers saw it essentially as a Farmers' Party because the basis of government policy was the agriculture industry.²⁰⁶ That the August 1923 general election occurred at the height of agrarian unrest in Waterford

¹⁹⁹ O'Connor, *Waterford*, p. 190.

²⁰⁰ Secret army report No. 7 for week-ending 14 July 1923 (UCDA, Fitzgerald papers, P80/727(10)).

²⁰¹ Circular letter from ITGWU Executive Committee, 3 Oct. 1923 (NLI, ITGWU papers, MS 27,065(1)). Note: the Waterford strike was costing the ITGWU approximately £1,500 per week, See *Voice of labour*, 14 July 1923.

²⁰² GC to Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, 5 Mar. 1924 (NAI, D/J, H156/73).

²⁰³ Kostick, *Revolution*, p. 207; Francis Devine, *Organising history: a centenary of SIPTU, 1909-2009* (Dublin, 2009), p. 142.

²⁰⁴ Bill Kissane, *Explaining Irish democracy* (Dublin, 2002), pp 73-4.

²⁰⁵ Glascott J.R.M. Symes, *Sir John Keane and Cappoquin House in time of war and revolution* (Dublin, 2016), p. 34; Mel Farrell, 'Cumann na nGaedheal: a new 'national party'? in Mel Farrell, Jason Knirck and Ciara Meehan (eds), *A formative decade: Ireland in the 1920s* (Sallins, 2015), p. 40.

²⁰⁶ Knirck, *Afterimage*, p. 216; Farrell, 'Cumann na nGaedheal', p. 41.

may in part explain the government's heavy-handed approach to the protection of property rights.

Lastly, it marked the end of aggressive unionism among farm labourers, the last chapter in a long history of organised agrarian unrest. For the WFA the demise of the ITGWU in Waterford must have been worth the price of the long, bruising and costly strike. Reflecting on the dispute, the WFA claimed that from the beginning the crux of the dispute was 'the attempted enslavement of the farmers and entire business community' by the organisers of the ITGWU.²⁰⁷ Both farmer and labourer had endured significant hardship for the duration of the dispute. Many relationships were inevitably damaged beyond repair. Yet, in a gesture 'of justice and good will' to restore a semblance of normality, the WFA recommended that all its members should 'employ all the men possible who offer themselves for work, and pay the highest wages they can afford' so long as they were not involved with any union.²⁰⁸ It is unlikely that the landowners would have held out were it not for the unequivocal support of the state. The ILP&TUC accused the government of providing the Waterford farmers with 'all the resources of the State' to allow farm labourers to starve 'unless they are prepared to accept the Masters' terms'.²⁰⁹ For John Keane 'were it not for the protection afforded by the armed forces of the State, a bitter class war might have been precipitated. The action of the government in providing protection in a firm and impartial manner ... is a good omen for the future of the State'.²¹⁰

From the beginning of the Civil War, the imposition of centralised authority over society was the chief priority of the government. Kevin O'Sheil, a government legal advisor, cautioned that the lessons of history demonstrated that challenges against central authority had only been overcome by 'prompt, effective, vigorous, and utterly ruthless action'.²¹¹ This dictum characterised the government's response not just to the anti-Treaty challenge but to labour disputes also. It was politically convenient to equate the two. The significance of the postal strike and farm labours'

²⁰⁷ Report on 'The Waterford farm strike' by the WFA, 18 Oct. 1923 (NAI, DJ, H156/16).

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 14 Dec. 1923.

²⁰⁹ CAR (1923), p. 51.

²¹⁰ Keane speech to Co. Waterford branch of IFU, Feb. 1924 (Cappoquin House, Sir John Keane papers, Box 17, Item 1).

²¹¹ Kissane, *Irish democracy*, p. 159.

dispute is twofold. First, it saw Cumann na nGaedheal adopt a 'civil war' mindset when approaching social and labour relations issues that was maintained through the 1920s. Second, in different ways both disputes challenged the social balance. This explains the determination of rural employers to break the power of the ITGWU and to 're-establish the pre-1917 relationship between farm worker and farmer'.²¹²

III

Two major labour disputes – the 1922 postal strike and the 1922-3 farm labourers' strike in Co. Waterford – occurred during the Civil War. They are significant because they were the first major labour disputes in the new Irish state but from a labour relations perspective they are revealing for several reasons. First, although the Provisional government's determination to defend the security of the state from anti-Treaty subversion was understandable, it meant that any form of unrest, even if unrelated to the Treaty settlement, could be conveniently deemed a threat to state security. Consequently, with unlimited discretionary powers, the government responded to social and labour unrest in a heavy-handed manner that would have been unacceptable in peace time. Secondly, the government's reaction to both strikes reveals its acute inexperience and naivety in labour affairs. The over-reaction to labour unrest was essentially a reflection of the government's political insecurity which demanded a need to demonstrate control. Apart from Collins, whose input was, unfortunately, far too brief, not a government minister demonstrated even a rudimentary grasp of the norms of labour relations. In fact, the former trade unionist at the cabinet table – J.J. Walsh – proved the most truculent and vindictive in his response to well-grounded labour unrest. Third, even in the first months of the new state's existence the disputes demonstrated the emergence of deep social class tensions within the independence movement and throughout Irish society. The nature of the government's response was a clear indication that the establishment of the IFS did not herald a new dawn for Irish labour. Fourth, in theory the strikes provided the labour movement with an opportunity to test its strength in independent Ireland and to lay down a marker of how it would be perceived by the political establishment. In practice, the strikes exposed the weakness of labour, a disconnection between trade

²¹² O'Connor, 'Agrarian unrest', p. 52.

union headquarters in Dublin and the localities but most of all the primacy of the farmer over the agricultural labourer and the government over the civil servant. The end of the Waterford farm labourers' strike marked a downward trend in trade union membership and the abandonment of any further attempt by the ITGWU to represent farm labourers. Lastly, the disputes proved a formative experience for the government because for the next decade Cumann na nGaedheal viewed labour relations and labour unrest only through the prism of the Civil War. A disregard for labour relations and an intolerance of labour unrest, no matter how justified, became a Cumann na nGaedheal trademark. As the next chapter demonstrates, this was particularly evident during the labour troubles on the Shannon Scheme.

Exploiting the workers?: Labour relations on the Shannon Scheme, 1925-27

The development of the Shannon Hydro Electric Scheme at Ardnacrusha, County Clare in the mid-1920s was an audacious project for an infant state recovering from Civil War and it attracted interest nationally and internationally.¹ The Scheme was intended to provide a national network of generating stations, initially producing power for urban consumption, and to be followed, by a rural electrification scheme. While the political and socio-economic history of the Scheme has received historical attention, the experience of workers, who endured some of the most gruelling labour conditions during the interwar period, largely has not.² An exception to this is the work of Michael McCarthy. Drawing on the Shannon Scheme collection held in the NAI, he chronicled working conditions on the Scheme and attempts by the labour movement to improve wages and working conditions, something that was resisted by both the German contractor and the Irish government.³ Despite McCarthy's detailed focus on the lives of workers, the ugly nature of labour relations associated with the Scheme has not yet received in-depth historical attention and has been overshadowed by the national, political and civil engineering achievements of the Scheme.

This chapter remedies that omission by delving into the darker history of the Shannon Scheme and examining the controversy that surrounded the treatment of workers' rights. It scrutinises the nature of labour relations on the Scheme and the roles of government, employer and trade unions.⁴ The dispute on the Shannon banks was not solely about wages; it also encompassed concerns about social justice and the status of labour relations in Ireland. Whereas the case studies presented in Chapter 2 were dominated by the government's civil war mentality, the Shannon scheme

¹ Hydro-electric Shannon Scheme file, *passim* (NAI, DFA/1/GR/385).

² In 2002 when the ESB celebrated its 75th anniversary, it and Siemens collaborated in the publication of a collection of essays on the scheme: Andy Bielenberg (ed.), *The Shannon scheme and the electrification of the Irish Free State* (Dublin, 2002).

³ Michael McCarthy, 'How the Shannon scheme workers lived' in Bielenberg (ed.), *Shannon scheme*, pp 48-72 and his monograph, *High tension: life on the Shannon scheme* (Dublin, 2004).

⁴ The Siemens Historical Institute holds records pertaining to contracts, quotations and technical civil engineering issues but not labour relations or employment issues, Dr Frank Wittendorfer (chief archivist Siemens Historical Institute, Berlin and Munich) to Gerard Hanley, 22 Feb. 2018.

demonstrates how little importance the government attached to labour relations, employment conditions and the general welfare of the unskilled working-class even when the dangers of Civil War had passed. The inherent weaknesses of the labour movement and its flawed strategy contributed to its capitulation in this significant dispute. The labour relations dimension of the Shannon Scheme bears some parallels with the 1926 general strike in Britain though there are also significant differences. As was the case in Britain after the general strike, the Shannon Scheme dispute occasioned a period of reflection within the ILP&TUC and was, this chapter argues, a catalyst for reform within the Irish labour movement.

There was more to the Shannon Scheme than the generation of electricity. For the Irish government, it was an 'icon of industrial development and modernity'.⁵ An image of a progressive and ambitious IFS was cultivated by the government and captured in press accounts, postcards, paintings, drawings, film footage, and guided tours of the site.⁶ Without going to public tender, the construction was awarded to Siemens-Schuckert, a German firm, in 1924.⁷ Siemens were also keen to reap the positive international publicity associated with the Scheme and major financial losses were more than offset by the prestige gained across the world for its construction and engineering capabilities. The company was also prepared to agree to unfavourable terms to secure the contract as Germany needed foreign exchange and prestigious foreign projects to help it recover from the First World War and to pay its war reparations.⁸

The successful completion of the Scheme demonstrated the capacity of the new Irish state to undertake major social and economic initiatives. In his election manifesto in 1927 Kevin O'Higgins deemed the Scheme 'a vindication of Irish nationalism, of all our struggles to secure mastery of our own house'.⁹ This statement

⁵ Andy Bielenberg, 'Seán Keating, the Shannon Scheme and the art of state-building' in Bielenberg (ed.), *Shannon scheme*, pp 124-5.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Meehan, *Cosgrave party*, pp 55-6.

⁸ Gerald O'Beirne and Michael O'Connor, 'Siemens-Schuckert and the electrification of the Irish Free State' in Bielenberg (ed.), *Shannon scheme*, pp 73-4.

⁹ McKayla Sutton, 'Harnessed in the service of the nation: party politics and the promotion of the Shannon hydroelectric scheme, 1924-32' in Mel Farrell, Jason Knirck and Ciara Meehan (eds), *A formative decade: Ireland in the 1920s* (Sallins, 2015), p. 89.

also captures the government's determination that no labour grievances would hinder the successful completion of the project. The glow of publicity that surrounded the Scheme has endured to the present day and has obscured the turbulent labour relations that pockmarked the project. Both the government and contractor showed a blatant disregard for unskilled workers whose contribution to bringing the Scheme to fruition has received little attention in the historiography. The construction commenced during a period of chronic unemployment and this enabled the government to dispense with labour relations norms.

I

The Shannon Electricity Bill was signed into law in 1925. At its annual meeting, Congress welcomed the Scheme as 'bold and far-reaching' and was convinced that it was of 'fundamental, and perhaps, epoch-making in importance to the economic and social future of the country'.¹⁰ The decision to embark on the project was as bold as it was surprising for a conservative government which initially took a *laissez-faire* approach in economic matters and favoured private enterprise over state intervention. As President of Congress in 1925, William O'Brien expressed the hope that the 'campaign of disruption' within the trade union movement had finally ceased and describing unemployment as 'the most serious question of all', he also expressed the belief that the Shannon Scheme would 'do much to stimulate development to brighten the lives of the whole population'.¹¹ While the Scheme was generally welcomed from all quarters, there were some opponents, such as Senator John Keane, who attacked the Scheme as extravagant and socialistic before being eventually won over.¹²

During the construction social ideologies clashed with economic expediencies, and the power, strength and influence of the labour movement was put seriously to the test. In response to a question in the Dáil on 4 March 1925, the Minister for Industry and Commerce stated that the rate of wages paid to workers on the Scheme

¹⁰ CAR (1925), p. 26; McCarthy, *High tension*, p. 27.

¹¹ CAR (1925), pp 79-83.

¹² Symes, *Sir John Keane*, p. 36. Note: Sir John Keane, the Waterford landowner and former chairman of the WFA (see chapter 2) was nominated to the first IFS senate in 1922. See Patrick Maume, 'Keane, Sir John' in *DIB*. (<http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a4400>) (accessed 3 July 2018).

‘must ultimately be the subject of arrangement between those responsible for carrying out the works and the employees’.¹³ When the contractor set the wages for labourers at 32s. per week, the ILP&TUC protested that this was less than a decent living wage and a violation of the ‘fair wages clause’ for government contracts which the government had agreed in 1923 (this is discussed below).¹⁴ The term ‘living wage’ did not feature prominently in wage bargaining negotiations heretofore. The concept was central to Catholic social thought, set out in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), that ‘a workman’s wages be sufficient to enable him comfortably to support himself, his wife and his children’.¹⁵

The government argued that it had no responsibility for setting wages and that a living wage was a matter of supply and demand. It maintained that the wage advertised for the Scheme compared ‘favourably’ with the wages paid to farm labourers in the area which were then 25s. to 27s. per week. By making such a comparison the government claimed that it was in compliance with the ‘fair wage’ clause.¹⁶ This was disingenuous for not only were farm labourers in the surrounding counties paid less than ‘a living wage’, there was no comparison between the work of a labourer on the Scheme and that of a west of Ireland farm labourer described by Johnson as ‘about the poorest in Europe’.¹⁷ Labour feared that the wages offered to unskilled workers on the Scheme, 32s. per week, would become the norm for similar ‘national’ projects in the future.¹⁸

II

In 1891 the British Conservative government accepted a ‘fair wages resolution’ of the House of Commons whereby it was agreed that in the awarding of government contracts every effort should be made ‘to secure the payment of such wages as are

¹³ *DD*, 4 Mar. 1925, vol. 10, no. 7, cols. 498-9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3 Nov. 1925, vol. 13, no. 1, cols. 55-6.

¹⁵ Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum: Encyclica on capital and labour*, (1891), (http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html) (accessed 17 Feb. 2018).

¹⁶ *DD*, 3 Nov. 1925, vol. 13, no. 1, cols. 55-6; Mitchell, *Labour*, p. 196.

¹⁷ ‘Labour and the Irish elections’ by Tom Johnson – article published in *Canadian Congress journal*, Sept. 1927 (NLI, Thomas Johnson papers, MS 17,207/2).

¹⁸ *DD*, 3 Nov. 1925, vol. 3, no. 1, cols. 60-2.

generally accepted as current in each trade for competent workmen'.¹⁹ This subsequently became a feature of all public contracts in Britain and Ireland. However, post-independence, the Irish trade union movement believed that there was a deliberate attempt by the IFS government to dispense with the 'fair wages resolution' or 'fair wages clause' as it later became to be known. Following concerted labour representations, a 'fair wages clause' was adopted by the Government Contracts Committee in January 1923. Essentially, this obliged contractors for government work to pay wages 'not less favourable than those commonly recognised by employers ... in the trade in the district where the work is carried out'.²⁰

The 'fair wages clause' was central to the labour disputes on the Shannon. The words 'in the trade' had particular relevance. The government and the contractor disparagingly claimed that the comparable trade was the work of farm labourers. This was strongly disputed by the ILP&TUC which, quite correctly, claimed that the work was not agricultural but was of a nature 'never seen, and never would be seen, on a farm' and should be classified as 'a big constructional job' or 'a civil engineering undertaking'.²¹ The Scheme was a succession of building sites, miles long, with thousands of workers, beavering away against the clock. Health and safety was an unknown concept in a work environment where rock blasting was an every-day occurrence. During the three and a half years of construction thirty-three men lost their lives while another fourteen died in related accidents. This excludes the nineteen-strong crew of the *SS Arabia* which sank in a storm in March 1925 en route from Germany to Limerick loaded with materials for the project.²² A total of 1,373 'reported accidents' occurred during the construction.²³ The artistic work of Seán Keating, one of the most significant artists in the formative years of the IFS, vividly captures the hazardous working environment of the construction site with

cranes working on mounds of unstable clay that might collapse at any moment; workmen, tiny by comparison with the machines, stand astride ropes and cables that might move or snap at any moment; tonnes of broken rock loaded into wagons that lean at dangerously precarious

¹⁹ Henry Pelling, *A history of British trade unionism* (Fifth ed. London, 1992), pp 96-7.

²⁰ CAR (1923), pp 19-20; DD, 27 April 1928, vol. 23, no. 6, cols. 569-9.

²¹ ILP&TUC Report on Shannon Scheme (1925), pp 14, 16-7.

²² McCarthy, *High tension*, pp 110-12.

²³ DD, 6 Mar. 1929, vol. 27, no. 7, cols. 848-50.

angles. All the while, steam-powered engine trains pull heavy wagons, laden with rock, wood, cement, and machinery, all around the site.²⁴

The work required to be undertaken by unskilled labourers on the Scheme was so unique that there was no local comparable trade. The labour movement argued that the work of a labourer on the Shannon Scheme should be compared to a navvy who received a much higher rate and also noted that labourers working on the construction of a new railway in the Shannon area were being paid 48s per week.²⁵ This suggests that a rate of wages for unskilled workers on the Scheme needed to be negotiated. The 'General Conditions of Contract' for the Shannon Scheme stipulated the use of Irish labour and materials. The terms of the contract also allowed the Minister for Industry and Commerce to appoint engineers and other officials 'to watch and superintend, on behalf of the Minister' the progress of the works and conformity with the contract in terms of work and materials.²⁶ Notably, the contract made no reference to the 'fair wages clause', even though Johnson claimed that it was 'inherent' in all government contracts.²⁷ Difficulties in relation to the application of the 'fair wage clause' were not confined to Ireland. The British Trade Union Congress, meeting in Cardiff in 1921, passed a resolution strongly protesting against the manner in which British government departments disregarded the clause so that contractors could pay rates below those agreed between employers and trade unions in local areas.²⁸

III

In September 1925, an advertisement in the national press sought 3,000 unskilled labourers for construction work on an area of the River Shannon in Counties Limerick and Clare at a wage of 32s for a fifty hour week with free lodgings. Canteens were to be established and run by Irish contractors, where cooked food and other necessities

²⁴ Éimear O'Connor, *Seán Keating: art, politics and building the Irish nation* (Sallins, 2013), p. 165.

²⁵ *DD*, 3 Nov. 1925, vol. 13, no. 1, cols. 59-60, 73-4; ILP&TUC Report on Shannon Scheme (1925), p. 22.

²⁶ Shannon Power Development Civil Construction Work – Specification (Part 1) – General Conditions of Contract, August 1925 (UCDA, McGilligan papers, P35/35).

²⁷ ILP&TUC Report on Shannon Scheme (1925), p. 13.

²⁸ The national Joint Council, representing the General Council of the Trades Union Congress, The Executive Committee of the Labour Party and the Parliamentary Labour Party, *The fair wages clause* (London, [1922?]), pp 1, 13.

could be bought for cost price.²⁹ Dr Thomas McLaughlin, who had played a crucial role in the establishment of the Shannon Scheme and who was subsequently appointed Siemen's representative in Ireland, was quick to defend the advertised wage rates. He also maintained that the rate being offered compared favourably with the going rates for farm labourers, and it was these, not city labourers, who should be used as the proper comparators.³⁰ This comparison was unfair for two reasons – the work was not of a comparable nature and the wages paid to farm labourers had been reduced considerably following the withdrawal of trade unionism from the agricultural sector in 1923.

While farmers sympathised with the low standard of living of their labourers, they claimed that their own income did not allow them to pay more. Dan Bradley claims that the depression in agriculture in the period 1924-36 'created a smokescreen', whereby some of the big farmers, for whom about three-quarters of the labourers worked, 'attempted to get back from their workers some of the profits they lost due to the fall in income'.³¹ The government's claim that it could not intervene in the Shannon dispute and that the project would be unviable if wages were raised was strongly supported by farmers who feared a spill-over effect.³² As discussed in Chapter 2, farmers had recently established their terms of employment with the farm labourers during the Waterford strike and had no desire to re-open old wounds. Likewise, the government was also fearful that the rate of wages paid to labourers on the Shannon Scheme had the potential to become a benchmark for farm labourers' wages in the area, thereby threatening to 'upset the economic balance of agriculture'.³³ They were resolved to prevent the payment of a higher wage than 'the premier industry in this country can afford' as Cosgrave put it in the Dáil.³⁴ Union anger at the advertised conditions soon provoked a protracted and bitter labour dispute.

²⁹ McCarthy, 'Shannon Scheme workers,' p. 49.

³⁰ *DD*, 3 Nov. 1925, vol. 13, no. 1, cols. 51-2; McCarthy, *High tension*, p. 31.

³¹ Bradley, *Farm labourers*, pp 93-6.

³² McCarthy, *High tension*, p. 39.

³³ Executive Council meeting, 2 Nov. 1925 (NAI, DT, S4380).

³⁴ *DD*, 3 Nov. 1925, vol. 13, no. 1, cols. 52-3.

No sooner had the Shannon Electricity Bill been voted into law, with the wholehearted support of the Labour Party in the Dáil, than the government and the contractor rejected approaches from the trade union movement for discussions about labour matters associated with the project. The ILP&TUC suspected that the government had collaborated with the German contractors 'to pull down rates and conditions in the country'.³⁵ It was regarded as a deliberate policy to reduce the standard of living of the working-class. Johnson accused the government of betraying the spirit of the revolutionary years by forcing pre-war wages on workers.³⁶ McGilligan's commitment to the Dáil that the rate of wages on the Scheme would be the subject of negotiations and agreement was not honoured as they were unilaterally set by the contractor based on information provided by the government. Even though the government did not require the support of the Labour Party, it is surprising that Labour gave unconditional support for the Shannon Electrical Bill considering the government's track record of support for a downward push in the general level of wages.

Jim Larkin, then at war with the ITGWU (this is discussed in chapter 6), exposed this weakness in the ILP&TUC strategy and cleverly depicted the ILP&TUC as a supporter of the interests of government and the contractor while failing in their responsibilities to the needs of workers.³⁷ Larkin's return to Ireland in April 1923, having spent the previous nine years in the United States, triggered an extended period of disharmony in the Irish trade union movement. This witnessed Larkin's failed attempt to regain control of the ITGWU; a split in the ITGWU; the establishment of Larkin's Workers' Union of Ireland (WUI) and the onset of inter-union rivalry between the ITGWU and WUI at a time of high unemployment and difficult economic circumstances.³⁸ The WUI had twenty-two branches in Dublin city and county and only five elsewhere with no branch in Limerick.³⁹ Ever the opportunist, Larkin kept a keen eye on the unfolding labour developments on the Shannon Scheme and 'once the

³⁵ ILP&TUC Report on the Shannon Scheme (1925), pp 5-7.

³⁶ *DD*, 3 Nov. 1925, vol. 13, no. 1, cols. 38-41.

³⁷ Larkin to James Carr, 2 Nov. 1925 (NLI, O'Brien papers, MS 15,677/11).

³⁸ O'Connor, *Big Jim*, pp 215-20; O'Connor, *Labour history*, pp 130-31.

³⁹ O'Connor, *Big Jim*, pp 230, 241.

trouble broke out' dispatched WUI organisers.⁴⁰ The Shannon Scheme had transformed Limerick into a mecca for the unemployed, particularly from the surrounding counties. Larkin was determined to capitalise on the situation but his initial attempt to win over unskilled workers in Limerick met with a hostile reception.⁴¹

To the dismay of the trade unions, given his role in the postal strike, Joe McGrath, the former Minister for Industry and Commerce, was appointed director of labour for Siemens Schuckert on 30 September 1925. On the day of his appointment, McGrath met with representatives of Siemens Schuckert and the ITGWU in Limerick. No agreement was reached on improving the advertised wage of 32s. for unskilled labourers. In response, pickets were placed immediately on Siemens' offices and the Scheme's work sites in Limerick. Dock workers in Limerick city and Foynes would not handle material for Siemens Schuckert. In addition, skilled trade unions instructed their members not to work with non-union labour on any of the contractors' sites either inside or outside the city. A special committee, made up of members of the national executive and representatives of the unions most affected by the dispute, was established and authorised by Congress to direct the dispute.⁴²

It soon became clear to both the special committee and Congress that their ability to control the 'dispute' was severely limited. Critically, an official dispute did not exist as technically the men employed on the Shannon Scheme were not organised and were not on strike. Workers who picketed the Scheme and who were described as 'strikers' were essentially those who refused work at the advertised rate and other workers, such as dockers, who boycotted and refused to undertake any duties which might assist the activities of the contractor. Fundamentally, they were secondary picketers and protestors. The ILP&TUC annual report for 1925 noted that 'direct industrial action from within was impossible'.⁴³ Those who went on strike were unionised labourers and skilled workers based at the contractors' sites in Limerick city

⁴⁰ Larkin to James Carr, 2 Nov. 1925 (NLI, O'Brien papers, MS 15,677/11).

⁴¹ Chief of Staff of Army to Minister for Defence, 15 July and 15 Sept. 1925 (UCDA, Blythe papers, P24/222(14) and P24/222(17)).

⁴² CAR (1925), p. 44.

⁴³ Ibid.

and Limerick dock workers in protest at the advertised rate for unskilled labourers at the Ardnacrusha site.⁴⁴

Consequently, any action by the labour movement was restricted to external pressure in the form of publicity, financial assistance to those on strike in Limerick city, and the enforcement of a boycott of the provision of any form of assistance to Siemens-Schuckert.⁴⁵ Union pickets on the Ardnacrusha site prevented many willing job applicants from availing of employment. Work on the site progressed, albeit slowly, as a core group of labourers worked on the project notwithstanding the pickets or encouragement to withdraw their labour.⁴⁶ *The Voice of Labour* blamed McGilligan for creating the labour unrest by signing the contract without any consultation with the trade union movement – signed, in the paper’s view, ‘as if the working class had no rights, no authority, [and] no recognised status in the State’.⁴⁷

The government, rather than the contractor, was the main focus of ILP&TUC criticism. This was also reflected in the actions of local protestors in Limerick who paraded the principal streets carrying signs bearing the words –‘Sack Cosgrave and Higgins after McNeill’.⁴⁸ An interesting premise of the union’s objection to the low rate of wages offered by the contractors was that the action of the government involved an attack on the ‘natural right of the working man to marry and beget children’, and it thus constituted ‘a denial of the doctrine that the family is the basis of social life’. It claimed that workers were expected to endure conditions ‘worse than chattel slavery’ and to renounce their values as ‘Trade Unionists and as Christian citizens.’⁴⁹ This may have been a deliberate attempt by Congress to appeal to Cosgrave’s religious, moral and family values, as he often cited Christian principles to defend his government’s actions’.⁵⁰ Congress planned to vent its outrage against the government by organising a series of meetings throughout the country ‘to arouse the public to a sense of the evil

⁴⁴ Executive Council meeting, 2 Nov. 1925 (NAI, DT, S4380); *DD*, 3 Nov. 1925, vol. 13, no. 1, cols. 70-1.

⁴⁵ *CAR* (1925), p. 44.

⁴⁶ McCarthy, *High tension*, p. 39.

⁴⁷ *Voice of Labour*, 29 Oct. 1925.

⁴⁸ Chief Superintendent, Limerick to GC, 30 Nov. 1925 (NAI, DJ, H275/29).

⁴⁹ *Voice of Labour*, 29 Oct. 1925.

⁵⁰ Knirck, *Afterimage*, p. 239; Meehan, *Cosgrave party*, p. 32.

that is being perpetuated with the specific sanction and approbation of the Government'.⁵¹

The ability of trade union action, including the boycott, to force any change by both the contractor and the government in relation to the pay and conditions of employment on the Scheme was undermined by the large numbers of 'unorganised, unemployed and desperate men' anxiously seeking employment due to the depressed state of the economy.⁵² There was much truth in the ILP&TUC claim that the offer of such low wages for work of such a demanding and dangerous nature was taking advantage of the plight of the unemployed.⁵³ The employers' contention that the advertised rate compared favourably with the wages of local farm labourers was a cynical defence particularly at a time of high unemployment. That a total of 6,000 applications were received for 3,000 unskilled jobs reflected the high level of unemployment and the desperation of the unemployed.⁵⁴ Trade union frustration was compounded by two concerns. The first was that the government, with its prestige at stake and given past form, was preparing to mobilise the police and the military to prevent any interference with the progress of the Scheme. The second was the decision of the German contractor, with the agreement of the Irish government, to bring in German workers to undertake work on the Scheme for which, it was claimed, no Irish workers were qualified. The fact that many of the German workers could not or would not speak English did not seem to be an impediment to their employment.⁵⁵ In the event, the 'civil war-like' mentality with which the government had approached both the postal dispute and the Waterford farm strike was less evident during the Shannon Scheme.

In October the government appeared to accept responsibility for the advertised wage and indicated its readiness to enter national, rather than local, negotiations on whether or not it constituted a fair wage.⁵⁶ It objected to local negotiations with the Limerick strike committee on the basis that it was 'a local body

⁵¹ Report on Shannon Scheme dispute, 30 Nov. 1925 (NLI, ITGWU papers, MS 27,072).

⁵² ITGWU Annual report (1925) (NLI, ITGWU papers, Ms. 27,074(8)).

⁵³ ILP&TUC Report on Shannon Scheme (1925), p. 7.

⁵⁴ *DD*, 3 Nov. 1925, vol. 3, no. 1, cols. 55-6.

⁵⁵ Unsigned note attached to Minutes of Special Meeting of ILP&TUC resident committee held on 2 Oct. 1925 (NAI, ITUC and Labour Party minutes 1923-1935, ICTU/Box 100).

⁵⁶ ILP&TUC Report on Shannon scheme (1925), pp 8-9.

influenced by an unhelpful atmosphere'.⁵⁷ The government's promise to enter negotiations was disingenuous. When opposing a Labour Party motion in the Dáil on 3 November, Cosgrave, moved an amended motion:

That the Dáil is satisfied that in connection with the Shannon Electrification Scheme steps have been taken to ensure that the rate of wages paid to workmen engaged thereon shall be such as will compare favourably with the rates paid in other occupations in which the same kind of labour is employed.⁵⁸

This was approved by a comfortable majority. The motion not only scuttled the opportunity of national negotiations but was clearly a departure from the spirit of the 'fair wages clause' as the significant words 'in the trade' were dispensed with and the mischievously worded motion implied that as most of those applying for work on the Scheme were from the ranks of the farm labourer, the wage of the farm labourer was an appropriate rate for work on the Shannon Scheme. The government's attitude was perceived as devious by the labour movement and led to a genuine fear that the manipulation of the 'fair wages clause' 'could be extended to all sorts of work' and was therefore 'a danger to all other trades and all other occupations'.⁵⁹ An additional concern was that the Shannon Scheme could set a damaging precedent for the conduct of future labour relations practices.⁶⁰

For these reasons, the dispute was not just about the rate of pay for work on the Shannon Scheme. The wider ramifications explain the steely determination of the normally placid ILP&TUC in facing down the government and the contractor in this dispute, thus placing the movement at a considerable financial risk. Johnson accused the government of pursuing a policy deliberately designed to reduce the standard of living of the working-class. TDs who had supported the 'Democratic Programme' in 1919 were accused of making false promises and of using the labour movement for political purposes when it suited them. Cosgrave dismissed the ideals of the 'Democratic Programme' by describing it as 'that great Utopia that we imagined in the

⁵⁷ ILP&TUC resident committee, 26 Oct. 1925 (NAI, ITUC and Labour Party minutes 1923-1935, ICTU/Box 100).

⁵⁸ *DD*, 3 Nov. 1925, vol. 13, no. 1, cols. 58-9; ILP&TUC Report on Shannon Scheme (1925), p. 11.

⁵⁹ ILP&TUC Report on Shannon Scheme (1925), p. 15.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

prosperous years of 1919 and 1920'.⁶¹ It was an indication, perhaps, that the nature of nationalist solidarity had changed fundamentally in the post-Treaty era and that the labour movement's wait for meaningful social reform would continue.

The unique nature of the Shannon Scheme development challenged the strategy of the labour movement in relation to the fundamental question of what constituted an adequate wage rate. However, it remained unclear what it viewed as a fair rate for the work of unskilled workers. Johnson suggested that 50s. should have been offered to labourers on the Scheme for a 50 hour week as many, if not most, had to live away from home, cover the cost of their board and lodgings, and continue to support their families and pay rent for the family home. They would not have had the opportunities for cheap living in the country typically available to farm labourers.⁶² It would appear that the trade unions were reluctant to identify publically what they considered to be a fair wage, believing that it was a matter best left to the power of negotiations. At a Special Conference on 30 November Johnson, in a throw-away remark suggested that 'the rate would be anything up to £5 a week – in other words the most they could get.'⁶³

In such circumstances the ILP&TUC campaign to improve the 'advertised terms' had little chance of success. While this might raise questions for the labour movement's strategy, especially during a time of high unemployment, it believed that it had a moral obligation to fight for a fair wage. This point was articulated by the Labour Senator, John O'Farrell, who declared: 'There are times we must fight whether we win or not'.⁶⁴ There were strong indications that the indomitable effort on the part of the ILP&TUC and the ITGWU, in particular, to increase substantially the advertised rate was not alone driven by the inadequacy of the wage rate, but also by a determined attempt to increase its prestige and to out-flank Larkin and the WUI in a high stakes game. Kevin O'Higgins suggested the trade union movement was making

⁶¹ *DD*, 3 Nov. 1925, vol. 13, no. 1, cols, 39-45, 51-2.

⁶² *Ibid.*, cols 41-42; ILP&TUC Report on Shannon Scheme (1925), p. 11.

⁶³ ILP&TUC Report on Shannon scheme (1925), p. 29.

⁶⁴ *SD*, 10 Dec. 1925, vol. 6, no. 2, cols 42-3.

the future of the country and the unemployed 'the victims of a squalid rivalry between one labour organisation and another'.⁶⁵

The Dáil debate on 3 November made it clear that the government was entrenched and unwilling to see the advertised wage for unskilled workers on the Scheme increased. The concerns within the trade union movement about deteriorating labour relations on the Scheme were underlined by the unusually proactive initiative of the ILP&TUC which wrote to all affiliated unions and councils on 18 November 1925 initiating 'a rigorous boycott' of work on the Shannon Scheme 'and of everybody and everything connected with it'.⁶⁶ This decision followed a special conference of unions catering for general labour, railway, transport and construction trades which had taken place on 16 and 17 November. In addition to taking issue with the rate of wages and the hours of work, the ILP&TUC also objected to the contractors' refusal to negotiate with the trade union movement and the government's complicity with the contractor in unjust and unreasonable treatment of workers. The ILP&TUC demanded that the minimum wage for workmen ought to have regard to 'the cost of maintaining a man and his family in frugal comfort' and insisted that, in the case of the Shannon Scheme, this was not possible since the contractors had forced workers to accept, due to their already impoverished situation, a wage similar to that paid in the 'most depressed industry' – agriculture. In addition, the increasing number of German workers employed on the Scheme, 'to do the work of Irish workers during a Trade Dispute', led many to believe that it was a deliberate attempt to undermine and frustrate the dispute.⁶⁷ Unlike its repudiation of J.J. Walsh's decision to bring in workers from Britain in 1922 to break the postal strike, on this occasion the government did not hesitate to issue work permits to German workers.

On his return from a trip to the United States, McGilligan exacerbated an already tense situation further by insisting that the wages for unskilled labour on the Scheme must be determined by the rate paid to farm labourers and that no wage standard can be durable except the standard of what the employment can afford. In a

⁶⁵ *DD*, 3 Nov. 1925, vol. 13, no. 1, cols. 65-6, 70-1.

⁶⁶ Thomas Johnson to all Secretaries of affiliated trade unions and trade councils, 18 Nov. 1925 (NLI, ITGWU papers, MS 27,072).

⁶⁷ Report on Shannon Scheme, 30 Nov. 1925 (*Ibid.*).

strong rebuke of the trade union movement, the minister described its 'veiled attack on the wage standard' as doing 'more credit to their morbid suspicion than to their common sense or to their regard for the present or future interests not only of the nation but of the whole community of workers'. He called on the national executive of Congress to 'stand out of the way of those who desire to see the country develop according to the reason of its real resources and who are prepared to work hard to secure that object.'⁶⁸ McGilligan's remarks were telling in that he was not only dismissive of any role for the organised workers representative body, Congress, in representing and negotiating on behalf of workers, but they were also a strong indication that the government was not disposed to developing or engaging in any form of labour relations process. It was clear that national development and 'hard work', from the government's perspective, did not go hand in hand with a fair wage. It was in the interest of the government to force a low wage in order to keep contract costs to a minimum. The government also kept pressure on the contractor to keep the number of workers assigned to the project within the Limerick city boundary to an absolute minimum in order to avoid payment of a city rate, thereby demonstrating further its influence on the control of wages and undermining its contention that wages were a matter for the employer.⁶⁹

On 30 November 1925, 130 delegates from the IFS and Northern Ireland attended a special meeting of Congress in Dublin, which was regarded as one of the most significant conferences held since 1918. The meeting endorsed the boycott of the Shannon Scheme and called on both the government and the contractor to reconsider their positions and to enter negotiations. Not surprisingly delegates condemned the level of wages paid to the Scheme's unskilled workers with Tom Johnson again insisting that the work required by the Scheme bore no resemblance to that of the farm labourer who would never be required to work with 'all kinds of plant and machinery such as were never seen, and never would be seen, on a farm.'⁷⁰ The government was accused of playing 'fast and loose with established conditions of

⁶⁸ ILP&TUC Report on Shannon Scheme (1925), p. 12; //, 19 Nov. 1925.

⁶⁹ Siemens-Schuckert to F.S. Rishworth, Chief Engineer, 28 Jan. and 20 Feb. 1926 (NAI, Shannon Scheme/Irish Workers, SS13929).

⁷⁰ ILP&TUC Report on Shannon Scheme (1925), pp 16-7; McCarthy, *High tension*, p. 41.

employment ... in their latest outrage on the Shannon banks'.⁷¹ It was noted by Labour Party deputies that government ministers who insisted that 32s. per week was more than sufficient for a working man to live were themselves, at this time, paid £32 per week.⁷²

Mass meetings in Limerick attracted significant numbers and this was interpreted by the trade unions as a positive indication of public support. However, many were enveloped by the novelty of the events which both the project and the dispute had brought to the city – 'people agog with excitement and on the look-out for incidents.'⁷³ The national and regional press provided generally factual coverage of the dispute but it was not always sympathetic to the views of the labour movement. Thomas Kennedy, ITGWU vice-president, condemned the *Irish Times* for claiming that there was nothing wrong with labour conditions on the Shannon Scheme.⁷⁴ Criticism was not all one way as the intensity of 'Ardnacrusha-bashing' in the letters to the editor section of the *Irish Times* prompted McGilligan to suggest that the paper was fronting a conspiracy against the state.⁷⁵ The international press was less interested in the nature of the labour dispute associated with the Scheme and more interested in its major engineering achievements and its potential for social and economic development.

An appeal for funds was issued to all unions seeking a voluntary contribution of not less than 6d per member.⁷⁶ This had the potential to raise at least £3,700. However, only £344 was received. One member of the strike committee claimed that they had to 'put our shame under our feet and go from door to door and pub to pub' in order to raise funds.⁷⁷ This was a reflection of the low level of support which existed among trade union members, many badly paid but fortunate to be employed, for fellow workers and trade unionists. Grants were also received from the ITGWU and

⁷¹ ILP&TUC Report on Shannon Scheme (1925), p. 18.

⁷² *DD*, 3 Nov. 1925, vol. 13, no. 1, cols. 46-7.

⁷³ F. Maguire, Chief Superintendent, Limerick to GC, 6 Oct. 1925 (NAI, DJ, H275/29).

⁷⁴ *Limerick Leader*, 5 Oct. 1925.

⁷⁵ Mark Maguire, 'Powering the nation: a social history of hydro-electricity in Ireland' in T. Tvedt and T. Oestigaard (eds), *A history of water, volume 3: the world of water* (London and New York, 2006) p. 85.

⁷⁶ *CAR* (1925), pp 44-5; ILP&TUC Report on Shannon Scheme (1925), p. 33. Note: the number of trade union members affiliated to ILP&TUC in 1925 was 149,000. See Nevin, *Trade union century*, p. 433.

⁷⁷ J. Hickey, Sec. ITGWU, Strike Committee to Mortished, Asst. Sec. ILP&TUC, 24 Dec. 1925 (NLI, O'Brien papers, MS 15,670/7).

other funds were raised as a result of collections in Limerick and elsewhere. The dock workers, who refused to unload ships for Siemens-Schuckert, were very much aware of their pivotal role in the dispute but the longer a resolution seemed out of reach, the more discontent developed within their ranks.⁷⁸ Labour Party TDs made a last desperate and irresponsible effort to re-ignite diminishing enthusiasm among trade unionists in Limerick. A public meeting on 22 November attracted an estimated crowd of 5,000 and was addressed by the Labour Party TDs, Daniel Morrissey and Tom Johnson. Morrissey stated that he would take 'all means legal and illegal to wreck the scheme'.⁷⁹ The police reported that most of those present had only attended 'out of curiosity to hear Mr. Johnson' for as soon as he had finished speaking 'the crowd melted away'.⁸⁰

In theory, the decision of Congress to boycott the Scheme would have affected 250,000 workers throughout the country but the strategy was not implementable.⁸¹ This was largely due to insufficient support by union members and the unemployed. The weapon of a general strike had been utilised in other parts of the world such as Britain, Italy, Argentina, Spain, Sweden, the United States and China, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸² The results were sometimes successful, such as in the case of revolutionary driven strikes in Spain and Cuba in the early 1930s, and sometimes not as was the case in France in 1920 and Britain in 1926.

Johnson's suggestion that the advertised rate of 32s per week be increased by almost sixty per cent may have damaged the campaign on behalf of the Shannon workers. The labour movement failed to put forward a sufficiently sound case to support their argument that the advertised rate did not represent the value of the labouring work required and also failed to demonstrate the basis for their claim of 50s. per week. Some, without realising the negotiating tactics been played, may have viewed it as excessive and unwarranted. It possibly alienated the support of other workers, who could never aspire to such a wage standard, not to mention public

⁷⁸ Chief Superintendent, Limerick to GC, 5 Nov. 1925 (NAI, DJ, H275/29); CAR (1925), pp. 44-5.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 23 Nov. 1925; II, 23 Nov. 1925.

⁸⁰ Chief Superintendent, Limerick to GC, 23 Nov. 1925 (NAI, DJ, H275/29).

⁸¹ McCarthy, *High Tension*, p. 41.

⁸² Wilfrid H. Crook, 'The revolutionary logic of the general strike', *The American political science review*, 28:4 (Aug., 1934), pp 655-59.

opinion. Some commentators believed that Johnson's claim, if successful, would have had a detrimental effect on business and the economy and, far from improving the lot of workers, would only have increased unemployment and emigration.⁸³ Public opinion was also influenced by the fact that unemployed men were 'rolling up in their thousands to seek employment on the advertised terms'.⁸⁴ In the Limerick area alone the dispute had lost local support, particularly among the unemployed, and many hoped that it would just 'fizzle out'. With many desperate to find work, the contractor had no difficulty in attracting willing unskilled workers irrespective of union pickets. Small farmers and labourers came from all parts of the country; a number of ex-servicemen laid off from the National army were hired;⁸⁵ there were fishermen from Connemara and locomotive drivers from the Listowel and Ballybunion Railway in County Kerry which had closed in 1924.⁸⁶ By January 1926 there were at least 5,000 men on the contractor's waiting list anxiously awaiting the opportunity of work at the advertised rate.⁸⁷ Men walked for days to join this 'Irish Klondyke'.⁸⁸ As the dispute had placed additional demands on Garda resources in Limerick, the local Chief Superintendent was anxious that the contractor would proceed more rapidly with achieving full employment on the scheme as it would 'go a long way towards ending the trouble'.⁸⁹ Ultimately, the level of unemployment proved the most significant factor in determining the outcome of the dispute (See Chapters 4 and 5).

IV

By December 1925, it was increasingly evident that the ILP&TUC had lost the fight. It could no longer afford to support the dispute financially and funding of the local strike committee ceased in early January 1926.⁹⁰ There was little enthusiasm among trade

⁸³ *Irish Truth*, 7 Nov. 1925 (UCDA, McGilligan papers, P35d/15(6)).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Note: Between 1923 and 1925 over 41,000 were demobilised. See chapter 4 for discussion of the impact of army demobilisation on unemployment.

⁸⁶ Bielenberg, 'Keating, Siemens & the Shannon Scheme', p. 46.

⁸⁷ *Evening Herald*, 12 Jan. 1926.

⁸⁸ Mary Mulvihill, 'Turning the infant state electric', *IT*, 3 April 2004; Note: An average of 54,922 workers were unemployed in 1925 and this represented 21.9% of insured workers. The rate of unemployment was certainly higher because the number of unregistered unemployed persons was not known. See Chapter 4.

⁸⁹ Chief Superintendent, Limerick to GC, 28 Oct. 1925 (NAI, DJ, H275/29).

⁹⁰ ILP&TUC resident committee, 11 Jan. 1926 (NAI, ITUC and Labour Party minutes, 1923-1935, ICTU/Box 100).

union leaders for a general strike in Limerick city, as sought by the local branch of the ITGWU.⁹¹ Members of the ex-servicemen's association, led by ex-Brigadier Tim Murphy, who had been working on the project and which was affiliated to the ITGWU, decided to discontinue their strike action and returned to work on 20 November. While it represented a significant body-blow to the morale of the striking workers, the atmosphere in Limerick, according to the police, remained 'electrical'.⁹² On 15 January the death knell was struck when dockers, so pivotal to the success of the strike, ceased their boycott of Siemens-Schuckert.⁹³ The special strike committee then called off the general boycott which it deemed 'impractical' and effectively ended the dispute. The decision was approved by the national executive of Congress on 18 January. Conceding defeat, the ILP&TUC special committee accused the government of having taken advantage of the widespread destitution and unemployment to force a violation of the 'fair wages clause'.⁹⁴

Defeat was inevitable for four main reasons. The first and most significant was the level of unemployment and the desperate plight of so many unemployed for whom the 'fair wages clause' had little or no relevance. While Germans were imported for skilled work they were also used for unskilled work.⁹⁵ Furthermore, the unions had been out-flanked by Joe McGrath's ruthlessness. His divide-and-conquer policy and employment of ex-servicemen was another crucial factor in the collapse of the dispute.⁹⁶ A second factor was government propaganda. The special committee's publicity campaign was insignificant compared with that of the government which realised from an early stage that propaganda and publicity were essential to the success of the Scheme. This had tremendous public appeal, whereas news of labour unrest had become too frequent and mundane. The labour movement attributed the loss of general interest in its agitation to other emerging issues such as 'the Boundary Commission fiasco' and the 'London Agreement' which 'monopolised' the attention of

⁹¹ Chief Superintendent, Limerick to GC, 6 Nov. 1925 (NAI, DJ, H275/29).

⁹² Ibid., 20 Nov. 1925.

⁹³ McCarthy, *High tension*, pp 42-3.

⁹⁴ ILP&TUC resident committee, 18 Jan. 1926 (NAI, ITUC and Labour Party minutes 1923-1935, ICTU/Box 100).

⁹⁵ *DD*, 3 Nov. 1925, vol. 13, no. 1, cols. 44-5.

⁹⁶ McCarthy, *High tension*, p. 84.

the press and the public. They subsequently acknowledged that it had failed to rouse 'the public conscience' in respect of this dispute.⁹⁷

The artist, Seán Keating, was allowed unrestricted access to the Ardnacrusha construction site where his art work recorded the progress of the Scheme. His positive depiction of 'nation-building' found favour with the government and the ESB and his works were subsequently utilised to popularise both the economic benefits of the Scheme and the heroics of the government.⁹⁸ Publicity posters issued by the ESB in 1928 gave pre-eminence to the role of machinery and electricity in the construction of the project. This and the notable absence of people at work conveyed a sense of dynamism and progressiveness which obscures the immense human contribution and hardships associated with this Scheme. These posters carried headlines such as: 'Electricity does the heavy work' adding that the Scheme could not be completed 'without the use of electrically driven machinery'. Another poster celebrated the claim that an electric 'Bucket Dredger' does 'the back breaking work of hundreds of navvies'.⁹⁹ It was ironic that this ESB poster acknowledged that the labouring work on the Scheme was comparable to that of a navvy, something that had been refuted by the government. The account of the scheme in the *Saorstát Éireann: Official Handbook*, published in 1932, also omits the contribution of ordinary workers.¹⁰⁰ In addition, arranged visits to the site drew thousands of visitors and extensive coverage of progress was fed to the national and international press.¹⁰¹ The image created by the government's propaganda proved enduring so much so that by the time the ESB commissioned its rose-tinted history of the Scheme in 2002 much of the marginal human, though integral, history had been suppressed.¹⁰²

Third, the lack of funding, primarily due to the unsuccessful appeal for funds from all unions, meant that the dispute could not be sustained and, unfortunately, for the labour movement, this was a clear indication of either disinterest on the part of the general body of trade unionists or an inability to pay. This was also further

⁹⁷ CAR (1925), pp 45-6.

⁹⁸ O'Connor, Seán Keating, p. 161; Bielenberg, 'Keating, Siemens & the Shannon Scheme', pp 114-5.

⁹⁹ Sorcha O'Brien, *Powering the nation: images of the Shannon scheme and electricity in Ireland* (Newbridge, 2017), pp 132-144.

¹⁰⁰ *Saorstát Éireann: official handbook* (Dublin, 1932), passim.

¹⁰¹ Bielenberg, 'Keating, Siemens & the Shannon Scheme', pp 44-5.

¹⁰² Maguire, 'Powering the nation', p. 87.

evidence of a general lack of commitment to the ideals of trade unionism among individual 'trade unionists'.¹⁰³ Lastly, the strategy of having dockers refuse to handle goods destined for Siemens was undermined by the company as it organised 'a gang of blacklegs' to unload ships. It was acknowledged by the trade unions that these 'blacklegs' 'would eventually become fairly expert and would remain as a permanent menace to the Union men'.¹⁰⁴

V

In the aftermath of the dispute the ITGWU concentrated its efforts on the organisation of the unskilled labourers working on the Scheme.¹⁰⁵ It was a difficult challenge considering its abysmal defeat in a high-stakes dispute, at the hands not only of the employer, but also the government and, unwittingly, the unemployed. A number of trade unions, representing skilled workers, negotiated agreements for the employment of their members with Siemens-Schuckert. Even though skilled trade union workers were employed at trade union rates, there was a concerted effort to employ non-trade union skilled workers who were paid at a lower rate.¹⁰⁶ Opportunistically, Larkin and the WUI also launched a campaign to entice unskilled Shannon Scheme workers and members of the ITGWU to join the WUI with promises to make 'make things hum on the Shannon Scheme' in pursuit of wage increases for workers.¹⁰⁷ Although the threat of further labour unrest hung over the Shannon Scheme until the project was completed, Larkin failed to attract significant numbers to his union. By August 1926 they only accounted for approximately seven per cent of the total workforce on the Scheme.¹⁰⁸

The Shannon Scheme was arguably a missed opportunity to advance the development of labour relations in the IFS. The standard and nature of labour relations on the Scheme can be measured not only on the basis of the level of wages offered to workers but also on the general working conditions and the treatment of workers. J.K.

¹⁰³ ILP&TUC Report on Shannon scheme (1925), p. 45; ILP&TUC resident committee 9 Nov. 1925 (NAI, ITUC and Labour Party minutes 1923-1935, ICTU/Box 100).

¹⁰⁴ ILP&TUC Report on Shannon scheme (1925), p. 45.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁰⁶ Siemens-Schuckert to F.S. Rishworth, 31 Mar. 1926 (NAI, Shannon Scheme/Irish workers, SS13929).

¹⁰⁷ Chief Superintendent, Limerick to GC, 4 Aug. 1926; Chief Superintendent, Limerick to Secretary, DJ, 6 Aug. 1926 (NAI, DJ, H275/29).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

Prendergast, resident engineer on the Scheme, acted on behalf of the Department of Industry and Commerce in monitoring the implementation of the terms of the contract in respect of engineering, logistical and personnel issues. In mid-1926, Prendergast became aware of 'local gossip and discontent' in relation to the unfair dismissal of Irish labourers – some who had stood by the contractor under great difficulties at the commencement of the Scheme.¹⁰⁹ He was sufficiently concerned about the matter to report it to his superior, Frank S. Rishworth, the chief civil engineer. As there was no formal procedure for processing employees complaints, Prendergast's concerns were based on rumour and were therefore not pursued.¹¹⁰

The German contractor was generally 'anxious' to employ German workers whenever possible.¹¹¹ It had a poor opinion of the Irish work ethic and suggested that the level of workers' grievances on the project would be greatly reduced if 'contractors and workers were of the same nationality'.¹¹² This may account for the many claims of unfair treatment and unjust dismissal by Irish workers. Prendergast diligently pursued claims of discrimination against Irish workers with the contractor.¹¹³ He challenged the contractor's explanations when provided with evidence of discrimination, insinuating that Siemens-Schuckert was in denial of the facts.¹¹⁴ Prendergast appears to have had a particular empathy for the workers and their harsh working conditions. He alone sought to improve labour relations on the project by advocating the appointment of a person 'who could be in constant touch with the labour conditions'.¹¹⁵ In hindsight, such an appointment may have gone a long way in minimising labour unrest on the Scheme.

The continuing unfair treatment of Irish workers eventually compelled the resident engineer to refer the matter to the Department of Industry and Commerce in

¹⁰⁹ Resident engineer to R.S. Rishworth, 25 June 1926 (NAI, Shannon Scheme/Irish workers, SS13929); McCarthy, *High tension*, pp 60- 4.

¹¹⁰ McCarthy, *High tension*, p. 64. Note: For further and more detailed information on workers living and working conditions Michael McCarthy's *High tension: life on the Shannon Scheme* should be consulted.

¹¹¹ Siemens-Schuckert to Resident engineer, 30 Nov. 1926 (NAI, Shannon Scheme/Irish workers, SS13929).

¹¹² Siemens-Schuckert to F.S. Rishworth, 10 Feb. 1927 (Ibid.).

¹¹³ Resident engineer to Siemens-Schuckert, 29 Nov. 1926 (Ibid.).

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 1 Dec. 1926.

¹¹⁵ Resident engineer to R.S. Rishworth, 25 June 1926 (Ibid.).

July 1927.¹¹⁶ There is no evidence to indicate that any action was taken. Prendergast continuously demonstrated the need for a work-place grievance procedure, believing that the resolution of these matters would 'materially help the progress of the work'.¹¹⁷ In that regard he was both astute and far ahead of his time. As various sections of the project reached completion, the contractor dismissed Irish rather than German foremen. Dismissed workers had little protection and it was a further fifty years before such protection was provided in the form of the Minimum Notice and Terms of Employment Act, 1973, and the Unfair Dismissals Act, 1977. The archival evidence suggests that Irish authorities at both local and national level were ill-equipped to deal with staff grievances. The inattention afforded to labour relations issues had an adverse impact on the individual worker who had little or no employment rights and who was hired and fired at the whim of his employer. The Shannon Scheme was an opportunity for the government to raise standards for workers, even modestly. They chose not to do so. This was undoubtedly a factor in the deteriorating relationship between the Labour Party and Cumann na nGaedheal and the growing appeal of Fianna Fáil policies. Tom Johnson and his Labour Party colleagues had gained a reputation as parliamentarians of great ability but it was their inability to influence Cumann na nGaedheal in the slightest and their paralysis in the face of growing social and political discontent which left them devoid of any electoral appeal.

Adding to the ignominy of Irish workers on the Scheme was the fact that they were required to live in deplorable conditions. The volume of the dormitory style accommodation for workers was insufficient and large numbers of Scheme workers, along with those hoping for work, were compelled to rent rooms and sheds given the lack of infrastructure in the area for such an influx of men and families.¹¹⁸ A claim that men were living in pigsties led to an investigation by the local medical inspector of health which found that some of the accommodation was 'not at all fit for human

¹¹⁶ Resident engineer to Sec., Dept. of Industry and Commerce, 1 July 1927 (UCDA, McGilligan papers, P35/32).

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ McCarthy, *High tension*, pp 77-92; Mark Maguire, 'Socialists, savages and hydroelectric schemes: a historical anthropological account of the construction of Ardnacrusha', *Irish Journal of Anthropology*, 3 (1998), pp 65-6.

beings'.¹¹⁹ O'Grady's farmyard in Blackwater, County Clare was singled out by the Medical Inspector as a particular black-spot. The yard became home for twenty-one families, consisting of forty-two adults and fifty-three children, who swarmed into the stables and outhouses. An outbreak of typhoid eventually forced the closure of the yard.¹²⁰ By contrast, the German camp included a number of multi-occupancy timber houses, each accommodating four families who had the services of a dedicated teacher to provide a German education for their children.¹²¹

This incident gained coverage in the national press and was the subject of a meeting of the Dáil Committee of Procedure and Privileges on 1 July 1926. In response to criticism of the treatment of those desperately seeking work, McGilligan told the Committee that 'if people go to Limerick to wait on the chance of getting work when some vacancies occur from time to time that is their own lookout'.¹²² While deserving of credit for the completion of the Scheme, McGilligan could have put more pressure on the German contractor to improve the working and living conditions of Irish workers. He failed to do so, arguing that it would be unfair and unreasonable to expect the Germans to carry any more responsibility than they were already doing.¹²³ McGilligan's remarks seemed to encapsulate the attitude of a political establishment which had little regard for the welfare and dignity of the unskilled worker including their physically gruelling contribution to the State's first major economic and social achievement. McGilligan's papers reveal that his main concern, and that of the government, was fiscal stringency.¹²⁴

Siemens-Schuckert was not only critical of the low productivity of Irish workers but increasingly formed the view that Irish workers lacked 'the knowledge and experience' required of the project owing to the fact that work of a similar nature had not been undertaken in Ireland previously.¹²⁵ This view was supported by the project's insurance company, Ocean Insurance, which found that many of the insurance claims

¹¹⁹ *II*, 26 June 1926; McCarthy, *High tension*, p. 81.

¹²⁰ *DD*, 1 July, 1926, vol. 16, no. 18, cols. 2017-33.

¹²¹ O'Brien, *Powering the nation*, pp 115-16.

¹²² *DD*, 1 July, 1926, vol. 16, no. 18, cols. 2027-28.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, cols. 2031-32.

¹²⁴ McCarthy, 'Shannon scheme workers', p. 67.

¹²⁵ Siemens-Schuckert to Rishworth, 12 July 1927 (NAI, Shannon Scheme papers/Irish workers, SS13929).

arising on the project were largely due to 'the carelessness and inexperience of the labour employed' which they noted had been sourced from 'remote parts of Ireland'.¹²⁶ These complaints and observations by the contractor and its insurer undermine the government's contention that the nature of the unskilled work on the scheme was similar to that of the farm labourer. They also reveal that very little prior consideration was given to the skills required or the provision of a training programme for Irish workers. However, many Irish workers employed on the Scheme benefitted from learned new skills which were later in demand by American firms offering work in the United States.¹²⁷

The Shannon Scheme was seen by many as an important test for the young state and its physical construction became a metaphor for the nation-building of the era.¹²⁸ All attempts by Labour to generate support in both houses of the Oireachtas for a sense of social justice on behalf of the Shannon workers were drowned in a sea of patriotic rhetoric. In such circumstances the working and living conditions endured by workers on the Scheme received little sympathy from elected representatives apart from Labour politicians. The case of Irish workers was hardly assisted by the remarks of the Earl of Mayo, a government-appointed senator, who disparagingly described the work of a labourer on the Scheme as simply 'wheeling a barrow with clay up along a narrow plank.' Adding insult to injury, he suggested that 'the difficulty we have in Ireland ... [is] ... to get men who are trained to do that.'¹²⁹ Senator John Keane was satisfied that the conditions were not unduly harsh.¹³⁰ These ill-judged comments caused the Labour Senator, Thomas Farren, to declare that nothing surprised him more in the debate regarding working conditions on the Scheme than 'the audacity and colossal ignorance' of some of the government senators.¹³¹ This revealing Seanad debate clearly indicated the social chasm between the new Irish political elite (aping their imperial predecessors) and the working-class.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Maguire, 'Socialists, savages and hydroelectric schemes', p. 60.

¹²⁹ *Seanad Éireann debates* (hereafter *SD*), 10 Dec. 1925, vol. 6, no. 2, cols. 45-6.

¹³⁰ Ibid., cols. 52-3.

¹³¹ Ibid., cols. 56-7.

Completion of the project was scheduled for 1929. However, as concerns developed during 1928 as to whether or not the project might be completed on time relationships between McGilligan, his officials and the German contractor grew fraught. The contractor sought a six-month extension and attributed the perceived delay not only to the industrial dispute but also to an earlier complaint – ‘the low working capacity of the Irish labour and the difficulties to get sufficient skilled labour.’¹³² The contractor also complained of a lack of support and understanding from the Department of Industry and Commerce, particularly in relation to the need to bring in German workers, in their endeavours ‘to make up for lost time’, and in a final demonstration of frustration accused the Department of having ‘never suggested any methods and ways which would have improved these awkward conditions.’¹³³ This attack was not left unchallenged. F.S. Rishworth, who was clearly writing with the authority of the minister, defended the quality of Irish labour, accused the contractor of refusing to appoint sufficient Irish engineers and insisted that ‘the Government have met your requirements in a very generous manner.’¹³⁴ In an effort to make up for lost time the contractor, given the nature of the recent labour trouble, made an extraordinary suggestion to the Department - that higher wages be paid in order ‘to attract a better type of labour.’¹³⁵ This was dismissed by McGilligan not only because it would increase expenditure, which he obviously was not prepared to do, but also because he believed that it would not increase productivity to any significant extent and it had the potential to generate ‘labour trouble.’¹³⁶ Siemens request for an extension of the completion date was refused and despite the disagreements and accusations the Scheme was completed on time.¹³⁷

VI

The Shannon Scheme dispute coincided with the British general strike of 1926 which had its origins in the decision of coal mines owners to reduce the pay of miners from

¹³² Siemens-Schuckertwerke to F.S. Rishworth, 10 Jan. 1928 (UCDA, McGilligan papers, P35/72); McCarthy, *High tension*, p. 168.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ F.S. Rishworth to Siemens-Schuckertwerke, 23 Feb. 1928 (Ibid.).

¹³⁵ Memo of meeting between contractor and McGilligan, 1 May 1928 (UCDA, McGilligan papers, P35/72).

¹³⁶ McGilligan to Dr Von Siemens, 25 May 1928 (Ibid.).

¹³⁷ McCarthy, *High tension*, pp 168-70.

between 10 to 25 per cent from 1 August 1925. Even though the Shannon dispute never escalated from an ineffective national boycott to a nationwide general strike, there were similarities with the British case. In both disputes most of the workers involved in industrial action were either on strike, locked-out or involved in a boycott in the pursuit of a cause that did not directly affect themselves. The cause of both disputes was the forced reduction of wages and the purpose of the industrial action, in both cases, was to secure an acceptable standard of living for workers.¹³⁸ While the employers in both disputes were the direct object of the industrial action, the governments had always been the ultimate targets as the labour movements in both countries struggled to compel their governments to take action. Neither government was prepared to negotiate on the grievances presented while, at the same time, both were deeply concerned about the impact of the disputes on their prestige.¹³⁹ A search in the National Archives, London (TNA) has revealed very little contact between the two governments at this time. The respect hitherto shown to the labour movements which had grown in stature simultaneously in both countries – one due to its contribution to the 1914-18 war effort and the other due to its commitment to the nationalist cause – was quickly disregarded by both governments which favoured confrontation over negotiation.¹⁴⁰

Both disputes have been viewed as being essentially about class warfare and an attempt by right-wing politicians to curtail the power of trade unions and uphold the power of business and property owners.¹⁴¹ The business classes in Ireland and Britain perceived the strikes as a left-wing threat to the balance of social structure and power. Striking workers in Britain were portrayed as irresponsible in their demands and unpatriotic in their allegiance to the alien creed of bolshevism.¹⁴² By the end of both disputes it was evident that the labour movements in Britain and the IFS were

¹³⁸ Melvin C. Shefftz, 'The trade disputes and the trade union act of 1927: the aftermath of the general strike', *The review of politics*, 29:3 (July 1969) pp 289-394; ILP&TUC Report on Shannon Scheme (1925), pp 5-7; ITGWU report on Shannon Scheme, 30 Nov. 1925 (NLI, ITGWU papers, MS 27,072).

¹³⁹ Shefftz, 'The trade disputes and trade union act', pp 390-2; ILP&TUC Report on Shannon Scheme (1925), pp 5-7.

¹⁴⁰ John Foster, 'British imperialism and the labour aristocracy' in Jeffrey Skelley (ed.), *The general strike, 1926* (London, 1976), p. 4; Keith Laybourn, *The general strike of 1926* (Manchester, 1993), p. 15.

¹⁴¹ Robert Pearce, *Britain: industrial relations and the economy* (London, 1993), p. 91; *The Voice of Labour*, 29 Oct. 1925; McCarthy, *High tension*, p. 39.

¹⁴² James Vernon, *Modern Britain: 1750 to the present* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 340.

unwilling or unable to face the logic of their actions. The disputes in both countries were an unmitigated disaster which terminated with the unconditional surrender of both labour movements, leaving in their wake a demoralised group of trade unions, which lost members and incurred significant financial losses.¹⁴³ Despite initial concerns, the general strike did not have an adverse impact on the British Labour Party which achieved significant gains in the 1929 general election. Instead, the economic depression in the aftermath of the Wall Street crash, cuts in public services and excessive unemployment brought an end to the second British Labour government in 1931 with the party holding only 46 of the 287 seats it had won in 1929.¹⁴⁴ Likewise, there is no evidence that the Irish Labour Party was adversely affected by the collapse of the Shannon dispute. However, despite increasing its representation in the Dáil by fifty per cent in the June 1927 general election, Labour suffered significant losses in the September 1927 and 1932 general elections. It lost 9 seats in the September 1927 election, leaving it with 13, and following the 1932 election it was reduced to 7 seats. These losses can be attributed to funding and organisational difficulties within the party, the disruptive tactics of Jim Larkin, and the growing appeal of Fianna Fáil.¹⁴⁵

Employers were easily able to resist labour disputes during times of economic depression and high unemployment when workers were prepared to undersell one another.¹⁴⁶ Both disputes demonstrated the weakness of the labour movement, and indeed the working-class, in both countries and neither movement succeeded in making any major impact on the general direction of government economic policy during the remainder of the inter-war years.¹⁴⁷ Neither dispute marked any significant change in direction for the respective trade union movements, although in Ireland a desire to separate the political and trade union elements of the ILP&TUC emerged. This cannot be attributed solely to the consequences of the Shannon dispute.¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the disastrous outcome of the Shannon dispute acted as a catalyst for

¹⁴³ Andrew Thorpe, *A history of the British Labour Party* (Basingstoke and London, 1997), p. 62; Shefftz, 'The trade disputes and trade unions act', p. 392; Crook, 'The revolutionary logic of the general strike', p. 661; Laybourn, *The general strike of 1926*, p. 108.

¹⁴⁴ Thorpe, *A history of the British Labour Party*, pp 62-77.

¹⁴⁵ Puirseil, *Labour Party*, pp 22-37; Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, pp 131-33.

¹⁴⁶ Fox-Piven and Cloward, *Poor people's movements*, p. 98.

¹⁴⁷ Martin Jacques, 'Consequences of the general strike' in Jeffrey Skelley (ed.), *The general strike, 1926* (London, 1976), p. 382.

¹⁴⁸ Laybourn, *The general strike of 1926*, p. 111.

change within the Irish labour movement. This was evident in the reflection and soul-searching which characterised the 1926 Congress.¹⁴⁹ Likewise British trade unions, in the aftermath of the General Strike, were forced to re-consider their role, and its pursuit. A dramatic slide in trade union membership followed sharply on the heels of defeat and between 1926 and 1929 the number in unions affiliated to the BTUC fell by 700,000.¹⁵⁰ In Ireland the number of workers affiliated to the ITUC fell by 57,000 during the same period, representing a decrease of 38.26 per cent.¹⁵¹ The ITGWU lost 24,500 members during the same period, representing a decrease of 38.6 per cent.¹⁵² The fall in trade union membership in Ireland, which had been in decline since 1920, cannot be attributed solely to the fallout from the Shannon Scheme but it provided its own contribution. In 1929 trade union membership in Ireland reached its lowest point since 1911.¹⁵³

One major difference between the British and Irish disputes was the level of worker solidarity. Although the British General Strike lasted only nine days – some eighty unions were affected which represented about two million workers, in addition to the miners.¹⁵⁴ This was not the case with the Shannon Scheme dispute. It highlighted, despite claims to the contrary by union leaders, that the Irish labour movement never secured a radical and ideological trade union base and was a reflection of Ireland's lack of industrial development. The historiography of both disputes is vastly different. Writers have been fascinated by the British General Strike and historians have keenly debated its causes and consequences.¹⁵⁵ The accounts of the Shannon Scheme hail the bravery and audacity of a new state to undertake the most important industrial project in its history and apart from Michael McCarthy's contribution, the significant labour issues associated with the Scheme have received scant attention – something this dissertation attempts to redress.

¹⁴⁹ CAR (1926), *passim*.

¹⁵⁰ Anne Perkins, *A very British strike: 3 May – 12 May 1926* (Basingstoke and Oxford, 2006), pp 261-2.

¹⁵¹ Nevin, *Trade union century*, p. 433.

¹⁵² Devine, *Organising history*, p. 180.

¹⁵³ Nevin, *Trade union century*, p. 433.

¹⁵⁴ Foster, 'British imperialism and the labour aristocracy', p. 3; Jacques, 'Consequences of the general strike', pp 382-3; Pearse, *Britain*, p. 83.

¹⁵⁵ Laybourn, *The general strike of 1926*, pp 2-3.

VII

Cosgrave performed the official opening ceremony of the Shannon Scheme on 22 July 1929. Invitations to the ceremony issued to the ILP&TUC were promptly returned due to 'the conditions of labour' associated with the Scheme.¹⁵⁶ The completion of the project coincided with a time of technological, social and cultural modernisation on the international stage and the Scheme thus allowed the IFS to claim its place as part of that progressive movement. It was heralded internationally as a triumph.¹⁵⁷ The final cost of the project was £6.2 million which represented over twenty per cent of the government's revenue budget in 1925. The over spend of £1 million was mainly caused by the payment of just over £800,000 in compensation to local landowners.¹⁵⁸ However, the promises of modernity and social improvement which were to be delivered by the Scheme were too slow in materialising. Cumann na nGaedheal's failure to retain power at the 1932 general election must be seen in the light of its inability to follow through with promises to improve the standard of living.¹⁵⁹ Instead it offered increased taxation and reduced wages.¹⁶⁰

'Control' was a central theme at the heart of the Shannon Scheme construction project and a significant feature of the dispute itself. Essentially, it was a question of private versus state control of the electricity industry. Fearing a foreign stranglehold, the government eliminated the possibility of private control. The alternative was a civil service monopoly. McGilligan had little faith in either the ability or the motivation of the public service and his solution was semi-state control. On 11 August 1927 the ESB was established as the very first board of its type in Ireland.¹⁶¹ Due to its huge financial investment in the project and with its reputation in the spotlight, the government was equally diligent in preventing the trade unions controlling the terms and conditions of employment for workers on the Scheme. The government managed a highly effective

¹⁵⁶ Mortished to Sec., Dept. of Industry and Commerce, 19 July 1929 (NAI, ITUC papers, ICTU/1/17-28).

¹⁵⁷ Mulvihill, 'Turning the infant state electric', *IT*, 3 April, 2004; Meehan, *The Cosgrave party*, p. 60.

¹⁵⁸ *DD*, 6 July, 1932, vol. 43, no. 3, cols. 235-237; O'Beirne and O'Connor, 'The electrification of the Irish Free State', pp 73-99; Note: Some accounts of the Shannon Scheme identify the cost at £5.2m. This was the original estimated cost. Most accounts put the cost at £5.8m. This was the cost in 1929 which included just over £600,000 paid in compensation. However, the final cost was not realised until 1932 when a further £203,250 was paid in compensation to land owners in and around Lough Derg.

¹⁵⁹ Meehan, *The Cosgrave party*, p. 60; Sutton, 'Harnessed in the service of the nation', p. 105.

¹⁶⁰ Laffan, *Judging W.T. Cosgrave*, p. 271.

¹⁶¹ Maguire, 'Powering the nation', p. 84.

publicity and propaganda campaign which minimised the extent of the labour relations narrative associated with the Scheme. The German contractor sought also to exercise its own control by its preference for German workers. Significantly, the trade unions failed in their mission to control the workers.

In his incisive account of labour in Irish politics, Mitchell maintains that there was 'practically no demand' for reform within the Irish labour movement until 1928.¹⁶² This chapter concludes that a careful study of the fiasco of the Shannon scheme reveals that it prompted a reappraisal of labour's mission. These sentiments are evident in the presidential address of Denis Cullen to delegates at the 1926 Annual Congress. All of the high hopes and expectations which had been articulated at previous meetings of Congress were suddenly deflated as Cullen told delegates that the continuation of 'the same problems, the same evils, the same tinkering with them ... has resulted in widespread and deep-seated disillusionment and apathy.'¹⁶³ There was a realisation that little had changed for the working-class since the days of British administration. With a sense of despondency, Cullen posed a critical question: 'After all the effort and all the change, how little change there really is in the condition of the ordinary worker. Was it worth while?'¹⁶⁴ The Shannon Scheme is remembered as an audacious political and economic success but on closer inspection its legacy was a deeply tarnished one.

VIII

From a labour relations perspective, the Shannon Scheme dispute had a very unsavoury aspect to it. The dispute was not just about wages. It also revealed much about class, social justice, unemployment, government prestige and its contempt for labour relations. The Scheme was promoted by the Cumann na nGaedheal government as evidence of its capability. The vital role played by unskilled workers in its construction has historically been overlooked. Most of them came from the ranks of the farm labourer and were regularly victims of social injustice and class discrimination. Class distinction on the Scheme itself was notable in the contrasting

¹⁶² Mitchell, *Labour*, p. 278.

¹⁶³ CAR (1926), p. 107.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

treatment of skilled and unskilled workers and German and Irish workers, with the unskilled Irish worker faring worst of all. The government's stance was coloured by its experience of labour unrest during the Civil War. It denied any responsibility for working conditions on the Scheme, refused to negotiate, manipulated labour agreements and continued to disregard labour relations. The prestige of the project and the significant financial investment by a penurious state occasioned a Machiavellian approach by the government. While promoting the Shannon Scheme as a magnificent showcase for the infant state, the opportunity to utilise it as a template for improving employment conditions, even moderately, and establishing sound labour relations practices to facilitate future industrial development was not so much spurned but never contemplated.

The dispute gravely damaged the trade union movement's trust in the government and left a legacy of cynicism and bitterness. But it also demonstrated the weaknesses of the trade union movement, the faults in its organisation, its poor sense of strategy and coherent planning, and the overestimation of support among its own members. While the government basked in the warm afterglow of the project's successful completion, no long-term benefits accrued to the trade union movement. This chapter demonstrates that the fiasco of the Shannon scheme prompted a reappraisal of labour's mission and set in train a push for change. However, the labour movement's campaign for fair wages was essentially defeated by rampant unemployment, a key factor in understanding the labour issues associated with the Shannon Scheme. The hunger for work turned Ardnacrusha into a mecca for unemployed men who, in 1925, accounted for just over twenty three per cent of the insured male workforce. Not surprisingly, as the next chapter will show, there was little confidence in the government's interest or ability to address the unemployment problem.

Avoiding responsibility: Cumann na nGaedheal and unemployment, 1922-1932

The first meeting between representatives of an Irish government and a delegation from the Irish labour movement in independent Ireland took place on 10 January 1922, within days of ratification of the Treaty. Unemployment was the main issue discussed. The economic environment into which the IFS emerged was not promising. In large measure the depression that began in 1920 following the end of the First World War economic boom was to last for the next twenty years.¹ Throughout the 1920s unemployment commanded considerable attention in the press, in the Dáil and from the labour movement but there was little agreement on how best to alleviate it. Unemployment brought with it human distress and deprivation and nurtured a significant level of discontent which had the potential to intensify the political instability which marked the early years of the IFS. One might have expected unemployment to have been harnessed by the Labour Party to boost its political appeal. In fact it became the party's Achilles heel. For the government, unemployment was constantly overshadowed by security and financial priorities. For Fianna Fáil it proved an issue around which it could mould its policies and achieve office. The unemployment problem also shaped the development of labour relations in independent Ireland. Attitudes towards unemployment ranged from compassion to complacency. This chapter examines the stance of the Cumann na nGaedheal government, the Labour Party, Fianna Fáil, the trade union movement and the Catholic Church. The scale, causes and consequences of unemployment have received little sustained historical examination. The political turmoil following the Anglo-Irish Treaty has generally been the dominant theme in the historiography of the early years of the IFS. Unemployment and related social issues have largely been overlooked by historians. Though threaded through some general social, economic and labour histories, unemployment in Ireland in the 1920s has not been the subject of detailed

¹ David Johnson, *The interwar economy in Ireland* (Dublin, 1989), p. 6.

study.² By contrast, the study of unemployment in inter-war Britain, at both national and local levels, has grown in popularity in the last two decades.³

One reason for this neglect is the utter unreliability of official data pertaining to unemployment. In fact, as this dissertation demonstrates, Cosgrave's government misrepresented the erroneous unemployment data to disguise the extent of the problem. Unfortunately, some historians have taken at face value flawed 'official' data. This chapter draws on a broad range of primary sources, such as ILP&TUC papers and annual reports, ITGWU papers and annual reports, the personal papers of some notable labour leaders, government departmental papers, political papers, Dáil debates and newspaper reports to present a detailed insight into the problem of unemployment in the 1920s. It begins by outlining the various causes of unemployment before discussing in detail the extent of the problem in the IFS during the 1920s and the problems associated with unemployment figures. The second part of the chapter assesses in turn the responses of the government, voluntary charities, the labour movement and lastly Fianna Fáil. The novel use of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) material in this dissertation confirms that the national level of unemployment was understated and, furthermore, demonstrates the widespread poverty and deprivation to which it gave rise.

² Labour and trade union historians/writers such as O'Connor, McCarthy and Nevin afford very little consideration to the problem of unemployment. See O'Connor's, *A labour history of Ireland*, McCarthy's, *Trade Unions in Ireland* and Nevin's *Trade union century*. Neither is it given any prominence in the works of social and economic historians such as Daly, Ó Gráda, Cullen, Meehan and Bielenberg and Ryan. However, Ó Gráda does draw attention to problems in interpreting official unemployment data. See Daly's *Industrial development and Irish national identity, 1922-1939*, Ó Gráda's *A new economic history* and *A rocky road*, Cullen's *An economic history of Ireland since 1660*, Meehan's *The Irish economy since 1922* and Bielenberg and Ryan's *An economic history of Ireland since independence*. There is a brief but reasonable focus on unemployment in the works of some political and social historians such as Ferriter, Girvin and Lee. Girvin, in particular, focuses on the extent and effects of unemployment in his *Between two worlds*. Lee in his *Ireland, 1912-1985* also draws attention to the unreliability of unemployment data. See also Ferriter's *Transformation*. Mitchell's account of *Labour in Irish politics* also ignores the problem apart from highlighting the Labour Party's initiatives to increase employment. The problem is not addressed in the biographies of some of the country's most prominent labour/trade union leaders. See Gaughan's *Thomas Johnson*, Morrissey's *William O'Brien* and O'Connor's *Big Jim*. Neither is it given any real consideration in Puirseil's *Labour Party*.

³ For example see W.R. Garside, *British unemployment, 1919-1939: a study in public policy* (Cambridge, 1990), Philip Mark Katz, *The long weekend: combating unemployment during the inter-war years* (Cambridge, 2001), Matt Perry, *Bread and work: social policy and the experience of unemployment, 1918-39* (London, 2000).

The causes of unemployment in the IFS can be divided into two broad categories: historic economic constraints and more proximate factors. In terms of the former, the IFS lacked an industrial base, was located near the advanced industrial economy of the UK and had a large number of unproductive people.⁴ Many commentators have observed that during the 1920s there was no sustained government policy of industrialisation and, consequently, industrial growth and attendant job creation was limited.⁵ As discussed in chapter 2 the government's principal economic and social focus was not unemployment but measures for the protection of agriculture which was viewed as the only viable driver of national economic growth.⁶ The position of large farmers was favoured at the expense of spending on unemployment measures and industrial development initiatives. While agriculture provided employment to approximately nine times as many persons in the IFS as the manufacturing industry, the net value of the goods produced was less than three times as great with the amount per person employed being about £80 in the case of agricultural production and about £266 in the case of the manufacturing industry.⁷ Agriculture contributed less than one-third of national income due to the lower output of agricultural workers. The economic development model of the 1920s was not only bedevilled by poor economic conditions but was based on false assumptions.⁸ Farmers, contrary to government beliefs, could not 'raise all boats', and both unemployment and emigration remained high.

Several factors exacerbated the unemployment crisis in the 1920s. While it is easy to be critical of the Cumann na nGaedheal administrations of the 1920s, no Irish government faced the range of challenges that confronted Cosgrave and his team. The first factor was the unemployment caused by the withdrawal of the British army and army families. This adversely affected garrison towns and their hinterlands. For

⁴ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, pp 49-50.

⁵ Kieran A. Kennedy, Thomas Giblin and Deirdre McHugh, *The economic development of Ireland in the twentieth century* (London, 1988), pp 7-8.

⁶ Terence Dooley and Tony McCarthy, 'The 1923 Land Act: some new perspectives' in Mel Farrell, Jason Knirck and Ciara Meehan (eds), *A formative decade: Ireland in the 1920s* (Sallins, 2015), p. 135.

⁷ Memorandum on 'Rates in relation to Agricultural and Industrial Production' by government inter-departmental committee, 7 Mar. 1929 (UCDA, Blythe papers, P24/126).

⁸ Mary E. Daly, *Social and economic history of Ireland since 1800* (Dublin, 1981), p. 142.

example, the Department of Justice deemed the British withdrawal from Buttevant and Ballyvonane as having ‘created a situation of immense gravity’ that required immediate assistance through emergency relief schemes.⁹ It was estimated that three-quarters of the revenue of Buttevant businesses was derived directly or indirectly from the military barracks.¹⁰ A second factor was the financial burden caused by the Civil War. Michael Hopkinson has estimated that it cost about £17 million to finance and that material damage was in excess of £30 million. A £4 million deficit built up over 1922 had to be met by borrowing.¹¹ In 1923 Irish banks only came to the rescue of the state when ordered to do so by the British Treasury.¹² A chronic shortage of money curtailed the government’s ability to meet a range of socio-economic challenges.

A third factor was large scale demobilisation following the end of the Civil War. Between 1923 and 1925 over 41,000 were demobilised. It was estimated that less than 9,000 had secured employment, which was probably a reasonable achievement all things considered.¹³ By 1932 the strength of the army had been reduced to 5,800 officers and men and 7,700 reserves.¹⁴ As the Department of Industry and Commerce acknowledged, demobilised soldiers had been ‘thrown ... on a labour market already flooded’ with unemployed workers.¹⁵ Efforts to assist ex-soldiers were insufficient. These included preferential treatment in employment exchanges, the reservation of junior vacancies in the civil service and various short-term employment schemes such as road building.¹⁶ Many demobilised soldiers in Dublin were reported to be in ‘a state of semi-starvation’ and up to one hundred were forced to sleep in the Phoenix Park and other public areas.¹⁷ Most ex-soldiers remained unemployed and as their unemployment benefit ceased, their position and that of their families became one of

⁹ Memo of deputation from Buttevant to Minister for Defence, undated [Mar. 1922] (NAI, DJ, H88/2); Lindsey Earner-Byrne, *Letters of the Catholic poor: poverty in independent Ireland, 1920-1940* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 21.

¹⁰ Deputation from the people of Buttevant to Minister for Home Affairs, 29 Mar. 1922 (NAI, DT 29 Mar. 1925, TSCH/3/S4278A).

¹¹ Michael Hopkinson, *Green against green: the Irish civil war* (Dublin, 2004), p. 273.

¹² Mary E. Daly, *Industrial development and Irish national identity, 1922-1939* (Dublin, 1992), p. 15.

¹³ ‘Ex-soldiers of the national army: problem of their resettlement in civil life’, *Irish trade journal*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Nov. 1925), p. 41.

¹⁴ Knirck, *Aftermath*, pp 97-8.

¹⁵ ‘Ex-soldiers of the national army’, p. 41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Association of Ex-Officers and Men, National Army to Archbishop of Dublin, 17 Sept. 1925 (Dublin Diocesan Archives (hereafter DDA), Edward Byrne papers/lay organisations/box 4).

misery.¹⁸ Fourth, in the aftermath of the First World War and the Civil War the IFS experienced diminished bank deposits, an adverse national trade balance, high taxation, excessive public expenditure and the loss of a potentially productive workforce through emigration. A lack of confidence by private investors was compounded by the government's lack of economic confidence and cautious economic policy.¹⁹

II

In the early twentieth century the term 'unemployment' was relatively new. It first appeared in the *New English Dictionary* in 1888 and by 1913 only a handful of articles dealing with unemployment appeared in economic journals. The Great Depression pushed unemployment from the wings to centre stage of international economic affairs, where it has remained ever since.²⁰ In the 1920s many European countries had experienced mass unemployment due to the economic and political consequences of the First World War which gave rise to hyperinflation and unstable banking systems.²¹ Agrarian economies like Ireland were accustomed to seasonal fluctuation in the demands for labour as workers were hired and laid off according to the ebbs and flows of agricultural activity. When idle, such workers considered themselves 'out of work' rather than 'unemployed'. It was only when unemployment became more structural and less cyclical that it came to be viewed as a social problem. Victorian attitudes depicting the unemployed as lazy or immoral persisted into the twentieth century and it fell to voluntary agencies to care for those affected.²² This Victorian mind-set, as Ferriter demonstrates, was well represented by W.T. Cosgrave who, in correspondence to Austin Stack in 1921, disparagingly described people reared in workhouses 'as no great acquisition to the community' and suggested that 'it would be a decided gain if they all took it into their heads to emigrate ... where they would have

¹⁸ 'Ex-soldiers of the national army', p. 41.

¹⁹ Memo, including 'memorandum (circulated by Paddy McGilligan), on the subject of unemployment', from Sec. Executive Council to Minister for Industry and Commerce, 20 Nov. 1924 (NAI, DT, TSCH/3/S4278A).

²⁰ Charles H. Feinstein, Peter Temin and Gianni Toniolo, *The world economy between the world wars* (Oxford, 2008), p. 113.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39; Julian Jackman, *Europe 1900-1945* (Oxford, 2002), pp 124-5.

²² Feinstein, Temin and Toniolo, *World Economy*, pp 113-15.

to work whether they like it or not'.²³ The attitude of the Irish government to unemployment was similar to the situation in Britain where solutions to unemployment were deemed hostile to the interests of the middle-classes who demanded deflationary or orthodox economic policies rather than active intervention in the labour market.²⁴

III

Despite rapidly increasing unemployment, the Irish government was unable to calculate the number of unemployed, either insured or uninsured. As Tom Johnson observed during a Dáil debate in October 1924 'we do not know with accuracy how many unemployed persons there are'.²⁵ In March 1925 the Department of Industry and Commerce suspended the publication of weekly unemployment figures until 'some better system' could be established.²⁶ Consequently, an accurate measurement of unemployment during the 1920s is extremely problematic, and unemployment statistics, as Ó Gráda notes, 'are notoriously difficult to interpret'.²⁷ This remained the position until at least 1932 with one government report later describing unemployment statistics as 'worthless'.²⁸ Unreliable unemployment data was also common in other countries at this time.²⁹

During the 1920s official unemployment figures only represented the numbers attending employment exchanges to obtain benefit or to seek employment. The figures did not reflect the actual number of unemployed persons as many did not qualify for benefit under the Unemployment Insurance Acts, through which relief for the unemployed was provided, and therefore did not register as being unemployed. In addition, unemployment was high among agricultural workers. As they were not insurable they did not register and so were excluded from the official unemployment

²³ Cosgrave to Stack, May 1921 as cited in Ferriter, *A nation and not a rabble*, p. 223.

²⁴ J.D. Tomlinson, 'Unemployment and government policy between the wars: a note', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 13:1 (Jan. 1978), p. 66; Ross McKibbin, 'Great Britain' in Robert Gerwarth (ed.), *Twisted paths: Europe, 1914-1945* (Oxford, 2007), p. 41.

²⁵ *DD*, 30 Oct. 1924, vol. 9, no. 6, cols. 511-12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5 Mar. 1925, vol. 10, no. 8, cols. 580-1.

²⁷ Ó Gráda, *New economic history*, p. 437; Mel Cousins, *The birth of social welfare in Ireland, 1922-52* (Dublin, 2003), p. 35.

²⁸ P.J. O'Loughlen, author of minority report to Banking Commission report 1938, as cited in Ó Gráda, *New economic history*, p. 437.

²⁹ Feinstein, Temin and Toniolo, *World economy*, pp 115-24.

figures. Official figures were, therefore, limited in scope. In 1922 the figures suggested that an average of 43,759 persons (8.9% of the total wage earning population) was registered as unemployed.³⁰ The level of unemployment benefit was modest. A man received 15s. per week with an additional 5s. for a wife and 1s. for each child. In Northern Ireland the respective amounts were 18s., 5s. and 2s. meaning that an unemployed married man with three children in Northern Ireland received 8s. per week more than a man in a similar situation in the IFS.³¹ The government resisted all attempts by Labour Party deputies to extend the financial provisions of the Unemployment Insurance Acts on the basis that money would be best used for 'productive work' rather than 'keeping men maintained'.³²

Unemployment continued to grow throughout the 1920s. In June 1924 the Minister for Industry and Commerce informed the Dáil that the number of unemployed had reached 82,000 (the basis for this figure was not given) – almost double the official figure of 41,600. Many of these unemployed workers not only had little prospect of work, they also had no benefit.³³ Some business associations estimated that the number of unemployed in 1924 stood at 150,000.³⁴ Out of 76,509 claims on which benefit was paid in a thirteen week period from July to October 1924, 9,558 (12.5%) were for between 1 and 18 days; 9,873 (13%) for between 19 and 36 days; 7,669 (10%) for between 37 and 48 days; and 49,409 (64.5%) for between 48 and 60 days.³⁵ By April 1926 it was estimated that 100,000 insured workers had received some payment from the unemployment fund during the previous year.³⁶ In June 1927 the Minister for Industry and Commerce informed the Dáil that a total of 18,151 persons were 'registered' as unemployed but he was unable to confirm the actual number of unemployed except to claim that the number had reduced by 62,000 since 1924.³⁷ Much of this reduction could be attributed to emigration which is examined

³⁰ Table showing the average number of persons registered as unemployed 1922-30 (UCDA, McGilligan papers, P35a/28).

³¹ *DD*, 29 June 1927, vol. 20, no. 2, cols. 91-2.

³² *Ibid.*, cols. 145-7.

³³ *DD*, 12 June 1924, vol. 7, no. 23, cols. 2220-21; 23 Oct., vol. 32, no. 1, cols. 12-13; Gordon Campbell to Sec. Executive Council, 10 Dec. 1925 (NAI, DT, TSCH/3/S4278A).

³⁴ *IT*, 19 April 1924.

³⁵ ILP&TUC, 'Unemployment 1922-1924', p. 10 (NLI, O'Brien and Kennedy papers, MS 33,718/B (26)).

³⁶ David Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands, 1912-1939* (Oxford, 1998), p. 212.

³⁷ *DD*, 29 June 1927, vol. 20, no. 2, cols. 82-4 and 26 Oct. 1927, vol. 21, no. 5, cols. 431-2.

later in this chapter. The minister conveniently used the lack of accurate data to insist that ‘there is very little unemployment which is not notified in the ordinary register’.³⁸ This claim was blatantly untrue. Despite the absence of precise data, the problem was regarded by opposition deputies as ‘a very serious crisis’; ‘a state of emergency’ and ‘a terrible evil’.³⁹

Obfuscation on unemployment became a Cumann na nGaedheal speciality. In November 1927 it took six days of discussion in the Dáil to conclude a debate on unemployment relief during which everything ‘from the history of the Huguenots ... to ... what constitutes the balance for car wheels’ was discussed but little of a substantial nature was contributed to address the unemployment problem.⁴⁰ The lack of information prompted one frustrated deputy, during the fourth day of the debate, to declare: ‘I am utterly in the dark as to what the extent of unemployment in the country is’.⁴¹ The lack of reliable statistics suited the government which suggested that its economic policies – the reduction in taxation and the improvement in public services – as well as its commitment to the restoration of law and order, had contributed to a reduction in unemployment.⁴² There was no foundation for those claims and all available information indicated that unemployment was in fact increasing. In 1929 President Cosgrave continued to present the official, yet incomplete, unemployment figures to the Dáil as an indication of the success of his government’s policies in reducing unemployment from an average of 30,031 in 1925-26 to an average of 22,500 in 1928-29.⁴³

Table 4.1 Number of Registered Unemployed Persons compared to the total number of Insured Workers for the years 1923 to 1929.⁴⁴

Year	Number of Registered Unemployed (Jan)	Total No. of Insured Workers	Percentage of insured workers registered as unemployed
1923	37,057	261,217 (June)	14.2

³⁸ Ibid., 29 June 1927, vol. 20, no. 2, cols. 92-3, 150-1.

³⁹ Ibid., cols. 123-4, 138-9.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 3 Nov. 1927, vol. 21, no. 8, cols. 739-40.

⁴¹ Ibid., cols. 819-20.

⁴² Ibid., cols. 462-3.

⁴³ Ibid., 3 July 1929, vol. 31, no. 1, cols. 183-6.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 23 Oct. 1929, vol. 32, no. 1, cols. 12-13.

1924	34,007	242,494 (June)	14
1925	54,922	250,279 (June)	21.9
1926	31,714	246,134 (July)	12.9
1927	23,790	245,613 (July)	9.7
1928	27,510	280,005 (Oct.)	9.8
1929	24,886	-	-

With the exception of 1924 and 1925, the proportion of the insured workforce that was unemployed was broadly similar in Britain.⁴⁵

While acknowledging that the number of ‘registered unemployed’ did not include the total number of unemployed, Cosgrave indicated that the unemployment rate was 0.65 per cent compared to approximately 2.7 per cent in Northern Ireland and Britain.⁴⁶ His figures were misleading as the percentage of unemployed was based on a percentage of the total population, not the potential workforce, and the reduction in the ‘average number of registered unemployed’, more than likely, was an indication that more long term unemployed had exhausted their benefits and therefore no longer registered as unemployed. The misery of the unemployed was compounded by baseless political triumphalism as government deputies were advised by Cosgrave to go back to their constituencies ‘and throw their chests’ in celebration of the government’s achievements.⁴⁷ In his evidence before the Committee on the Relief of Unemployment in 1927, J.J. Keane, the Chief Employment Officer in the Department of Industry and Commerce with responsibility for Employment Insurance and Labour Exchanges, exposed the government’s charade by declaring that his Department had no means of knowing the full extent of unemployment as it had no information in respect of the unregistered unemployed. To illustrate his point Keane gave the example of Bray where 175 persons were registered as unemployed and ‘at least 100 others unemployed’.⁴⁸ In other words total unemployment in the Bray area was at least 57 per cent higher than the number recorded on the live register.

⁴⁵ The British figures were 11.7% (1923), 10.3% (1924), 11.3% (1925), 12.5% (1926), 9.7% (1927) and 10.8% (1928), cited in Garside, *British unemployment*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ *DD*, 23 Oct. 1929, vol. 32, no. 1, cols. 12-13.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, cols. 186-7; *IT*, 4 July, 1929.

⁴⁸ Minutes of evidence: Committee on Relief of Unemployment, 1927 (NAI, DT, TSCH/3/S5553D). Keane did not explain how he knew that there were ‘at least 100’ unregistered unemployed persons in the Bray area.

Cosgrave's presentation of his government's 'success' in reducing unemployment was a cynical misrepresentation of the facts.

Ó Gráda's analysis of the 1926 census reveals an unemployment rate of 6.0 per cent of the work force. According to the census the total number of unemployed was 78,071 or 46,357 more persons than identified in the official registered unemployment figures in January 1926.⁴⁹ However, the census figure also understates the extent of unemployment because it was based on those involved in 'industrial employment' and does not include agricultural workers or those engaged in domestic service. The Labour Party estimated the number of unemployed in 1927 to be close to 90,000 as that was the number in receipt of prolonged social insurance in that year (i.e. persons who did not get twenty-six weeks work in the year).⁵⁰ The accuracy of the Labour estimate is also debatable as the National Health Insurance Committee had reported that this figure included persons who had died or emigrated and that the 'register' had not been properly updated.⁵¹ Fianna Fáil estimated the number of unemployed to be 65,000 on the assumption that the ratio of the number of unemployed among insurable workers was one in seven and that the same ratio applied in the case of uninsurable workers.⁵²

That debate on the unemployment crisis took place in an information vacuum and the pursuit of a range of solutions for a problem that could not be quantified was farcical. The main opposition parties did agree that unemployment constituted a national crisis.⁵³ As unemployment reached unprecedented levels in both Northern Ireland and Britain in mid-1930, where 48,000 and 2 million respectively were unemployed, the IFS government released 'official' figures in 1930 showing the number unemployed in the IFS to be just 20,771. The *Irish Times* described the figure as 'deceptive' and cited 'some authorities' that put the unemployment figure between 60,000 and 70,000. The Irish Labour Party claimed that the figure was neared to 100,000.⁵⁴ The *Irish Times* pointed out that in Britain the unemployed worker could

⁴⁹ *IT*, 23 Sept. 1931; *DD*, 23 Oct. 1929, vol. 32, no. 1, cols. 12-13; Ó Gráda, *New economic history*, p. 437.

⁵⁰ *DD*, 26 Oct. 1927, vol. 21, no. 5, cols. 380-1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, cols 431-2.

⁵² *Ibid.*, cols. 406-7.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, cols. 396-7, 441-2.

⁵⁴ *IT*, 8 Aug. 1930.

access unemployment benefit more easily and that the British system of unemployment insurance attracted people to register for the sake of the benefits which accrue, while in the IFS unemployment benefit was not paid unless an unemployed person had stamps to his/her credit.⁵⁵ In reality unemployment in the IFS, like many countries at the time, was excessive but no one could quantify the extent of it and that seemed to suit the government.

IV

The prevalence of emigration, which averaged 33,000 per annum during the 1920s, further complicated the picture.⁵⁶ Emigration provided a safety valve for a country incapable of providing sufficient employment and it reduced the burden on the exchequer as social welfare claimants and potential claimants sought better circumstances abroad.⁵⁷ Even though every Irish government claimed as a major objective the ending of emigration, any possibility of it being curtailed by a British recession or British government restrictions 'gave rise to fears, not rejoicing'.⁵⁸ Unrestricted access to the USA was ended by the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act which permitted the IFS a quota of 28,567; this was subsequently reduced to 17,853 in 1929.⁵⁹ In the mid-1920s the government faced a delicate economic balancing act. Increasing international activity stimulated export revenue. It was therefore necessary to keep budgetary costs to a minimum so that taxes would not handicap rising exports. This meant that welfare expenditure was not expanded.⁶⁰ Emigration facilitated this policy by reducing unemployment from the high levels of the early 1920s. Most of those unable to find work on the land were faced with either unemployment or emigration. The Irish government's indifference towards the emigrant was not shared by other European countries. Whereas Italy viewed its diaspora as a symbol of national failure, Ireland took pride in the success and achievements of many of its countrymen

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Sean Glynn, 'Irish immigration to Britain, 1911-1951: patterns and policy' in *Irish Economic and Social History*, vol. VIII (1981), p. 55; Kennedy, Giblin and McHugh, *Economic development*, p. 38.

⁵⁷ Enda Delaney, *Demography, state and society: Irish migration to Britain, 1921-1971* (Liverpool, 2000) p. 60; Mary E. Daly, *The slow failure: population decline, and independent Ireland, 1920-1973* (Madison, 2006), pp 138-9.

⁵⁸ Daly, *Slow failure*, p. 139.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 140.

⁶⁰ L.M. Cullen, *An economic history of Ireland since 1660* (London, 1972), pp 173-5.

who were forced into emigration.⁶¹ However, it should be stated that emigration as a means of reducing unemployment was not unique to Ireland. In Britain 'Empire Settlement' was encouraged in the 1920s as a solution to growing unemployment.⁶²

V

While it is challenging, to identify with any degree of accuracy the levels of unemployment in Ireland in the 1920s, it is more challenging still to identify the actual level of unemployment among female workers. Available data such as the 1926 census probably under reports the female work-force. Census data indicates that 341,082 women were 'gainfully occupied' in Ireland in 1926 and these accounted for 18.8 per cent of the Irish labour force compared to 24.7 per cent in Britain.⁶³ The majority of female workers in Ireland in 1926 were employed as domestic servants (26.6 per cent) or in the agricultural sector as workers assisting relatives (21.8 per cent) or as farmers in their own right (14.7 per cent).⁶⁴ However, for female labour in the 1926 census the distinction between gainful and non-gainful occupations lacks a clear meaning and as a consequence so too must the statistics based on that distinction.⁶⁵ In addition, a large discrepancy to an undercount of female workers in the 1926 census has also been attributed to the widespread tendency of female farm workers to prefer to classify themselves 'as engaged in home duties'.⁶⁶ A further difficulty is that official government unemployment data, while questionable in itself, did not always highlight female unemployment. This reflected the low level of importance attributed to female employment by both society and the political establishment, including the Labour Party, at the time. The number of female workers officially recorded as 'registered unemployed' compared to male workers, as at January each year, 1923-1929, is as follows:

⁶¹ Nicholas Doumanis, 'Europe and the wider world' in Robert Gerwarth (ed.), *Twisted paths: Europe, 1914-1945* (Oxford, 2007), p. 374.

⁶² *IT*, 28 Mar. 1923.

⁶³ *Census of Ireland 1926*, pp 119-20; Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 58.

⁶⁴ *Census of Ireland 1926*, pp 119-20.

⁶⁵ Tony Fahy, 'Measuring the female labour supply: conceptual and procedural problems in Irish official statistics', *The Economic and Social Review*, 21:2 (Jan. 2010), p. 178.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

Table 4.2 Number of registered unemployed male workers and registered unemployed female workers during the period 1923-1929.⁶⁷

Year	Registered Unemployed Males	Percentage of Insured Male Workforce	Registered Unemployed Females	Percentage of Insured Female Workforce
1923	30,162	14.6	6,895	12.5
1924	26,618	14	7,389	14.2
1925	45,422	23.1	9,500	17.8
1926	26,555	12.7	5,159	11.4
1927	19,426	9.9	4,364	8.7
1928	23,612	12.2	3,898	7.6
1929	20,704	9.2	4,182	7.4

However, while official data was unreliable and understated it was generally more so in the case of women due to the fact that the majority of women worked in non-insurable employment, such as domestic service and agriculture and, accordingly, their employment/unemployment status was not recorded. Yet the above statistics show that unemployment had almost as much an impact on the insured female workforce as it did on the male insured workforce. Often forced through family circumstances to work for extremely low wages to supplement family income, particularly in areas where male employment was seasonal or casual, women were open to exploitation by employers. As a result of low pay becoming synonymous with low status, women workers increasingly became the object of resistance by male workers. The perception that working women were competing with men and, as a consequence, lowering the wages paid to men had been common throughout the nineteenth century. This view resurfaced with renewed vigour in the IFS. From the 1920s to the 1940s Irish working women were faced with many attempts by government to restrict their right to work through the implementation of 'protective' legislation.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ DD, 23 Oct. 1929, vol. 32, no. 1, cols. 12-13.

⁶⁸ Maria Luddy, 'Working women, trade unionism and politics in Ireland, 1830 to 1945' in Fintan Lane and Donal Ó Drisceoil (eds), *Politics and the Irish working class, 1830-1945* (Basingstoke, 2005), p. 54; Rosemary Cullen Owens, *A social history of women in Ireland, 1870-1970* (Dublin, 2005), pp 227-8.

Many male trade unionists believed that women were displacing men in industrial and service employment despite there being no evidence to support this view. In fact men and boys had been taking over jobs previously done by women following the ban on women's night work which was enforced by the Employment of Women, Young Persons, and Children Act, 1920 and International Labour Organisation Conventions during the 1920s. This move received the full support of the Irish trade union movement with the exception of the Irish Women Workers' Union (IWWU).⁶⁹ As Ferriter remarks the establishment of the IWWU in 1911 probably owed as much to 'traditional prejudice against women workers on the part of male trade union membership as to a specific claim for exclusivity on the part of women'.⁷⁰ That the IWWU made direct representations to the government in October 1922 regarding 'the very serious amount of unemployment' experienced by women, bears out the view of its general secretary, Louie Bennett, that women's concerns in a male dominated trade union movement would always be of secondary importance.⁷¹

Despite the prominent role played by the IWWU within Congress, the leadership of the ILP&TUC did little to promote the needs of female workers until the second half of the twentieth century.⁷² The IWWU called for the development of home industries to promote female employment in the jam and sweet industry and the hosiery and woollen industries. The union was also highly critical of the government's decision to place contracts abroad for the supply of a range of goods which would normally be manufactured in Ireland by companies employing a female work-force.⁷³ It denounced 'a growing tendency to make domestic service a refuge for unemployed girls' claiming that it was a senseless policy to induce 'more incompetent girls' to enter an already over-crowded market.⁷⁴ This criticism was coupled with a demand by the union for better education for females and the raising of the school leaving age to 16

⁶⁹ Mary E. Daly, 'Women and trade unions' in Donal Nevin (ed.), *Trade union century* (Dublin, 1994), p. 110.

⁷⁰ Ferriter, *Transformation*, p. 215.

⁷¹ Bennett to Cosgrave, 24 Oct. 1922 (NAI, DF, - Early series papers, Fin 1/2010); Frances Clarke, 'Bennett Louisa', *DIB*. (<http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a5874>) (accessed 23 June 2018).

⁷² Daly, 'Women and trade unions', p. 109.

⁷³ Bennett to Cosgrave, 24 Oct. 1922 and Ministry of Industry and Commerce to Sec., Ministry of Finance, 6 Jan. 1923 (NAI, DF - Early Series 1922-1924, Fin 1/2010).

⁷⁴ *IT*, 28 May 1923.

years to improve the employment opportunities for young women.⁷⁵ Calls for the restriction of work for women increased as unemployment increased, the loss of jobs being equated, in part, to the incursions made by women into the industrial ranks. The employment of women had become a feature of new industries such as packaging, house-hold appliances, readymade clothing and chemicals.⁷⁶

In addition, Catholic social teaching disapproved of the very notion of married women working and advocated a family wage for men to whom preference should be given in employment.⁷⁷ Although Bennett and the leadership of the IWWU were ahead of their time in championing the case for gender equality in the work place, Bennett also expressed a preference for women to remain in the domestic sphere and at the centre of family life. She condemned the utilisation of increasing numbers of female workers in industry at lower wages than men as not only the exploitation of women but the undermining of family life. Her Presidential address to the ICTU Congress in 1932 described modern industry as 'a menace to family life' in that it had had 'blocked the employment of men' and 'intensified poverty among the working class.' Bennett and other trade unionists tended to defend women's work, not as a right but as a necessary evil.⁷⁸ As with employment generally, women's employment stagnated or declined from the 1920s. From 1926 the marriage bar was extended to all civil service posts. The state also made it clear in reports on technical education in 1926 that female ambition, particularly among poorer classes, should be confined to the domestic environment.⁷⁹ Emigration provided women with an escape from unemployment and a society that had little regard for their rights and aspirations. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, ten females emigrated for every eight males.⁸⁰ Negative attitudes towards female employment were also reflected in the terms of the Conditions of Employment Act 1936. This is outlined in more detail in the following chapter.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Mary Jones, *These obstreperous lassies: a history of the Irish Women Workers' Union* (Dublin, 1988), p. 113.

⁷⁷ Allen, *Fianna Fail*, p. 58.

⁷⁸ CAR (1932), p. 23; Luddy, 'Working women, trade unionism and politics in Ireland, 1830-1945', p. 57; Daly, 'Women and trade unions', p. 110; Cullen Owens, *A social history of women in Ireland*, p. 240.

⁷⁹ Geraldine Meaney, Mary O'Dowd and Bernadette Whelan, *Reading the Irish woman; studies in cultural encounters and exchange, 1714-1960* (Liverpool, 2013), p. 106.

⁸⁰ Ibid; Delaney, *Demography*, pp 47-8.

VI

The unemployment situation in the IFS was by no means unique. The pattern of industrial unemployment for countries for which acceptable statistics are available shows that four countries experienced particularly high levels of unemployment during the 1920s: Denmark (18.7%), Norway (16.8%), Sweden (14.2%), and Britain (12%). Unemployment was lowest in Belgium (2.4%) and France (3.8%). The rate of unemployment in the United States during the 1920s was 7.7%, while the average European rate of unemployment during the 1920s was 8.3%.⁸¹ In the aftermath of the Wall Street crash, the number of workers unemployed in the United States reached 3.7 million, leaving one in four workers without work. This was unprecedented in American labour history, even though some commentators suggest that the unemployment rate was double this figure due to the ambiguity of government 'numerical data'.⁸² There was a consequential slump in emigration from the IFS to the United States.⁸³ Unemployment in Britain reached unprecedented numbers in the early 1920s. In June 1922 almost 1.1 million insured and 63,000 non-insured British workers received Poor Law relief.⁸⁴ There were at least a million people unemployed in Britain – approximately ten per cent of the insured workforce – from 1921 to 1940. While other European countries enjoyed an economic recovery from 1923, Britain's economy remained sluggish and in the period 1920 -29 the value of Britain's imports exceeded that of her exports.⁸⁵ Scandinavian economies also followed the inter-war pattern of instability and crisis which was accompanied by persistently high levels of unemployment.⁸⁶

VII

Hamstrung by debt Cumann na nGaedheal sought to disperse responsibility for the unemployment problem and rejected several innovative economic or social policy suggestions. It never developed an employment policy and even toyed with the idea of

⁸¹ Feinstein, Temin and Toniolo, *World economy*, pp 14, 124.

⁸² *IT*, 8 Mar; 2 and 4 April; and 8 Aug. 1930.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 9 Oct. 1930.

⁸⁴ Marjorie Levine-Clarke, *Unemployment, welfare, and masculine citizenship: "so much honest poverty" in Britain, 1870-1930* (Basingstoke, 2015), pp 43, 88-9.

⁸⁵ Pearse, *Britain*, p. 50.

⁸⁶ Mary Hilson, 'Scandinavia' in Robert Gerwarth (ed.), *Twisted paths: Europe, 1914-1945* (Oxford, 2007), p. 18.

abolishing employment assistance altogether.⁸⁷ As unemployment intensified Cosgrave's administration came under increasing pressure. Social resentments were inflamed by the bitter labour disputes of 1922-3 and were further exacerbated by high taxation and the rising cost of living. By December 1923, the Unemployment Insurance Fund was overdrawn by £1m.⁸⁸ For the *Irish Times*, mounting unemployment was no less than 'a failure of statesmanship' and 'a breakdown of the functions of modern government'.⁸⁹ Some government ministers, such as Paddy Hogan and J.J. Walsh, maintained that antipathy towards work had been fostered by 'irregularism' and they blamed the high levels of unemployment on workers who had 'not yet settled down to hard work'.⁹⁰ Such views reflected the attitude of a government lacking in economic initiatives and refusing to take responsibility. Others such as Patrick McGilligan believed that a 'bold policy' was required and that the government should 'take the leading part'.⁹¹ But the government's efforts were modest. As Minister for Industry and Commerce, until his resignation at the time of the 'Army Mutiny'⁹² in 1924, Joe McGrath viewed unemployment as a threat to the security of the state. He recommended public works schemes to alleviate unemployment, the establishment of an employment commission to advise the government, and a tariff policy.

The government's penchant for commissions as a delaying tactic was widely ridiculed.⁹³ A Reconstruction and Development Committee was established in 1923 with Labour represented by Thomas Johnson and Thomas MacPartlin. Its brief was to survey the employment opportunities, particularly for demobilised soldiers that might arise from improvements to ports and harbours, drainage, communications and power

⁸⁷ Philip Monaghan to Secretary, Dept. of Local Government and Public Health, 22 Oct. 1927 (UCDA, McGilligan papers, P35a/30); Cousins, *Social welfare*, p. 35; Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 56.

⁸⁸ *DD*, 14 Dec. 1923, vol. 5, no. 24, cols. 2028-9.

⁸⁹ *IT*, 7 Mar. 1924.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2 May 1925.

⁹¹ Memo on 'Unemployment' by Patrick McGilligan, undated [Winter 1923] (UCDA, McGilligan papers, P35b/1).

⁹² McGrath resigned on 7 Mar. 1924 in sympathy with the old IRA members who had initiated the army mutiny. On 28 Mar., along with eight other TDs, he resigned from Cumann na nGaedheal, forming the 'national group', which resigned *en bloc* from the Dáil in October following the failure of negotiations between McGrath and Cosgrave to reach a settlement with the army mutineers. See Marie Coleman, 'McGrath, Joseph ('Joe') in *DIB*. (<http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a5683>) (accessed 5 Nov. 2017).

⁹³ See for example *IT*, 18 June 1923; *CAR* (1924), p. 135.

resources.⁹⁴ A key recommendation was that 40,500 men should be employed on the construction and maintenance of roads supported by central government and a local authority levy.⁹⁵ The report's financial implications enraged Cosgrave who rejected the recommendations despite his government's earlier backing of the commission. Cosgrave's anxiety about the IFS's financial burden was coloured by a debt of £26 million in 1923-4. The ILP&TUC representatives withdrew from the commission in disgust. For many trade unionists the 'apathetic' response of the government to the recommendations of its own commission summed up the government's overall attitude towards the unemployed.⁹⁶ Johnson was utterly despondent at the labour movement's inability to do anything which would substantially address the unemployment situation – an issue which he had championed since independence.⁹⁷

In November 1927 a Committee on the Relief of Unemployment was established under the chairmanship of Vincent Rice, Cumann na nGaedheal TD for Dublin South. Its membership consisted of a broad range of representatives drawn from industry, the labour movement, local authorities and government departments.⁹⁸ Its task was to identify steps to relieve unemployment. The committee's approach was flawed from the outset because it omitted an analysis of the causes and extent of unemployment from its remit. A second limitation was its decision not to make any recommendations which might necessitate a change of government policy.⁹⁹ A third was the absence of female representatives despite demands for representation from a number of women's groups. As Bennett put it 'the problem of unemployment as it affects women cannot receive adequate consideration from a Committee which lacks the point of view of women'.¹⁰⁰ The committee found that relief works were demoralising for workers (many of whom were in poor physical condition), costly and of limited value.¹⁰¹ In any event funding for relief works was often misappropriated by

⁹⁴ *Commission on reconstruction and development: interim report on reconditioning and improvement of roads* (Dublin, 1923), p. 1; CAR (1923), pp 20-4.

⁹⁵ *Interim report of commission on reconstruction and development*, pp 2-3.

⁹⁶ CAR (1923), pp 58-9.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

⁹⁸ O'Hegarty to Sec., Dept. of Finance, 22 Nov. 1927 (NAI, DF, Establishment files, E121/9/27); *DD*, 16 Nov. 1927, vol. 21, no. 14, cols. 1391-2.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Bennett to the Minister for Industry and Commerce, 25 Nov. 1927 (NAI, DT, S5553A); *IT*, 9 Mar. 1928.

¹⁰¹ *Final report of the committee on the relief of unemployment, 1927* (Dublin, 1928), p. 2.

some local authorities who, without any benefit to the unemployed, spent the money on 'ordinary road maintenance', while in other cases more money was spent on materials than in the payment of wages for those employed on the schemes.¹⁰²

The committee recommended a holistic approach to the problem and provided a range of suggestions in relation to improving housing, education, public health and the development of various industries.¹⁰³ As feared by the IWWU and other women's representative bodies, the employment needs of women were completely overlooked. The committee's final report was met with a 'stony reception' by the government and effectively buried in a typical Cumann na nGaedheal response to an unwelcome report.¹⁰⁴ Although the committee was prohibited from investigating the causes and extent of unemployment, it found itself 'bound or at least entitled' to investigate this area. These investigations concluded, not surprisingly, that 'there is nothing to indicate the extent of unemployment throughout the Saorstát'.¹⁰⁵

There seemed to have been a wide divergence between Labour expectations and government intentions to relieve unemployment. Labour Party representatives in the Dáil failed to see that their expectations of the identification and immediate implementation of government funded relief schemes were not shared by the government who had advised the Dáil that it would 'consider what further steps could be taken' to relieve unemployment 'without putting undue burden on the resources of the country'.¹⁰⁶ This point was re-emphasised by Cosgrave who advised the Dáil that the government had 'no money at its disposal' to support any recommendations which the Committee on the Relief of Unemployment might make, 'other than that voted by the House'.¹⁰⁷ That only amounted to £150,000. The Committee on the Relief of Unemployment was doomed from the outset by the limitations under which it was expected to operate. It was according to Lemass, 'blindfolded and gagged and bound-

¹⁰² Epitome of the reports from the committees of public accounts on the appropriation accounts for the years 1922-23 to 1933-34, inclusive, and of the minutes of the Minister for Finance thereon (Dublin, 1937), pp 73, 82.

¹⁰³ *Final report of the committee on the relief of unemployment*, pp 2-18.

¹⁰⁴ Meehan, *Cosgrave party*, p. 170; Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 115; Earner-Byrne, *Catholic poor*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁵ *Final report of committee on the relief of unemployment*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁶ *DD*, 4 Nov. 1927, vol. 21, no. 9, cols. 903-4.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 23 Nov. 1927, vol. 21, no. 27, cols. 1744-5.

hand-and-foot and hamstrung' by its terms of reference.¹⁰⁸ It is surprising that the ineffectiveness of this committee did not attract greater political and media criticism. However, a report in the *Connacht Sentinel* in October, 1928, which outlined the harsh impact of unemployment in the greater Galway area, made the following observation:

The Committee on the Relief of Unemployment made a report to the Government last year the adoption of which ... would have gone far to relieve recurring distress. The Government and the Dáil set the seal of their approval on the Report, but beyond this academic acceptance in principle, neither the money nor the machinery have been found to put its provisions into effect. Accordingly, we shall have the unemployment problem with us this season, if not in accentuated form, at least in as great a degree as we have known it for several years past.¹⁰⁹

By October 1928 the government were considering the establishment of another committee 'with a view to improving the situation as regards employment'.¹¹⁰ It was little more than a time wasting exercise which further questioned the government's sincerity and commitment to addressing the unemployment problem.

McGrath's advocacy of protectionism ran into the brick wall that was the Department of Finance. His successor, Patrick McGilligan, was persuaded of the benefits of promoting an industrial policy based on the imposition of tariffs by Gordon Campbell, secretary of the Department of Industry and Commerce.¹¹¹ Accordingly, duties were imposed in 1924 on shoes, glass bottles, soap, candles and motor bodies so as 'to relieve the widespread unemployment which exists and also to give a limited but sufficient experience in the use of a tariff for the stimulation of Irish industry'.¹¹² In 1925 the list was extended to include personal clothing, blankets and rugs, bedsteads and wooden furniture. By 1929 manufacturing industry employed over 5,000 more workers than in 1926 and in 1930 it was calculated that employment in industries which had received protection had risen by approximately 13,000. The economy as a whole was improving until 1929, in line with trends in Britain, and this may have led to an increase in employment.¹¹³ However, the imposition of tariffs had the effect of causing unemployment among dockers and related workers.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, a decline in emigration, particularly to the United States in the wake of the Wall Street crash,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 22 Nov. 1928, vol. 27, no. 4, cols. 627-8.

¹⁰⁹ *Connacht Sentinel*, 23 Oct. 1928.

¹¹⁰ *DD*, 24 Oct. 1928, vol. 26, no. 7, cols. 741-2; 25 Nov. 1928, vol. 27, no. 2, cols. 173-4.

¹¹¹ Girvin, *Between two worlds*, pp 32-3.

¹¹² Daly, *Social and economic history*, p. 143.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 144.

¹¹⁴ ITGWU Annual report (1933) (NLI, MS 27,085(6)).

contributed significantly to the unemployment crisis to such an extent that by 1935 unemployment at 133,000 was double the level of 1926.¹¹⁵ Essentially Cumann na nGaedheal's 'timid experimentation' with tariffs – described by Tom Johnson as 'a mongrel protection policy, half hopeful, half fearful that it will fail' – brought disappointing results in so far as new business and employment was concerned.¹¹⁶

In tandem with protectionism, McGilligan and Campbell proposed a range of other measures to promote employment such as the re-building of public facilities, destroyed during the Irish Revolution, by central and local government. A sum of £7m was identified for this.¹¹⁷ Other construction proposals included an extension to Dublin docks, subsidised housing schemes and a hydroelectric scheme at Ardnacrusha. While the Shannon Scheme was presented as a solution to unemployment and emigration, it was not a job creation project. During construction it temporarily employed 5,000 workers of which at least 800 were German.¹¹⁸ Financial assistance by way of government guaranteed loans was available to employers under the Trade Loans (Guarantee) Act, 1924 and despite a total allocation of £140,000 to various factories engaged in a wide range of businesses, up to February 1926, few new jobs were created.¹¹⁹ Between 1926 and 1931 they totalled no more than 5,000 but picked up by the mid-1930s with a total of 34,165 more in employment in 1936 than in 1926.¹²⁰ McGilligan and Campbell also believed that the state would have to attract private capital to invest in sugar beet (of which Carlow was the best example) and other new industries. Some proposals were costed but most remained aspirational in the penurious IFS. The private sector made little or no contribution to investing in economic development. Although an inter-departmental Economic Committee was established, lack of agreement among the government led to a reversion to the

¹¹⁵ Cullen, *Economic history*, p. 178.

¹¹⁶ Johnson to Conference of Labour candidates, 23 Mar. 1927 (NLI, Johnson papers, MS 17,230/3); Ó Gráda, *New economic history*, p. 396.

¹¹⁷ Ó Gráda, *New economic history*, p. 396.

¹¹⁸ McCarthy, *High tension*, p. 131; McKayla Sutton, 'Harnessed in the service of the nation', p. 97.

¹¹⁹ 'The industrial position: state assistance, present position, prospective developments' in *Irish Trade Journal* 1:6 (Mar., 1926), p. 114.

¹²⁰ *Census of population, 1936* (Dublin, 1940), p. 2; Ferriter, *Transformation*, p. 313; Alvin Jackson, 'The two Irelands' in Robert Gerwarth (ed.), *Twisted paths: Europe, 1914-1945* (Oxford, 2007), p. 70.

priority of agriculture and fiscal conservatism.¹²¹ As noted by Lee, the Department of Industry and Commerce made little impression on the entrenched social, economic and political interests within the government. Campbell identified the problem as a lack of political will to depart from British economic orthodoxy.¹²²

VIII

The government was content to offload as much relief work as possible to voluntary and charitable organisations. In fact the 1927 Report of the Commission on the Relief of Sick and Destitute Poor acknowledged that the voluntary sector relieved the ratepayer and the taxpayer of significant financial burdens.¹²³ The annual reports of the SVP expose a hidden social history of poverty, deprivation and destitution where the common cause was unemployment. Dublin was particularly afflicted owing to the size of the population and the tendency of the unemployed from other areas to flock to the capital in pursuit of work.¹²⁴ At the annual meeting of the Association of Charities in Dublin in March 1922 the prevalence of beggars in the city of Dublin was described as being 'worse' than in London.¹²⁵ By 1923 the SVP noted that its night shelter at Back Lane in Dublin was affording assistance to 'quite another class of sufferer' who consisted of large numbers of 'decent, respectable men' who 'must go for long periods without employment'. The Shelter had a total of 32,196 admissions in 1923.¹²⁶ Most of these men were from various parts of the country and had 'walked many miles in the hope of securing employment,' only to end up in a strange city dependant on charity.¹²⁷ It was a stark reminder that despite the political changes heralded by independence, self-government provided no palliative for the miserable social conditions and widespread poverty which afflicted so many, mainly due to a lack

¹²¹ Secretary, Executive Council to McGilligan, 20 Nov. 1924 (NAI, DT, TSCH/3/S4278A); Girvin, *Between two worlds*, pp 29-46; Lee, *Ireland*, pp 120-24.

¹²² Campbell to McGilligan, 16 July 1927 (UCDA, McGilligan papers, P35B/10); Lee, *Ireland*, pp 123-4.

¹²³ *Report of the commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor, including the insane poor* (Dublin, 1927), p. 84.

¹²⁴ *Final report of the Committee on the relief of unemployment* (Dublin, 1928), p. 3; Note: This Committee is often referred to as the 'Unemployment Committee'.

¹²⁵ *IT*, 31 Mar. 1922.

¹²⁶ SVP, Free Night Shelter for Catholic Men, Report for 1923 (Dublin, 1923), pp 3-4; Note: The SVP Free Night Shelter at Back Lane, Christchurch, Dublin was opened by the Society in 1912 at the request of Archbishop William Walsh of Dublin. It had a capacity for 200 beds and also provided free meals and washing facilities. See SVP, Free Night Shelter for Catholic Men, Annual Report for 1929, p. 24 (DDA, Edward Byrne papers, Lay Organisations/Box 1).

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, Report for 1925 (Dublin, 1925), p. 4.

of work. The Dáil also heard accounts of ‘people living on the verge of starvation’ in some western counties but such reports were dismissed by the government.¹²⁸ McGilligan claimed an *Irish Times* report which described ‘the harrowing state of poverty, starvation and misery’ in Mayo caused by unemployment was ‘biased’.¹²⁹ The situation in the west of Ireland was compounded by a severe crop failure between 1922 and 1925 which necessitated food relief and caused acute embarrassment to the IFS government.¹³⁰

A letter to the *Irish Times* in May 1925 was critical of the government for being ‘so fully occupied with work for the nation in the economic sphere’ that it had no time to make itself acquainted ‘with the effects of widespread unemployment’. The letter writer declared that no sound fiscal policy can afford to ignore the needs of the unemployed and the poor and suggested that the government should consider ‘the real needs of all classes’.¹³¹ This was not necessarily a view that garnered much public support at the time outside the labour movement and charitable organisations. It certainly had no impact on government policy. As an impoverished government struggled to maintain its grip on power, it fell to charitable organisations, especially the SVP, to address the effects of unemployment: poverty, hunger, and sickness.¹³² This was Ireland in the 1920s, ‘a cruel, timid place that was hard on its weakest’ and where, as Lee describes it, ‘[t]he poor, the aged and the unemployed must all feel the lash of the liberators’.¹³³

The heavy demands on charitable organisations reflected the inadequacy of relief under the Poor Law which was often insufficient to maintain a family in food, clothing and housing.¹³⁴ The National Insurance Act 1911 provided for unemployment, sickness and maternity benefits and, like much British legislation, continued to be applied in Ireland after 1922. There was little development in social welfare provision

¹²⁸ *DD*, 3 Nov. 1927, vol. 21, no. 8, cols. 381-2, 388-9.

¹²⁹ *IT*, 29 Oct. and 3 Nov. 1927; *DD*, 4 Nov. 1927, vol. 21, no. 9, cols. 884-5.

¹³⁰ Juliana Adelman, ‘Food in Ireland’ in Eugenio F. Biagini and Mary E. Daly (eds), *The Cambridge social history of modern Ireland* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 239.

¹³¹ *IT*, 5 May 1925.

¹³² Yeates, *Dublin, 1921-4*, p. 116.

¹³³ Anne Dolan, ‘Politics, economy and society in the Irish Free State, 1922-1939’, in Thomas Bartlett (ed.), *The Cambridge history of Ireland: volume iv, 1880 to the present* (Cambridge, 2018), p. 323; Lee, *Ireland*, p. 124.

¹³⁴ *Report of the commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor*, p. 85.

between 1922 and 1932. After independence indoor relief was largely abolished and outdoor relief was renamed 'home assistance'. It was not until Fianna Fáil came to power in 1932 that significant developments occurred in the provision of social welfare.¹³⁵ By 1928 the Dublin Council of the SVP was alarmed by the 'continuance of the severe distress' which it had observed during the previous four years'. Of the total number of cases seeking their assistance, 82 per cent were as a result of unemployment.¹³⁶ During the course of one week in December 1927 five thousand applications for work and outdoor relief were received by the Dublin City Poor Law Commissioners which was attributed to 'the existence of exceptional distress' in the city resulting from unemployment.¹³⁷

The situation in Cork was just as bad. But Philip Monahan, the Cork City Commissioner from 1924 to 1929, refused to accept the depth of distress caused by unemployment, even though the SVP in its annual report for 1927 described the poverty among the poor of Cork as 'greater and more acute' than in previous years and noted that families suffering from hunger had become 'a normal state of things'.¹³⁸ Incredibly, Monahan actively discouraged both home assistance and charitable aid lest it overburden the rate payer or institutionalise undeserving 'chronic idlers' and 'inveterate drunkards'.¹³⁹ The SVP feared being overwhelmed with the primary responsibility of responding to the needs of the unemployed which was not its 'proper function'.¹⁴⁰ It was adamant that its role should be to supplement government agencies not to act in lieu of them.¹⁴¹ In fact the Society tried to dispel the misperception that it was a national relief institution and reminded its members that

¹³⁵ Mel Cousins, *The Irish welfare system: law and social policy* (Dublin, 1995), pp 14-5; Cousins, *Social welfare*, p. 24.

¹³⁶ Unsigned report from Dublin Council of SVP to Archbishop of Dublin, 1928 (DDA, Byrne papers, Lay Organisations/Box 1).

¹³⁷ Vincent Rice to Diarmaid O'Hegarty, 19 Dec. 1927 (NAI, DT, TSCH/3/S5553B).

¹³⁸ SVP Annual report (1927) (DDA, Byrne papers/lay organisations/box 1).

¹³⁹ Ibid; Donnacha Seán Lucey, *The end of the Irish poor law?: welfare and healthcare reform in revolutionary and independent Ireland* (Manchester, 2015), p. 49.

¹⁴⁰ Report from Dublin Council of SVP to Archbishop of Dublin, 1928 (DDA, Byrne papers, Lay Organisations/Box 1).

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

they were 'not relieving officers' and that their primary duty to the poor was spiritual.¹⁴²

To stave off destitution, unemployed skilled and semi-skilled workmen were forced to sell their tools which prevented them re-entering the job market should opportunities arise. Public relief did not extend to assisting such workmen to purchase new tools or to redeem them from the pawnbroker. In such circumstances organisations such as the SVP played a vital role in supplying tools and replenishing 'the stock-in-trade' of workmen in temporary difficulties. The Mendicity Institution in Dublin provided free travel tickets for unemployed persons who required financial assistance to avail of work outside of their locality.¹⁴³ If the SVP was unable to find employment for the men financial assistance was provided, in co-operation with the Mendicity Institution, to enable the men to return home or to emigrate to either England or Scotland in search of work.¹⁴⁴ The St John's Ambulance Brigade also worked closely with the SVP by providing meals and clothing to the wives and children of unemployed men at their Dublin centres in Great Strand Street and Merrion Square.¹⁴⁵ At its annual meeting in 1929, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children noted that eighty per cent of the cases which it responded to were the outcome of bad housing and unemployment.¹⁴⁶ Charitable assistance was not confined to Catholic organisations. In 1923 the Distressed Protestants Association spent £1,957 to alleviate distress.¹⁴⁷ The Dublin City Mission of the Presbyterian Church provided charitable assistance to the unemployed, the sick and the elderly from its centres in Whitefriar Street and North Strand. At its annual meeting in April 1925 it was noted that the previous year had been the worst for unemployment in the experience of the Mission's agents.¹⁴⁸ In 1929 the Distressed Protestants' Association

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ *Report of the commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor*, pp 84-5.

¹⁴⁴ SVP, Free Night Shelter for Catholic Men, Report for 1929, p. 25 (DDA, Byrne papers, Lay Organisations/Box 1).

¹⁴⁵ *IT*, 18 June 1928.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 7 Nov. 1929.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 28 Feb. 1924.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 27 and 18 April 1925.

attributed the main cause of distress among the majority of its applicants to the expiry of unemployment benefit.¹⁴⁹

IX

Notably, the pronouncements of the Catholic hierarchy in the 1920s focused not on the consequences of unemployment but on the perceived pursuit of pleasure. Gambling, violence, and, in particular, the decline in sexual morality attributed to 'the great evil' of the dance hall were frequently subjects of the moral mania which concerned the hierarchy in the 1920s.¹⁵⁰ The pronouncements tended to be directed at the working and lower classes deemed to be of 'weaker moral fibre'.¹⁵¹ Yet, the basic needs of the 'forgotten and the marginalised poor', or a demand for social justice were remarkably absent from the hierarchy's public utterances.¹⁵² Society was so divided between rich and poor and so diverse in opportunity and affluence, that it resembled two nations rather than a single community. It was a gulf which the Church found difficult to bridge and it often took its place unashamedly on the side of the middle-classes, 'allowing the great multitude to drift away like sheep without a shepherd'.¹⁵³

This tendency was bucked by Archbishop Edward Byrne of Dublin in his first Lenten pastoral in 1922 in which he called for the payment of 'an honest wage' to enable the worker 'to live in decent comfort and lay by a little store for his family needs'.¹⁵⁴ This was a rare intervention that reflected Pope Leo XIII's landmark *Rerum novarum* (1891) which was the first encyclical to commit the church to addressing social problems and emphasised the right to a living wage. The encyclical also introduced the principle that the higher social entity, the state, should assist the lower

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 30 Mar. 1929.

¹⁵⁰ Statement issued by the Archbishops and bishops of Ireland, 6 Oct. 1925 (DDA, Byrne papers/pastoral letters); J.H. Whyte, *Church and state in modern Ireland, 1923-1979* (2nd ed. Dublin, 1980), p. 24.

¹⁵¹ Ferriter, *Transformation*, p. 333.

¹⁵² Lucey, *Irish poor law?* p. 87.

¹⁵³ Liam Ryan, 'Unemployment: the role of the Church' in *The Furrow*, 35:1 (Jan. 1984), p. 6. Note: It is difficult to establish with any degree of accuracy the income gap between 'rich and poor' as it was not until 1937 that the Census of Regular Production (CIP) regularly collected information on workers ranges of pay. Even that information was limited as it did not include agricultural and salaried workers. See Anthony B. Atkinson and Brian Nolan, 'The changing distribution of earnings in Ireland, 1937-1968', *The economic history review*, vol. 63, no. 2 (May, 2010), pp 480-1.

¹⁵⁴ Lenten pastoral, 24 Feb. 1922 (DDA, Byrne papers/pastoral letters).

and weaker.¹⁵⁵ The general approach of the Church was to oppose extensive state intervention in social issues. This posed no problem for a relatively penurious government which was not adverse to allowing the Church to consolidate and extend its role in the areas of education, health and welfare, thereby allowing them to focus on the maintenance of law and order.¹⁵⁶ Byrne's papers indicate that he was well aware of the work of the SVP and organisations representing the unemployed as well as the widespread personal circumstances which they encountered. However, his response was generally confined to a financial donation without any attempt to condemn the causes of social deprivation or demanding the development of a new social ideology.¹⁵⁷ In a country that made a very public show of its Catholicism there was scant sympathy for the poor and unemployed and the response from the hierarchy was constrained and modified by political partisanship. In general terms, Irish Catholic bishops in the 1920s have been accused of misusing the instrument of Catholic social teaching by refusing to attack the massive social problems, such as unemployment, bad housing and injustice, in Irish society. In the area of social welfare policy the Catholic Church, according to Cousins, 'is the dog which does not bark'.¹⁵⁸

X

By contrast the labour movement frequently and loudly raised concerns about unemployment. At the same time the government wasted few opportunities to blame the labour movement for exacerbating the unemployment situation. In a thinly veiled attack on the Labour Party and the trade union movement, Cosgrave was highly critical of the raft of labour disputes which had occurred since the formation of the state and posed the question: 'Has the country got the best out of what is labour in it and what is capital in it?'¹⁵⁹ It clearly implied that the labour movement's lack of control over trade disputes and its demands for higher wages had contributed to both the country's economic woes and the unemployment problem. It was certainly the reason why one government deputy, Seamus Bourke, attributed the 'unemployment

¹⁵⁵ Daithí Ó Corráin, *Rendering to God and Caesar: the Irish churches and the two states in Ireland, 1949-73* (Manchester, 2006), p. 118.

¹⁵⁶ Daithí Ó Corráin, 'Catholicism in Ireland, 1880-2015: Rise, ascendancy and retreat' in Thomas Bartlett (ed.), *The Cambridge history of Ireland, volume iv, 1880 to the present* (Cambridge, 2018), p. 731.

¹⁵⁷ See DDA, Byrne papers, lay organisations, box 4, passim.

¹⁵⁸ Cousins, *Social welfare*, p. 196; Mitchell, *Labour*, p. 229.

¹⁵⁹ *DD*, 30 June 1925, vol. 12, no. 16, cols. 1822-23.

problem' to the 'failure of the Labour Party' claiming that it was 'up to them to hammer out some policy' to address the problem.¹⁶⁰ However, Labour's appeal for cross-party accountability and their declaration that 'the problem of unemployment ought not to be the business of one particular party' literally fell on deaf ears.¹⁶¹

From an economic perspective, the government had good reason to be wary of Labour's proposals for addressing unemployment as they were rarely costed and were often beyond the financial capacity of the exchequer. In addition to the provision of relief schemes for the unemployed, in 1924-5 the Labour Party proposed to keep railways in state hands, to set up a national housing authority to address the housing shortage, to provide education for all children irrespective of social class or income, to have a pupil-teacher ratio of 32:1, to provide free school books, mid-day meals, medical and dental treatment, and school transportation for all school-children. This social programme was progressive and innovative but lacking in financial detail.¹⁶² It was certainly beyond the financial capabilities of the state. To raise revenue Labour suggested the temporary withholding of the £1m superannuation payment due to former British officials in the IFS, and to place tariffs on imports. The first was rejected by the government as a violation of the Treaty; the second proposal was deemed likely to damage business and employment.¹⁶³ Johnson also advocated foreign borrowing to fund 'large schemes of public work', such as afforestation, new roads, land reclamation, drainage and housing to provide employment. He confidently expected that the prosperity generated by these works would be sufficient to repay the loans.¹⁶⁴ It was not a sound economic proposition for a country with a large and increasing national debt, and whose financial insecurity made even domestic banks reluctant to give loans to the government.¹⁶⁵ This unrealistic grasp of financial matters left Labour

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 2 Nov. 1927, vol. 21, no. 7, cols. 630-1; Note: Bourke was also parliamentary secretary to the Minister for Finance.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 29 June 1927, vol. 20, no. 2, cols. 111-2.

¹⁶² Thomas J. Morrissey, *William O'Brien, 1881-1968: socialist, republican, dáil deputy, editor and trade union leader* (Dublin, 2007), pp 235-6; J. Anthony Gaughan, *Thomas Johnson* (Dublin, 1980), pp 225-7.

¹⁶³ Mitchell, *Labour*, pp 181-2.

¹⁶⁴ 'A civilian army for productive work' by Thomas Johnson [c. 1924/25] (NLI, Johnson papers, MS 17,149/1/16).

¹⁶⁵ Daly, *Industrial development*, p. 37; Hopkinson, *Green against green*, p. 273.

open to criticism. In the event Cumann na nGaedheal would not contemplate borrowing for public works and were never prepared to risk the state's credit rating.¹⁶⁶

Congress had a natural empathy with the unemployed and the general social and economic distress caused by unemployment. At the same time, trade unionists were fully aware that the movement, by its nature, required a low level of unemployment as its bargaining power was enhanced by the strength of its membership and its ability to restrict the supply of labour to the employer. Unemployment eroded working-class solidarity and weakened the movement's capacity to bargain with employers. It, according to William O'Brien, 'went to the foundation of all their problems'.¹⁶⁷ The ITGWU annual report for 1924 noted that all trade unions had suffered 'both in membership and finance through unemployment'.¹⁶⁸ Some delegates at the 1924 Congress doubted the purpose and effectiveness of campaigning on behalf of the unemployed due to the weakness of trade unionism and the fact that it was unable to command the support of the 'mass of workers'.¹⁶⁹

When a deputation from the national executive of Congress met members of the government in November 1924 it formed the impression that the administration was 'at last beginning to realise the seriousness of the situation' but remained unprepared to commit any funding to address the crisis.¹⁷⁰ Frustrated by this the national executive issued a pamphlet: 'Unemployment 1922-24: The Record of the Government's Failure', in which it castigated the government's mishandling of the unemployment crisis.¹⁷¹ A total of 17,000 copies were printed for general distribution and for the national and local press. Copies were also supplied to affiliated organisations to be utilised as propaganda material for an 'energetic campaign' on unemployment. However, the campaign fell flat. McCarthy points out that the 'effervescence' in the Irish trade unions had subsided by the mid-1920s which resulted in reduced activity and involvement by trade unions in national events and a sharp

¹⁶⁶ Mel Farrell, *Party politics in a new democracy: the Irish Free State, 1922-37* (Dublin, 2017), p. 200.

¹⁶⁷ CAR (1924), p. 190.

¹⁶⁸ ITGWU Annual report (1924) (NLI, MS 27,071(5)).

¹⁶⁹ CAR (1924), pp 189-190.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., (1925), p. 13.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

decline in the number of delegates attending annual conferences.¹⁷² Unemployment had essentially sapped the strength of individual trade unions. The Congress unemployment campaign also failed to evoke any response from the government.¹⁷³ In a further attempt to mobilise an all-Ireland protest on the issue of unemployment the ILP&TUC arranged, with the co-operation of Labour Party public representatives in both Dublin and Belfast, national 'unemployment campaigns' to force local authorities to provide employment schemes or adequate financial maintenance for the unemployed.¹⁷⁴ The campaign was not widespread but protest meetings were held in Drogheda, Dun Laoghaire, Tralee, Arklow and Avoca on 18 October 1925.¹⁷⁵ As feared, apathy amongst employed workers contributed to the campaign's lack of success. The IWWU noted 'those who were working were too selfish to concern themselves about the unemployed'.¹⁷⁶

A general apathy also descended on Congress. The unemployment problem, though described as 'acutely grave' by the trade union leadership, consumed less debating time at annual Congress and fewer resolutions were passed proposing a remedy or attributing blame.¹⁷⁷ If the government had become indifferent to the problem, trade union leaders had become despondent and weary of the lack of progress. Louie Bennett complained of being 'tired of general resolutions to which the government paid no attention'.¹⁷⁸ The fact that the main resolution on unemployment at the 1931 Congress placed an emphasis on the provision of 'adequate maintenance' for the unemployed as opposed to employment reflected an acceptance that jobs were almost impossible to create within the prevailing global economic circumstances.¹⁷⁹ This resolution was also significant in that its tenets seemed to demand a re-ordering of the relationship between the state and society. Tom Johnson described it as 'a revolutionary approach' to the unemployment problem.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷² McCarthy, *Trade unions in Ireland*, p. 70.

¹⁷³ CAR (1926), p. 41.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, (1925), p. 99.

¹⁷⁵ ILP&TUC national executive meeting, 19 Oct. 1925 (NAI, ILP&TUC minutes 1923-1935, ICTU/Book A/Box 100).

¹⁷⁶ CAR (1925), p. 100.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, (1928), pp 70-1.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, (1931), pp 96-8.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Some attempts were made in 1923 and 1924 to organise a general conference of employers and trade unions about the 'economic and social position of the country' with a particular emphasis, from the employers perspective, on the unsustainable level of high wages and the increasing rate of labour disputes, many of which were inter-union disputes. This initiative arose from a resolution passed by the Associations of Chambers of Commerce which called on the government to appoint a representative committee to examine the level of industrial unrest and to make recommendations for the prevention of strikes and lockouts.¹⁸¹

The ILP&TUC was open to participating in an employer-labour conference if its terms of reference were broad enough to examine the 'whole industrial situation' which, in their view, had to include attempts to improve employment prospects and to extend unemployment insurance benefit.¹⁸² The government was reluctant to participate directly but was prepared to facilitate such a conference.¹⁸³ There were mixed views among leading trade unionists. Louie Bennett of the IWWU welcomed it as an opportunity for workers to give 'useful tips' to employers, whereas Cathal O'Shannon of the ITGWU feared employers would use it as a mechanism to reduce wages and to curtail strike action. Johnson believed that a conference would be beneficial for both the labour movement and the country as long as all participants adopted a position of mutual respect.¹⁸⁴ Gordon Campbell maintained that it would be 'an entire fiasco and only serve to confirm the Labour Party members claim to control all labour conditions'.¹⁸⁵ In the event the conference never got off the ground. It was evident that the labour movement and employers retained a deep sense of their own self-interests and a reluctance to collaborate on economic issues due to strong mutual suspicions and mistrust. It also reflected the dismal state of labour relations at the time.

Trade unions internationally were often hostile to any grouping that appeared to compete with them as the voice of labour, even at the margins. They also proved generally uninterested or incapable of organising the unemployed despite the fact that

¹⁸¹ Ibid., (1924), pp 73-4; (1925), pp 13-14.

¹⁸² Ibid., (1925), p. 13; *DD*, 30 June 1925, vol. 12, no. 16, cols. 1796-1844.

¹⁸³ *CAR* (1925), p. 14.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., pp 88- 92.

¹⁸⁵ Campbell to Paul Banim (President's Office), 22 Dec. 1925 (NAI, DT, S4749).

for many they were obvious institutions to turn to for help. This may have been partly because if they were active in unions the unemployed could, at least at certain points, easily determine policy for the employed, arousing fears that that union policy would be determined by the workless.¹⁸⁶ In Ireland increasing numbers of unemployed workers sought organisation. The ILP&TUC dithered about its responsibilities for such a movement. The trade union movement had significant concerns that the unemployment problem had the potential to sap it of all its power and influence. The increasing numbers of unemployed were also viewed as a possible source of insecurity for the state, a view expressed by Labour's Richard Corish in the Dáil: 'The unemployed are a serious menace to the state. They are susceptible to the influence of people who would exploit the unemployed in the interests of their own particular policy.'¹⁸⁷ This view possibly reflected a tendency, particularly in Ireland, for the unemployed 'to become separated' and estranged from their trade union.¹⁸⁸ The ILP&TUC's attitude towards the unemployed also reflected, as outlined earlier in this chapter, their attitude towards female workers who they regarded as synonymous with cheap labour and having the potential to dilute the wages paid to men. It gave rise to an uneasy and complex relationship between women and the trade union movement.¹⁸⁹

Other reasons for the ILP&TUC's reluctance to become either the sponsor or advocate for an organised movement of the unemployed were its own weak financial position and a desire not to remove responsibility from the government. Johnson was also concerned that the organisation would be difficult to control.¹⁹⁰ However, when meetings and processions of an 'independent organisation' of unemployed workers, which took place in Dublin in 1926, began to have a positive impact on public opinion, the ILP&TUC offered financial and moral support.¹⁹¹ There were divided opinions among members of the national executive as to how best to deal with the matter.

¹⁸⁶ Richard Croucher, 'The history of unemployed movements', *Labour History Review*, 73:1 (April 2008), p. 6.

¹⁸⁷ *DD*, 30 June 1925, vol. 12, no. 16, cols. 1829-30; Kelly, 'Social security in independent Ireland 1922-52', p. 80.

¹⁸⁸ John Busteed, 'Economic barometers', *Dublin journal of the statistical and social inquiry society of Ireland*, vol. xiv, no. 4, 1925-1927, p. 297.

¹⁸⁹ Daly, *Women and trade unions*, p. 106.

¹⁹⁰ CAR (1926), pp 112-13.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Social unrest over unemployment threatened to boil over in the IFS as meetings and protests by the organisation of the unemployed became almost a weekly occurrence. They soon came under the influence of the Workers Party of Ireland (WPI), led by Roddy Connolly, which launched the Irish National Unemployed Movement (INUM). Charlotte Despard, also a member of the WPI, later remarked that the unemployed 'have been difficult' and have been 'impossible to organise'.¹⁹² Some of Johnson's concerns had been realised, thus ensuring that Congress and the organised unemployed maintained a safe distance.

For Fianna Fáil the economic and political situation in the late 1920s presented an opportunity to forge a winning electoral policy. Central to this was full scale industrial protection with the aim of facilitating the growth of home industries and consequently the expansion of the economy, thus leading to a substantial increase in employment.¹⁹³ After much soul searching, de Valera declared the oath of allegiance to be an 'empty political formula' and led his party into the Dáil for the first time on 11 August 1927.¹⁹⁴ The development of Irish industry became the principal theme in Fianna Fáil's concerted effort to encourage working-class and rural labourer support, constituencies alienated by Cumann na nGaedheal's economic policies. Fianna Fáil successfully combined rhetoric about social justice with a policy of promoting home industries by arguing that the cause of Irish poverty was British imperialism.¹⁹⁵ Lemass viewed Ireland's unemployment as unique and unnatural and a consequence of a non-industrial economy. In the mid-1920s only 14 per cent of the working population in the IFS were engaged in industry compared to 35 per cent in Northern Ireland.¹⁹⁶

Once Fianna Fáil was in the Dáil, Tom Johnson focused his attention on their economic policies and supported de Valera's assertion that the state had a duty to provide work for the unemployed. Even if Fianna Fáil's ambitious claim that unemployment could be 'an evil memory within 5 years' if elected to government, was complete conjecture, it demonstrated a sense of compassion and offered a level of

¹⁹² Richard English, *Radicals and the Republic: socialist republicanism in the Irish Free State, 1925-1937* (Oxford, 1994), p. 120.

¹⁹³ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, pp 74-87; Michael Gallagher, *Political parties in the Republic of Ireland* (Manchester, 1985), p. 12.

¹⁹⁴ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, pp 131-2; Lee *Ireland*, pp 154-5.

¹⁹⁵ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 91; Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 18.

¹⁹⁶ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, pp 50, 92; Ferriter, *Transformation*, p. 313.

dignity to the unemployed which contrasted sharply with Cumann na nGaedheal's attitude of resignation towards unemployment.¹⁹⁷ At the 1932 Annual Congress, Louie Bennett, the first woman to be elected President of the ITUC, welcomed the social policy of the new government which had brought 'a wave of hope and vitality into depressed and apathetic ranks' and who were sympathetic with Labour ideals.¹⁹⁸ Fianna Fáil, unlike Labour, quickly realised the political value of social reforms and when social policy initiatives were articulated in terms of its economic programme and its perceived political radicalism, the Labour Party, which lacked both an economic programme and radical credentials, was quickly outflanked.¹⁹⁹

As the Cumann na nGaedheal government plodded through the four and a half years of its last term in office 'in the same solid, frugal and unimaginative fashion', Fianna Fáil brought a new and exciting dynamic to Dáil debates on social issues which also illuminated the stale and weary contributions from the Labour Party whose criticism of the government tended to be half-hearted and apologetic.²⁰⁰ Fianna Fáil determinedly cultivated an image 'as the friend of trade unionism'.²⁰¹ It emphasised industrial development rather than relief schemes as the long-term solution for unemployment.²⁰² The party's growth in popularity and its appeal, which drew support from many elements of society, were probably due less to its own efforts than to the political ineptness of the government and the Labour Party. Its strong local organisation also contrasted with the lack of such organisation by Cumann na nGaedheal which was drifting out of touch with the electorate.²⁰³ The outcome was its first taste of government in 1932 with the support of the Labour Party.

XI

Unemployment was the dominant social problem during the 1920s. It is central to understanding the nature of labour relations at this time and posed contrasting difficulties for the government on one hand and for the labour movement on the

¹⁹⁷ *DD*, 29 April 1932, vol. 41, no. 8, cols. 913-4; Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 24.

¹⁹⁸ *CAR* (1932), pp 24-5.

¹⁹⁹ Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 31; Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, pp 99, 122.

²⁰⁰ Gallagher, *Political parties*, p. 44.

²⁰¹ Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, pp 47-8.

²⁰² *IT*, 3 Mar. 1939; *DD*, 3 Nov. 1927, vol. 21, no. 8, cols. 802-13.

²⁰³ Gallagher, *Political parties*, pp 13, 45 and 71.

other. That Cumann na nGaedheal did not engage with unemployment in a meaningful way was a product of its financial stringency and values both of which had been shaped by the Civil War. Indeed, some of its ministers displayed Victorian attitudes towards the unemployed: a mix of pity and moral stigma attached to unemployed people deemed lazy or inept. The government deliberately misrepresented flawed unemployment data which tended to minimize the true scale of the problem and disguise Cumann na nGaedheal's inability to address this social ill. The price paid by the most vulnerable section of Irish society was consequently higher than it might have been and the next chapter will show how Fianna Fáil took a more interventionist approach. Government attempts to disguise the extent of widespread unemployment was dispelled by the labour issues associated with the Shannon Scheme, emigration, and by its impact on the services and resources of charitable organisations, in particular the SVP. Cumann na nGaedheal largely abdicated its social and moral responsibility and the buck was passed to the voluntary charity sector. Where charitable assistance proved insufficient, emigration was an option taken by many. Although many historians have commented on the nature of class divisions in the IFS, the problem of unemployment has rarely been utilised to demonstrate its impact. High levels of unemployment facilitated the downward push on wages. Consequently, efforts to find solutions to the problem did not have the support of farming, middle and business classes. Neither did it attract much commentary from church leaders. Thus pressure on the government was confined mainly to the minority ranks of Labour with assistance from Fianna Fáil from 1927.

Unemployment posed a different set of challenges for trade unions. First, it drained their strength, both financially and in terms of membership. Second, it also weakened their negotiating power. Third, the formation of associations of unemployed workers created difficulties because their attempts to affiliate with the trade unions had the potential to undermine the aspirations of the employed or to attract radical elements. The last mentioned was also a concern for the government. By 1932, the trade union movement emphasised financial support rather than work to ameliorate conditions for the unemployed. This underlined the brutal economic reality that job creation, at least in the short term, was unlikely and that public relief schemes

were degrading to able bodied unemployed and ineffective. It was also significant in that it represented a demand for the re-ordering of the relationship between the state and society.

New approaches: Fianna Fáil and unemployment, 1932-1945

This chapter examines the nature and extent of unemployment in the aftermath of the Wall Street crash and how this issue affected the development and nature of labour relations in Ireland from 1932 to 1945. Fianna Fáil brought a new dynamic to government following its election in March 1932. It had gained the goodwill of the labour movement but its enthusiastic programme of economic and social reform was curtailed by the consequences of the global economic depression and, also, by indigenous factors such as the economic war with Britain, the rising cost of living and the fall in agricultural prices. As Minister for Industry and Commerce, Seán Lemass attempted to re-shape the nature of labour relations by cultivating a nascent sense of social partnership. This was mainly driven by his attempts to encourage the trade union movement to accept its share of responsibility for the harmful effects of industrial unrest, much of it caused by inter-union disputes, which posed a danger to industrial confidence and development and consequently an impediment to tackling the unemployment problem. Within days of being elected President of the Executive Council, de Valera declared: 'Our most urgent problem is that of unemployment and my colleagues and I intent to work without ceasing until that gravest of evils has been eliminated'.¹ The contrast with Cumann na nGaedheal was stark. The Fianna Fáil government acknowledged its responsibility for unemployment and its desire to deploy the resources of the state to ameliorate it.

Fianna Fáil's industrialisation programme was expected to generate much needed employment but was impeded by the unfavourable prevailing economic climate. A decline in emigration to North America due to entry restrictions also contributed to growing unemployment. Realising that the growth of employment would prove a longer term project, Fianna Fáil introduced the Unemployment Assistance Act in 1933. In the absence of jobs, the measure provided financial assistance to the poor and unemployed and represented the most significant piece of

¹ From a broadcast by De Valera on 17 Mar. 1932 cited in David McCullagh, *De Valera, volume ii: rule, 1932-1975* (Dublin, 2018), p. 10.

social legislation introduced since the establishment of the IFS. This legislation also had the effect, along with some administrative changes, of providing a more accurate assessment of the extent of unemployment. In addition, it shifted the balance of responsibility for the poor more towards government and relieved to some extent the burden that had been shouldered by voluntary charitable organisations, in particular the SVP.

By 1932 Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil had adopted contrasting approaches to socio-economic policy. Cumann na nGaedheal's economic conservatism had led to it being identified as the party of business, farming and the professions. Fianna Fáil, on the other hand, emerged as the party of the underdog, appealing to voters who had seen no material improvements since 1922.² While Fianna Fáil's plan to address unemployment was essentially based on a programme of industrialisation, Fine Gael (as Cumann na nGaedheal was restyled in 1933)³ struggled to develop any realistic labour policy. The Labour Party and the ITUC continued to highlight the issue of unemployment, but it accepted little responsibility for its cause or solution. Labour's suspicions of industry limited its focus to the provision of government-sponsored public schemes or state-sponsored industry. This chapter also examines the government's attempts to address increasing youth unemployment and lastly it considers in greater detail the challenges and opportunities provided for the unemployed during the course of Ireland's war-time 'Emergency'. Although the shortage of raw materials led to increasing unemployment, the impact of the Second World War had a less devastating effect on employment in Ireland than was initially feared. Emigration and recruitment to the Defence Forces mitigated the extent of the unemployment problem.

I

Fianna Fáil took office on 9 March 1932 with the goodwill of the labour movement after having fought an election campaign on a promise to bring improvements in

² Farrell, *Party politics*, p. 294.

³ Fine Gael, or the United Ireland Party, was launched on 8 Sept. 1933, under the leadership of General Eoin O'Duffy, following the amalgamation of Cumann na nGaedheal, the Centre Party and the Blueshirts. It was originally called 'The United Ireland Party: Fine Gael'. Within months the sub-title 'Fine Gael' was in common usage. See Farrell, *Party politics*, pp 263-74.

economic conditions, including a solution to the unemployment problem.⁴ The Labour Party believed naively that support for the new Fianna Fáil government would give it influence that would compensate for its small size of seven TDs. Labour's new leader, William Norton, offered his party's support on condition that the new government introduced measures to provide work or maintenance for 85,000 men – the number believed to be unemployed at that time.⁵ This faith in Fianna Fáil seemed to be repaid when the government introduced a raft of progressive legislation and announced funding of over £2 million for unemployment relief works. However, by the autumn of 1932, the effects of the economic war with Britain adversely effected government finances and by December the government announced its decision to reduce the cost of public service pay.⁶ De Valera, as David McCullagh points out, 'did his best to speak the Labour Party's language' but did so 'rather unconvincingly'.⁷ Fianna Fáil removed its dependence on Labour with a snap election on 24 January 1933 in which it gained eight seats from Cumann na nGaedheal, while Labour gained one seat.⁸ Within eighteen months of Fianna Fáil in office, Labour accused it of reneging on its election promises for workers, 'despite some well-meaning efforts in certain directions', and taking no action to curtail the increasing unemployment problem.⁹

Economic activity had peaked in 1929, and the last years of the Cumann na nGaedheal administration witnessed a substantial reduction in output, trade and employment. The policies pursued by Fianna Fáil were therefore influenced by both immediate economic pressures and by the party's ideological commitments. Their protectionist measures sought to create jobs quickly and to build more gradually a large indigenous industrial sector, producing primarily for the home market.¹⁰ The government's refusal to pay the 'land annuities' – a disputed issue in the Anglo-Irish settlement of 1921 – to Britain led to an 'economic war' in which the British government sought payment instead through penal 'emergency' tariffs on Irish

⁴ Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, pp 36-7.

⁵ Puirseil, *Labour Party*, pp 39-40; Mary E. Daly, 'The Irish Free State and the great depression of the 1930s: the interaction of the global and the local', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 38 (2011), p. 32.

⁶ Puirseil, *Labour Party*, pp 44-5; Cousins, *Social welfare*, p. 60.

⁷ McCullagh, *De Valera: rule*, p. 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52; Puirseil, *Labour Party*, pp 45-7.

⁹ CAR (1933), pp 30-1.

¹⁰ J. Peter Neary and Cormac Ó Gráda, 'Protection, economic war and structural change: The 1930s in Ireland', *IHS* 27:107 (May 1991), p. 250.

imports. In turn the Irish government imposed its own retaliatory duties, bounties, and licensing restrictions. The economic war badly damaged Irish agriculture while the duties inflicted by Ireland on the British economy only had a marginal impact.¹¹ In the aftermath of the great depression of 1929 many countries used tariffs to protect their own industries. From 1931 Ireland became one of the most protected countries in the world as protectionism became the cornerstone of the government's economic policy.¹² Although it led to an increase in prices, it also helped to increase employment – though by precisely how much is not easy to determine.

II

The unreliability of unemployment data remained a problem during the 1930s but new measures established the much broader extent of the problem. As explained in the previous chapter, deficiencies in the unemployment registration system underrepresented the extent of unemployment. In March 1932 the number of 'official' unemployed was 29,768. This may have suited Cumann na nGaedheal on the cusp of a general election. Lemass accused the government of taking great care not to find out the truth about unemployment and keeping the 'few meagre statistics' they had to themselves.¹³ On taking office, the Fianna Fáil government established a more reliable register for the unemployed.

A more accurate Live Register was achieved through administrative alterations in May 1932 and by means of legislation in October 1933. Each will be considered in turn. The administrative changes included the extension of facilities for registration to post offices and police stations and the provision of inducements to register. In particular, it was made conditional in respect of all work financed wholly or partially out of state funds that only persons registered as unemployed at employment exchanges could be considered for such work.¹⁴ Prior to May 1932 the unemployment register was predominantly composed of unemployed workers entitled to unemployment benefit, whereas after that date it was predominantly composed of unemployed workers who had no entitlement to benefit and who had heretofore no

¹¹ Ibid; Johnson, *Interwar economy*, pp 15-6; Ó Gráda, *New economic history*, p. 416.

¹² Johnson, *Interwar Economy*, pp 25-8.

¹³ *SD*, 18 Oct. 1933, vol. 17, no. 21, cols. 1609-10.

¹⁴ Ibid., cols. 1577-8; File note on 'Live Register', 9 Dec. 1942 (NAI, D/T, S11587B).

incentive to register.¹⁵ The administrative changes increased the numbers on the unemployment register from 35,874 on the last Monday of May 1932 to 66,918 on the last Monday of June 1932. By December 1932 there were 102,619 persons on the unemployment register.¹⁶ It demonstrated for the first time that the majority of those unemployed were heretofore officially unknown to the state and that unemployment was at least 65 per cent more than unemployment registers had previously indicated. One drawback of the changes was that comparison of unemployment data over time using the Live Register became impossible.¹⁷

In April 1932 Daniel Morrissey, a Cumann na nGaedheal and former Labour TD, moved a Dáil motion to provide work or maintenance to meet the immediate needs of the unemployed.¹⁸ This was supported by Fianna Fáil and adopted unanimously in the Dáil on 8 June 1932.¹⁹ At the same time, the ITUC national executive was concerned that the level of destitution among unemployed workers had developed to such a degree that violent public protests could be anticipated unless the state intervened.²⁰ While continuing to support relief schemes for the unemployed, the national executive now pressed for the payment of a monetary allowance to the unemployed who were not in receipt of unemployment insurance, reminding the government of its duty: 'to feed, clothe and shelter the unemployed'.²¹ This was accepted by Lemass as it was evident that industrialisation would be slow. In his detailed analysis of the social and political consequences of unemployment he indicated that reliance on private charities was no longer appropriate or adequate.²² This, as noted in the previous chapter, represented a significant re-ordering of the relationship between the state and society. Despite the predictable opposition of J.J. McElligott, secretary of the Department of Finance, the cabinet accepted Lemass's proposals and the Unemployment Assistance Act was approved by the Oireachtas in October 1933. Rates

¹⁵ Dept. of Industry and Commerce report on 'Periods of Unemployment', 21 Nov. 1934 (NAI, D/T, S9573).

¹⁶ File note on 'Live Register', 9 Dec. 1942 (NAI, D/T, S11587B).

¹⁷ Dept. of Industry and Commerce report on 'The further increase in the live register', 22 Jan. 1935 (NAI, D/T, S9575).

¹⁸ *DD*, 20 April 1932, vol. 41, no. 3, cols. 279-80.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, cols. 285-6; 8 June 1932, vol. 42, no. 6, cols. 932-3.

²⁰ ITUC to Irish Labour Party, 17 April 1932 (NAI, ITUC papers, box ICTU/2/1-4).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Kelly, 'Social security', pp 117-8.

of benefit varied depending on place of residence, sex, marital status and number of dependents. Benefit was also on a sliding scale depending on weekly means. The rate of benefit for a single man resident in a county borough was 9s per week while that for a married man was 13s and for a married man with a wife and three children it was 16s.²³ The cost of the Act was met through a combination of the unemployment insurance fund, local rates and exchequer funds. It was estimated that the scheme would cost £1m per annum. The actual cost for 1935 was £1.6m.²⁴ The Department of Finance had initially objected to the payment of maintenance to the unemployed on the grounds that it involved 'commitments of unknown magnitude for the Exchequer'.²⁵ Six years after the introduction of the legislation it still sought, unsuccessfully, to curtail the monetary effects of the legislation by demanding the cessation of unemployment assistance in rural areas so as to ensure an adequate supply of labour for tillage production.²⁶ This suggests that Finance believed that the financial benefits of the legislation were being abused. However, its demand for a cessation of payments in rural areas was ill-conceived and lacked any form of understanding of the plight and circumstances of the majority of recipients of unemployment assistance who depended on it for basic frugal comforts.

III

The introduction of the Unemployment Assistance Act (1933) was a radical change to the social welfare code because it established a statutory right to assistance for people who were involuntarily unemployed. It rectified a major deficiency in the existing insurance provisions by providing financial assistance even for unemployed workers who were uninsured, for small time farmers and their families and unemployed agricultural labourers. The census of 1926 indicated that 670,076 (fifty three per cent of the working population) were occupied in the agricultural sector alone, 138,658 of whom were neither farmers nor assisting relatives.²⁷ Lemass deemed the legislation as 'necessary and desirable', whereas Paddy McGilligan, the former Cumann na nGaedhael Minister for Industry and Commerce, derogatively described it as 'dole

²³ Kelly, 'Social security', pp 119-20.

²⁴ *DD*, 27 Sept. 1933, vol. 49, no. 14, cols. 1661-2; 25 Nov. 1936, vol. 64, no. 6, cols. 944-5.

²⁵ Fanning, *Finance*, p. 222

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

²⁷ Kelly, 'Social security', p. 118; *Census 1936*, vol. ii, pp 2-3.

policy'.²⁸ McGilligan's criticism had a hollow ring to it and it served to illustrate how little Fine Gael attitudes had changed since the 1920s. The idea of income redistribution was anathema to the majority of that party. One exception was James Dillon who appreciated the necessity of the measure.²⁹ Unsurprisingly, the legislation was welcomed by the Labour Party as an 'absolute imperative for the state to step in and endeavour to relieve those destitute persons from the misery, poverty and suffering which they are enduring'.³⁰ The ITUC viewed the Act as a vindication of its long-running demand for either 'work or maintenance'.

The Act was one of the most revolutionary pieces of social welfare legislation introduced since independence. It established a statutory right to a basic monetary income for the unemployed. For the first time unemployed workers without entitlement to unemployment benefit and those whose entitlement had expired no longer had to rely on the Poor Law for support. Entitlement to unemployment assistance was means-tested, paid fully in cash and applicants were no longer subject to the degrading supervision and surveillance of home assistance officers.³¹ It was, as Daly suggests, an Irish 'New Deal' since it resulted in a significant expansion of state support for the able-bodied poor – a process that transformed the concept of unemployment in Ireland, and the role of the state.³² In the first full year of operation over 75,000 people received unemployment assistance, as compared to just under 12,000 receiving unemployment insurance. By November 1934 claims under the Unemployment Insurance Acts and the Unemployment Assistance Act had increased to 20,455 and 91,712 respectively, thus indicating a total unemployment figure of 112,167.³³

The implementation of the Act caused some initial administrative problems which resulted in a delay in payments. Some poor law authorities withheld assistance if it was not satisfied that the applicant was genuinely seeking employment, which was a requirement of the scheme. A cumbersome appeals system also contributed to

²⁸ *DD*, 27 Sept. 1933, vol. 49, no. 14 cols. 1676-7; Kelly, 'Social Security', p. 121.

²⁹ *DD*, 27 Sept. 1933, vol. 49, no. 14, cols. 1711-2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, cols. 1692-3.

³¹ Cousins, *The Irish social welfare system*, p. 15; Lucey, *Irish Poor law?*, p. 71.

³² Daly, 'The Irish Free State and the great depression of the 1930s', p. 36.

³³ *DD*, 28 Nov. 1934, vol. 54, no. 3, cols. 373-4; Kelly, 'Social security', p. 123.

delays. The Department of Industry and Commerce produced a progressive set of guidelines. It advised that unemployment assistance officers should take it for granted that, with the exception of certain well-known classes, 'unemployed persons generally are only too anxious to obtain work and they are genuinely seeking it'.³⁴ The 1933 Act was modified by the Unemployment Assistance Act 1935 which led to, among other things, an acceleration of the appeals process.³⁵

The administrative and legislative measures introduced by Lemass significantly facilitated the creation of a more accurate unemployment register. The introduction of a free beef scheme on 19 November 1934 also encouraged registration. Recipients of unemployment assistance were entitled to receive a voucher for a quantity of beef of which there was a significant surplus due to the global depression and the economic war. By 1934 cattle prices were half what they had been in 1930.³⁶ Yet another inducement to register was that preference for employment on relief schemes was given to persons in receipt of unemployment assistance.³⁷ Although a more accurate picture of the extent of unemployment had been achieved, a department of Industry and Commerce committee emphasised that the Live Register could no longer be regarded as a register 'in the commonly accepted meaning of the word' since the operation of the Unemployment Assistance Act and the free beef scheme 'had radically changed its character'.³⁸ The committee considered that the Live Register might be better regarded as a measure of three social problems: unemployment, poverty and the existence of a very large volume of small uneconomic holdings.³⁹ The following table demonstrates how these measures altered the Live Register:

³⁴ Kelly, 'Social security', pp 122-3.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 125.

³⁶ Johnson, *Interwar economy*, p. 17; Daly, *Social and economic history*, p. 149.

³⁷ Departmental Committee report on 'The further increase in the Live Register', 22 Jan. 1935 (NAI, D/T, S9575).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

Table 5.1 Number of unemployed on Live Register for the years 1931-1946.⁴⁰

Date	Live Register/Number Unemployed	Date	Live Register/Number Unemployed
Dec. 1931	29,331	Nov. 1939	115,545
Nov. 1932	102,747	Nov. 1940	109,134
Nov. 1933	82,565	Nov. 1941	98,019
Nov. 1934	123,890	Nov. 1942	81,830
Nov. 1936	107,942	Dec. 1944	77,676
Nov. 1937	96,117	Dec. 1945	76,538
Nov. 1938	94,292	Dec. 1946	69,135

The significant increase in the numbers on the register after the implementation of administrative changes and the adoption of the Act represented the registration of 'existing' unemployed persons. It is difficult, therefore, to determine what impact 'new' unemployment was having on the Live Register during the period 1933-35. Some of the increase in the Live Register between 1933 and 1934 can be attributed to increasing, or new, unemployment in the agricultural sector. Agricultural unemployment grew in the early part of 1934 due to a fall in the price of livestock and other agricultural products. Workers in that sector registered 'in large numbers' to qualify for financial assistance and the opportunity to work on relief schemes.⁴¹ It was also noted, at the time, that a large proportion of farmers and their sons, some of whom were in 'comparatively comfortable circumstances' had also registered 'in the hope in getting work with their horses and carts on relief schemes'. There was a significant increase in the employment registers in the Tuam, Mallow and Thurles areas which was an indication that many hoped for the opportunity of work in the new sugar beet factories. In January 1933, 10.5 per cent of those on the Live Register declared themselves as landowners.⁴²

⁴⁰ Report on 'Total Unemployment 1932-40' by Timothy A. Smiddy, Dec. 1942 (NAI, D/T, S13027); Reports on 'Unemployment/Live Register, 1939-1946 (NAI, D/T, S11587/A/B/C); Dept. of Industry and Commerce committee report on 'The trend of employment and unemployment in the Saorstát', 1935 (NAI, D/T, Taois/98/8/19). Note: Timothy A. Smiddy (1875-1962) was born on Cork and was an economist, academic and diplomat. He was economic adviser to the treaty delegation in London in 1921 and was a close friend of Griffith and Collins. He was head of the combined purchasing section of the Dept. of Local Government and Public Health from 1933-1945. See Michael Kennedy, 'Smiddy, Timothy Anthony' in *DIB*. (<http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a8130>) (accessed 23 Nov. 2018).

⁴¹ Dept. of Industry & Commerce report on increase in Live Register, 29 Mar., 1934 (NAI, D/T, S9571).

⁴² *Ibid*.

By the end of 1934 the discharge of at least 6,000 workers from the employment of the county councils, due to the exhaustion of funds, contributed to the rise in unemployment in that year.⁴³ An analysis of those on the Live Register on 23 July 1934 indicates that 77.3 per cent were unemployed for one year or less and 22.7 per cent were unemployed for more than one year. By comparison much of the unemployment in Britain was short-term. Of the 1.8 million unemployed in Britain in June 1934, 56.5 per cent were unemployed for less than three months while, similar to Ireland, 22.3 per cent were unemployed for more than one year.⁴⁴

IV

Although the state continued to use charitable organisations to assist with the relief of the poor, the Unemployment Assistance Act 1933 shifted the balance of responsibility more towards the State. There was a noticeable reduction in the number of references to widespread distress caused by unemployment in the reports of SVP conferences. The Council of Cork Conferences remarked that the Act 'did much to relieve the Society of responsibilities which should never have been imposed upon it'.⁴⁵ In 1936 that Council reported as follows:

When the Unemployment Assistance Act and extended Home Assistance were first introduced the number of families in need of help quickly fell. Prior to this year many of the poor were living on wholly inadequate incomes, and ... many of them were hungry. This was a very sad and serious state of affairs. The help obtained under the Unemployment Assistance Act ... brought immediate amelioration of it, and for a while the poor seemed to be well off. Their standard of living advanced. But it should not be thought ... that they are living in any state approaching frugal comfort.⁴⁶

The Council of Dublin Conferences also noted a 'considerable' reduction in demands for assistance which they attributed to the effects of the Unemployment Assistance Act.⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, the SVP welcomed the opportunity to bring the pastoral element of its work into greater prominence than had been possible for some years.⁴⁸

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ SVP Annual report (1934), pp 11, 27.

⁴⁶ Ibid. (1936), p. 35.

⁴⁷ Ibid. (1934), p. 55.

⁴⁸ SVP Annual report (1934), p. 55.

The 1933 Act reduced the burden on charitable organisations but demands for charitable assistance continued because absolute poverty, due primarily to a lack of work, persisted for decades after Independence.⁴⁹ One manifestation of this was the Mount Street Club in Dublin. This organisation came into being in response to a doubling of unemployment in Dublin between May 1931 and May 1932 when the figure rose to 13,500.⁵⁰ A handful of Dublin business people established an unemployed men's club - 'The Mount Street Club Society' - in 1934 to make 'a real contribution towards the alleviation and ultimate solution of the problem of unemployment'.⁵¹ Unlike the trade union movement, the founders of the Club believed all elements of society had a responsibility for trying to alleviate the unemployment problem.⁵² The Club allowed unemployed men to earn 'tallies' which they could exchange for a range of goods and services, including food, clothing, fuel and furniture. The success of the club was limited. During the period 1936 – 1940 the turnover of membership was between 2,500 and 3,000, most of whom worked at its premises in Mount Street, on its farm at Clondalkin, in its garden allotments in Merrion and Sydney Parade and elsewhere.⁵³

Despite its lofty ideals, an inter-departmental committee reported in 1941 that the Club's activities did 'little more than relieve to some extent the burden on private charity or public institutions which meet the needs of the unemployed'.⁵⁴ Some prominent trade unionists became associated with the Club but the wider trade union movement was divided on the Club's operations and philosophy. In 1939 the Dublin Trades Union Council passed a resolution disapproving of the principles of the Club on the grounds that the Club did not operate in the best interests of the trade union movement in that members of the Club were performing work which would ordinarily

⁴⁹ Kennedy, *Cottage to crèche*, p. 58.

⁵⁰ *DD*, 8 June 1932, vol. 42, no. 6, cols. 899-900.

⁵¹ Memorandum on the aims and objectives of the Mount Street Club Society, July, 1942 (Dublin City Archives (hereafter DCA), Mount Street Club collection, Ar/add/81/015).

⁵² Draft report to A.G.M., Nov. 1937 (DCA, Mount Street Club collection, Ar/add/81/136).

⁵³ Inter-departmental committee report on the application of the Mount Street club for state aid, April 1941 (DDA, McQuaid papers, government, XVIII/35/3); Peter Somerville-Large, 'The first decade of the Mount Street club' in Peter Somerville-Large, Mary E. Daly and Colin Murphy (eds), *The Mount Street Club: Dublin's unique response to unemployment, 1934 – present* (Bray, 2014), pp 72-8.

⁵⁴ Inter-departmental committee report on the application of the Mount Street club for state aid, April 1941 (DDA, McQuaid papers, government, XVIII/35/3).

be undertaken by skilled craftsmen.⁵⁵ One craft union accused the Club of 'exploiting the unfortunate position of the unemployed' although the IWWU viewed the operations of the Club as 'a magnificent example' of co-operative labour and a system that trade unions should replicate.⁵⁶ The Club did not make any significant contribution to reducing the extent of unemployment but it gave support and purpose to men who were belittled by society and, who, through no fault of their own, were regarded as surplus to Dublin's employment requirements.

V

Notwithstanding the global depression, Fianna Fáil believed that unemployment was primarily caused by structural deficiencies in the Irish economy which could be remedied. A joint memorandum from the ITUC and the Labour Party to the government explicitly stated that if unemployment was to be eliminated 'nothing short of work provided through an all-round economic planning and re-construction scheme will ever be adequate to deal with the question'.⁵⁷ De Valera declared to a deputation from the ITUC in 1933: 'We have a plan. It is to industrialise the country'.⁵⁸ Following an exchange of correspondence between the labour movement and the government and a meeting with de Valera on 26 April 1933, Éamonn Lynch, Secretary of the ITUC, concluded that while sympathetic to the plight of the unemployed, de Valera did not seem to be clear as to how the situation should be addressed. He accused the government of 'tinkering' with the problem and providing no permanent solution.⁵⁹ De Valera was more preoccupied with unemployment than is realised. In May 1926 he described the fundamental duty of government as providing 'the opportunity for useful work and he reiterated this point in a 1926 publication explaining the aims of the new Fianna Fáil party: 'it is the primary duty of the modern state to ensure that every man, who is willing and able to work, will have work.'⁶⁰ It was also noted that the problem of unemployment was 'frequently discussed by de

⁵⁵ Ibid; Hon. Sec. Mount Street Club to P.T. Daly, DTUC, 4 July 1939 and P.T. Daly to J.J. Newcome, Mount Street Club, 5 Oct. 1939 (DCA, Mount Street Club collection, Ar/add/81/081).

⁵⁶ CAR (1945), pp 148-9.

⁵⁷ Ibid. (1933), p. 41.

⁵⁸ Meeting between deputation from ITUC and de Valera, 26 April 1933 (NAI, D/T, 98/8/19).

⁵⁹ CAR (1933), p. 88.

⁶⁰ De Valera's address to supporters in La Scala theatre, 16 May 1926 and Eamon de Valera, *What Fianna Fáil stands for* (Dublin, 1926) as cited in Kelly, 'Social security', p. 116.

Valera's new administration from 1932.⁶¹ Increasing unemployment and emigration in the late 1930s were an increasing sense of frustration for de Valera in the light of his rhetoric while in opposition.⁶²

This may have been a motivating factor for him to consult, in 1938, with Per Jacobsson, an international banker and economist, on unemployment and other economic matters. Jacobsson worked with the Bank of International Settlements in Basle and had been appointed by MacEntee to membership of the Banking Commission in 1934. Jacobsson suggested that an improvement in the income of the agricultural community through better export prices would provide the conditions for more employment in Irish manufacturing industries. But he warned against an over-reliance on trade protection which he described as 'exceedingly dangerous' from the employment point of view.⁶³ Fianna Fáil's approach to alleviating the distress of unemployment comprised three elements: development of industry, useful public works and the Unemployment Assistance Act. However, the poor state of public finances was a persistent obstacle. While supporting a Labour Party motion for more public work schemes in principle in November 1934, the government then voted against the motion as the money to support the schemes was not readily available.⁶⁴

Despite the ITUC criticism of de Valera's handling of the unemployment problem, the ITUC itself provided no real constructive proposals to eradicate the 'disease' of unemployment as Lynch put it.⁶⁵ The labour movement had little confidence in the ability or integrity of industrial capitalism to rescue the working-classes from the plight of unemployment.⁶⁶ Labour's demand that all vital industries be nationalised was firmly rejected by the government.⁶⁷ The remedies suggested by Labour alternated from government financial support to government-sponsored relief works. In 1940 William Norton proposed that such works be funded by 'utilising our financial and credit resources'. Displaying little regard for fiscal prudence or economic

⁶¹ Kelly, 'Social security', p. 117.

⁶² McCullagh, *De Valera: rule*, p. 20.

⁶³ Jacobsson to de Valera, 25 Mar. 1938 (NAI, D/T, S10, 620).

⁶⁴ *DD*, 28 Nov. 1934, vol. 54, no. 3, cols. 477-9.

⁶⁵ Memorandum by ITUC on unemployment, 11 Nov. 1936 (NAI, D/T, 98/8/19); CAR (1936), p. 33.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ CAR (1936), p. 90; Lorcan O'Brian, Sec. Dept. of Industry & Commerce to Lynch, ITUC, 16 Nov. 1936 (NAI, D/T, 98/8/19).

realities in wartime he declared: 'There should not be any real difficulty in getting money ... there is no such thing as a shortage of money'.⁶⁸ This was despite the fact that in the previous year, 1939, the Minister for Finance was forced to introduce an emergency budget due to the dramatic fall in estimated tax revenue. In addition, the outbreak of the Second World War had prompted the Department of Finance to seek drastic economies for the protection of the national interests.⁶⁹ While acknowledging signs of industrial expansion, the labour movement also noted that many of the new jobs were best suited to female and juvenile workers.⁷⁰ When Fine Gael's Richard Mulcahy questioned the Labour Party in the Dáil as to what exactly their fundamental principles were and asked what they were going to do to get employment for people, they failed to respond.⁷¹ The inadequate response of the labour movement to the unemployment problem was, perhaps, a reflection of its own dysfunctional and self-interested nature. This is considered further in the following chapter.

In 1932, the economist George O'Brien noted that, apart from the main employment centres such as Dublin, Cork, Waterford, Wexford and Dundalk, 'the rest of Ireland is industrially backward' and that the encouragement and growth of industry outside of the main urban centres was 'most desirable'.⁷² The protectionist policy pursued by Fianna Fáil from 1932 was partly motivated by a nationalist agenda – to reduce economic dependence on Britain – but more pragmatically it aimed to provide a wider spread of employment and reduce emigration. The international depression strengthened the case for re-constituting the economy as a more self-sufficient entity. However, the policy was geared towards generating employment throughout the country in the short term and not necessarily directed towards the establishment of new industries which would ultimately be expected to compete internationally.⁷³

⁶⁸ *DD*, 28 Nov. 1940, vol. 81, no. 6, cols. 931-2.

⁶⁹ Fanning, *Finance*, pp 315-17.

⁷⁰ *DD*, 21 Mar. 1934, vol. 51, no. 10, cols. 1357-8; Memo of meeting between ITUC deputation and de Valera, 26 April 1933 (NAI, D/T, 98/8/19).

⁷¹ *DD*, 21 Mar. 1934, vol. 51, no. 10, cols. 1379-81.

⁷² George O'Brien, 'Industries' in *Saorstát Éireann: official handbook* (Dublin, 1932), p. 147.

⁷³ Ó Gráda, *New economic history*, p. 398; Kennedy, Giblin and McHugh, *Economic development*, p. 40; Daly, 'The Irish Free State and the great depression of the 1930s', p. 19.

These policies did increase employment between 1932 and 1940. An ambitious housing programme created almost 20,000 construction jobs during those years. The building boom, according to Lee, 'created employment, consolidated working-class support for the government and helped alleviate a social scandal'.⁷⁴ The manufacturing sector grew, particularly in the area of vehicle assembly, shoemaking and hosiery and consequently provided new job opportunities. The rise in industrial share issues on the Dublin stock exchange reflected the growth in the number of manufacturing firms. Between 1933 and 1939 the number of Irish industrial concerns quoted trebled and their aggregate capital doubled.⁷⁵ A report in the *Manchester Guardian Commercial* in 1936 on the Dublin Horse Show noted that:

Each year the industrial display in connection with the Dublin Horse Show is becoming a truer reflection of the growing industrialisation of the Free State ... In every town and district new industries have been rooted and are flourishing. They are bearing blossoms and fruit which can be seen on every side of the stands ... Sorting out the impression of this big and varied display of industrial products one concludes first that industry in the Free State, belated as its development may be, is at last progressing ...⁷⁶

This report not only underlined the broad impact of the government's industrialisation programme but also underscored the emergence of a new sense of national optimism which up to this point, apart from the development of the Shannon Scheme, had eluded the IFS.

The planning and development of industry also required a labour code to fit in with industrial development and in an attempt to limit the potential for trade union militancy which might undermine the industrialisation programme. To this end, Lemass introduced the Conditions of Employment Act (1936) which essentially limited the weekly working hours of adults and juveniles and guaranteed minimum paid holidays. It was intended to ensure 'a fair deal for workers in the new industrial revival'.⁷⁷ It is important to note that while the Conditions of Employment Act 1936

Lee, *Ireland*, p. 193; Stefan Gerlach, Reamonn Lydon and Rebecca Stuart, 'Unemployment and inflation in Ireland: 1926-2012', *CFS working paper*, no. 514 (30 July 2015), p. 349.

⁷⁵ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Rocky road: the Irish economy since the 1920s* (Manchester, 1997), pp 108-9.

⁷⁶ 'Dublin show – growth of industry in the Free State' in *Manchester Guardian Commercial* (NLI, Patricia Lynch and R.M. Fox papers, MS 49,399/9).

⁷⁷ R.M. Fox, 'Eire's labour charter and its dangers' in *Labour* (London), Mar., 1938 (Ibid.); Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 47.

was viewed as progressive legislation which received widespread support from trade unions, the Labour Party, employers and political allies, it presented the greatest challenge to female workers. The Act placed restrictions on the employment of both women and juveniles and allowed the Minister for Industry and Commerce to prohibit the employment of women in industrial work or limit the numbers of women employed in such work. Although the intention was to enhance the employment prospects of men at the expense of women workers, these legislative provisions also reflected the general attitude of society at that time that women should remain in the domestic sphere and at the centre of family life.⁷⁸ While Louie Bennett also shared these views, she and her union, the IWWU, strenuously opposed the legislation. However, it received support from female trade unionists in other unions who believed that it was wrong ‘that young girls should be sent into factories and young men kept out’.⁷⁹ Once again the IWWU found little support from its fellow trade unionists and its relationship with the Labour Party was further damaged by its lack of support for the rights of women workers.⁸⁰

The Act also represented a canny and successful attempt by Fianna Fáil to commandeer the middle ground and to consolidate its electoral support at a relatively modest cost which in this case was borne by employers rather than the state.⁸¹ Some, at the time, viewed this legislative development as belonging to ‘the conception of the totalitarian state’.⁸² The extent to which the new legislation facilitated industrial development is impossible to quantify. However industrial and economic growth can be quantified as the following table shows:

Table 5.2 Economic growth and increase in employment between 1931 and 1940.⁸³

Increase in number of insured persons employed in industry	64,000
Additional number employed in protected	47,000

⁷⁸ Mary McAuliffe, ‘The Irish woman worker and the Conditions of Employment Act, 1936 – responses from the Irish Free State Women Senators’ in *Saothar*, vol. 36, women special issue (2011), pp 35-7; Luddy, ‘Working women’, pp 55-6.

⁷⁹ Rosemary Cullen Owens, *Louie Bennett* (Cork, 2001), p. 84; McAuliffe, ‘The Irish woman worker’, p. 36.

⁸⁰ Luddy, ‘Working women’, p. 57.

⁸¹ John Horgan, *Seán Lemass: the enigmatic patriot* (Dublin, 1999), p. 84.

⁸² Fox, ‘Eire’s labour charter and its dangers’ (NLI, Lynch and Fox papers, MS 40,388/9).

⁸³ Statistics on employment and industrial development 1931-1940, 18 Mar. 1942 (NAI, D/T, S11363).

industries	
Additional number employed in new factories	25,000
Number of new industries established	100
Increase in number of new factories and workshops	900
Net increase in output of manufacturing industry	£10,005,000

Practically every town was promised its own factory, ruling out scale economies and virtually guaranteeing that the new plants would be parochial in their ambitions. The increase in employment was unspectacular compared to Britain but at the very least it was notable. Neary and Ó Gráda suggest that it probably represented the first sustained increase in employment since the Famine and was comparable with any subsequent six-year increase. While industrial output increased by approximately forty-six per cent during this period, net agricultural output declined marginally. The employment effect in the agricultural sector was smaller. Although tariffs imposed on cattle exports by Britain as part of the economic war resulted in a shift from land intensive grazing towards labour intensive tillage, more tillage did not necessarily mean more employment.⁸⁴

The considerable hardship caused by the economic war to farmers was matched by increasing prosperity in towns. This was assisted by the increased employment generated by the establishment of a number of state companies to support the industrialisation drive and provide essential infrastructural requirements. These included the Irish Sugar Company established in 1933, the Turf Development Board established in 1934, Aer Lingus established in 1936 as well as the Irish Tourist Board, the Irish Life Assurance Board, the Industrial Credit Corporation and the Irish Alcohol Factories Ltd. In addition, an expansion of the public sector provided 3,000 extra jobs between 1932 and 1937.⁸⁵ An additional 47,000 workers were employed in 'protected industries' during the period 1931-1940.⁸⁶ Daly and also Girvin suggest that the increase in industrial employment of over 50,000 between 1926 and 1938 was the

⁸⁴ Ó Gráda, *New economic history*, p. 398; Neary and Ó Gráda, 'The 1930s in Ireland', pp 255, 259; Gerlach, Lydon and Stuart, 'Unemployment and inflation in Ireland', p. 349.

⁸⁵ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, pp 156-9.

⁸⁶ Statistics on unemployment 1931-1940, 18 Mar., 1942 (NAI, D/T, S11363).

most dramatic achieved during the twentieth century.⁸⁷ However, Lee claims that the increase might have been less because much of the recorded increase in employment might simply reflect improved enumeration procedures since 1926. Earlier census of industrial production omitted the self-employed and many small enterprises.⁸⁸

This is a significant point and one which John Leydon, secretary of the Department of Industry and Commerce brought to Lemass's attention in 1935. Although the methods for compiling public statistical data had improved since the 1920s, Leydon noted that a difficulty in providing an accurate measurement of unemployment still existed. This was due first to the lack of a generally accepted definition of unemployment and, secondly, to the difficulties of enumeration.⁸⁹ Leydon pointed out that each of the Census, the Unemployment Insurance Act and the Unemployment Assistance Act provided different definitions for 'unemployment'. He cautioned that any comparison of statistics compiled by such totally different means 'must be made with the greatest reserve'.⁹⁰ Accordingly, analysts may not always be comparing 'like with like'. Leydon also remarked that the common weakness with enumeration was that it depended 'on what the people wish to tell about themselves in the particular circumstances of the occasion' and that nobody is legally obliged to register as unemployed.⁹¹

Attempts by census officials to reconcile the data in the 1926 and later census suggest that about two-thirds of the increase in industrial employment between 1926 and 1936 was genuine.⁹² This indicates that the actual, but unconfirmed, increase in industrial employment between 1932 and 1938 was just over 33,000. In his study of the inter-war economy in Ireland, Johnson also points out that it is impossible to determine with any accuracy the rise in employment from 1926 to 1936 as relevant unemployment data is not reconcilable. By assuming that the unemployment rate amongst those who recorded industrial occupations was the same in both years, Johnson suggests that an additional 9,000 were employed in 1936 compared to

⁸⁷ Daly, *Social and economic history*, p. 150; Girvin, *Between two worlds*, p. 106.

⁸⁸ Lee, *Ireland*, p. 193.

⁸⁹ Leydon to Minister for Industry and Commerce, 31 July 1935 (NAI, D/T, 98/8/19).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Lee, *Ireland*, pp 193-4.

1926.⁹³ The difficulty in analysing the actual net increase in employment over this period is further emphasised by the findings of Kennedy, Giblin and McHugh who, while acknowledging that this period witnessed the first increase in employment since the Famine, describe the increase as 'slight'.⁹⁴ This is probably the safest conclusion.

VI

Despite the increase in employment Fianna Fáil's potential for creating political capital gain was dampened by continuing unemployment and emigration which remained high. Welcome as it was, employment gains were insufficient and brought little comfort to the vast majority of the unemployed, who averaged 100,000 between 1935 and 1938, or those forced to emigrate. Between September 1939 and March 1944, 188,254 Irish people were officially authorised to travel to Britain for work; although not all of those left the country. These figures were an embarrassment to de Valera, in particular, whose own test of national prosperity was based on 'whether our people can be retained in the country or not?'.⁹⁵ However, it did allow the Fianna Fáil government to contrast favourably its attempts to encourage and develop industrialisation with those of the Cumann na nGaedheal government. According to Lemass, 'during their ten years in office the previous government failed completely to make any impression upon the problem [unemployment]' and 'left it much worse than it was' when Fianna Fáil came into office.⁹⁶ This even found support within the ranks of Fine Gael with Frank MacDermot TD, a staunch critic of Fianna Fáil, claiming that 'it was only because of the extraordinary denseness of the old Cumann na nGaedheal Government and their lethargy in the matter of starting new industries that it [unemployment] had not been conquered long ago'.⁹⁷

SVP annual reports from various parts of the country also observed the impact of increased economic activity. From 1933 the SVP in Killeshandra, County Cavan noted increasing employment and in 1936 reported that considerable public employment in the area had 'absorbed every man and boy in the district seeking

⁹³ Johnson, *Interwar economy*, p. 30.

⁹⁴ Kennedy, Giblin and McHugh, *Economic development*, p. 48.

⁹⁵ McCullagh, *De Valera: rule*, p. 20; Delaney, *Demography*, p. 125.

⁹⁶ *DD*, 27 April 1934, vol. 51, no. 19, cols. 2553-4.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, cols. 2563-4.

employment'. The Ballinasloe SVP conference remarked on the 'very favourable conditions for employment in the building trade'.⁹⁸ Other SVP conferences reporting increased employment included Kells, Dundalk, Enniscorthy, Tullow, Gorey, Manorhamilton, Bray and Booterstown. Though the increases in employment were not uniform across the country, with some areas still reporting on continuing unemployment, the meeting of SVP presidents in 1939 reported that more favourable conditions had lessened demands on the Society 'as compared with conditions some years ago'.⁹⁹

The SVP reports demonstrate that employment and unemployment grew at the same time. This reflected the fact that while many sectors of industry were showing major employment growth, others, such as the drinks, tobacco and motor assembly plants were contracting. There was also a major decline in agricultural employment.¹⁰⁰ Leydon remarked in 1935 that an increase in the volume of employment was not in itself conclusive evidence of decreased unemployment. An increasing population, to which a decline in emigration to the US, in particular and seasonal migration to Britain contributed, could not be fully accommodated by the government's industrialisation programme. Rising unemployment was inevitable.¹⁰¹ Following the 1929 Depression and the restrictions on entry into the USA and Canada, destinations for emigration abruptly narrowed. For the first time since the Famine, emigration to the USA, Canada and Australia became insignificant and virtually ceased. It slowed from 18.8 per thousand of the population per annum in the period 1926-1931 to just 0.7 per thousand per annum during the period 1932-1939. The effect was a rise in the labour force, such that while new job opportunities were created, unemployment was also increasing.¹⁰²

The simultaneous growth of both employment and unemployment was also recognised by the ITUC. While acknowledging the efforts of the government to create employment, it claimed that while 'more people are employed today than heretofore

⁹⁸ SVP Annual report (1936), pp 113, 126.

⁹⁹ Ibid. (1939), p. 8.

¹⁰⁰ Daly, *Industrial development*, pp 80-1.

¹⁰¹ Leydon to Lemass, 31 July 1935 (NAI, D/T, 98/8/19); Ó Gráda, *New economic history*, p. 234.

¹⁰² Delaney, *Irish emigration*, p. 8; Neary and Ó Gráda, 'The 1930s in Ireland', p. 254; Gerlach, Lydon and Stuart, 'Unemployment and inflation', p. 349.

no appreciable reduction in unemployment has taken place'.¹⁰³ In 1939 MacEntee remarked that despite all the efforts to cope with the problem of unemployment and to increase employment there was still more people unemployed.¹⁰⁴ The industrial censuses suggest a levelling off in output and employment by the late 1930s. The home market had been saturated by tariff factories and, as Ó Gráda puts it, 'the exuberant phase of development was over'.¹⁰⁵

VII

The Irish case reflected international trends. By the end of the 1930s, despite several years of growth, many countries had only partially recovered from the slump and most had fairly high unemployment rates. Some of the more industrialised countries, such as France, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, failed to regain their pre-depression levels of activity. The German economy performed exceptionally well and it virtually eradicated unemployment during the 1930s. Recovery in Britain was more pronounced and sustained than in many countries. Although unemployment remained a problem there up to the late 1930s it was more structural than cyclical.¹⁰⁶ Unemployment in Britain was not evenly distributed. The unemployment rate in southern Britain was 14.9 per cent in 1932, falling to 7.9 per cent in 1936. In the north-east, the north-west and Wales the aggregate rate was 30.2 per cent in 1932 and only fell back to 21.1 per cent by 1936.¹⁰⁷ The impoverishment which unemployment caused in these areas, in addition to the implementation of a stringent and intrusive means test for unemployment assistance, or dole, led to hundreds of thousands of workers, and their families, participating in 'national hunger marches' to London in 1932, 1934 and 1936.¹⁰⁸ It was not until the late 1930s that the shadow of unemployment lifted in Britain.¹⁰⁹

Although unemployment in France was low by international standards during the 1930s, mounting unemployment against the backdrop of a national economic

¹⁰³ Éamonn Lynch to Sec. Dept. of Industry and Commerce, 19 April 1937 (NAI, D/T, 98/8/19).

¹⁰⁴ Dolan, 'The Irish Free State, 1922-1939', p. 328.

¹⁰⁵ Ó Gráda, *a new economic history*, p. 400.

¹⁰⁶ Derek H. Aldcroft, *The European economy, 1914-2000* (4th ed. London, 2001), pp 75-9.

¹⁰⁷ Garside, *British Unemployment*, pp 10-11.

¹⁰⁸ Stephanie Ward, *Unemployment and the state in Britain: the means test and protest in 1930s south Wales and north-east England* (Manchester, 2013), p. 116.

¹⁰⁹ Garside, *British Unemployment*, pp 255-8.

crisis during the years 1933 to 1935 exacerbated a sense of escalating tension among the jobless in France.¹¹⁰ Economic historians place the average US unemployment rates, for the period 1930-38, between 18.2 and 26.1 per cent.¹¹¹ Policy-makers world-wide saw unemployment as a major social and political problem and some sought means to alleviate it in the short term by introducing public work-relief programmes.¹¹² However, based on available, though not perfect, data Ireland's unemployment rate compares very favourably with other countries during the 1930s. This was assisted, in the late 1930s, by a new wave of emigration to Britain which, according to the former Cumann na nGaedheal minister, Paddy McGilligan, allowed Ireland 'to limp and hobble along'.¹¹³

Table 5.3 Unemployment rates for a number of European countries and the U.S., 1930-1938.¹¹⁴

Country	Average Unemployment Rate 1930-1938
Belgium	14.8
Denmark	21.9
France	10.2
Germany	21.8
Netherlands	24.3
Norway	26.8
Sweden	16.8
United Kingdom	15.4
Australia	17.8
Canada	18.5
United States	26.1
Ireland	7.9 (1932-1938)

Ireland's unemployment rate peaked at 9.7 per cent in 1935.¹¹⁵ The economist, T.A. Smiddy, attributed Ireland's more favourable rate of unemployment to the fact that it

¹¹⁰ Matt Perry, 'The Calais riot of 5 January 1934 and the dynamics of unemployed contention', *Labour History Review*, 73:1 (April 2008), pp 39-41; Julian Jackson, *The politics of depression in France, 1932-1936* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 44.

¹¹¹ Feinstein, Temin and Toniolo, *World economy*, p. 116.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp 125-8.

¹¹³ Jackson, 'The two Irelands', p. 76.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹¹⁵ Data by T.A. Smiddy on total unemployment 1932-1940, Dec. 1942 (NAI, D/T, 98/8/19).

was not subject to the ill-effects of world trade cycles as other western European countries and the US.¹¹⁶

VIII

How did Fine Gael respond? In 1933 it prepared a draft of policy headings. Although its focus was mainly on agriculture, it included a proposal to encourage the development of Irish industry to promote employment. It also proposed to absorb able-bodied unemployed into 'a reconstruction corps' to undertake useful public works.¹¹⁷ These proposals were reflected in a broad policy document – *Labour policy of Fine Gael* – issued under the leadership of General Eoin O'Duffy in 1934. Describing unemployment as 'awful and demoralising', O'Duffy explained that Fine Gael proposed to feed and clothe the unemployed, to give them a little pocket money and 'to set them to tasks which, though they may not give a financial return, will still be of definite value to the country'.¹¹⁸ Although the policy was lacking in detail, its main thrust was public works to help the unemployed. The concept of a corporation for the unemployed drew its inspiration from the papal encyclical of October 1931, *Nova Impendet*, which deplored rising unemployment and increasing human misery.¹¹⁹

Party members enthusiastically claimed that the policy would provide an economic balance which would end chronic unemployment.¹²⁰ O'Duffy's attempts to present himself as the champion of the working-class and the unemployed were essentially meaningless. This became clear when, during the course of an address to a Blueshirt convention, he remarked on the numerical strength of the working-class which, he claimed, were in need of an organisation such as the Blueshirts.¹²¹ His policy failed to attract any support outside of his party and aroused bitter hostility. It was the subject of vitriolic attacks by the entire labour movement whose attitude was driven

¹¹⁶ Smiddy to de Valera, 18 Feb. 1943 (NAI, D/T, S13027).

¹¹⁷ Meeting of Fine Gael general purposes committee, 9 Nov. 1933 (UCDA, Cumann na nGaedheal/Fine Gael papers, P39/Min/2).

¹¹⁸ Eugene Broderick, 'The corporate labour policy of Fine Gael, 1934', *Irish Historical Studies*, 29:113 (May, 1994), pp 88-91.

¹¹⁹ Mike Cronin, *The Blueshirts and Irish politics* (Dublin, 1997), p. 84.

¹²⁰ Broderick, 'Labour policy of Fine Gael', p. 93.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

by the conviction that O'Duffy's policy and philosophy was an Irish manifestation of the fascism rampant in Europe at the time.¹²²

Fine Gael's standing committee established a 'Committee on Labour Policy' in August 1935 for the purpose of consulting with Labour leaders and others. The committee was expected to meet in early September 1935.¹²³ There is no evidence that this meeting or any other ever took place. For much of its remaining time in opposition, Fine Gael struggled to define any policy on unemployment or on labour matters generally and the party exercised little influence on economic policy.¹²⁴

IX

A further factor which contributed to increasing unemployment at this time was the fact that a significantly increased number of younger persons – 166,000 in the age group 14-19 years – were available for work for the first time in 1935.¹²⁵ Juvenile unemployment increased over the following years and was recognised as socially corrosive.¹²⁶ By the end of the 1930s unemployment among adolescent males was much higher than in England and Northern Ireland. In the early 1940s, a third of boys between 16 and 17 were unemployed, compared with 11.3 per cent in England and Wales and 17.2 per cent in Northern Ireland. Unemployment rates for girls in the same age group were higher with 51.6 per cent unemployed in Ireland compared to 24.1 percent in England and Wales.¹²⁷ Of a total of 120,000 young people aged 14 and 15 years in 1926, 30,000 were in primary schools, 18,000 in post-primary schools, 16,000 in agricultural occupations, 12,000 in non-agricultural occupations, and a remarkable 44,000 were neither in employment or in school.¹²⁸ A speech by Lemass emphasised the nature of the problem: 'the very existence of the nation depends ... on the ability of the state to cope with unemployment amongst youth'.¹²⁹ In June 1943 the government appointed Archbishop John Charles McQuaid of Dublin chairman of a

¹²² Ibid., p. 94.

¹²³ Meeting of Fine Gael standing committee, 1 Aug. 1935 (UCDA, Cumann na nGaedheal/Fine Gael papers, P39/Min/2).

¹²⁴ Daly, *Industrial development*, p. 106.

¹²⁵ Leydon to Lemass, 31 July 1935 (NAI, D/T, 98/8/19).

¹²⁶ Ferriter, *Transformation*, p. 396.

¹²⁷ E.J.C. McEvoy, Sec., Dept. of Industry and Commerce to McQuaid, 29 May 1943 (DDA, McQuaid papers, XXVIII/28/2); Ferriter, *Transformation*, p. 396.

¹²⁸ Kennedy, *Cottage to crèche*, p. 128.

¹²⁹ Speech by Lemass at meeting of Dick Murphy Fianna Fáil cumann, 8 Jan. 1943 (NAI, D/T, S13221A).

national Commission on Youth Unemployment.¹³⁰ On the one hand it was a strange appointment, not based on experience or suitability. However, considering the close friendship between de Valera and McQuaid and the extent to which de Valera consulted with the archbishop on the affairs of state, prompting the suggestion that he appeared more like a backbench Dáil deputy, his appointment is easier to understand.¹³¹ The archbishop, Lemass hoped, would add 'prestige' to the commission thereby facilitating the implementation of its recommendations.¹³²

The commission's terms of reference were, in summary, to examine and report on the extent and causes of unemployment among young persons under twenty and to make recommendations within prescribed parameters. The terms of reference also required the commission to make recommendations on measures 'for promoting the religious, intellectual and physical development of young persons'.¹³³ This may have been a sop to the archbishop but his suitability to act as chairman was further undermined by his refusal to have any involvement in matters concerning the religious welfare of non-Catholics.¹³⁴ As Horgan puts it McQuaid 'suffered from a confusion of roles'.¹³⁵ The commission consisted of twenty-three members and included, representatives of employer organisations, trade unions, the Departments of Industry and Commerce, Agriculture, and Education, and 'certain people with special knowledge or interest in the subject'.¹³⁶ Although the establishment of the commission was welcomed by all quarters, the *Irish Times* had some realistic concerns. It believed that so large a membership would prove cumbersome and would delay the issuing of a report.¹³⁷ These concerns proved to be well founded.

Just over eight years after the commission was established, its report was submitted to the Minister for Industry and Commerce on 13 August 1951.¹³⁸ By the time the work of the commission got underway, employment opportunities for young

¹³⁰ John Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid: ruler of Catholic Ireland* (Dublin, 1999), p. 150.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹³² Lemass to McQuaid, 14 May 1945 (DDA, McQuaid papers, XXVIII/13).

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ McQuaid to Lemass, 17 Dec. 1943 and McQuaid to de Valera, 9 Feb. 1944 (DDA, McQuaid papers, XXVIII/257 and XXVIII/261).

¹³⁵ Horgan, *Lemass*, p. 323.

¹³⁶ Lemass to McQuaid, 14 May 1945 (DDA, McQuaid papers, XXVIII/13).

¹³⁷ *IT*, 29 May 1943.

¹³⁸ E.J.C. McEvoy to McQuaid, 13 Aug. 1951 (DDA, McQuaid papers, XXVIII/920/1).

persons were improving in any event. In 1936, 18.4 per cent of young persons aged fourteen years and less than twenty years were classified as ‘unoccupied’ compared to 11.1 per cent in 1946.¹³⁹ The commission found nothing unique about youth unemployment and concluded that it was a reflection of adult unemployment and that the solution of one was inextricably linked with the solution of the other. It made no concrete suggestions as to how employment opportunities might be improved apart from some ‘partial measures’.¹⁴⁰ These included raising the school leaving age, reducing the retirement age ‘of over-age workers, and schemes designed to provide occupation for youths who were unable to obtain employment. Other measures included compulsory national service and shortening the working week for young persons. It also suggested that education should be utilised to increase the potential of young persons.’¹⁴¹ Many of the suggested remedies reflected the views presented to the commission by the ITUC.¹⁴² Very few of the commission’s recommendations were acted on and some were immediately rejected by the Department of Education as either unnecessary or untenable.¹⁴³ Although the government kept the commission’s report under consideration, it was soon forgotten.

X

Censorship was part of a range of extraordinary powers adopted by the government under the Emergency Powers Act (1939). These measures were deemed necessary for securing public safety, the preservation of the state, the maintenance of public order, and the provision and control of essential supplies and services. This had serious implications for the conduct of politics in general and also had an impact on labour relations.¹⁴⁴ The Office of the Controller of Censorship advised at the time that ‘[s]tressing class inequalities was divisive; publicising and campaigning on issues of unemployment, ill health and bad housing was defeatist; drawing attention to

¹³⁹ Report of commission on youth unemployment, 1951 (DDA, McQuaid papers, XXVIII/912/3). The report explains that the term ‘unoccupied’ was used to describe young persons not at work, not at school, not confined to an institution and, in the case of females, not engaged in home duties.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid; CAR (1944), p. 75.

¹⁴¹ Report of commission on youth unemployment, 1951 (DDA, McQuaid papers, XXVIII/912/3).

¹⁴² CAR (1944), pp 78-80.

¹⁴³ Eleanor O’Leary, *Youth and popular culture in 1950s Ireland* (London, 2018), p. 26.

¹⁴⁴ Donal Ó Drisceoil, ‘Whose emergency is it? Wartime politics and the Irish working class, 1939-45 in Fintan Lane and Donal Ó Drisceoil (eds), *Politics and the Irish working class, 1830-1945* (Basingstoke, 2005), p. 263.

emigration sapped morale'.¹⁴⁵ Despite increasing inflation, wages and social welfare payments were pinned down by government intervention. Unemployment rose due to the impact on industry of curtailed supplies and raw materials and building came to a virtual standstill as industrial output declined by 27 per cent between 1938 and 1943. The situation worsened as the war progressed and industrial workers were laid off in increasing numbers.¹⁴⁶ However, during the course of the Emergency the political focus in Ireland was on the protection of the business sector and less consideration than normal was afforded to workers and consumers.¹⁴⁷ To reduce the burden of unemployment during the Emergency the government introduced schemes known as 'Employment Schemes' and 'Emergency Schemes' which were executed almost entirely by local authorities. Emergency schemes related mainly to bog development and turf production. Over the entire period, 1938-44, employment and emergency schemes absorbed approximately 6,000 persons.¹⁴⁸

Demands by the ITUC for an investigation into all aspects of unemployment were rejected by the government on the basis that such an investigation would only intrude on the responsibilities and duties of employers and senior civil servants at a time of national emergency. MacEntee was also concerned that the findings of such an investigation might embarrass the government.¹⁴⁹ On 28 November 1940 the Labour Party moved a Dáil motion calling on the government to establish a committee 'to ascertain the cause and incidence of unemployment' and for it to make recommendations within six months of its establishment.¹⁵⁰ A government amendment to the motion was approved thereby establishing a commission, as opposed to a committee, to report upon the extent, cause and incidence of unemployment and to make appropriate proposals. No time frame was set for the presentation of proposals.¹⁵¹ The government's approved amendment was clearly

¹⁴⁵ Thomas J. Coyne (Asst. Controller of Censorship) to Maurice Moynihan (Sec. to An Taoiseach), 5 July 1941 as cited in Ó Drisceoil, 'Whose emergency is it?', p. 263.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., pp 264-6; Unsigned and undated government memorandum on 'Labour motion on unemployment', [1941] (NAI, D/T, S13027).

¹⁴⁷ Philip Ollerenshaw, 'Neutrality and belligerence: Ireland, 1939-1945' in Thomas Bartlett (ed.), *The Cambridge history of Ireland: volume IV, 1880 to the present* (Cambridge, 2018), p. 375.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Sec. Dept. of Industry and Commerce to Sec. Dept. of An Taoiseach, 26 Oct. 1939 (NAI, D/T, 98/8/19).

¹⁵⁰ *DD*, 28 Nov. 1940, vol. 81, no. 6, cols. 922-4.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 12 Dec. 1940, vol. 81, no. 8, cols. 1241-53.

intended to frustrate the opposition and to delay any serious investigation into the unemployment problem. The opposition had little faith in the establishment of a commission.¹⁵² It also seemed futile to establish such a commission at a time when the impact of a world war had the capacity to change economic conditions on a weekly basis. As one opposition deputy pointed out, within one week of the report being presented 'world events may take such a course as to make the report almost valueless and change altogether the circumstances and conditions obtaining at the time'.¹⁵³ William Norton described the motivation behind Fianna Fáil's amendment as, not only a delaying tactic, but 'a trap and a deception for the unemployed'.¹⁵⁴

The commission, as Labour feared, never got off the ground. Department of An Taoiseach papers reveal that Lemass, on his return to the Department of Industry and Commerce in August 1941, recommended to the government that its establishment be abandoned. It was removed from the cabinet agenda in December 1941.¹⁵⁵ There is no evidence that it was pursued by the labour movement. The Labour TD, Michael Keyes, made a brief reference to it in the Dáil in November 1942 when he accused the government of allowing the opportunity for an inquiry into the unemployment problem to be 'wasted and frittered away'.¹⁵⁶ However, as outlined above, the position of youth unemployment now became the focus of their attention and they were also pre-occupied with internal problems such as continuing inter-union rivalry and the fall-out from the Trade Union Acts (discussed in Chapters 6 and 7).

Obviously, unemployment was not, at this time, the only priority for the government. In the first instance little advancement could be made in creating jobs when plant, equipment and raw materials from abroad were almost impossible to obtain and, perhaps more importantly, government economic planning needed to focus on the post-war emergency period. The depressing conditions during the course of the Emergency did not diminish the government's sense of optimism that its success in stimulating industry, and consequently the growth of employment, prior to

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 28 Nov. 1940, vol. 81, no. 6, cols. 952-3.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, cols. 950-1.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12 Dec. 1940, vol. 81, no. 8, cols. 1252-3.

¹⁵⁵ Department of An Taoiseach memo on 'Commission on employment: Labour Party's motion of Nov. 1940', 8 Dec. 1942 (NAI, D/T, S13027).

¹⁵⁶ *DD*, 25 Nov. 1942, vol. 88, no. 18, cols. 2469-70.

the World War could be continued in its aftermath.¹⁵⁷ Although the government may have de-prioritised the issue of unemployment for the duration of the 'Emergency', it could not be fully ignored. The establishment a Construction Corps in the army for young urban unemployed and the general expansion of the defence forces absorbed some of the unemployed to the extent that numbers in the armed forces increased from 7,500 in 1939 to 38,000 in 1942.¹⁵⁸ A more developed programme of intensive turf production for the purpose of making up the shortages of imported fuel due to the prevailing war conditions commenced in April 1941. By 1942 these schemes were centred in Counties Kildare, Offaly and Wicklow. Taking the period when turf production was at its highest point the average number employed on all turf schemes was 23,876 in 1941 and 19,566 in 1942.¹⁵⁹ So serious was the scarcity of skilled agricultural and turf workers that the government prohibited men ordinarily resident outside towns of over 5,000 in population from emigrating.¹⁶⁰ In addition, Emergency Powers (No. 174) Order, 1942 disqualified any person who refused suitable employment in agriculture or turf production or who voluntarily left such employment without just cause or who lost it through his misconduct for a lengthy period from claiming unemployment assistance.¹⁶¹

XI

The fall in the number on the live register from 115,000 in 1939 to 98,000 in 1941 and to 76,000 by 1945 (see table 5.1) clearly demonstrates that emigration had once again become the safety valve for the growing number of unemployed. In 1941 the government was doubtful if 'well paid employment' in Britain could provide opportunities for those who had been laid-off due to a shortage of raw materials. A report in 1941 showed that of the total number of men laid-off by the Ford Motor Works in Cork only ten per cent sought employment in Britain and of that number 'a considerable number returned home'.¹⁶² However, this initial government assessment of emigration to Britain proved unfounded and by the end of the Emergency its

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 51; Ó Drisceoil, 'Whose emergency is it?', p. 266.

¹⁵⁹ *The trend of employment and unemployment in the years 1941 and 1942* (Dublin, 1943), p. 9.

¹⁶⁰ O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 155.

¹⁶¹ *The trend of employment and unemployment in the years 1941 and 1942*, p. 10.

¹⁶² Survey report on 'Emergency position' by Hugo Flinn, 13 Mar., 1941 (NAI, D/T, S13027).

attitude and the reality had altered. When a shortage of materials at the Ford plant forced its closure in June 1942 there was 'a mass exodus' of Ford employees from Cork to work for Ford in Britain simply to maintain continuity of employment. After almost four years the Cork plant resumed production in 1946.¹⁶³ In July 1941 a bilateral agreement between Ireland and Britain provided a mechanism for the recruitment of Irish citizens for employment in Britain. This arrangement suited both countries well. With the assistance of its own government, Irish workers played a significant role in the British war effort and the Irish government was provided with the facility for reducing unemployment at home.¹⁶⁴

Emigration during the war, at an average of about 26,000 per annum, was twice as high as in the 1930s. While an estimated 50,000 persons joined the British armed forces, the bulk of the rise in emigration was in response to the demand for labour in war production factories in Britain. Some estimates suggest that at least 100,000 and perhaps as many as 150,000 emigrated to Britain during the war years.¹⁶⁵ However, Ó Gráda points out that 136,000 travel permits were issued to allow Irish people to travel to Britain between 1940 and 1945. As each trip required a permit the net figure was perhaps closer to 100,000.¹⁶⁶ The annual reports of the SVP also bear testimony to increasing unemployment during the course of the Emergency, particularly in urban areas, and the exodus of many men to Britain to avail of work.¹⁶⁷ The Second World War re-enforced the concept of two different Irelands at that time. The war economy brought relative prosperity to Northern Ireland. Its unemployment rate was almost negligible from 1941 as activity revived in the shipyards and in the aircraft industry. Its role as a base for tens of thousands of US troops before D-Day also boosted the local economy. The buoyant economic conditions in the North also attracted significant migration of skilled workers from the South during the war.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶³ Miriam Nyhan, *Are you still below?: The Ford Marina plant Cork, 1917-1984* (Cork, 2007), p. 108.

¹⁶⁴ Enda Delaney, 'Irish migration to Britain, 1939-1945', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 28 (2001), pp 47-53.

¹⁶⁵ Delaney, *Irish migration to Britain*, pp 112-59; Kennedy, Giblin and McHugh, *Economic development*, p. 51.

¹⁶⁶ Ó Gráda, *Rocky road*, p. 18.

¹⁶⁷ SVP Annual reports (1941 and 1942), *passim*.

¹⁶⁸ Ó Gráda, *Rocky road*, pp 18-21; Lee, *Ireland*, p. 256.

A government report in 1946 noted that emigration had provided Ireland with 'a relatively favourable unemployment experience' during the course of the Emergency. The report appears to regret the fact that 'this favourable position' did not match the experience of 'belligerent countries where unemployment practically vanished'.¹⁶⁹ This could be interpreted as the government lamenting the fact that more of the unemployed did not avail of work opportunities in Britain. As mentioned earlier, the unemployment situation was also mitigated by recruitment to the Defence Forces and this, in addition to emigration, had the effect of reducing unemployment in all industrial groups (industry, transport, distribution and others) in 1944 compared to 1938.¹⁷⁰ Up to 1941 the downward trend in unemployment was attributed, mainly, to the expansion of the defence forces and from 1941 to 1943 to emigration. In 1944 a further decline in unemployment was, for the first time since the commencement of the Emergency, attributed to increased employment. The approximate average weekly number of persons employed in occupations insurable under the National Health Insurance and the Unemployment Insurance Acts was 9,000 and 6,000 greater, respectively, in 1944 than in 1943.¹⁷¹ Interestingly, an examination of the figures provided by the Department of Industry and Commerce in 1947 of the 'estimated average number employed weekly' and insured under the National Health Insurance Act (see table below), indicate that the numbers in full-time employment only fell by 19,600 from 1939 to 1943 and that the number in full-time employment increased from 1944 to the extent that there were more in full-time employment in 1945 than in 1938. The impact of the economic effects of the Second World War, in so far as employment is concerned, was less dramatic (as the table below indicates) than what was initially envisaged despite emigration.

¹⁶⁹ *Department of Finance report on national income and expenditure: including statistics relating to the income and expenditure of public authorities, and other aspects of the national economy, 1938-1944* (Dublin, 1946), p. 46.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *The trend of employment and unemployment in the years 1943 and 1944* (Dublin, 1945), p. 24.

Table 5.4 Estimated average number employed weekly and insured under the National Health Insurance Act for the years 1938 to 1945.¹⁷²

Year	Estimated Average Number Employed Weekly
1938	416,000
1939	417,200
1940	406,000
1941	401,000
1942	399,100
1943	397,600
1944	405,800
1945	416,900

XII

As early as June 1942, Lemass was considering plans for post-war unemployment problems. In a memorandum to de Valera, on 'Labour Policy', he called for the establishment of a new Department of Labour to facilitate the planning and development of post-war construction schemes when supplies became available. His concerns also centred on potential employment problems for returning emigrants and demobilised soldiers.¹⁷³ In a speech in 1943, he gave a commitment to ending 'involuntary unemployment' subject to the state, employers and trade unions accepting 'a new conception in their responsibility' for the matter and recognising that 'unemployment is ... a symptom of defective industrial organisation'.¹⁷⁴ These remarks were clearly directed at the trade union movement which Lemass believed was ill-prepared for change and reform – not just reform of its own movement but also reform of its attitude to job creation and unemployment. He described their past attitude 'as mainly negative' and encouraged their participation in industrial governance.¹⁷⁵ Lemass planned to address unemployment by continuing the programme of industrial expansion which his government had initiated in the 1930s and central to those plans was a scheme for constructing houses and public amenities. These plans were contingent on government, employers and trade unions entering

¹⁷² *DD*, 11 Mar. 1947, vol. 104, no. 13, cols. 1726-7.

¹⁷³ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil power*, pp 229-30; Girvin, *Between two worlds*, p. 136.

¹⁷⁴ Lemass at meeting of William Rooney Fianna Fáil cumann, 12 Feb. 1943 (NAI, D/T, S13027).

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

into a new spirit of co-operation and industrial peace.¹⁷⁶ Many of Lemass's initiatives, as Minister for Industry and Commerce, were enhanced and influenced by his able departmental secretary, John Leydon. The partnership forged between them was, according to Fanning, 'amongst the formidable and enduring in the history of the state and a vital component of Lemass's success'.¹⁷⁷ Leydon provided the essential foundation for many of Lemass's achievements was undoubtedly a significant factor in his campaign for trade union and labour relation reform.¹⁷⁸

Lemass's remarks (above) were significant for another reason. Social partnership, as we now know it, had not yet emerged as a concept within labour relations in Ireland at this time. The advent of social partnership in Ireland can be traced specifically to the signing of the *Programme for National Recovery* in 1987 and in a less tenuous manner to national pay agreements during the 1970s.¹⁷⁹ However, some of the key elements of the model are evident in Lemass's ideas – which are contained in many of his speeches during the early 1940s – and initiatives at this time. In a speech in January 1943 Lemass identified the elimination of unemployment as the central aim of the government's post-war economic development policy and called for 'a readiness to depart from old principles and practices by the State, employers and Trade Unions'.¹⁸⁰ In another speech in February 1943 he claimed that 'unemployment is a symptom of defective industrial organisation'.¹⁸¹ In order to tackle it effectively he called for a general realisation 'that it is a national responsibility transcending the rights of private enterprise or the sanctity of rigid Trade Union rules, a willingness on the part of both employers and Trade Unions to conform to a National Plan for ending it'.¹⁸² This and his promotion of the notion of trade union involvement in industrial governance can be identified as the genesis of social partnership in Ireland. The co-operative disposition between employers and trade unions in the 1960's which culminated in the development of social partnerships, between employers, trade

¹⁷⁶ Lemass at meeting of 'Dick Murphy' Fianna Fáil Cumann, 8 Jan. 1943 (NAI, D/T, S13221A).

¹⁷⁷ Fanning, *Finance*, p. 258.

¹⁷⁸ Horgan, *Lemass*, p. 65.

¹⁷⁹ Bill Roche, 'Social partnership: from Lemass to Cowen' paper delivered at the 2008 Countess Markievicz memorial lecture on 25 Nov. 2008, at Trinity College Dublin. (<https://www.ul.ie/iair/sites/default>) (accessed 11 June 2019).

¹⁸⁰ Lemass to Seamus O'Byrne Fianna Fáil cumann, 18 Jan. 1943 (NAI, D/T, S13221A).

¹⁸¹ Lemass to William Rooney Fianna Fáil cumann, 12 Feb. 1943 (Ibid.).

¹⁸² Ibid.

unions and government, in the 1970s and 1980s,¹⁸³ had their genesis in Lemass's promotion, in the early 1940s, of the development of a 'National Plan' involving the state, employers and trade unions. This chapter suggests, therefore, that the ground work for social partnership had already commenced in the 1940s.

XIII

A striking feature of the change of government in 1932 was the impact of the new administration, and especially Lemass, in responding to the unemployment problem. The change of approach was instant, confident and determined. First, Lemass, in his capacity as Minister for Industry and Commerce, took some simple, practical and non-costly administrative measures to provide a more accurate measurement of unemployment. Secondly, the enactment of the Unemployment Assistance Act 1933 represented the most revolutionary piece of social legislation since the establishment of the IFS. Thirdly, this legislation represented a clear and unambiguous acknowledgement that government had a social and moral responsibility for the welfare of the unemployed. It also represented a significant realignment of the relationship between the state and society. Furthermore, it was an acknowledgement that industrial development would not produce short-term results. Both the administrative and legislative measures uncovered the extent of 'hidden' unemployment. By November 1934 the number on the live register had increased more than four-fold compared to the figure in December 1931. Fianna Fáil's industrial development strategy did produce positive results nation-wide and socio-economic improvement was noted in the reports of the SVP. However, the extent of the impact is debateable and, in any event, was scuppered by the onset of the Second World War. As an issue, unemployment occupied less of Labour's attention during the 1930s because Fianna Fáil provided financial maintenance to the unemployed, as Labour had long demanded, and, secondly, because the labour movement was readjusting to the separation of Congress from the Labour Party in 1930. A third factor, examined in the next chapter, was that internecine conflict during the 1930s tossed the trade union movement into such disarray that future job creation was threatened. Consequently, Lemass's strategy for industrial development encompassed a labour code to minimise

¹⁸³ See Lee, *Trade unions and change*, p. 36.

disruptive industrial unrest. This marked a major step towards the development of a new labour relations model and an embryonic form of what in subsequent decades became known as social partnership.

Self-inflicted wounds: Trade union disunity, divisions and disputes, 1922-39

Following the establishment of the IFS, it soon became apparent that ‘no new dawn had broken for the labour movement’.¹ Three issues impeded the development of the labour movement in the 1920s and 1930s and will be discussed in this chapter. The first was the weakness of the movement’s organisational structures. Secondly, the personal enmity between Jim Larkin and William O’Brien proved intractable. Lastly, there was conflict between the Irish-based ITGWU and the British-based ATGWU. The result was a movement permeated by what O’Conner termed a ‘suicidal sectionalism’.² Many of the labour disputes of the 1930s were caused by inter-union rivalry, particularly between Irish and British-based unions, and were influenced by the impact of both nationalism and the effect of independence on some trade union leaders.³ The utilisation of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) papers held at the University of Warwick provides a previously unexplored dimension to this dispute and adds new layers to the historiography of the labour movement.⁴ A major split in the Irish trade union movement occurred in 1944 when a number of trade unions broke away from the ITUC to establish the Congress of Irish Unions (CIU). This state of affairs lasted until 1959 when both Congresses reunited to become the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

I

Until 1894 most trade unions in Ireland – many of which were British-based – were affiliated to the British Trade Union Congress (BTUC). The Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) was established in 1894 and in 1895 the affiliations to the ITUC consisted of

¹ Donal Nevin, ‘Decades of dissension and divisions, 1923-1959’ in Donal Nevin (ed.), *Trade union century* (Dublin, 1994), p. 87.

² Ibid., pp 86-8; Emmett O’Connor, ‘Re-imagining labour: attempts at reforming trade unionism from within, 1864-1975’, paper delivered at fortieth Countess Markievicz memorial lecture on 2 Sept. 2016 at UCD Business School, p. 10.

(<https://www.ul.ie/iair/sites/default/files/Emmet%20OConnor.pdf>) (accessed 6 May 2017).

³ On this see Tom Garvin, ‘Nationalist elites, Irish voters and Irish political development: a comparative perspective’, *Economic and Social Review*, 8:3 (1977).

⁴ The divisions between Larkin and O’Brien have been treated by their respective biographers - O’Connor, *Big Jim Larkin*; Morrissey, *William O’Brien*. A very general discussion of dissension is provided by Nevin, ‘Decades’.

50,000 members of British unions as opposed to 17,000 members of Irish unions. The reasons for establishing the ITUC were more pragmatic than ideological.⁵ Many Irish trade unionists felt that Irish labour issues rarely succeeded in gaining adequate attention on the order of business at the BTUC and considering the expense of sending an Irish delegation to the British congress, they believed that the advantages accruing from their attendance were insignificant.⁶ It had also taken some time for trade unionists in Ireland to realise that trade union leaders in Britain were seldom interested in Irish affairs and knew little about its political and labour problems.⁷

O'Connor notes that in their rush to break away from the BTUC the Irish trade union leaders simply replicated the British model in Ireland.⁸ The structure was simple – a national executive which, like the British model, was elected from among the Congress delegates and which represented the governing body's affiliated organisations and was often referred to as the 'parliamentary committee'. The replication of the British model was a natural result of the fact that many of the ITUC leaders belonged to amalgamated unions and had attended British congresses.⁹ Little thought was given to the contrasts between conditions in Britain and Ireland such as the nature and character of Irish industry, the needs and demands of Irish workers and the organisational structures that would best meet Irish labour requirements. Urban and industrial working-class culture in Ireland was insignificant with services and industry accounting for thirty-six and seventeen per cent respectively.¹⁰ The country was by no means dominated by industrial activity which usually helped to tightly bind working-class communities together and to foster the vibrant working-class cultures

⁵ Fergus A. D'Arcy, 'The Irish trade union movement in the nineteenth century' in Donal Nevin (ed.), *Trade union century* (Dublin, 1994), p. 10.

⁶ Dermot F. Keogh, 'Foundation and early years of the Irish TUC, 1894-1912' in Nevin (ed.), *Trade union century*, pp 20-1.

⁷ Boyd, *Irish trade unions*, p. 50.

⁸ O'Connor, *Labour history*, pp 63-4.

⁹ Boyle, *The Irish labour movement in the nineteenth century*, p. 151.

¹⁰ Lee, 'Worker and society', p. 16; Note: There is no definitive definition of 'Irish working-class culture'. Mary E. Daly notes that 'there is little detailed study of distinctions and similarities within the working class except on questions of wages, trade union membership and related issues such as workers' benefits'. See Mary E. Daly, 'Social structure of the Dublin working class, 1871-1911, *Irish historical studies*, vol. 23, no. 90 (Nov. 1982), p. 121. For further reading and information see David Convery, 'Writing and theorising the Irish working class in Michael Pierse (ed.), *A history of Irish working-class writing* (Cambridge, 2018), pp 37-56; James Wickham, 'The new Irish working class?', *Saothar*, vol. 6 (1980), pp 81-8.

found in other countries.¹¹ Fundamentally, the ITUC was not necessarily designed to best meet the working conditions, needs and environment which existed in Ireland and it failed to recognise the fact that Ireland was, at the time, predominately an agricultural economy. This was a fatal design flaw.¹²

During the first three decades of its existence, annual Congress meetings passed well-meaning motions aimed at increasing and strengthening trade union membership and its organisation but there was a lack of commitment to implement change. Congress meetings generally developed into an event which allowed trade union officials and delegates to re-new old acquaintances, to enjoy the occasion including 'the mock parliamentary pomp' associated with the event.¹³ One of the most dominant figures in the Irish labour movement, William O'Brien, recalled that the ITUC 'never was very strong' and did little else except pass the same resolutions year after year 'and nothing much resulted from it'.¹⁴ O'Connor also notes that the irrelevance of Congress to its founding philosophy of self-reliance is most evident 'in its failure to arrest the retreat of trade unionism into the British movement'.¹⁵

In January 1926 R.J.P. Mortished, assistant secretary, ILP&TUC, addressed the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland on the topic of 'Trade Union Organisation in Ireland'.¹⁶ He struggled to describe the form and nature of the trade union movement in Ireland not only because of the lack of cohesion, stability and uniformity within its structure but also because it was impossible 'to secure, from any source, statistics of membership that are even remotely satisfactory'.¹⁷ The constitution of the ILP&TUC, adopted in 1918, increased the size of the national executive of Congress to fourteen, including a chairman, vice-chairman, treasurer and secretary and ten other members elected annually at Congress. This was the administrative authority of the organisation which had responsibility for its general

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 63.

¹³ Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁴ Undated article by William O'Brien titled 'British and Irish Labour' (NLI, O'Brien papers, MS 15,704/7/10).

¹⁵ O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 65.

¹⁶ R.J.P. Mortished, 'Trade union organisation in Ireland', *Journal of the statistical and social inquiry society of Ireland*, Vol. xv, Oct., 1927, pp 213-18.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp 213-14; McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 71.

work.¹⁸ Yet its role and authority were unclear. Mortished noted that while it was the representative body for organised workers in Ireland, 'it is not invested with any very definite authority'. Its power was derived from 'its prestige and moral authority' and not from any formal transfer of power from the affiliated organisations, which remained fully autonomous.¹⁹

Another manifestation of the weakness of trade union organisation was that many rural trade union secretaries and organisers, especially in larger unions such as the ITGWU, felt alienated, not only from the ITUC, but also from their own Dublin-based union hierarchy. One ITGWU branch secretary in Mayo described his Dublin colleagues as 'unapproachable "Brass-hats" whose 'idle words' were 'nothing short of empty bauble, arrant humbug, sheer make-believe, catchy sob-stuff, childish and pathetic clap-trap'.²⁰ This chasm between local officials and headquarters staff was often the cause of both local officials and union members forming new alliances.

At the heart of the labour movement's organisational difficulties was the awkward combination of a political party and a trade union body within a single conjoint body. It was not conducive to a rational form of organisation for either wing of the movement.²¹ In 1917 the title of Ireland's national labour and trade union organisation changed from the Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party to the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, symbolising, according to Nevin, the greater importance of the political dimension of the organisation.²² While this was not what was intended by the revised constitution presented to Congress in 1918 it was an indication of an unsettled relationship between the political and industrial sections within Congress. That relationship became even more unsettled over the following ten years. In an explanatory letter to affiliated unions, the national executive confirmed that the new constitution 'intended to provide machinery for organising the Political branch of the Labour Movement while keeping it subordinate to the Industrial branch'.

¹⁸ Donal Nevin, 'Congress: an outline history' in Nevin (ed.), *Trade union century* (Dublin, 1994), p. 340.

¹⁹ Mortished, 'Trade union organisation', p. 227.

²⁰ T. Bourke, Secretary, Westport Quay Branch ITGWU, to William O'Brien, 21 Nov. 1930 (NLI, O'Brien papers, MS 15,676/1/93).

²¹ Nevin, 'Decades', p. 86.

²² *Ibid.*, pp 85-6.

The political work was to supplement but not supplant trade union activities which 'will always be predominant'.²³

What made this arrangement so unusual is the fact that the political dimension of working-class culture, often so important elsewhere, was almost totally lacking in Ireland. Workers did not identify predominantly with a working-class party.²⁴ By international standards this arrangement was also unusual. In Britain the Labour Party and the Trade Union Congress were two distinct organisations. However, the major and important trade unions were affiliated to both. In most other European countries both organisations were even more distinct as the trade unions did not affiliate to the national labour or socialist party. However, these parties did attract significant trade union and working-class support.²⁵ It was not a case that Irish trade union leaders were unaware of international trade union organisation, structures and practices since the Congress sent delegates to the conference of the International Labour Organisation each year and trade unionists from England and Scotland were regular attendees as fraternal delegates at Congress in Ireland. These experiences provided ample opportunity to develop an awareness of the nature of trade unionism outside of Ireland.

By 1922 it was apparent to some trade unionists, but in particular the IWWU, that 'industrial affairs' within Congress were not securing 'adequate attention'. To address the imbalance, the IWWU submitted a resolution at the 1922 Congress which sought to increase the membership of the national executive by six and, from within the increased membership, to appoint a 'Special Committee' to deal only with industrial matters.²⁶ Louie Bennett, joint secretary of the IWWU, noted that several complaints had been raised in Congress 'that there was too much talk about politics'.²⁷ Contrary to the spirit of the ILP&TUC constitution, William Davin TD argued that the IWWU 'had no right to ... ask for what is demanded in the resolution'.²⁸ At the behest of Congress, the IWWU agreed to withdraw the resolution on the basis that the

²³ CAR (1918), pp 129-30.

²⁴ Lee, 'Worker and society', p. 16.

²⁵ Mortished, 'Trade union organisation', p. 227.

²⁶ CAR (1922), p. 201.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 206

incoming national executive would consider the possibility of appointing a sub-committee to address industrial affairs. Bennett stressed the importance of reform and with extraordinary prescience warned her colleagues that 'some preparations [must be] made for the difficulties that are facing us tomorrow'.²⁹ At the 1923 Congress the IWWU again withdrew a similar resolution following agreement by Congress that the matter would be considered at a Special Congress to be summoned for this purpose in March 1924.³⁰ However, at that meeting the IWWU demand was avoided.³¹ Senator Thomas Farren was highly critical of the IWWU attempt to bring a stronger emphasis to bear on industrial matters within Congress. His accusation that 'it was notorious that the people who were most opposed to political activity were always wanting the Labour Party to remedy a bad industrial situation by political methods' only seemed to demonstrate the authoritarian attitude of some 'political activists' within Congress.³² Thomas Johnson spoke ardently in favour of his motion to increase the size of the national committee and insisted that it was simply not possible to make a distinction between social and political questions. The IWWU resolution was defeated by thirty-nine votes to eighteen, while Johnson's motion was carried on a show of hands.³³

This issue surfaced again at the 1924 Congress, not this time in the form of a resolution but in the form of a walkout protest by delegates of the Irish Engineering Industrial Union (IEIU) when discussion of inter-union rivalry was cut short.³⁴ A spokesperson for the union explained that the protest arose due to frustration at attempts 'to get an expression of opinion from Congress on industrial policy' due to the inordinate amount of time which had been devoted to political matters.³⁵ It underlined the frustration and growing concerns of some trade unionists with the heavy political agenda of Congress.

Curiously, in 1925 Congress national executive reported its dissatisfaction with the support which the Labour Party received from 'the machinery of the Trade Union

²⁹ Ibid., pp 208-9.

³⁰ Ibid. (1923), p. 101.

³¹ ILP&TUC, Special congress report (1924), p. 49.

³² Ibid., p. 50.

³³ Ibid., pp 52-7.

³⁴ CAR (1924), p. 182.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 201.

branches for political purposes.’³⁶ Labour’s optimism for its political future was somewhat buoyed by its success in the 1925 local elections. It believed the time was ripe for a concerted effort to build up a more effective political organisation but also that it could not rely, as it had in the past, merely on the support of trade unionists.³⁷ This raised the spectre of the committed ‘political activists’ within Congress fighting for an even greater share of the stage, a move which was to antagonise further committed trade unionists. Interestingly, the national executive questioned whether the Congress constitution, which had only been adopted in 1918, made sufficient provision for its political activities. It was considered ‘out-of-date’ and not affording ‘sufficient prominence to the political side of the movement’.³⁸ The executive wished to steer a more political course and this created the conditions for a power struggle between the political and industrial sections of Congress. Notably, of the seventeen members of the 1924/25 national executive, five were serving political representatives and five others had or would eventually serve as political representatives.³⁹

A separation of the political and industrial sides of the labour movement was nonetheless central to a motion on reorganisation moved by the national executive at the 1926 Congress. The trouncing of Labour at the September 1927 general election, when the party lost nine of its twenty-two seats including that of Johnson, prompted renewed focus on the labour movement’s organisation generally and its political element, in particular.⁴⁰ By the time of the 1929 Congress ‘political activists’ within the movement had decided to take charge of organisational reform. In effect, this led to a separation of the two distinct elements within the ILP&TUC that had existed since 1914. It was finally realised that trade unions were ineffective instruments for political activity.⁴¹ Regardless of trade unionist sensibilities, the solution, as far as William Norton and others were concerned, was to abandon the organisation’s narrow union appeal and look elsewhere for votes. This was the thinking behind Norton’s resolution,

³⁶ Ibid. (1925), p. 30.

³⁷ Ibid; Puirseil, *Labour Party*, p. 21.

³⁸ CAR (1925), pp 30-1.

³⁹ See CAR (1924), pp 6-7 for national executive membership and membership of Oireachtas. A survey of ILP&TUC annual reports indicates that the national executive each year was highly representative of current, former and future political representatives.

⁴⁰ Puirseil, *Labour Party*, pp 26, 30.

⁴¹ Mitchell, *Labour*, p. 280.

passed unanimously by the 1929 Congress, to establish a special committee to report on the desirability of separating the industrial and political sides of the labour movement into two autonomous bodies.⁴² The debate on the resolution emphasised the need to develop the political side of the movement, as opposed to the industrial side. This appeared to be at odds with the revised 1918 constitution.

Despite the sometimes rancorous debates which had occurred, since 1922, the plan for separation met wide approval when the special conference met in Dublin on 28 February 1930.⁴³ Yet, as McCarthy aptly points out, 'in the division of the labour movement in 1930 ... the trade union organisation was the remnant'.⁴⁴ While the separation ultimately came about to enhance the development of the Labour Party, there was little reference in the report of the special conference of any advantages that might accrue to trade unions.⁴⁵ The separation did not, in the short-term, improve the fortunes of the Labour Party and only seven of its thirty-three candidates were elected to the Dáil in 1932.⁴⁶ In addition, the party's corporate base shrank since many unions did not affiliate to the new party, leaving it dominated by a small number of large unions. This presented funding difficulties for the party which posed challenges to Norton's leadership in the early 1940s.⁴⁷ In August 1930 when the ITUC stood alone, without the Labour Party, at the thirty-sixth annual Congress, the problems bedevilling the trade unions such as inter-union disputes, the multiplicity of unions and the status of British-based unions remained as before.

II

For over twenty years the main underlying tension in the trade union movement was the personal animosity between Larkin and O'Brien and their determination to destroy

⁴² Puirseil, *Labour Party*, p. 30; CAR (1929), pp 106-7. Note: After securing Labour's first ever by-election victory in 1926, Norton failed to hold the seat in the June 1927 election. He stood aside in the September 1927 election, hoping to improve the chances of his constituency colleague, Tom Johnson, Labour Party leader, who, however, failed to hold his seat. See Lawrence William White, 'Norton, William Joseph ('Bill')' in *DIB*. (<http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a6239>) (accessed 23 Jan. 2018).

⁴³ Puirseil, *Labour Party*, p. 31.

⁴⁴ McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 92.

⁴⁵ CAR (1930), pp 124-38.

⁴⁶ Puirseil, *Labour Party*, p. 37.

⁴⁷ Niamh Puirseil, 'William Norton' in Emmet O'Brien and John Cunningham (eds), *Studies in Irish radical leadership: lives on the left* (Manchester, 2016), p. 244.

one another's trade union. Arrogantly, both placed self-interests above those of the trade union movement which was effectively the victim of a bitter personal dispute.⁴⁸ The acrimony damaged not only the ITGWU, the largest trade union in the country, but the wider labour movement. Consequently, efforts to develop and reform the movement were greatly curtailed. In addition, labour's reputation was also seriously damaged in the eyes of employers, politicians and members of the public. The Larkin-O'Brien enmity and the subsequent split in the ITGWU are central to understanding why the trade union movement was weakened and the standing of Irish labour relations undermined.⁴⁹ What began as an inter-personal dispute between two strong-willed men for control and power was, detrimentally, to characterise much of the activities of the trade union movement for the next thirty years.⁵⁰

The rumoured return of Larkin to Ireland in early 1922 alarmed British authorities who described him as 'a most dangerous man of great influence amongst the worst type of population' and considered that his presence in the country would be as 'provocative of incalculable mischief'.⁵¹ Some Irish trade leaders shared similar views when Larkin eventually returned to Ireland in April 1923. Many expected trouble when Larkin resumed his job as ITGWU general secretary, none more so than William O'Brien. Expectations within the labour movement were high following a successful general election in June 1922 when seventeen of the eighteen Labour candidates were elected. There had also been a period of increasing trade union membership. Understandably, some leading trade unionists feared Larkin's motives and potential to damage the entire labour movement.⁵² Attempts to organise a meeting between Larkin and members of the ILP&TUC national executive 'to avoid friction in the labour movement' and to have 'a general talk with Larkin about future work' proved fruitless.⁵³ It was also feared that some discontented elements within the movement and in the political field were interested in utilising Larkin and his 'wild bull methods'

⁴⁸ Nevin, 'Decades', p. 95.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 89.

⁵⁰ McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 63.

⁵¹ Edmund Fitzalan-Howard to George Curzon, 20 Mar. 1922 (TNA, CO 739/4).

⁵² Puirseil, *Labour Party*, p. 12.

⁵³ Thomas MacPartlin to William O'Brien, May 1923 (NLI, O'Brien papers, MS 13,961/4/9).

to pursue minority agendas.⁵⁴ This was probably a reference to P.T. Daly, secretary of the Dublin Trades Council (DTC). Throughout the 1920s, the DTC, under Daly's influence, represented itself as Larkinite and communistic and fought against the official Labour Party and the ITUC under O'Brien.

The split in the ITGWU was entirely of Larkin's making and driven by his self-defeating and irrational motives. To exercise some control over Larkin, O'Brien had the rules of the ITGWU revised to lock Larkin into a five-man collective leadership. Although anxious to work with the union as a freelance agitator rather than having direct involvement in union work, Larkin, at the same time, could not countenance anyone else, especially O'Brien, running 'his' union.⁵⁵ An argument between Larkin and O'Brien on 30 May 1923 regarding the purpose of Larkin's visit to the USA in 1914 culminated in an irrevocable breakdown in their relationship. Larkin claimed that he had been sent to the USA by Connolly, Pearse and Clarke.⁵⁶ This incensed O'Brien who claimed to have irrefutable evidence that this was untrue. An equally enraged Larkin declared that that 'he could no longer work with this man O'Brien'.⁵⁷ At a meeting, attended by some 2,500 out of 11,000 members of the union's no. 1 branch, held on 5 June 1923 Larkin proceeded to sow the seeds of division by denouncing O'Brien and demanding his resignation from the union's national executive.⁵⁸ O'Brien was seething at Larkin's attempts to pose as a 'super-patriot' and to cause division within the largest Irish union which had expanded successfully during Larkin's eight-year absence. O'Brien later recalled that this event 'caused unprecedented dissension, turmoil and bitterness in the Irish labour movement'.⁵⁹

Larkin had little support among union members outside of Dublin and his attempt to muster support by undertaking a tour of rural union branches only exposed his arrogance. His disruptive tactics triggered a raft of letters and telegrams from provincial branches, all of which were of the opinion that the trouble was driven by Larkin's ego rather than policy issues and that it amounted to an attack on themselves

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ O'Connor, *Big Jim*, p. 215.

⁵⁶ O'Brien to editor, *IT*, 20 Mar. 1956 (NLI, O'Brien papers, MS 15,679/6/27).

⁵⁷ Ibid; O'Connor, *Big Jim*, p. 220.

⁵⁸ O'Brien to editor *IT*, 20 Mar. 1956 (NLI, O'Brien papers, MS 15,679/6/27).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

as much as the executive.⁶⁰ There were many similarities and contrasts between Larkin's and O'Brien's personalities. O'Brien's ambition for power and his view of himself as being the true heir of Connolly suggests that his egotism rivalled Larkin's. He was also difficult to work with and insensitive to the feelings of others. Both were dictatorial and domineering in their relationships with others. Unlike Larkin, O'Brien was, however, scrupulously organised.⁶¹ He also had the support of almost all the members of his union's national executive. Following special delegate conferences of the union, legal and counter-legal actions by Larkin and O'Brien and Larkin's disruption of the 1923 Annual Congress, Larkin was expelled from the ITGWU on 14 March 1924.⁶²

Despite an attempt to encourage the ILPTUC to intervene in the dispute between Larkin and O'Brien, it made no effort to do so. This merely underscored the weakness within its organisation. The establishment of the Workers Union of Ireland (WUI) by the Larkin family, in June 1924, with 'Big Jim' as its general secretary, was viewed as a 'schism' within the Irish labour movement and marked the continuation of a personal struggle between two men that was pursued relentlessly, 'poisoning the trade union atmosphere for two decades'. Sixteen thousand members of the ITGWU, mainly in Dublin, defected to the WUI.⁶³ The reverberations of this struggle were not only felt by the labour movement, but also by workers, employers and the general public. Many of the trade disputes over the following decade had little to do with disagreements with employers but were generally the result of 'turf' wars between the ITGWU and the WUI. Following the establishment of the WUI, inter-union disputes broke out in the construction industry, the docks, theatres and cinemas and the bakery trade. Both the WUI and ITGWU sought exclusive trade union rights in various employments and the methods adopted to force one union's domination over the

⁶⁰ Correspondence with ITGWU branches in relation to submitting Larkin dispute to a delegate conference (NLI, ITGWU papers, MS 27,062 (1); O'Connor, *Big Jim*, p. 221. Note: the receipt of so many similar letters and telegrams against Larkin appears orchestrated – most likely by ITGWU HQ.

⁶¹ Morrissey, *O'Brien*, p. 232; Nevin, 'Decades', p. 95; O'Connor, *Big Jim*, p. 246.

⁶² ITGWU Annual report (1924) (NLI, ITGWU papers, MS 27,071 (5); CAR (1923), p. 43; Nevin, 'Decades', p. 90.

⁶³ O'Connor, *Labour history*, pp 130-31; Nevin, 'Decades', p. 90.

other, but mostly on the part of the WUI, included 'bullying, terrorism, physical violence ... and intimidation'.⁶⁴

Most of those disputes were confined to Dublin. They were viewed with concern by Congress which noted that they had caused not only serious financial loss to the workers involved but had also caused loss and distress to many others who were not directly involved in the conflict.⁶⁵ They declared that:

Workmen lost wages, businesses were dislocated, the erection of houses, for which the workers have such crying need, was held up; tradesmen not connected with the dispute were disemployed, and no material advantage was even hoped for – certainly was not attained – while the moral damage to trade unionism in loss of strength and prestige is incalculable. No good cause was served by these disastrous strikes, their only use seems to have been to pander to the vainglory of individuals desirous of making a show of power.⁶⁶

According to one 'leading' but unnamed trade unionist these disputes had the potential to bring about not only social and industrial chaos but also widespread anarchy.⁶⁷ An editorial in the *Irish Times* on 19 November 1924 attributed much of the blame for the paralysis of industry in Dublin to Larkin and it feared that Dublin was likely to face economic ruin as much of its business was diverted to Belfast.⁶⁸ The press generally attributed blame for these disputes to Larkin who was accused by one newspaper as pursuing 'labour terrorism'.⁶⁹

In the Dáil it was noted that 'unnecessary strikes' which had 'dragged on for weeks and months' and which were caused by these inter-union disputes and a lack of unity within the labour movement, had contributed, unnecessarily, to the already high levels of unemployment.⁷⁰ Many employers were becoming exasperated at the impact of inter-union squabbling on their business and in July 1925, the Coal Merchants' Association locked out the ITGWU and WUI workers until a satisfactory guarantee was obtained that all men employed in the coal yards would work amicably together regardless of their union membership. Their action was supported by the Dublin

⁶⁴ ITGWU Annual report (1924) (NLI, ITGWU papers, MS 27,071 (5)).

⁶⁵ *IT* and *II*, 27 Sept. 1924.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *FJ* and *II*, 25 June 1924.

⁶⁸ *IT*, 19 Nov. 1924.

⁶⁹ *FJ*, 25 Nov. 1924.

⁷⁰ *DD*, 30 Oct. 1924, vol. 9, no. 6, cols. 476-80.

Employers' Federation.⁷¹ In November, Dublin employers decided to pursue a policy of dismissing any employee who refused to perform legitimate duties.

A confidential report from the chief of staff of the army to the Minister for Defence, in November 1925, raised concerns about the widespread 'labour unrest' in Dublin which showed no sign of abating. The main cause of the 'unrest' was attributed to Larkin and his newly formed WUI which, it was reported, had taken on the model of the old Citizen Army and had attracted extremist elements.⁷² There was little doubt that criminal activity had been utilised by Larkin and supporters to intimidate members and officials of the ITGWU and they were held responsible for 'the throwing of bombs and the firing of shots' into huts occupied by members of the ITGWU.⁷³ Larkin had considerable contact with the IRA at this time with one intelligence report suggesting that the IRA was prepared to 'assist Larkin in every way possible' and was 'implicated in attacks on scabs'.⁷⁴ The *Manchester Guardian* suggested that Larkin had brought the Irish labour movement 'to a critical point' while the Irish-American commentator, Thomas O'Flaherty, believed that Larkin's antics had destroyed, at least for the time being, 'the possibility of putting life into the labour movement in Ireland'.⁷⁵

While the ITGWU was the main target of Larkin's 'wrecking policy', Congress was equally concerned about the impact of his disruptive tactics on the entire labour movement and the 'dangers' he posed for trade unionism. Its national executive issued a manifesto titled: 'A Call for Unity', on 26 September 1924, deploring 'disunity in the ranks of Labour' while at the same time fully supporting the stance of the ITGWU and denouncing the 'disruptive tactics' of Larkin.⁷⁶ However, there was little it could do except challenge the heroic status which many still attached to Larkin. They regularly referred to him as a renowned 'disruptionist'; 'a shallow but shrewd chancer' and someone who lacked 'any knowledge of what is meant by trade unionism'.⁷⁷ The

⁷¹ O'Connor, *Big Jim*, p. 244; Morrissey, *O'Brien*, p. 229.

⁷² Army Chief of Staff to Minister for Defence, 14 Nov. 1925 (UCDA, Blythe papers, P24/222(19)).

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Army intelligence report, 22 Oct. 1925 (UCDA, Fitzgerald papers, P80/847(117)).

⁷⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 26 Nov. 1924; O'Flaherty to John J. Lyng, 27 May 1925 (NLI, O'Brien papers, MS 15,677/9).

⁷⁶ CAR (1925), pp 33-7.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

fact that the WUI was not affiliated to Congress left the ILP&TUC powerless to exercise any influence. An attempt to affiliate in 1934 was opposed by the ITGWU and more vehemently by O'Brien as its general secretary. He declared that 'No employer, or combination of employers, has ever inflicted upon the labour movement the damage which James Larkin is directly responsible for'.⁷⁸ Despite the factual and historical evidence pertaining to Larkin's ego, unbalanced personality, and the damage he inflicted on the Irish trade union movement, a public perception persists of Larkin as the ultimate trade unionist and defender of workers' rights.

The problems which Larkin presented for the labour movement forced Congress to realise its own helplessness, yet its weakness was such that it was unable to confront its problems. Its strength and courage seemed to be sapped by the individualism of its affiliated organisations and their respective leaders. Much of the disunity within trade unionism had little to do with its members and was essentially driven by the self-interests of some of its leaders. One Congress delegate noted that while unity is apparent 'among the working class at the bottom, not so much amongst the Trade Union figures at the top'.⁷⁹ At the 1924 Congress, its president, Luke Clancy, found it difficult to accept that a movement which had been known for 'its determination, its unity of purpose, and its high idealism could, within the space of a year, be torn asunder by sectional feuds'.⁸⁰ Louie Bennett later questioned if there could be 'any real trade union unity' while the feud between Larkin and O'Brien and their respective trade unions, the WUI and the ITGWU, remained unresolved.⁸¹ In this she was proven correct as the animosity persisted until both men had departed the public stage.

The subtle subtext of Clancy's address to Congress in 1924 was that change was necessary within the labour movement to resolve differences and remove misunderstandings. He discreetly questioned the quality and suitability of some trade union leaders by suggesting that if the highest interests of the movement are to be

⁷⁸ O'Brien to P.T. Daly, Dublin trade union council, Sept. 1934 (NLI, O'Brien papers, MS 15,677/20).

⁷⁹ W.H. Threaddoold, Associated Blacksmiths, Forge and Smithy Workers, speaking at 1946 Congress. See CAR (1946), p. 156.

⁸⁰ CAR (1924), p. 118.

⁸¹ Notes by Louie Bennett on a letter from Seán Lemass regarding trade union organisation, [Undated, c. 1945] (NLI, O'Brien papers, MS 13,974/26).

pursued and maintained then 'the best and most courageous men and women in the Movement must be elected to positions where they will advise and guide'.⁸² Clancy called on Congress to give it its undivided support to enable it to pursue 'a strong open policy' in order 'to save the Irish Labour Movement from destruction'.⁸³ What that policy was or might be was not addressed. It is clear that the urgency for trade union reform and restructuring did not occur until the 1930s following the commencement of Fianna Fáil's industrialisation programme and renewed internecine strife within the trade union movement.⁸⁴ However, some trade unionists, such as Clancy, had recognised the need much earlier.

III

Inter-union disputes, particularly in Dublin, were not confined to conflict between the ITGWU and the WUI. There was also a major stand-off between the ITGWU and the British-based Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (ATGWU)⁸⁵ as well as disputes between certain Irish and British-based craft unions of which little has been written. While most of these disputes came to the fore in the 1930s, they had their genesis in the greening of the Irish labour movement during the revolutionary years and the establishment of the IFS. The character of this nationalism was also greatly influenced in the 1930s by economic protectionism and by a strong authoritarian disposition in the country.⁸⁶ This was a development which the ILP&TUC national executive not only ignored but dismissed. In 1926 R.J.P. Mortished, assistant secretary of Congress, regarded the on-going development of amalgamated unions as having 'practical economic advantages' and attributed the development of Irish-based unions to a nationalist fervour which was already on the wane.⁸⁷ In this he was greatly mistaken.

Up to 1922, the Irish movement saw itself as having a shared purpose and, to some degree, a shared structure with its fraternal trade unionists in Britain. In 1907

⁸² CAR (1924), pp 119-20.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 175.

⁸⁴ O'Connor, 'Re-imagining', p. 9.

⁸⁵ The ATGWU was effectively the Irish branch of the British trade union, the Transport and General Workers' Union.

⁸⁶ Charles McCarthy, 'The development of Irish trade unions' in Nevin (ed.), *Trade unions and change in Irish society* (Dublin and Cork, 1980), pp 29-30.

⁸⁷ Mortished, 'Trade union organisation', p. 218.

the ITUC rejected a proposal from the early Sinn Féin organisation to form an Irish Federation of Trade Unions and to encourage Irish trade unionists to leave British-based unions.⁸⁸ As we shall see later, this advice was belatedly taken on board by William O'Brien in 1939. After 1922 the all-Ireland movement was confronted not with one government, as in the past, but with one in Dublin, and another in Belfast. In addition, some Irish trade unionists believed that the position of British or amalgamated trade unions in Ireland was now compromised by the fact that they were affiliated to both the British and Irish Trade Union Councils. By implication their commitment to the new Irish state was also questioned.⁸⁹ The government raised no objection to British-based trade unions operating in the IFS. The ATGWU's London-based general secretary, Ernest Bevin, one of the greatest British trade union leaders of the twentieth century and stalwart of the Labour Party, was prepared to accede to the Irish government's wishes if it desired Irish unions only. In the event the government's lack of communication on the issue was taken as an indication that they 'desired to maintain contact with the English working-class'.⁹⁰

This 'greening' of trade unionism was openly apparent in the immediate aftermath of independence. At the 1922 Congress James Carr, representing the Limerick United Trades and Labour Council, moved a resolution that 'all Irish workers should be catered for by Irish Unions'.⁹¹ He claimed that by 'listening to two voices' the Irish labour movement was weakened.⁹² The implication was that the ILP&TUC should not permit the affiliation of trade unions registered in another country. At this time twenty-one trade unions affiliated to Congress, with a combined membership of 100,000, had headquarters in Ireland, whereas another seventeen with a membership of over 46,000 were based in Britain.⁹³ Not surprisingly, the motion was opposed by many of the British-based unions. For example, the Railway Clerks' Association

⁸⁸ Boyd, *Irish trade unions*, p. 104.

⁸⁹ McCarthy, 'From division to dissension', p. 356.

⁹⁰ Memo of meeting of representatives of Gen. Ex. Council, TGWU and a deputation from Area 11 Committee (ATGWU), 10 Oct. 1933 (MCR/UWAR, TGWU papers, MSS. 126/TG/64/1/4).

⁹¹ CAR (1922), pp 239-40.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Mortished, 'Trade union organisation', pp 214-5.

described the resolution as ‘a green resolution from green people’.⁹⁴ However, while the intention of the resolution found support with some delegates, many believed the time was not yet opportune for such a move. The resolution was withdrawn but the sentiment contained therein did not dissipate and re-emerged more openly in the following decade.⁹⁵

A special Congress conference was held in November 1927 to ‘restore the prestige and vigour of the Trade Union Movement’ and was at best a feeble attempt to make the most of existing trade union organisation.⁹⁶ Louie Bennett of the IWWU pleaded with fellow trade unionists to ‘arouse enthusiasm and spread conviction among the workers by preaching a wider conception of Trade Unionism’.⁹⁷ Her plea obviously fell on deaf ears as the national executive reported the following year that the results and efforts of the special conference had been ‘disappointing’.⁹⁸ While a number of resolutions were debated at the special conference, it is notable that one urged amalgamated unions to ‘appoint an Irish organiser or secretary’ and ‘some form of representative body for the consideration of matters of peculiar or special concern to the Irish membership’.⁹⁹ Bizarrely, a special conference which was intended to strengthen the trade union movement seems to have sown the seeds of further division. Trade unionism was at a low ebb. Membership of trade unions affiliated to Congress had fallen from 189,000 in 1922 to 95,000 in 1932. The number of trades councils, an indicator of the geographical spread of trade unions, fell from forty-six to ten in 1930.¹⁰⁰ It had been, as noted by O’Connor, ‘a grim decade under Cumann na nGaedheal’.

The weaknesses within the movement, growing unemployment, its lack of resources and its inability to expand its membership caused individual unions to target members of other unions and in many of the ensuing inter-union disputes Irish and British trade unions found themselves in conflict. By 1933 the ITGWU had successfully

⁹⁴ Comments by J.T. O’Farrell, Railway Clerks’ Association, during a debate on ‘Irish unions for Irish workers. See CAR (1922), p. 240.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 243.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 68; (1928), p. 15.

⁹⁷ Ibid. (1928), p. 15.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

⁹⁹ Ibid., pp 16-20.

¹⁰⁰ O’Connor, *Labour history*, p. 146; Nevin, *Trade union century*, p. 433.

enticed 'whole sections and branches' of British unions 'numbering hundreds' into its membership and it became its clear intention to target the membership of British unions 'until the entire wage-earning class in Ireland was organised and controlled entirely from within Ireland'.¹⁰¹ O'Brien, in a truculent manner, declared that there was a 'problem' in Congress and that if the only solution was a parting of the ways, then 'we will have to part'.¹⁰²

As yet, the ITUC did not call on British trade unions to withdraw from Ireland but it was evident that some of its decisions revealed an adverse disposition towards them. To prevent the growth of maverick unions and the fragmentation of the movement, Congress operated a policy of discouraging 'break-away' unions. Such unions were generally refused affiliation to Congress. Some members of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers (ASW) broke away from that union in 1921 to form the Irish National Union of Woodworkers (INUW). Perhaps, noting the changing attitude towards amalgamated unions on the part of Congress and a rekindling of the nationalist spirit among some of its leaders, the INUW applied to Congress for affiliation towards the end of the 1920s. This was opposed vigorously by the ASW to the point that it threatened to withdraw from Congress if the INUW were admitted.¹⁰³ Not only did the ASW have a great tradition in Ireland, but it had 7,000 members compared to just 500 in the INUW. However, 'once the nationalist bell was sounded' the application of the Irish-based union, whose cause was championed by two of the movements most ardent republicans, William O'Brien and Helena Molony, could not be refused.¹⁰⁴ The affiliation of the INUW to Congress in May 1931 was promptly followed by the withdrawal of the ASW.¹⁰⁵ However, by 1934, the ASW, whose Irish members had remained steadfastly loyal to the Society, had been enticed back into Congress and the INUW remained affiliated.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ ITGWU Annual report (1933) (NLI, ITGWU papers, MS 27,085(6)); Report of Proceedings of ITGWU annual conference 1934 (NLI, ITGWU papers, MS 27,085(11)).

¹⁰² CAR (1934), p. 132.

¹⁰³ McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 121A.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 122; See Mortished, 'Trade union organisation in Ireland', p. 217.

¹⁰⁵ Minutes of ITUC national executive, 8 May 1931 and 29 April 1932 (NAI, ITUC and Labour Party minutes, 1923-1935, book C, box 100, G4/82/38).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 10 Nov. 1933; McCarthy, *Trade unions in Ireland*, pp 123-7.

Despite the affiliation of both organisations to Congress, their inter-union rivalry continued in the work-place, particularly in the Cork area. An inquiry, under the Industrial Courts Act, 1919, was established to investigate such a dispute in Cork in 1937. In his report, the arbitrator suggested that the problem of the multiplication of trade unions might be immediately considered 'by a body appointed for that purpose' and that this body 'should examine the whole question, having regard to the interest of the trade unions, the liberty of the subject and the common good'.¹⁰⁷ This was a clear indictment of the weakness of the ITUC and its inability to manage the problems within the labour movement, some of which even threatened its very future. The Cork inter-union dispute was also portrayed by some as an attempt by a British trade union, the ASW, to prevent an Irish carpenter to work at his trade in his native city. As we will see in the next chapter, it was a view shared by the Minister for Industry and Commerce, Seán MacEntee, and this particular dispute was cited by him during the debate on the passage of the Trade Union Bill (1941) in the Dáil in July 1941.¹⁰⁸

The 1930s witnessed the rise of 'national separatism of a strikingly xenophobic kind', which almost overwhelmed the broader based and more international character of the Irish labour movement.¹⁰⁹ Its international character was mainly developed from its shared purpose and, to a lesser degree, its shared structure with trade unionism in Britain and also its association with the International Labour Organisation in Geneva. There was a growing belief among the leaders of Irish-based trade unions that the days of British unions in Ireland were numbered, and that their demise in the national interest should be hurried along. This, as detailed below, was actively encouraged by Fianna Fáil. Furthermore, the leader of Ireland's largest union, the ITGWU, emerged as the most prominent figure to champion this view. O'Brien was driven by a sense of both personal ambition and nationalist instinct. The importance of the nationalist impulse and its power to motivate men was not lost on him and his contribution to the Irish revolution was not insignificant with a period of detention in

¹⁰⁷ Report of court inquiry into the causes and circumstances of a dispute between the ASW and the INUW in respect of the employment of certain persons in Cork, 4 Nov. 1937 (NLI, O'Brien papers, MS 13,971/5).

¹⁰⁸ *DD*, 2 July 1941, vol. 84, no. 6, cols. 851-62.

¹⁰⁹ Charles McCarthy, 'From division to dissension: Irish trade unions in the nineteen thirties', *Economic and Social Review*, 5:3 (1974), p. 354.

Frongoch.¹¹⁰ He rekindled the great stirrings of nationalism which he had witnessed in the earlier part of the century and he utilised it fully.

The initial conflict between the ITGWU and the ATGWU emerged following the birth of the IFS when, in June 1922, the ITGWU obtained a court order restraining the ATGWU from using the name Transport and General Workers Union. Thereafter, with an occasional exception, the two unions managed their disagreements with relative detachment until 1933.¹¹¹ By October 1933, the ATGWU believed that a 'determined drive' was being made, particularly by the ITGWU, to undermine British unions in Ireland.¹¹² In January 1934 the ATGWU called on the national executive of Congress to condemn the 'poaching' of its members by the ITGWU. This arose from a dispute between the two unions over the transfer of 600 members, employed at the Dublin Tramway Company, from the ATGWU to the ITGWU. The ITGWU maintained that workers were entitled to change their allegiance and on 2 February the national executive of Congress concurred. To support its decision, the national executive claimed that if it did not endorse the ITGWU position there was a danger that a small group of disgruntled workers would form 'small, weak sectional units, whose weakness and isolation would make them a loss and a menace to the integrity of the whole movement'.¹¹³ However, the influence which O'Brien and the ITGWU exerted within the ILP&TUC was decisive.

Ernest Bevin viewed things differently. Accusing the ITUC national executive of being 'parties to an intrigue' to transfer members from his union to the ITGWU, he called on them to 'take a straight and honest line'. This was resented by members of the national executive who considered Bevin's attitude as 'ill-considered impertinence'.¹¹⁴ Although Bevin had a proven track record in British trade unionism as an advocate for closer organisation between trade unions including the

¹¹⁰ Arthur Mitchell, 'O'Brien William' *DIB*. (<http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a6505>) (accessed 26 Mar. 2017).

¹¹¹ McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 121.

¹¹² Memo of interview between Gen. Executive Council of TGWU and a deputation from No. 11 Area Committee (ATGWU) on subject of 'local autonomy', 10 Oct. 1933 (University of Warwick, Modern Records Centre (hereafter UWMRC), TGWU papers, MSS. 126/TG/64//1/4).

¹¹³ CAR (1933), pp 50-1; McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 121; Morrissey, *O'Brien*, pp 269-70.

¹¹⁴ Minutes of ITUC resident committee, 22 Feb. 1934 (NAI, ITUC and Labour Party minutes 1923-1935, book C, box 100, G4/82/38).

strengthening of trade unionism through union amalgamation, he was incensed by the actions of the ITGWU and the support it received from Congress.¹¹⁵ When a number of Tramway Company workers sought to return to the ATGWU, Bevin was prepared to facilitate them and to bend certain rules to do so – declaring ‘that when you are in a war it is not possible to stick strictly to the rule’.¹¹⁶ In an attempt to hit back at the ITGWU Bevin gave his Irish secretary, Sam Kyle, full ‘plenary powers’ to act on his behalf in facilitating the return of workers to his union and confided in Kyle that ‘[n]othing would give me greater joy than to hear from you that you have cleared the Irish Transport Union out of the Dublin Tramways, even if it does mean paying a price’.¹¹⁷

This particular incident also demonstrates the fickle allegiance of some trade union members who were easily enticed to change trade union membership according to the terms on offer or as an opportunity to default on the payment of outstanding arrears of union subscriptions. In one sense the inter-rivalry between trade unions was driven by the lack of loyalty among its members who were prepared to play one union off against another.¹¹⁸ The overbearing influence of the ITGWU as the largest affiliated union within the ITUC at this time is striking. It is also noteworthy that, in the aftermath of the ITGWU/ATGWU dispute, the ATGWU’s Irish-based secretary should accuse the ITUC national executive of failing to be pro-active in addressing the weaknesses in its organisation and, in particular, ignoring the potential damage which inter-union disputes could inflict on the movement.¹¹⁹ As we shall see below, if the national executive did not necessarily heed this warning, it did eventually come to the realisation that action was required.

The development of other inter-union disputes, particularly between a number of Irish and British-based unions, caused concern for the national executive of Congress to such an extent that it questioned whether the integrity of the Irish trade

¹¹⁵ Keith Laybourn, *Fifty key figures in twentieth century British politics* (London and New York, 2002), p. 39; James Larkin Jones, ‘Ernest Bevin – revolutionary by consent’, *Employment Gazette*, 89:3, Mar. 1981, p. 97.

¹¹⁶ Bevin to Kyle, 1 May 1934 (UWMRC, TGWU papers, MSS. 126/TG/64/1/4).

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ See letter from Kyle to Bevin, 28 April 1934 (UWMRC, TGWU papers, MSS. 126/TG/64/1/4).

¹¹⁹ Minutes of ITUC resident committee, 2 Nov. 1934 (NAI, ITUC and Labour Party minutes 1923-1935, Book C, Box 100, G4/82/38).

union movement could be preserved. Lost for a possible solution, the national executive called a conference of representatives of affiliated trade unions with headquarters outside of Ireland. Despite the serious concerns expressed for the movement, this conference never took place but 'definite action' was promised.¹²⁰ An appeal by the ATGWU to the annual meeting of Congress in 1933 did nothing to change matters. However, it did occasion further expressions of nationalist sentiment. Helena Molony, a member of the national executive and also a prominent republican, addressed delegates by describing herself as an 'irreconcilable separatist' and justified the executive's decision in favour of the ITGWU by claiming that the executive had to take on board 'the history of Ireland' during the previous two decades and the growing 'national self-consciousness' which was finding expression in the desire of Irish workers to belong to Irish rather than British trade unions.¹²¹

It is difficult to determine the extent to which a sense of 'national identity' was developing among ordinary trade union members or whether that agenda was being driven by the leadership of Irish-based unions. There is certainly strong evidence from the utterances of trade unionists such as William O'Brien and Helena Molony that it was being driven by some leaders. The ATGWU were convinced that the 'menace of nationalism' was behind the ITGWU's effort 'to disintegrate English Unions'.¹²² In November 1933, a large advertisement appeared in the national press under the heading 'An Irish Union for Irish Tramway Men' with details of a meeting to be held in Dublin on 13 November aimed at encouraging members of British unions to join an Irish union. All of the speakers were ITGWU officials and 'ITGWU' Senators and TDs.¹²³ This strategy was not aimed solely at workers in the Dublin Tramway Company. Posters also appeared in towns where workers were members of British unions advertising protest meetings 'against the formation of an English union in the town'.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ CAR (1933), pp 125-6.

¹²² Memorandum of meeting between the general secretary and representatives of the TGWU general executive council and a deputation from Area 11 Committee ATGWU, 10 Oct. 1933 (UWMRC, TGWU papers, MSS 126/TG/64/1/4).

¹²³ II, 9 Nov. 1933.

¹²⁴ Poster advertising protest meeting against an 'English Union', Nov. 1933 (UWMRC, TGWU papers, MSS. 126/TG/64/1/4).

Figure 6.1 Newspaper notice calling on workers in DUTC to join 'an Irish trade union'.¹²⁵

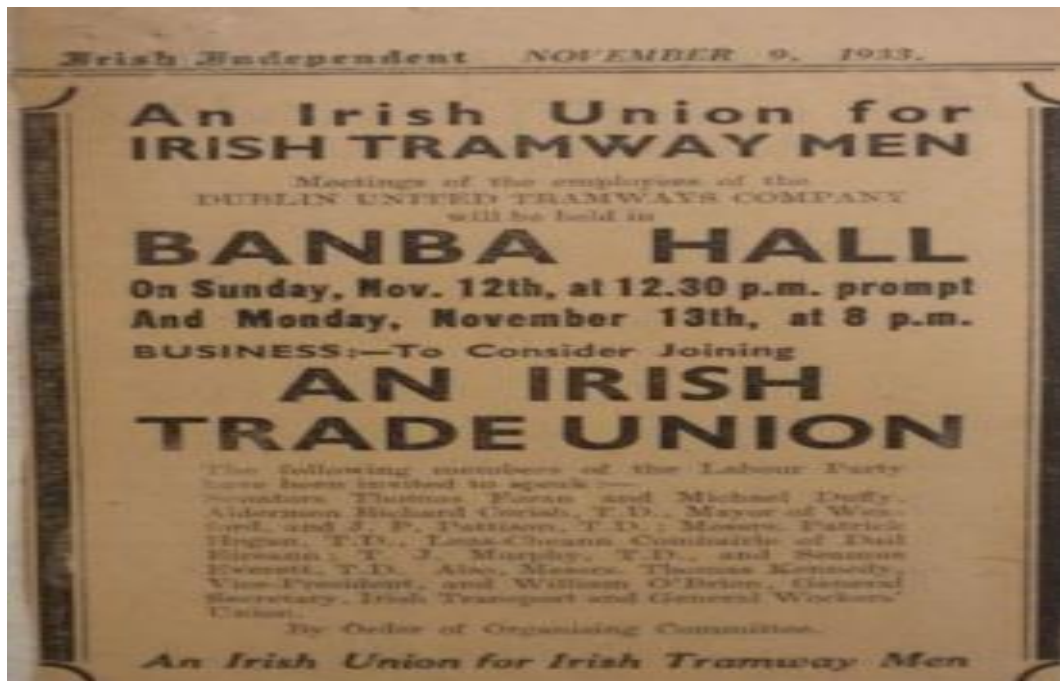
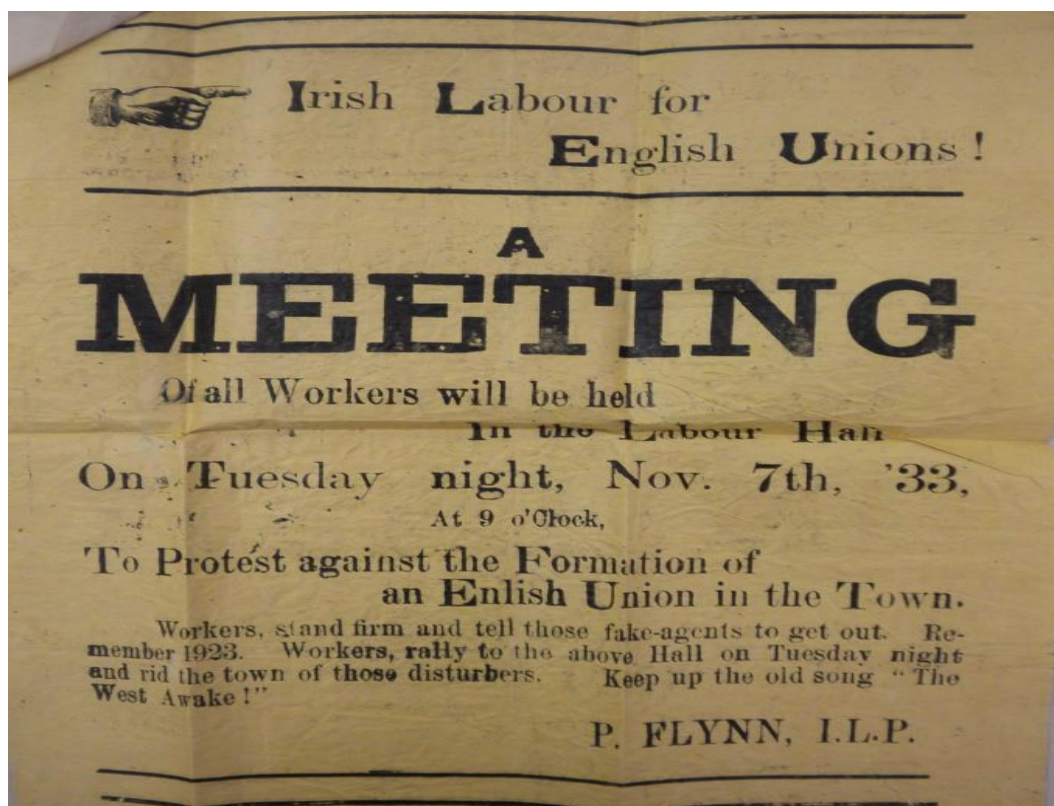


Figure 6.2 Poster publicising protest meeting against an 'English Union'.¹²⁶



¹²⁵ Notice in //, 9 Nov. 1933, calling on workers in DUTC to join 'an Irish trade union' (Ibid.).

¹²⁶ Poster publicising protest meeting against 'an English Union' (Ibid.)

It seems plausible that some members of the ATGWU who were working in the Dublin Tramway Company began to feel a lack of patriotism when challenged with the fact they chose membership of a British union when the option to join an Irish trade union was available. As one member of the ATGWU put it, 'as long as such people say, "this Union is Irish", we find ourselves up against a stone wall'.¹²⁷ A prominent member of the Dublin branch of the ATGWU resigned from the union, along with some others, on the grounds that he believed that it was the 'ambition of the present Government to foster Irish Unions' and felt that much more power would be afforded to workers if they were 'working in harmony with the national outlook'.¹²⁸ The branch president claimed that 'the feeling for an Irish Organisation is strong' and he himself resigned from membership of the ATGWU on the grounds that unity and solidarity could only be achieved in an Irish union.¹²⁹ By April 1934 the ATGWU had lost 420 members in the DUTC, though 1,576 remained. The ATGWU were convinced that prominent members of its union were induced financially to encourage many of its members to join the ITGWU and that these actions were supported by the six 'ITGWU TDs'. Kyle describes a toxic atmosphere which gave rise to an 'extremely bitter national feeling'.¹³⁰

A sense of Anglophobia was evident in the utterances of Irish trade unionists in the 1930s with amalgamated unions referred to as 'British unions', 'British-controlled unions', 'English organisations' and 'foreign controlled' unions. This unsavoury tone was the antithesis of trade union comradeship and fraternity. Delegates from the amalgamated trade unions naturally objected to such 'spurious patriotism' at Congress.¹³¹ Crucially, O'Brien turned a deaf ear to calls for fraternal reconciliation and was determined to drive a deep wedge between Irish and British-based unions. At Congress in 1933 he declared: 'We are a separate and distinct nationality. We believe we know what the Labour movement stands for in this country'.¹³² Later that year in an address in Dungarvan he suggested that the most useful service British unions

¹²⁷ Letters of resignation from two members of ATGWU, 14 and 15 Nov. 1934 (UWMRC, TGWU papers, MSS. 126/TG/64/1/4).

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Kyle to Bevin, 17 April 1934 and 19 Nov. 1934 (Ibid.)

¹³¹ CAR (1933), pp 125-7.

¹³² Ibid., p. 132.

could render to Irish workers was to 'leave them alone'.¹³³ When the Irish area committee of the ATGWU brought its concerns to the TGWU general executive council the advice was

Nationalist outbursts occur from time to time, but the point we must remember is, that we are a working class organisation. Our task is primarily economic; the maintenance of the wages and conditions of our members, the improvement of their social surroundings, and their standard of living. That is our task, and in carrying it out we must direct our energies irrespective of political fluctuations.¹³⁴

In private, Bevin believed that the ITGWU was 'racially' motivated in its attempt to undermine the ATGWU. He was determined not to allow it 'to be broken by people with ulterior motives'.¹³⁵ To this end, the council of the TGWU granted as much autonomy to the ATGWU as possible 'to try and create in the minds of the members that, in effect, their business is being handled by an Irish Executive'.¹³⁶

On the national question the Labour Party was always uneasy and equivocal. The Irish Labour elite were, as Garvin describes, 'secularist, internationalist, "All-Ireland" and British in outlook and in many cases, origin'.¹³⁷ In addition, the Labour Party was a product of the pre-partition political system and consequently, it could be accused of failing to adapt to the emerging nature of parochial politics in the post-1922 situation. The majority of Labour leaders failed, as Brian Farrell points out, 'to synthesise socialism and nationalism'.¹³⁸ Fianna Fáil's aggressive and assertive stance on the national question appealed to a broad element of working-class voters who became disillusioned not only with the divisions within Labour but also with its timorousness approach to the national question.¹³⁹ Although there was a strong working class character to Fianna Fáil's membership, especially in the early years, this did not necessarily translate into policy. By trying to be all things to all classes the

¹³³ Speech by O'Brien to workers in Dungarvan, 6 Oct. 1933 (NLI, O'Brien Papers, MS 15,676 (1)).

¹³⁴ Memorandum of meeting between the general secretary and representatives of the TGWU general executive council and a deputation from Area 11 Committee ATGWU, 10 Oct. 1933 (UWMRC, TGWU papers, MSS 126/TG/64/1/4).

¹³⁵ Bevin to Kyle, 15 Nov. 1933 (Ibid.)

¹³⁶ Memorandum of meeting between the general secretary and representatives of the TGWU general executive council and a deputation from Area 11 Committee ATGWU, 10 Oct. 1933 (Ibid.).

¹³⁷ Garvin, 'Nationalist elites', pp 179-80.

¹³⁸ Brian Farrell, 'Labour and the Irish political party system: a suggested approach to analysis', *Economic and Social Review*, 1:4 (1970), p. 488.

¹³⁹ Garvin, 'Nationalist elites', pp 177-80.

party could never legitimately claim to be the 'real Labour Party' as one of its TD's, Patrick Cummins, declared in 1965.¹⁴⁰

Some elements within Fianna Fáil shared O'Brien's views on British-based unions. A resolution at the 1933 ard-fheis called on the government to give preference to unions 'that are controlled in Ireland by Irishmen' while a resolution moved in 1938 demanded 'the abolition of Foreign Trade Unions operating in Ireland'.¹⁴¹ The next chapter will demonstrate how this grassroots attitude towards British unions was soon articulated by senior Fianna Fáil ministers, such as MacEntee and Lemass, in advance of the Trade Union Acts of 1941 and 1942. The issue of British-based unions was one which helped pull labour more firmly into the Fianna Fáil camp. Some within Fianna Fáil regarded British unions as suspect because they might not subordinate class interests to the goal of building up the Irish state and its industries. Fundamentally, the party's demand for Irish-based unions also implied that the labour movement needed to organise on a twenty six county basis.¹⁴²

Fine Gael had little to say in relation to the divisions between Irish and British trade unions or in relation to trade union disunity more generally. It was not an issue that concerned that party; the apathetic attitude displayed towards labour relations and trade unionism while in government persisted. However, during a Dáil debate on the Trade Union Bill in 1941, Cosgrave stated that he had hoped, at one time, that Irish workers would be members of Irish trade unions only. He no longer believed that this was a practical proposition since being a member of a British union better facilitated the movement of workers between Ireland and Britain.¹⁴³

An unexpected outcome of the Irish-British rivalry within Congress was that it re-energised the resolve of the amalgamated unions in the face of growing trade union nationalism. Their Irish members had possessed a traditional loyalty to these unions

¹⁴⁰ Niamh Puirseil, 'Fianna Fáil and the evolution of an ambiguous ideology' in Sean McGrath and Eoin O'Malley (eds), *One party dominance: Fianna Fáil and Irish politics* (Abingdon and New York, 2018), p. 59; Gallagher, *Political parties*, p. 27.

¹⁴¹ Reports of 1933 and 1938 Fianna Fáil Ard-Fheiseanna (UCDA, Fianna Fáil papers, P176/747 and P176/749(a)).

¹⁴² Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 59.

¹⁴³ *DD*, 3 July 1941, vol. 84, no. 7, cols. 916-7.

which had never displayed any evidence of ‘trade union colonialism’.¹⁴⁴ Some of the amalgamated unions, such as the ASW, accused the ITUC of ‘disorganising’ Irish workers while the National Union of Railwaymen, another British-based union, declared that nationalism and patriotism were irrelevant as regards union organisation which stood for the ‘emancipation of the working class’.¹⁴⁵ In addition to demanding equal protection of Congress rules, the amalgamated unions steadily increased its number of delegates to Congress.¹⁴⁶ This development had significant implications for the future of the Irish trade union movement over the following decade and this is examined in the following chapter on trade union reform. A further unanticipated development, particularly for O’Brien and the ITGWU, was the fact that Larkin now believed the growing nationalist flavour of Congress was the ideal opportunity for the WUI to apply for affiliation to Congress. As mentioned above, when he did so in 1934, it was vehemently opposed by O’Brien.

IV

The increased incidence of trade disputes during the 1930s had the potential to damage, not only the trade union movement, but also industry and the economy. From 1929 to 1938, a total of 941 disputes occurred. They involved 95,569 workers and resulted in the loss of 3,346,000 working days.¹⁴⁷ It is notable that the number of trade disputes increased significantly from 1932 to 1937 in line with the marked expansion of industrial activity in the country as the following table shows:

Table 6.1 Number of trade disputes for each year 1929 to 1938, the number of workers involved and the total number of working days lost for each year:¹⁴⁸

Year	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	Total
No. of Disputes	53	83	60	70	88	99	99	107	145	137	941
No. of Workers	4,533	3,410	5,431	4,222	9,059	9,288	9,513	9,443	26,734	13,736	95,589
Working Days Lost*	100	77	310	42	201	179	288	187	1,754	208	3,346

¹⁴⁴ McCarthy, *Trade unions*, pp 127-8.

¹⁴⁵ Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 60.

¹⁴⁶ CAR (1934), p. 122; McCarthy, *Trade unions*, pp 126-8.

¹⁴⁷ Presidential address by C.P. McCarthy to the Commerce Society of UCC on ‘Industrial disputes and wage levels in Éire’, 11 Mar. 1940 (UCDA, MacEntee papers, P67/229(14)).

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

*Nearest '000 days.

The disputes were spread across all areas of industry and employment. The number of establishments affected by disputes increased from 147 in 1935 to 383 in 1937 before falling back to 305 the following year.¹⁴⁹

During the period 1935 to 1938, 23 per cent of disputes averaged between six and ten days, while 22 per cent exceeded thirty days.¹⁵⁰ A report prepared by the Department of Industry and Commerce on inter-union trade disputes from 1932 to 1941 identified thirty-six such disputes during that ten-year period.¹⁵¹ However, another detailed report on industrial disputes in the 1930s found that 'trade union questions' were the cause of forty-six trade disputes between 1935 and 1938 during which 48,615 working days were lost; this amounted to ten per cent of all disputes during that period.¹⁵² The deteriorating industrial unrest caused the author of this report, C.P. McCarthy, to describe the situation as 'most depressing' and ask '[m]ust these disputes continue to spread in number and intensity and to ravage our industrial life?'¹⁵³ He also questioned if there were too many trade unions in Ireland and called for the introduction of a conciliation and arbitration scheme which would focus on the prevention of strikes and work stoppages rather than having to find a solution to resolve an actual strike.¹⁵⁴ After strike activity reached a climax in 1937, *Fianna Fáil* TDs became increasingly vociferous in their demands for action against unions.¹⁵⁵ For example, P.J. Fogarty, bluntly told the Dáil that 'there is nothing as bad in the country at the present day as trade unionism'.¹⁵⁶

The nature and extent of labour unrest in Ireland at this time did not reflect a global pattern. During the years 1933-39 Britain experienced a period of low level industrial unrest during which a total of 1,694,000 working days were lost. This compares with 49,053,000 days lost between 1919 and 1921, 162,233,000 in 1926 and

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Report by the Dept. of Industry and Commerce in connection with 'Trade disputes in Ireland (26 counties) arising out of inter-union differences since 1932 (UCDA, MacEntee papers, P67/239(15)).

¹⁵² Presidential address by McCarthy to the Commerce Society of Cork UCC on 'Industrial disputes and wage levels in Éire, 11 Mar. 1940 (UCDA, MacEntee papers, P67/229(14)).

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 49.

¹⁵⁶ *DD*, 5 Dec. 1939, vol. 78, no. 7, cols. 947-8.

29,474,000 in 1979 at the height of the British public sector strikes.¹⁵⁷ The United States experienced a significantly high level of strike activity in 1937 with 4,740 strikes leading to the loss of 28,425,000 working days. Approximately 58 per cent of these American strikes concerned trade union organisation and about 30 per cent were related to wages and hours of work.¹⁵⁸

The scale of inter-union and general labour unrest raised serious concerns for both the government and the trade union movement. A strike at the Dublin transportation services in 1935, which the ITGWU described as the most stubbornly fought in twenty years, gave a further signal that the relationship between Fianna Fáil and the trade union movement was changing.¹⁵⁹ Below the surface of this labour dispute the bitter conflict between the Irish and British-based trade unions smouldered. Their mutual antipathy was temporarily held in check for the duration of this protracted dispute with the Dublin United Tramway Company (DUTC).¹⁶⁰ The strike lasted eleven weeks, ending on 17 May 1935, and involved almost 3,000 workers, all members of either the ITGWU or ATGWU.¹⁶¹ To the dismay of the general public and the government, the strike, which commenced over the dismissal of a worker, was soon transformed into a demand for a wage increase. It had a devastating effect on Dublin businesses and seriously inconvenienced the general public. Some retailers were forced to reduce the cost of their stock by a quarter. The army was called in to provide a limited transport service for the public and it was estimated that they carried 2,360,000 passengers during the strike. Criticism of the strike was also reflected in the press which hoped that it would direct the minds of all concerned towards 'the discovery of some machinery' which might prevent these disputes.¹⁶²

The *Irish Times* described the strike action as 'an assault upon the people of Dublin' and issued a call for public volunteers to man the trams and buses if the strike

¹⁵⁷ Richard Hyman, *Strikes* (4th ed. Basingstoke and London 1989), pp 27-8.

¹⁵⁸ 'Analysis of strikes in 1937' from the Monthly Labor Review of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, no. 789 (May, 1938), pp 1, 15. (https://www.bls.gov/wsp/1937_strikes.pdf) (accessed 20 Oct. 2018).

¹⁵⁹ Allen *Fianna Fáil*, p. 48.

¹⁶⁰ Bill McCamley, *The role of the rank and file in the 1935 Dublin tram and bus strike* (Dublin, 1981), p. 1.

¹⁶¹ *II*, 18 May 1935.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 2 April and 20 May 1935; *Cork Examiner*, 23 Mar. 1935; *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 May 1935.

did not end soon.¹⁶³ Although the *Irish Press* called for a solution to any 'legitimate' grievances that the workers might have, it believed that Lemass as Minister for Industry and Commerce was doing all in his power 'to release the citizens of Dublin ... from an intolerable situation'.¹⁶⁴ The *Southern Star* called for some means 'sanctioned by law' for the settlement of trade disputes, in particular those which inconvenienced the general public.¹⁶⁵ Lemass accused the workers of 'deliberately embarking on a policy of causing the maximum degree of public inconvenience' and refused to intervene in the dispute while the strike continued.¹⁶⁶ He did not disguise his annoyance that the trade unions refused to agree to the provision of an emergency transport service. The rebuke was not received well by the ITUC which accused the minister of a 'biased opinion' and of failing to act in 'a judicial manner'. The dispute was a tipping point and Lemass indicated his determination to take legislative action 'to prevent a recurrence of a similar emergency'.¹⁶⁷

Even though this dispute brought two opposing trade unions together in pursuance of a common cause, both remained wary of the other and awaited an opportunity to outflank the other. The significant concern for both unions was the fear of losing membership to their erstwhile enemy. The 'truce' which existed between both unions for the duration of the strike did not reduce the animosity between them.¹⁶⁸ In the aftermath of the dispute, open hostilities resumed.¹⁶⁹ Alan Bullock observes that 'union and national rivalries had as much to do with ... the strike ... as any economic causes'. He notes that Ernest Bevin was determined that his union would not collapse the dispute 'if only to show that the ATGWU could be as militant as its Irish rival'.¹⁷⁰ The strike was, however, a catalyst for provoking change and it was

¹⁶³ *IT*, 15 Mar. 1935.

¹⁶⁴ *IP*, 18 Mar. 1935.

¹⁶⁵ *Southern Star*, 1 June 1935.

¹⁶⁶ Minutes of ITUC national executive meeting, 5 April 1935 (NAI, ITUC and Labour Party minutes 1923-1935, Book C, Box 100, G4/82/38); *IT*, 15 Mar. 1935.

¹⁶⁷ Cabinet minutes, Cab. 7/217, 19 Mar. 1935 (NAI, DT, S7481A); Minutes of Special meeting of ITUC resident committee, 16 Mar. 1935 (NAI, ITUC and Labour Party minutes 1923-1935, Book C, Box 100, G4/82/38).

¹⁶⁸ McCamley, *Tram and bus strike*, pp 10-18.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁷⁰ Alan Bullock, *The life and times of Ernest Bevin. Volume 1, trade union leader, 1881-1940* (London, 1960), p. 18.

pivotal to defining Fianna Fáil's determination to drive trade union and labour relations reform.

V

As the 1930s progressed, Fianna Fáil's image as the 'workers' party' began to fade. Internal debates within the party indicated a sharp shift to the right as the party began to press for more action against trade unions. It certainly appeared as if the ITUC had lost control over its affiliated unions as inter-union disputes, lightning strikes and action in pursuit of 'unreasonable demands' escalated. Lemass toyed with the idea of compulsory arbitration for disputes but felt that it might have been a step too far in the labour relations climate of the time.¹⁷¹ He believed that the multiplicity of unions and inter-union rivalries militated directly against proper industrial organisation, not least because it meant that as minister he 'was dealing with a hydra rather than with a single, coherent organisation'.¹⁷² Of equal importance was his concern that an unreformed trade union movement was an obstacle to industrial development.

With trademark pragmatism in March 1935 Helena Molony of the IWWU warned her colleagues on the national executive that the disorganisation besetting certain industries, where trade unions were operating, 'was developing to a degree which was alarming'.¹⁷³ She was particularly concerned about the damaging impact which the strike at the Dublin United Tramway Company, and other such disputes, were likely to have on the trade union movement. She called for an examination and analysis of the matter at the earliest possible opportunity so as to bring an end to internecine quarrelling and disunity.¹⁷⁴

Molony's appeal captured the attention of her national executive colleagues and at the 1935 Congress the national executive advised delegates that

the time has arrived when a more orderly state of affairs should be called into existence amongst the existing Trade Unions to prevent any further disruption into warring competitive sections ... The National Executive feel a duty devolves on them to call attention to the

¹⁷¹ N.S. O'Nualláin, Dept. of I&C to M. Moynihan, Sec., DT, 15 Nov. 1938 (NAI, DT, S11106); Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 49.

¹⁷² Horgan, *Lemass* (Dublin, 1999), p. 120.

¹⁷³ Minutes of ITUC resident committee, 7 Mar. 1935 (NAI, ITUC and Labour Party minutes 1923-1935, book C, box 100, G4/82/38).

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 5 April 1935.

disintegrating circumstances which are manifesting themselves in the Trade Union Movement throughout the country leading to an absence of harmony and unity.¹⁷⁵

The national executive proposed far-reaching recommendations designed to discourage house unions (unions controlled by employers), break-away unions and inter-union rivalry. The main objective was to 'prevent the rise of undisciplined so-called Trade Unions at the instigation of every individual who considers he has a grievance against an existing union' and to present 'a solid unified union front' to the industrially organised employers.¹⁷⁶ The national executive warned that failure to prevent the disorganisation and demoralisation of the movement would render it 'impotent as an industrial fighting machine'.¹⁷⁷ Running through the executive's recommendations was a great sense of agitation which emphasised their grave concern for the future. They spoke of warring competitive unions, disintegrating new bodies and internecine union warfare, suggesting a state of affairs more fragmented than many Congress delegates might have realised.¹⁷⁸ The seriousness of these concerns is emphasised by the fact that the ITUC was not an organisation known for orchestrating any great or radical change to its structures or *modus operandi*.

As 1935 progressed, inter-union disputes, internal labour divisions and differences, and demarcation strikes had escalated to such a level that not only was the credibility and integrity of the ITUC at stake but the future of the trade union movement was, at a pivotal moment, exposed to influences from radical elements and/or government intervention. It was in such circumstances that the national executive called a special trade union conference on 25 April 1936, at which delegates directed its executive to 'forthwith set up a Commission to inquire into and report on the terms of reference to the unions'.¹⁷⁹ The terms of reference, which clearly emphasised the lack of organisation and proactive strategies within the ITUC up to this point, called for the amalgamation of unions; machinery for co-ordinating the conduct of trade disputes, industrial demarcation and other inter-union disputes; advice on rules to govern applications for affiliation to the ITUC and Trade Councils; an inquiry

¹⁷⁵ CAR (1935), p. 65.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., pp 65-6.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁷⁸ McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 134.

¹⁷⁹ CAR (1939), pp 44-5.

into the legal position of trade unions; and the formulation of recommendations for general organisation.¹⁸⁰ The national executive called for 'a vast organisational improvement' within the trade union movement and noted that the commission may well mean 'a complete turning point in the life of the Trade Union Movement'.¹⁸¹ The outcome of the commission is examined in the next chapter.

VI

The hopes and promises which the labour movement expected political independence to deliver were seriously diminished by their own organisational weaknesses, infighting and the rise of a misplaced Anglophobic nationalism.¹⁸² Much of its organisational weaknesses originated from the establishment of the ITUC in 1894. The ILP&TUC demonstrated that as an organisation it was ill-prepared for the impact of independence and for at least two decades lacked the ability to strengthen and develop its structures or to make any significant contribution to improving and developing labour relations and supporting machinery. There is a tendency to identify the 1930s as the decade of disunity and division within the labour and trade union movement. However, disunity and divisions were apparent from as early as 1922. The antagonism towards the British-based unions emerged in 1922, fostered by the nationalism which triumphed during the previous decade and which was crowned by the establishment of the IFS that year. The nationalist impulse both enlarged and inflamed the tensions and stresses within the labour movement at the time. Both the political and industrial blocs within Congress vied for the dominant role within the organisation. This gave rise to unseemly divisions but also emphasised the fact that Congress's structures were ill-equipped to cater for both a political party and a trade union organisation.

A weak and ineffectual organisation was also significantly responsible for failing to control and address the raft of inter-union disputes which afflicted the ILP&TUC

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 45; McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 142.

¹⁸¹ CAR (1936), p. 46.

¹⁸² Note: Although the Anglophobic nationalism within trade unionism at the time might be understandable to a certain degree, it was generally misplaced. An examination of the TGWU papers in the University of Warwick clearly demonstrates that the union had no ulterior motives by their presence (ATGWU) in Ireland. Their sole purpose in Ireland was to offer an alternative service to general and unskilled workers. Bevin's correspondence to the Irish government clearly demonstrated that his union would leave Ireland if asked to do so.

during the 1930s. Individual unions were more concerned with their own members' interests than with the wider interests of the trade union movement. Inter-union disputes were also intensified by the personal war waged by Larkin and O'Brien, the dominant figures in the Irish labour movement. They put personal interests above those of the entire labour movement. Their vendetta not only inhibited the development of the movement but also delayed reform and the introduction of much needed labour relations procedures and machinery.

New beginnings: Trade union and labour relations reform, 1926-1946

The theme of reform in Irish labour history has received only modest historical attention. McCarthy provides a solid account of the Trade Union Commission, the Trade Unions Acts of 1941 and 1942 and the Industrial Relations Act 1946 without specifically addressing the subject of reform.¹ John Horgan's biography of Seán Lemass briefly charts Lemass's attempts to drive both trade union and labour relations reform.² This chapter has two aims. First, it analyses attempts to reform the trade union movement and, secondly, it examines reform of labour relations procedures between 1926 and the Industrial Relations Act of 1946. While there were many calls for reform and much talk about it, there were few genuine attempts to undertake it. For the most part such efforts failed. Lemass's affinity for the question of labour relations and labour issues generally may spring from his friendship and acquaintance with some trade union leaders – notably Thomas Foran, Thomas Kennedy and William O'Brien – all of whom held both a republican as well as a labour ideology. As an urban politician, Lemass had witnessed and helped significantly to engineer growing electoral support for Fianna Fáil among the working class.³ He also had a considerable regard for James Connolly's 'practical social policy'.⁴

During the 1920s the attempt to reform Congress to promote and enhance the industrial side of the movement served only to highlight the divisions within Congress and led to a damaging split between its industrial and the political wings, with each side claiming the other hampered Congress's development. Following the split, the issue of reform focused on the difficulties created by the multiplicity of trade unions and concerns regarding the growing dominance of amalgamated or British-based trade unions. Another spur was the Fianna Fáil government's industrialisation programme and its demand that the trade union movement either reform or be reformed. Accepting the case for reform and fearful that the government intended to build its

¹ McCarthy, *Trade unions*, pp 200-43, 533-45.

² Horgan, *Lemass*, pp 120-5.

³ *Ibid.*, pp 83 and 143.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

industrialisation drive on a low wages policy, the ITUC responded by establishing a high-powered commission of inquiry into trade union organisation. The unsuccessful outcome of the commission's deliberations demanded government intervention and the introduction of limited trade union reform under the Trade Unions Acts 1941 and 1942. However, the nature of labour relations in Ireland was altered radically by the introduction of the Industrial Relations Act in 1946.

I

As discussed in chapter 6, the organisational divisions within the ILP&TUC during the 1920s saw the IWWU, in particular, endeavour to develop a more prominent role for the industrial side of the movement. This occasioned 'a feeble attempt' to initiate reform at the 1926 Congress.⁵ Congress delegates voted in favour of a resolution, moved by Tom Johnson, to instruct the national executive to survey working-class industrial organisation in Ireland and to submit a report upon the possibilities of securing greater organisational simplicity and effectiveness. The resolution was driven by what was described as the growth of labour political activity, the situation created by the establishment of two new governments in Ireland, the multiplicity of unions, and the difficulties of trade union organisation in small urban and rural areas.⁶ The fact that these problems had existed for some time – many prior to independence – only emphasised the failure of the labour movement to take cognisance of both changing circumstances and emerging challenges and to take appropriate remedial action.

In the event, no action had been taken by the time of the 1927 Congress. This prompted another resolution that it would be the 'first duty' of the incoming national executive in 1927 to undertake the proposed survey.⁷ Both Johnson and Mortished, respectively secretary and assistant secretary of the ILP&TUC at that time, drew attention to the financial and manpower difficulties of undertaking a comprehensive survey, as initially envisaged, aimed at far-reaching reform. Instead it was recast. The original aim of producing a strategy to reduce the number of trade unions and to promote unity was replaced by a plan of action 'to get individual workers into the

⁵ CAR (1926), p. 152; O'Connor, 'Re-imagining', p. 9.

⁶ CAR (1926), p. 152.

⁷ Ibid. (1927), p. 86.

unions, no matter what union they got into'. It became known as the 'into the Unions campaign'.⁸ This resulted in a special conference in November 1927 to restore 'the prestige and vigour of the Trade Union Movement' but its results were disappointing and few worthwhile suggestions were made by delegates.⁹ The conference appeared to reflect a sense of indifference and lethargy. The difficult questions identified in 1926 were ignored and nothing was achieved. Its failure to achieve any semblance of planned reform only served to demonstrate the dysfunctionality of Congress.¹⁰ With effect from 1 April 1930, the Irish Labour Party and the Irish Trade Union Congress functioned as separate entities.¹¹ If anything, the whole affair appeared to support the IWWU concerns regarding the dominance of the political side of the movement over the industrial side, as the revival of the Labour Party, in the aftermath of its dismal performance in the 1927 elections, took precedence over everything else.

At the 1926 Congress, Johnson warned of future difficulties over the law governing the registration of trade unions.¹² Although it was not compulsory, most unions registered under the Trade Union Acts to avail of legal advantages such as certain tax exemptions under the Income Tax Act, 1918. Before 1920 a trade union could register its rules with the Registrar of Friendly Societies, according to the location of its head-office, in London, Dublin or Edinburgh and such registration could be automatically recorded in any of the other cities. Following partition and the Anglo-Irish Treaty, Westminster, Stormont and Dublin were responsible for registrations.¹³ This led to a legal quagmire. The IFS Revenue Commissioners declared that a trade union not registered in the IFS could not avail of certain tax exemptions. In addition, the Irish Register of Friendly Societies refused to register the rules of British unions.¹⁴ Such unions generally registered in London but the decision precluded their availing of certain protections and entitlements in the IFS. Nevertheless, British trade unions continued to operate as heretofore.

⁸ Ibid., pp 69-87.

⁹ Ibid. (1928), pp 15, 21.

¹⁰ O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 142.

¹¹ CAR (1930), p. 19.

¹² Ibid. (1926), p. 152.

¹³ Mortished, 'Trade union organisation', pp 219-20; McCarthy, *Trade unions*, pp 80-1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

With the coming to power of Fianna Fail in 1932 trade union and labour relations reform acquired a new sense of urgency as the new government's industrialisation programme gave the trade union movement an improved perception of itself and its own importance due to expanding trade union membership. As outlined in chapter 6, these circumstances also gave rise to greater strike activity and inter-union disputes.¹⁵ Fianna Fáil identified the multiplicity of trade unions as the root cause of unacceptable militancy, inter-union disputes and the unnecessary disruption of trade and industry which threatened the government's industrialisation programme. Having set out a strategy for industrial development, the government was compelled to protect it by urgently developing a labour relations strategy. This explains Fianna Fáil's self-interested push for trade union reform and rationalisation. This in turn divided trade unions. In one camp were the traditionalists who favoured the continuation of the sectionalist trade union organisation and an antagonistic relationship with both state and employer. On the other side were reformists who favoured industrial trade unionism and a more collaborative relationship with the state.¹⁶ As O'Conner remarks, 'unfinished business was back on the Congress agenda'.¹⁷

Within months of taking up office the Fianna Fáil government had drafted legislation to provide for a system of arbitration, compulsory or otherwise, in labour disputes. Civil servants investigated the legal position pertaining to the resolution of labour disputes in a broad range of countries such as Italy, Norway, New Zealand, Canada, the United States and South Africa.¹⁸ It is unclear what the civil servants learned from their study of the position in other countries. One civil servant, at least, reached the following conclusion: 'Despite general and loose talk to the contrary I think it will be found on examination that this country has had a comparatively good history in the matter of stoppages due to strikes and lock-outs and frankly I see no necessity for new legislation'.¹⁹ This assessment was, obviously, not accepted by Lemass. The escalation of labour disputes during the course of the 1930s ensured that

¹⁵ O'Connor, *Labour history*, pp 129-30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Memo from unnamed civil servant, 8 Dec. 1932 (NAI, DL, TID1387).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

reform of labour relations remained prominent on the government's agenda. The matter was accelerated by Lemass, following strong representations from employers during the long-running Dublin Tramways dispute in 1935.²⁰ Lemass was also highly critical of the ITUC's inability to exercise control.²¹ His opposition to British trade unions on political and industrial grounds also influenced his desire for reform.²² He had a respect for trade unionism and viewed it as an essential element of organised society. Consequently, he had a greater awareness – more than the movement itself perhaps – of its flaws and weaknesses. Lemass encouraged reorganisation from within rather than government-enforced change as the former had a better chance of success. In one sense his inducement of the trade union movement to embrace reform was to prevent it from bringing its reputation into further disrepute.²³

In opposition, Fine Gael endeavoured to follow Fianna Fáil's example by developing a policy which attempted to appeal to workers and trade unionists. Its *Labour policy of Fine Gael*, published in 1934, under the leadership of Eoin O'Duffy (see chapter 5), has attracted little historical attention. This policy was significantly influenced by Professors Michael Tierney and James Hogan, both of whom were vice-presidents of Fine Gael, as well as Ernest Blythe and Desmond Fitzgerald. All were inspired by Pope Pius XI's seminal encyclical, *Quadragesimo anno* (1931) and were staunch advocates of an alternative economic, social and political system based on corporate or vocational organisation. During the period 1933-4 they initiated a process of formulating policies to give practical expression to vocational objectives, the labour policy being the most complete and comprehensive.²⁴ However, the Fine Gael labour policy cannot be interpreted as any endorsement of the labour movement as an integral element of Tierney's corporatism policy was the suppression of organised labour in the interests of industrial peace.²⁵

²⁰ Cabinet minutes, Cab. 7/217, 19 Mar. 1935 (NAI, DT, S7481A); PAr (1935), p. 58; William Norton, TD, to special trade union conference, 25 July 1936 (NAI, ITUC papers, box 62, G4/82/31).

²¹ William Norton, TD, to special trade union conference, 25 July 1936 (Ibid.).

²² Horgan, *Lemass*, p. 121.

²³ Interview with Lemass on 'Industrial reform', *IP*, 23 Feb. 1937 (NAI, ITUC papers, box 62, G4/82/31).

²⁴ Eugene Broderick, *Intellectuals and the ideological hijacking of Fine Gael, 1932-1938* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, 2010), pp 1, 147; Broderick, 'Labour policy of Fine Gael', p. 91; Peter Martin, 'The political career of Michael Tierney, 1920-44', *Irish Historical Studies*, 37:147 (May, 2011), p. 420. See also Cronin, *The Blueshirts and Irish politics*, pp 78-99.

²⁵ Martin, 'Michael Tierney', p. 422.

O'Duffy hoped to capitalise on the weakness of the labour movement in Ireland. In a speech in Kildare on 25 February 1934 he expressed his 'greatest admiration' for trade unionism while at the same attacking union leaders and labour policy which he claimed had failed ordinary workers.²⁶ In addition to outlawing non-trade union labour, the party proposed to enhance and develop labour relations by establishing a scheme for conciliation and arbitration and a Labour Court, which would be responsible for regulating pay and conditions of employment as well as resolving labour disputes.²⁷ General benefits were intended to ensure the establishment of a new corporate system of labour relations which would allow trade unionism to take on 'a nobler function'.²⁸ Fine Gael's labour policy failed to attract any support and was viewed by all elements of the labour movement as a foreign ideology associated with fascism.²⁹ In addition, traditional Fine Gael politicians also lost interest in vocational principles in favour of the overriding concern of political survival.³⁰ Despite its new found dalliance with labour affairs some in Fine Gael, such as Blythe, remained cautious of trade unions claiming that while they may have been of some benefit to workers, they had also made decisions detrimental to the community at large.³¹

II

Increasing inter-union disputes forced the ITUC national executive to hold a special meeting on 2 November 1934 with a view to introducing some 'specific machinery' that would enable union members to transfer between unions in an orderly manner and to eliminate the practice of 'poaching'.³² Although an agreement was drawn up, its implementation was delayed by the ITGWU and over the next year inter-unions disputes escalated alarmingly and led to numerous strikes over lines of worker

²⁶ Speech by O'Duffy in Kildare, 25 Feb. 1934 (UCDA, Costello papers, P190/270).

²⁷ 'Fine Gael and Labour – 12 points on the immediate labour policy of Fine Gael within', 1934 (UCDA, Blythe papers, P24/365); Document titled 'Draft of heads of policy', 1934 (UCDA, Blythe papers, P24/670). See also Costello papers (UCDA, Costello papers, P190/269); Broderick, 'Labour policy of Fine Gael', pp 88-9.

²⁸ Broderick, 'Labour policy of Fine Gael', pp 90-1.

²⁹ Ibid., pp 94, 99.

³⁰ Broderick, *Intellectuals and the ideological hijacking of Fine Gael*, pp 147-8.

³¹ Document titled 'Preliminary notes on planned economics', presumably by Blythe, [c. 1934] (UCDA, Blythe papers, P24/678).

³² CAR (1935), p. 59.

demarcation.³³ Lemass, as Minister for Industry and Commerce, advised Congress that the government would intervene unless continuing trade union internecine friction was addressed. Congress national executive called for a more orderly state of affairs 'to prevent any further disruption into warring competitive sections' among trade unions. In April it appointed a high-powered twelve-member commission of inquiry to examine and report on the organisation of the trade union movement in Ireland. This included the possible amalgamation of unions and the establishment of machinery for co-ordinating the conduct of trade disputes and inter-union disputes.³⁴ The ITUC acknowledged its responsibility to the economic development of the country and anticipated that the commission would herald 'a complete turning point in the life of the Trade Union Movement'.³⁵

At a special conference in April 1936, delegates heard from the Congress secretary, Éamonn Lynch that the public perception of trade unionism was one dominated by 'disgruntled individuals' whose main purpose was to paralyse industry and disturb the community through strikes and work stoppages. Although dismissing such perceptions as erroneous and alarmist, he acknowledged that the government had 'taken serious notice' of such views.³⁶ The establishment of the commission provided the trade union movement with a much needed opportunity for reflection and a re-assessment of its role. While Lynch tended to attack the capitalist system for the predicament in which the trade union movement found itself, he accentuated the positive. He believed that improved organisational structures would reduce internal friction and obviate the need for the introduction of coercive legislation.³⁷ Yet the fact that the ITUC sought confirmation from the Labour Party as to the seriousness of the government's intent to impose reform suggests that the ITUC had given little consideration to tackling the innate and growing problems within the movement and were not prepared to change unless forced to do so. It seems probable that they were constrained by sectional and vested interests. One of Lynch's most significant

³³ Ibid. (1936), pp 44-5.

³⁴ Ibid., pp 45-6; O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 148.

³⁵ CAR (1936), p. 46.

³⁶ Éamonn Lynch to special trade union conference, 25 April 1936 (NAI, ITUC papers, Box 62, G4/82/31). Note: Lynch was also appointed secretary to the commission. See CAR (1936), p. 46.

³⁷ Ibid.

observations was the need for courage and foresight among trade unionists to promote the interests of the movement rather than the narrow interests of their own trade.³⁸ This, undoubtedly, was at the core of the movement's difficulties. The commission did not issue its final report until 1939. The three-year delay reflected apathy and an absence of engagement by individual trade unions.

Membership of the commission included many of the major trade union leaders, including William O'Brien, whose views dominated much of its work and deliberations. No less than three reports were drawn up by various groupings within the commission regarding the future structure of the trade union movement.³⁹ A majority consensus could not be found for any. The two main proposals represented a division of opinion between those who headed up Irish-based trade unions and those from British-based unions. William Norton, another member of the commission, presented his own proposal.⁴⁰ The re-organisation and reform commission was descending into farce. The proposal by O'Brien and the other 'Irish union based' commission members, was encoded 'Memorandum I' by the ITUC national executive. Largely the work of O'Brien, in terms of trade union amalgamation it suggested the dissolution of all forty-eight ITUC affiliated unions and their replacement with ten industrial unions into which all trade union members should be accommodated.⁴¹ To avoid accusations of empire building, O'Brien declined to press for 'One Big Union' for marine, transport and general workers – which would have accounted for a membership of 83,000 members – and opted instead for three unions to cater for these workers. O'Brien's argument was that industrial unionism would meet with government expectations; lead to a big increase in membership from a general re-organisation of all workers; and eliminate inter-union disputes which he claimed had militated against the progress of the trade union movement.⁴²

Although O'Brien's dominant motive appears to have been trade union reform, his proposals threatened the future of many trade unions and implied significant change for the British-based unions. He suggested that the amalgamation of British-

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid; McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 143.

⁴⁰ CAR (1939), pp 54-65.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp 54-8; McCarthy, *Trade unions*, pp 143-4; O'Connor, 'Re-imagining', p. 10.

⁴² CAR (1939), p. 58; O'Connor, 'Re-imagining', p. 10.

based unions with other unions in the same industrial grouping might 'necessitate the severing of the "Cross-Channel" association' which he acknowledged would be viewed by some with distrust and as a 'leap in the dark'.⁴³ Given his known antipathy towards British trade unions, many believed O'Brien's proposals were not necessarily in the best interests of the trade union movement and were motivated by a desire to see the demise of the amalgamated unions in Ireland.⁴⁴ However, his proposals, regardless of his own vested interests, were pragmatic.

It was inevitable that O'Brien's proposals would be opposed by the leaders of unions, whether British or Irish, that faced extinction. Lynch who had already called on trade unionists to ignore narrow interests in favour of the good of the movement, soon realised that his call had fallen on deaf ears. In September 1938 Lynch who, as both secretary to the ITUC and the commission, had a keen awareness of the attitudes of various trade union leaders, informed O'Brien of his conclusion that any further work on O'Brien's proposals would 'be only a sheer waste of time'.⁴⁵ He suggested that the national executive be informed that it appeared impossible for the commission to secure unanimity and that no useful purpose would be served in continuing the work of the commission. Lynch feared that the attempts to deliver reform might prove counterproductive and occasion more dissension and 'a state of confusion worse confounded'.⁴⁶

Lynch's concerns were proved correct when five members of the commission, all leaders of British-based unions, submitted their own report encoded Memorandum II. It decried O'Brien's proposals as 'much too far reaching' and 'quite unworkable'.⁴⁷ The main proponent of Memorandum II, Sam Kyle, secretary of the ATGWU and an adversary of O'Brien/Memorandum I, vehemently opposed the possible dissolution of some of the larger trade unions, noting that 'many of these craft unions have histories going back a long way'.⁴⁸ This was a serious concern for such unions who treasured

⁴³ CAR (1939), p. 55; McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 144.

⁴⁴ McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 144.

⁴⁵ Lynch to O'Brien, 20 Sept. 1938 (NLI, O'Brien papers, MS 13,971/8).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ CAR (1938), pp 63-4; Report by certain members of the Commission of Enquiry, 1 Oct. 1938 (NAI, ITUC papers, box 62, G4/32/81).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

their long and proud histories, some of which grew out of the medieval trade guilds.⁴⁹ On the other hand, such trade unions allowed sentimentality to impede due consideration of the problems facing the movement and the practical solutions and decisions which needed to be taken. Memorandum II suggested that the curtailment of inter-union and demarcation disputes could be achieved by 'the exercise of a modicum of common sense and the ordinary exercise of the brotherly spirit' without resorting to the rationalisation and amalgamation of unions as proposed by O'Brien.⁵⁰ It contained little of substance and lacked in the detail of Memorandum I.

William Norton, head of the Post Office Workers' Union and leader of the Labour Party, produced Memorandum III. This was quite similar to Memorandum II but for reasons of political prudence and not wanting to offend O'Brien, Norton decided not to align himself with either group.⁵¹ Although he supported trade union amalgamation, he opposed the establishment of industrial groupings as proposed by O'Brien.⁵² Norton's rejection of this concept meant that a majority of the commission's members rejected O'Brien's main proposal on industrial groupings.

The reports from the commission were the subject of a special ITUC conference on 9 February 1939, under the chairmanship of P.T. Daly, president of Congress. This proved ominous for O'Brien. Daly had been a long-time supporter and associate of Jim Larkin and not surprisingly, like Larkin, he had a long history of contempt for O'Brien. Daly was only too happy to thwart O'Brien whenever the opportunity presented itself. Adding to O'Brien's concerns was the fact that the British-based unions, aware of the growing pressures for reform and the possible implications for their unions, had been boosting their affiliation from Northern Ireland, and British unions now accounted for forty-eight per cent of ITUC membership.⁵³

O'Brien had his memorandum presented as the main report since it contained much more detail than the other reports and also because of the fact that it had been

⁴⁹ Malcolm Chase, *Early trade unionism: fraternity, skill and the politics of labour* (Abington and New York, 2000), p. 42.

⁵⁰ CAR (1938), pp 63-4; Report by certain members of the Commission of Enquiry, 1 Oct. 1938 (NAI, ITUC papers, box 62, G4/32/81).

⁵¹ CAR (1938), pp 63-4; McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 154; O'Connor, 'Re-imagining', p. 10.

⁵² CAR (1938), p. 63.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 65; McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 155; O'Connor 'Re-imagining', p. 10.

encoded 'Memorandum I'. However, Kyle countered by having Memorandum II moved first on the basis that it had majority support among the commission. It was proposed that the conference approve the conclusions of Memorandum II to the extent that they met the terms of reference'.⁵⁴ This changed the whole nature of the discussion as there had been an expectation that each report/memorandum would be discussed one by one, but no one had moved the adoption of Memorandum I. Memorandum II now became the substantive issue. Despite O'Brien's protestations, Memorandum II was put to a vote and approved by twenty-one unions with eighteen against.⁵⁵ When an attempt was made to put Memorandum I to a vote, Daly refused to accept the motion claiming that 'the motion substituting one document for another was voted on'.⁵⁶ Angry and frustrated at how the conference was chaired and conducted and inevitably angry at himself for being outwitted, O'Brien, accompanied by some delegates, walked out.⁵⁷

Daly's ruling must have been regarded as having been technically correct as it was never subsequently challenged. However, his position as a fair and impartial chairman was in question not only due to the history of personal animosity between himself and O'Brien but also because he had been a member of the ATGWU.⁵⁸ Some of the national newspapers were sympathetic to O'Brien's predicament with the *Irish Independent* noting that delegates from the Irish unions were under the impression that Daly had agreed that there would be a vote on each memorandum.⁵⁹ The *Irish Press* observed that 'those who desired the second vote took the view that there might be delegates present who were opposed to both memoranda and that the views of the delegates on the first document should be available for the information of Congress'.⁶⁰

The ITUC's attempt at reform ended in abysmal failure and engendered further division, particularly between Irish and British-based unions. Its reform commission merely emphasised and exacerbated the division between Irish and British unions. At a

⁵⁴ CAR (1938), p. 65.

⁵⁵ Ibid. (1939), p. 65; Morrissey, *O'Brien*, pp 300-1; McCarthy, *Trade unions*, pp 159-162.

⁵⁶ Morrissey, *O'Brien*, pp 301-2; McCarthy, *Trade unions*, pp 161-2.

⁵⁷ Morrissey, *O'Brien*, p. 302.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 303.

⁵⁹ *II*, 10 Feb. 1939.

⁶⁰ *IP*, 10 Feb. 1939.

meeting on 1 March 1939, O'Brien and the leaders of five other Irish unions established 'an Advisory Council of Irish Trade Unions in affiliation to the Irish Trade Union Congress' and suggested that a provisional committee be appointed to devise a national and economic policy for Irish trade unions.⁶¹ Their main concern was that the interests of Irish trade unions were not receiving adequate attention and representation within Congress. They extended an invitation to all Irish unions to join the Council and expressed a desire to continue working in harmony with the ITUC. They recognised the difficult position of the ITUC in relation to trade union reorganisation as it was 'precluded from taking any action that might be considered by the British unions to prejudice their position'.⁶² The Irish union leaders committed themselves to reform but at the same time quite tactically portrayed the British unions as the villains of the piece and opposed 'to any change, believing ... that any scheme of reorganisation would be detrimental to their status in this country'.⁶³ This reinforced the divide between Irish and British unions. They added that Irish unions were prevented from 'expressing an independent point of view' and that if problems were left unaddressed they were inviting the government to interfere.⁶⁴ The Council of Irish Unions was, as O'Connor put it, the beginning of the remedy as they saw it.⁶⁵ But it was unclear what they were trying to fix.

Despite the enormity of the issue for the trade union movement and the fact that the commission had sat for three years, a disconcerted national executive appeared incapable of responding to the fiasco at the 1939 Congress. Daly, who was president that year, made no mention of the matter in his presidential address and the national executive report contained no commentary on the proceedings of the special conference of February, apart from publishing details of the three memoranda. A protest from some delegates regarding the casual manner in which the entire matter had been dismissed by the national executive caused Éamonn Lynch to reply that 'the

⁶¹ Resolutions adopted by Irish unions affiliated to ITUC due to failure of the Special Trade Union Commission to recommend an acceptable scheme of trade union organisation, [1 Mar. 1939] (NLI, O'Brien papers, MS 13,971/19); Morrissey, *O'Brien*, p. 303.

⁶² Resolutions adopted by Irish unions affiliated to ITUC due to failure of the Special Trade Union Commission to recommend an acceptable scheme of trade union organisation, [1 Mar. 1939] (*Ibid.*).

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 168.

report is brief and perhaps it were advisable that it should be brief'.⁶⁶ It suggests that the national executive was not only over-whelmed by the negative fall-out from the commission but also believed that the damage was best contained by saying as little as possible. O'Brien turned to Fianna Fáil in his quest for reform.⁶⁷

III

In September 1938, following a cabinet reshuffle, Seán MacEntee replaced Lemass as Minister for Industry and Commerce. He took a less compromising attitude to labour relations and trade unions than his predecessor.⁶⁸ On 10 October 1939 three hundred members of the National Union of Vehicle Builders (NUVB) began a 'stay-in' strike at the Dublin United Tramway Company's Inchicore Works. The strike arose from the workers refusal to work with an employee who had fallen into arrears with his trade union subscriptions and was subsequently expelled from the union. The strike action spread to seven other tramway depots before work resumed on 16 October.⁶⁹ It was a stark example of the type of strike which was surely bringing the trade union movement into disrepute not only with employers and the government but also with the general public. It provided the first indication that MacEntee intended to adopt a tough stance. On the second day of the dispute, the minister advised the Taoiseach that 'this form of strike cannot be tolerated' and he proposed that all necessary steps be open to him to end the strike.⁷⁰ On the same day the secretary of the Department of Industry and Commerce summoned officials of the NUVB to a meeting and warned that the minister would not tolerate the type of actions which had been taken in this dispute.⁷¹

From the government's perspective trade union reform was expected to reduce the instances of trade disputes and the consequential disruption to trade and industry. Following the failure of the Trade Union Commission, the threat of strikes,

⁶⁶ CAR (1939), pp 153-4.

⁶⁷ O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 150.

⁶⁸ Tom Feeney, *Seán MacEntee: a political life* (Dublin, 2011) p. 101.

⁶⁹ *IP*, 11 and 14 Oct. 1939; *Belfast Newsletter*, 13 Oct. 1939; Note: The term 'stay-in' strike was used to describe a strike in which strikers forcibly occupy the premises of the employer so as to prevent work being carried on. See unsigned Department of I&C document titled 'Proposed measures to regulate the exercise of the right to strike', 2 April 1949 (UCDA, MacEntee papers, P67/229(12)).

⁷⁰ Sec. Dept. of Industry and Commerce to Maurice Moynihan, Dept. of An Taoiseach, 11 Oct. 1939 (NAI, D/T, S11840).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

particularly in essential services, at the height of the Emergency triggered a hardening of government attitude. In January 1940 the cabinet was forced to consider how to handle the debilitating effects of the Dublin municipal strike which threatened to escalate to other industries.⁷² The strike involved 2,000 workers, lasted twenty days and affected many public services including water works, street cleaning, sewerage and the fire service. The strike was eventually called off following the intervention of the auxiliary bishop of Dublin, Dr Wall.⁷³ In March 1940 Senator James Douglas, then vice-president of the Federation of Irish Manufacturers, moved a motion in the Seanad seeking the introduction of a bill to amend the law in relation to trade disputes and to provide for the establishment of a permanent industrial court. 'The public', he told the upper house, 'has been much concerned with the question of strikes and the possible methods of avoiding the loss sustained through labour disputes'.⁷⁴ MacEntee told the Seanad on 24 April that the motion, if passed, would receive the most careful consideration of the government. He was particularly critical of lightning strikes in essential services and inter-union disputes. Douglas's motion was carried.⁷⁵

Unknown to his departmental officials, MacEntee prepared draft heads of a bill to restrict the right to strike.⁷⁶ It is worth recalling that in the aftermath of the 1926 General Strike, the British government, tired of industrial turmoil, moved swiftly to curb the powers of trade unions to strike by introducing the Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Act (1927). The legislation was the subject of acrimonious protest by the British labour movement until repealed in 1946.⁷⁷ Compared to other countries, until the 1970s Britain's peacetime system of labour relations was generally unfettered by legal constraints. This reflected a level of indebtedness to the British trade unions for their

⁷² Feeney, *MacEntee*, p. 115.

⁷³ Finbarr O'Shea, 'A tale of two acts: government and trade unions during the emergency' in Dermot Keogh and Mervyn O'Driscoll (eds), *Ireland in world war two: neutrality and survival* (Cork, 2004), pp 213-4.

⁷⁴ *SD*, 14 Mar. 1940, vol. 24, no. 9, cols. 1004-5, 1018-19.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 24 Mar. 1940, vol. 24, no. 11, cols 1132-37, 1151-2.

⁷⁶ MacEntee to Ferguson, 17 Mar. 1949 (UCDA, MacEntee papers, P67/229(13)).

⁷⁷ Chris Howell, *Trade unions and the state: the construction of industrial relations institutions in Britain, 1890-2000* (Princeton, 2005), pp 77, 92; Roger Charles, *The development of industrial relations in Britain, 1911-1939: studies in the evolution of collective bargaining at national and industrial level* (London, 1973), p. 261.

role in helping to mobilise the British economy for war and for the post-war economic recovery.⁷⁸

Not surprisingly, the Irish trade union movement saw Douglas's Seanad motion as a threat and part of a concerted campaign to curtail trade unionism.⁷⁹ A motion passed at the 1940 Congress, under the heading 'Menace to Trade Unionism', called on unions 'to resist any such attacks upon their freedom'.⁸⁰ This and other motions suggested that trade union leaders were concerned that wartime political and economic conditions provided the government with 'an excellent excuse' to introduce legislation to curtail trade unionism and to restrict democratic liberties.⁸¹ Yet when the national executive surveyed each affiliated union in relation to this motion and enquired about any information in their possession which might be considered to 'imperil the existence' of their union or be in any way prejudicial to the interests of the movement, only five replies were received of which only two had issues to report.⁸² One was from the ATGWU which claimed that the greatest threat to trade unionism in Ireland came not from forces external to the movement, but from the ITGWU which it deemed 'a grave menace to the continuation of free Trade Unions' in the twenty-six counties.⁸³ More importantly, this correspondence demonstrates that none of the affiliated unions had any real concerns about a possible threat of forced trade union reform.

MacEntee was unhappy with the first draft of the bill to regulate the right to strike. His main criticism was that the draft did not make trade unions responsible for their actions and did not provide for the imposition of financial sanctions on unions which engaged in 'irresponsible or unjustifiable strikes'. He also believed that the general community should be entitled to seek compensation from trade unions where their members, working in essential services, engaged in an 'unjustifiable strike'.⁸⁴ In a lengthy memo to Robert Ferguson, acting secretary Department of Industry and Commerce, which captures the essence of his approach to labour relations, MacEntee

⁷⁸ Chris Wrigley, *British trade unions since 1933* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 1.

⁷⁹ McCarthy, *Trade unions*, pp 196-7.

⁸⁰ CAR (1940), pp 119-20.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp 119-22.

⁸² Éamonn Lynch to each affiliated union, 9 Jan. 1941 (NAI, ITUC papers, ICTU/2/52, box ICTU/2/42-57).

⁸³ Kyle, ATGWU to Lynch, ITUC, 11 Jan. 1941 (*Ibid.*).

⁸⁴ MacEntee to Ferguson, 17 Mar. 1940 (UCDA, MacEntee papers, P67/229(13)).

advocated a much tougher stance; his concerns about the stability of the state and civil order were reminiscent of the attitude of the IFS government during the Civil War and its immediate aftermath.⁸⁵ To MacEntee trade unions had committed the greatest of social evil by wielding 'tremendous power ... without a due feeling of responsibility'.⁸⁶ It was his intention, by way of legislation, to compel trade unions to tackle what he described as the 'chaos' and 'abuses' in the movement and provide machinery for the elimination of disputes arising from 'the overlapping' of trade unions and the poaching of the members.⁸⁷ Buoyed by what he believed to be 'the present favourable conditions of public opinion', he proceeded to secure the acceptance, in legislative form, of two key principles – trade union responsibility for the acts of their members and the state's entitlement to retributive action.⁸⁸

The draconian nature of MacEntee's proposals raised serious concerns within the cabinet, in particular the likelihood of a challenge in the courts. The most damning criticism came from Lemass, now Minister for Finance. What is most interesting about Lemass's intervention is the fact that his comments were not confined to strictly financial considerations and he justified doing so on the basis that it was 'hardly practicable to divorce considerations of financial expediency from considerations of policy'. Lemass declared that the implementation of proposals 'of such a drastic nature ... would necessarily raise such wide and contentious issues, with consequences of a kind that could not readily be foreseen'.⁸⁹ His main concern was the danger of large-scale resistance leading to considerable civil disorder and the possibility of damage to property. His financial considerations were confined solely to the possible expenditure which the state may have to incur to deal with public disorder and the provisions of essential services arising from protests against the draft bill. Lemass also proposed that MacEntee should consider whether the Emergency Powers Act (1939) gave the government adequate powers 'to deal with political strikes during the war

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ MacEntee to O'Brien, 1 July 1941 (NLI, O'Brien papers, MS 13,974/10).

⁸⁸ O'Shea, 'Government and trade unions during the emergency', p. 219.

⁸⁹ Observations of the Minister for Finance on the Memorandum circulated by the Minister for I&C in connection with the proposed Bill to Regulate the Exercise of the Right to Strike, 16 April 1940 (UCDA, MacEntee papers, P67/229(10)).

emergency'.⁹⁰ Reflecting his more pragmatic approach, Lemass also sensibly suggested that changes to the provisions governing labour disputes be made 'in a less dramatic form through negotiation'.⁹¹ Lemass's 'observations' on the draft bill contained strong undertones of a personal criticism of MacEntee's approach to trade union reform.

William O'Brien had initiated secret contacts with the Department of Industry and Commerce in May 1940 and in forwarding the department a copy of Memorandum I he was clearly endeavouring to induce the government to adopt the main tenets of his proposals. The combination of O'Brien's intervention and the cabinet's negative reaction to MacEntee's proposed measures succeeded in altering MacEntee's initial proposals to such an extent that it changed from one specifically aimed at lightning strikes in essential services to one aimed at rationalising and regulating the trade union movement.⁹² The revised measures, which were finally discussed with the ITUC in October, aimed to do precisely what O'Brien attempted to do in 1939 – to restructure the trade union movement. It was proposed to establish a tribunal with powers to provide a majority union with the right to organise a particular class of worker and to impose restrictive conditions on British-based unions.⁹³ In a move designed to reduce the number of smaller unions and to eliminate multiplicity the bill stipulated that to enjoy legal immunity and the right to negotiate, unions had to obtain a licence and register under the Trade Union Acts. In addition to maintaining a registered office in Ireland, unions were required to lodge a deposit of between £2,000 and £10,000 with the High Court.⁹⁴ The size of the deposit was intended to make it prohibitive for smaller unions to register.

The initial response to MacEntee's proposals from the labour movement was measured. Michael Keyes, a Labour TD, acknowledged that the government had given the trade union movement every opportunity to 'put its own house in order' but that it had failed to do so. While welcoming measures to control the development of

⁹⁰ Ibid; Note: The term 'political strike' was used to describe strikes in essential services and also any other strike which endeavoured to compel a change in the law of the State or government policy. See unsigned Department of I&C document titled 'Proposed measures to regulate the exercise of the right to strike', 2 April 1949 (UCDA, MacEntee papers, P67/229(12)).

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 156-7; Feeney, *MacEntee*, pp 118-19.

⁹³ CAR (1941), p. 29; McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 202; Feeney, *MacEntee*, pp 119-20.

⁹⁴ O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 157.

smaller unions, he cautioned the government against infringing on trade union liberties.⁹⁵ The ITUC national executive and the Council of Irish Unions (representing Irish unions in the ITUC and formed on O'Brien's initiative in 1939) had both indicated that they were favourable towards the bill in principle when briefed in October 1940.⁹⁶ The terms of the bill were published on 30 April 1941 with little evidence of any unease within the labour movement. The feared encroachment on trade union rights and liberties had not materialised.⁹⁷ The ITUC deferred any public comment until its affiliated unions had an opportunity to discuss the measure at a special conference on 16 May.⁹⁸

However, condemnation of the bill by the Dublin Trades Council on 6 May appeared to trigger a snowball effect of rank and file dissent against the proposed legislation.⁹⁹ The Council was unambiguously left-wing and helped radicalise opposition to the measures in the form of a 'Council of Action' in which Larkin, his son Jim Junior and P.T. Daly were central figures.¹⁰⁰ In an apparent snub to the ITUC, Daly, as secretary of the Dublin Trades Union Council, wrote directly to trade union organisations nationwide with a view to organising national mass demonstrations against the bill.¹⁰¹ A mass demonstration in Dublin attracted an estimated 20,000 people, including representatives of fifty three unions. It was an impressive show of strength especially at the height of the Emergency. As a further indication of the weakness of Congress and the degree of fragmentation within the movement, the higher echelons of the trade union movement, initially moot in their response to the bill, were forced to review their stance.¹⁰²

Delegates at the ITUC special conference on 16 May decided to oppose the bill 'as an unwarranted invasion of the constitutional and historic rights' of the Trade Unions'.¹⁰³ All aspects of the measure were opposed by Labour deputies who forced a

⁹⁵ *IP, II and IT*, 19 Nov. 1940.

⁹⁶ Ó Drisceoil, 'Whose emergency is it?', p. 269; See also 'Report of deputation from national executive that waited on R.C. Ferguson, Sec., Dept. of I&C, 30 Oct. 1940 (NAI, ITUC papers, box 62, G4/32/81).

⁹⁷ O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 157.

⁹⁸ CAR (1941), p. 31.

⁹⁹ O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 157.

¹⁰⁰ Ó Drisceoil, 'Whose emergency is it?', p. 269.

¹⁰¹ Daly to trade unions and trade councils, 2 July 1941 (NAI, ITUC papers, box 62, G4/32/81).

¹⁰² O'Shea, 'Government and trade unions, p. 222.

¹⁰³ O'Connor, *Labour History*, p. 157.

division on every section.¹⁰⁴ On 7 May the Emergency Powers Wages Order (No. 83), 1941, known as the 'Standstill Order' was introduced which prohibited wage increases. This proved inopportune timing by the government and provocative because, as one trade unionist put it, it was viewed as an attempt 'to take their [trade unionists'] bread and butter away', it helped to seal the fate of the Trade Union Bill.¹⁰⁵

O'Brien found himself in a difficult situation. His clandestine involvement with the Department of Industry and Commerce could also have been deemed ill-advised. The escalating opposition within the labour movement to the bill and the introduction of the Wages Standstill Order prevented him from voicing support for the Trade Union Bill. His own credibility within the movement had been arousing suspicion for some time. His criticism of government interference in the movement was met with some derision considering, as O'Connor describes, he 'had committed the unpardonable sin of inviting the state to meddle in union affairs'.¹⁰⁶ This is not entirely correct as the government had made its intentions quite clear that it would address trade union reform if the movement failed to do so but O'Brien, in his meetings with the Department of Industry and Commerce, was not acting on behalf of the trade union movement and was pursuing a personal agenda. During a Dáil debate on the bill on 2 July, William Norton pointedly suggested to MacEntee, without naming O'Brien, that he should get another trade union advisor as the 'one he has might be misleading him'.¹⁰⁷

Larkin's *Irish Workers' Weekly* described O'Brien as MacEntee's 'ally perched in the highest position inside the Trade Union movement who is frustrating the efforts of the movement to force the withdrawal of the Bill'.¹⁰⁸ Some in the labour movement were also suspicious of O'Brien's known friendship with some government ministers with whom he worked or shared imprisonment during the national struggle and these suspicions were only heightened by the ITGWU's interest free loan of £50,000 to the government in 1940. Senior union officials claimed that the loan was to prevent the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid; Puirseil, *Labour Party*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁵ Dept. of Industry and Commerce document 'Wages policy during and after the war', 14 Oct. 1947 (NAI, D/T, S13847A); James Collins, National Amalgamated Furnishing Trades Assoc. in debate on Emergency Powers Order. See CAR (1941), p. 111.

¹⁰⁶ O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 157; Feeney, *Mac Entee*, p. 122.

¹⁰⁷ *DD*, 2 July 1941, vol. 84, no. 6, cols. 851-2.

¹⁰⁸ *Irish Workers's Weekly*, 26 July 1941 (UCDA, MacEntee papers, P67/236).

necessity of the state having to borrow money at high interest rates during the Emergency and also to set a headline to wealthy capitalist organisations.¹⁰⁹ Others took a more cynical view by linking the loan to O'Brien's appointment as a director of the Central Bank on its establishment in 1942.¹¹⁰

In June the Council of Irish Unions requested MacEntee to withdraw the bill, pleading that its requirement for a financial deposit discriminated against smaller unions and treated Irish unions unfairly as British unions could borrow funds from their parent union. MacEntee not only agreed that the deposit might be reduced by up to seventy-five per cent for Irish unions in difficult circumstances, thereby undermining the intent and impact of the legislation, but also, as O'Connor points out, 'redirected the venom of the bill from the small unions to the amalgamateds'.¹¹¹ MacEntee's change of tact was clearly intended to split opposition to the bill. MacEntee made a bad situation worse by encouraging the organisational split in the trade union movement which had been festering for some years.¹¹² By July 1941 MacEntee was deliberately presenting the bill in Irish-based versus British-based union terms, taking advantage of the fault line in Irish trade unionism and playing the nationalist/neutrality card. The Trade Union Act became law on 21 September 1941.¹¹³ MacEntee's handling of it enveloped Fianna Fáil in one of the most serious standoffs between the government and the trade unions since independence. His pugnacious approach demonstrated little appreciation of the rights of trade unions and the dynamics of labour relations. The crisis demonstrated the mutual animosity between the labour movement and MacEntee.¹¹⁴

The passing of the Trade Union Act 1941 also had the effect of bringing about the establishment of the Federated Union of Employers (FUE) in 1942. The Act made no distinction between trade unions and employer organisations and required each to hold a negotiating licence. The FUE was formed as a result of a merger between some existing employers bodies including, notably, the Dublin Employers' Federation which

¹⁰⁹ Morrissey, *O'Brien*, p. 311.

¹¹⁰ Horgan, *Lemass*, p. 123.

¹¹¹ O'Connor, *Labour history*, p. 158.

¹¹² Horgan, *Lemass*, p. 121.

¹¹³ Ó Drisceoil, 'Whose emergency is it?', p. 271.

¹¹⁴ McCullagh, *De Valera*, p. 234; O'Shea, 'Government and trade unions', p. 222.

was founded in 1911. The Trade Union Act had highlighted the need for a more cohesive organisation of employers to negotiate on behalf of affiliated members and to represent their interests. Its evolution from a loose association of individual employers into a coherent representative organisation is closely bound up with the development of the Irish trade union movement, the changing dynamics of the Irish economy and the development of labour relations practice.¹¹⁵

On the re-assignment of MacEntee to the Department of Local Government and Public Health, Lemass returned to Industry and Commerce in August 1941. A Joint Labour Party and ITUC campaign against the Act ran from November 1941 to March 1942. But, like the movement itself, it lacked energy and direction. Lemass defused opposition to the Act by making minor adjustments in December, thereby encouraging a majority of the unions to take out licences. These moves were presented as having occurred following government-trade union negotiations, and were welcomed by the ITUC. Lemass further pacified the unions by agreeing to modify the Standstill Order. Having succeeded in calming the storm and engaging the unions in semi-formal negotiations, Lemass ensured the passing of the amending Trade Union Act 1942 which met many union objections without modifying the central thrust of the original legislation.¹¹⁶ Although the Act had some effect in preventing the unnecessary proliferation of breakaway groups and duplicate unions, it had little or no effect in reducing the number of existing unions.¹¹⁷ It would seem also that the threats which the Act held for the future of trade unionism had been exaggerated. As Michael Keyes, the president of Congress in 1943, put it: 'I do not know that it has really had the effect so many of us feared of hindering or preventing the activities of our Unions'.¹¹⁸

Lemass's endorsement of trade unionism and his empathy with the wage earning working man suggests a political astuteness which was focussed on maximising trade union support for Fianna Fáil.¹¹⁹ The level and intensity of his and his department's engagement with the trade union movement caused one trade union

¹¹⁵ Rona Fitzgerald, 'The first fifty years' in Basil Chubb (ed.), *The federation of Irish employers, 1942-1992* (Dublin, 1992), pp 1-5.

¹¹⁶ Ó Drisceoil, 'Whose emergency is it?', p. 271; Horgan, *Lemass*, p. 122.

¹¹⁷ Ruaidhri Roberts, 'Trade union organisation in Ireland', *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 20:2 (1958/59), p. 104.

¹¹⁸ CAR (1943), p. 65.

¹¹⁹ Ó Drisceoil, 'Whose emergency is it?', p. 271.

leader to complain that 'these regular discussions were making too great a demand on the time and energy of the trade union chiefs'.¹²⁰ The extent to which the ITUC trusted Lemass is, perhaps, best reflected in a tribute paid to him at the 1942 Congress by its president, Michael Colgan, who declared that the national executive 'found him willing to be as helpful as possible on all occasions' and that 'he was never slow to show a sympathetic appreciation of the difficulties of the National Executive in these difficult times'.¹²¹ His relationship with the Irish based trade unions, in particular, was also enhanced by the fact that he, also, was temperamentally and politically opposed to the position that many Irish workers were organised in British unions – an issue which inevitably encouraged fissiparous tendencies among trade unionists.¹²²

Lemass, as McCarthy points out, 'managed to combine a warm, cooperative approach to the trade union movement, with a steely approach to the Labour Party'.¹²³ He was reported as saying that the most significant thing that had happened during the Emergency was the failure of the Labour Party to rouse the indignation of workers.¹²⁴ Perhaps it was a political barb but there was a ring of truth to it and, if anything, it further underlined the weakness and fragmentation of the Irish labour movement. Lemass's softening of the earlier provisions of the Trade Union Act was not enough to prevent the trade union movement sliding further into disunity. Rather ominously and with prescience, Archie Jackson of the Dublin Trades Union Council declared at the 1941 Congress that 'they realised the movement was at a parting of the ways'.¹²⁵

Writing under the title 'Jamie Hope's – Flying Column', a columnist with the *Torch*, a weekly newspaper published by the Dublin Constituencies Council of the Labour Party, wrote an article in March 1942 on the weaknesses and strength of the trade union movement.¹²⁶ He posed the following question:

¹²⁰ Liam Skinner 'Seán Lemass: Nation Builder', pp 9-10, 1960 (UCDA, The unpublished biography of Seán Lemass, P161).

¹²¹ CAR (1942), p. 71.

¹²² Ó Drisceoil, 'Whose emergency is it?', p. 271; Feeney, *MacEntee*, p. 121; Brian Farrell, *Seán Lemass* (Dublin, 1983), pp 75-6.

¹²³ McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 246.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ CAR (1941), p. 118.

¹²⁶ *Torch*, 28 Mar. 1942 (UCDA, MacEntee papers, P67/254(4)); Puirseil, *Labour Party*, p. 74.

Now why the devil shouldn't we in the trade union movement who recognise the value of closer linking, greater organic unity, better, bigger and fewer unions get on with our system of unification instead of being forced to adopt somebody else's much less satisfactory, much less agreeable, method and form of unification imposed on us by the Trade Union Act?¹²⁷

Having put the question to many people who were active in the movement, the answer, he claimed, was unanimous: 'No reason in the wide world except our conservatism, our personal, craft, and organisational feelings and traditions, and our reluctance to stir out of the old easy ways and methods we have been accustomed to'.¹²⁸ This succinctly sums up the essence of the problem. While recognising the strong support for uniting and strengthening the trade union movement, the writer bemoaned the 'waste of good time and good talk ... [and] the petty displays of temper' which were a feature of Congress and which produced nothing constructive and would best be remembered for the lack of any willingness to take positive action at Congress for the good of the movement. He asked: 'Why must we always wait till we are pushed'?¹²⁹

The movement was not only bedevilled by vested interests and personal vendettas, but was also trapped in an out-dated culture which was fearful of both exposure and change. There was little evidence of constructive thinking within Congress at this time and the views expressed even suggested a firm opposition to any change. R.J.P. Mortished had been at the heart of the Irish trade union movement, particularly as assistant secretary to the ILP&TUC until 1929, before his appointment to the diplomatic division of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Geneva.¹³⁰ He addressed the 1942 Congress as a fraternal delegate from the ILO. Noting that many delegates had remarked that he had not changed since he had left the ILP&TUC, he told delegates that he would like to say that Congress had changed but he regretted that it had not.¹³¹ He expressed his profound surprise to be listening to the same speeches he had heard twelve years before. He feared that the trade union movement had not realised the 'full gravity' of the changing world and the problems

¹²⁷ *Torch*, 28 Mar.1942 (Ibid.).

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ See material relating to Mortished in Thomas Johnson papers in NLI (NLI, Johnson papers, MS 17,624).

¹³¹ CAR (1942), p. 109.

which it was facing and called on it to re-consider all its old ideas.¹³² The challenge facing Lemass was further intensified by the split in the ITUC in 1944, following which fifteen Irish-based unions, including the ITGWU, established the Congress of Irish Unions (CIU) in January 1945.¹³³

IV

The Emergency was a watershed period for the conduct of pay bargaining. The cost of living rose by about two-thirds, while wages increased by only about one-third. With the prospect of a return to more normal conditions immediately following the Second World War the government was acutely concerned that demands which had been repressed during the war, would lead to increased expectations and that workers generally would seek a readjustment of wages and conditions of employment.¹³⁴ It was also argued at the time that advertisements for employment opportunities in Britain and Northern Ireland generated dissatisfaction among Irish workers since higher wages in Britain were more attractive.¹³⁵ In addition, trade union membership, despite the migration of 100,000 to 150,000 Irish men and women to Britain during the war to avail of employment opportunities, had increased by twenty-nine per cent during the period 1941 to 1945, thus adding strength to workers and unions demands.¹³⁶ These factors occasioned fears of a return to pre-war trade union militancy and a rush of wage claims following the revocation of the Emergency Powers Order (No. 260). This context was the driving force behind Lemass's determination to clear the way for the smooth passage of the Industrial Relations Bill in 1946.¹³⁷

Lemass was keenly aware of actual and potential post-war problems. He argued for expansionist, full employment policies to meet new dangers but he believed they had to be accompanied by a reshaping of both the Irish labour movement and labour relations. The price for the removal of the 'fear of unemployment' had to be acceptance, by workers, of the 'supervision of wages rates

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 274; O'Connor *Labour history*, p. 167; Puirseil, *Labour party*, p. 119.

¹³⁴ 'Wages policy during and after the war', 14 Oct. 1947 (NAI, D/T, S13847A).

¹³⁵ Delaney, *Irish migration to Britain*, p. 124.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 130; Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 86; Niamh Hardiman, 'Pay bargaining: confrontation and consensus' in Donal Nevin (ed.), *Trade union century* (Dublin, 1994), pp 148-9.

¹³⁷ 'Wages policy during and after the war', 14 Oct. 1947 (NAI, D/T, S13847A).

by a public authority charged with policing the real value of all wages'.¹³⁸ Lemass sought, through both public and Dáil speeches, to encourage the trade union movement to participate in industrial management, believing that such participation was 'a necessary preliminary to the acceptance by them of responsibilities in relation to the maintenance of discipline'.¹³⁹ In his efforts to induce trade unions to 'become part of the social furniture', as O'Connor puts it, he called on the trade union movement 'to abandon its negative attitude' and to take 'a position of responsibility'.¹⁴⁰ Lemass emphasised the responsibility of trade unions and insisted that 'there must be a willingness to make departures from old methods of operating'.¹⁴¹ This emphasis on leadership, responsibility and new methods was an attempt by Lemass to encourage the trade union movement to adapt. In this way it could play a more proactive role in Irish society and participate with other sectors of society, particularly the state and employers, for the promotion and development of the country's economic life. He was also preparing the way for the unveiling of a different model of labour relations. It was one which, as mentioned in chapter 5, would eventually be developed around the concept of social partnership.

The fear of post-war industrial and labour chaos was a significant motivating factor in the government's determination to establish trade dispute resolution structures. The British government faced similar fears at the end of the First World War. Anticipating a sudden decline in wages when war contracts ended and returning soldiers flooded the labour market, the Whitley Committee was appointed in 1916 to make recommendations aimed at the prevention of industrial conflict.¹⁴² The goal of the Whitley Committee was to recommend mechanisms that would permit continuous co-operation between employers and employed in each industry with a minimum of government interference. This led to the establishment of Joint Industrial Councils as the core of a new industrial relations system which was to facilitate labour

¹³⁸ Memo on full employment from Minister for Industry and Commerce, Jan. 1945 (UCDA, MacEntee papers, P67/264(4)).

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Lemass at Technical Students Debating Society as reported by *II*, 23 Nov. 1944 (NAI, D/T, S13221A).

¹⁴¹ Lemass at meeting of 'Dick Murphy' Fianna Fáil Cumann, 8 Jan. 1943 (Ibid.).

¹⁴² Dorothy Sells, 'The settlement of industrial disputes in Great Britain', *Monthly Labour Review*, 47:1 (July, 1938), p. 324.

negotiations in every industry.¹⁴³ At the end of the war a permanent industrial court was established to settle important industrial conflicts on a voluntary basis. The court was composed of three people: an employers' representative, a workers' representative and an independent chairperson.¹⁴⁴ During the inter-war period, legislation on labour courts had been enacted by many countries. By the 1940s labour courts had also been established in Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Switzerland, Austria, Canada and the United States. Australia and New Zealand had adopted compulsory forms of conciliation and arbitration schemes.¹⁴⁵ For a relatively young state, Ireland was not slow in following this trend.

In early 1945 Lemass initiated discussions with the trade union movement on the design of new machinery for the prevention and settlement of trade disputes. His written proposals to the two trade union congresses in December 1945 provided for the establishment of a labour court, a system for legally binding registered agreements between unions and employers and limitations on the right to strike.¹⁴⁶ Although the national executives of both congresses – the ITUC and the CIU – had stressed the importance of having an agreed trade union policy regarding Lemass's proposals on labour relations reform, the responses from both congresses were distinctly different. While welcoming facilities aimed at reducing trade disputes, the ITUC had some issues with the proposed functions of the Labour Court but were particularly concerned with proposals to limit the right to strike which they found 'objectionable'.¹⁴⁷ The president of the ITUC, Gilbert Lynch, described the bill as 'repugnant' to the trade union movement and although he was 'bitterly opposed' to some clauses he remained optimistic that the objectionable features of the bill would be removed.¹⁴⁸ Lynch's attitude was not unsurprising considering he was a senior official with the ATGWU. In contrast, the CIU gave a broad welcome to the proposal, describing it as 'a great

¹⁴³ Chris Howell, *Trade unions and the state*, p. 71; Charles, *Industrial relations in Britain*, pp 122-3.

¹⁴⁴ Howell, *Trade unions and the state*, p. 72; Sells, 'The settlement of industrial disputes', pp 327-8.

¹⁴⁵ R.J.P. Mortished, 'The industrial relations Act 1946: an outline of the Act with some comparisons with other countries', *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 17 (1947/1948), p. 681; J. De Givry, 'Labour courts as channels for the settlement of labour disputes: an international review', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 6:3 (1968), p. 364.

¹⁴⁶ CAR (1946), p. 21; Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 87.

¹⁴⁷ CAR (1946), pp 21, 34; Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 87.

¹⁴⁸ CAR (1946), p. 101.

landmark in our industrial history and in worker-employer relations.’¹⁴⁹ The principles of the bill were given tentative approval by O’Brien’s ITGWU. He believed that it would ‘place the relationship of worker and employer on a higher plane than hitherto existed’.¹⁵⁰

Lemass placed a particular emphasis on winning trade union cooperation. He was particularly aware that there were many things which the trade union movement was prepared to accept but which they could not publically acknowledge.¹⁵¹ Accordingly, he was careful to make it clear that while his discussions with the trade unions greatly assisted him in drafting the Industrial Relations Bill the government alone was responsible for its provisions and he acknowledged that many of the unions were not committed to it.¹⁵² At the same time he emphasised that the facilities which the legislation proposed were not intended solely as a government tool but were designed to enable trade unions, workers and employers to adjust and resolve their difficulties concerning wages and conditions of employment.¹⁵³ The legislation’s success would depend on the willingness of workers and employers to avail of the machinery created. In a significant gesture to the trade union movement, there was nothing compulsory in the bill and neither did it contain proposals to ban strikes in essential services.¹⁵⁴

Despite some protestations, the bill enjoyed widespread political support. Lemass recalled, during an interview in 1967, that the Act came into operation ‘more or less as an agreed measure and any opposition to it was only a matter of minor details’.¹⁵⁵ The lack of opposition, perhaps, was an acknowledgement of recent international developments in this area of labour relations. The second reading of the bill received broad support across the party divide in the Dáil with many deputies praising Lemass for the openness of his approach in the matter.¹⁵⁶ Lemass again

¹⁴⁹ Cathal O’Shannon, CIU secretary as quoted in Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 271.

¹⁵⁰ ITGWU Annual report (1946), p. 39.

¹⁵¹ Seán Lemass Interview with Dermot A. Ryan, 25 Sept. 1967, p. 23 (UCDA, Seán Lemass interviews, P311/6).

¹⁵² *DD*, 25 June 1946, vol. 101, no. 17, cols. 2279-80.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, cols 2283-4.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, cols. 2290-1 and 2368-9.

¹⁵⁵ Seán Lemass Interview with Dermot A. Ryan, 25 Sept. 1967, p. 23 (UCDA, Seán Lemass interviews, P311/6)

¹⁵⁶ *DD*, 25 June 1946, vol. 101, no. 17, *passim*.

emphasised the issue of shared responsibility and that the process to be followed in respect of wages and labour relations generally, 'will not merely be the responsibility of Government, but of everybody whose actions can affect it'.¹⁵⁷ The bill was broadly welcomed by the press which viewed it as 'a contribution to industrial peace ... at a time when it is most urgently needed'.¹⁵⁸ It was also hailed by employer organisations as 'a fair compromise' but they remained fearful that 'intransigent' unions might not 'play-ball'.¹⁵⁹ Lemass, in particular, was warmly praised by the press for the extent of his consultation and deliberations with trade unions, employers and members of the Oireachtas and also his willingness to accept changes to the proposed legislation. The *Irish Independent* described him as having done 'a splendid service' and regretted that his 'excellent example has not been more generally followed'.¹⁶⁰

The Department of Finance proved a strong source of opposition as it feared that the proposed Labour Court would strengthen the hand of the unions and workers; award generous pay settlements thereby contributing to inflation; and have an undue and inappropriate influence on public pay policy. Finance pushed, unsuccessfully, to have the measure deferred and the 'Standstill Order' on wages retained. It sought also to have the powers of the Labour Court stymied in respect of its ability to make awards and to have the court accountable to the government rather than the Department of Industry and Commerce.¹⁶¹ Had the Department of Finance got its way it would have unravelled Lemass's delicate efforts to modernise and reform labour relations procedures and it would also have restricted the operations of the Labour Court to such an extent that it would have been rendered ineffective. In any event, Lemass got his way on the Labour Court. This proved of crucial importance for Fianna Fáil's future relationship with the trade union movement and its ability to resist pressure from certain sections of society.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., cols. 2281-2.

¹⁵⁸ *II*, 22 Aug. 1946.

¹⁵⁹ Extract from June 1946 bulletin of the Federation of Builders, Contractors and Allied Employers of Ireland as reported in the *II*, 9 July 1946.

¹⁶⁰ *II*, 25 May and 17 June 1946.

¹⁶¹ Dept. of Finance 'Memorandum for government on the proposed Industrial Relations Bill', 27 April 1946 (NAI, D/T, S13847A); Fanning, *Finance*, p. 396. Note: Similarly in Britain the Treasury waged an unrelenting war on the labour relations functions of the Ministry of Labour from 1921 onward. See Chris Howell, *Trade unions and the state*, p. 76.

¹⁶² Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 250.

The Industrial Relations Act was introduced in the Dáil on 25 June 1946, approved by the Seanad on 16 August and enacted on 26 September 1946.¹⁶³ The purpose of the Act was set out in its long title:

to make further and better provision for promoting harmonious relations between workers and their employers and for this purpose to establish machinery for regulating rates of remuneration and conditions of employment and for the prevention and settlement of trade disputes.¹⁶⁴

Central to the Act was the establishment of the Labour Court and the setting out of its general structure and overall procedures. It reformed the Trade Boards system replacing them with Joint Labour Committees. The provision of Employment Regulation Orders gave legal status to employment conditions agreed by the Committees and approved by the Labour Court. The Act also amended provisions for the registration of employment agreements and they as well as Joint Industrial Councils, whose object was ‘the promotion of harmonious relations’ between workers and their employers, could also be registered with the Court.¹⁶⁵ In essence, most of the industrial relations machinery which had functioned under the Minister for Industry and Commerce was updated and expanded and now became the responsibility of the Labour Court. The Act took a voluntarist approach to labour relations issues and it effectively enshrined in law the principle of free collective bargaining.¹⁶⁶

The Labour Court itself consisted of a full-time chairman, a part-time deputy chairman and two employers’ and two workers’ members. The employers’ and workers’ members were nominated by organisations representative of workers and employers. Before the court could be appointed, the problem of who should nominate the workers’ members had to be faced. This matter was complicated by the split in the ITUC and the establishment of the break-away CIU in January 1945, thus establishing

¹⁶³ *DD*, 25 June 1946, vol. 101, no. 17, passim; *SD*, 16 Aug. 1946, vol. 32, vol. 15, passim; Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 149.

¹⁶⁴ The Industrial Relations Act 1946

(<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1946/act/26/enacted/en/print>) (accessed 24 Aug. 2018).

¹⁶⁵ Evelyn Owens, ‘The labour court: past, present and future’, paper delivered at twenty first Countess Markievicz memorial lecture on 18 Nov. 1996 at AIB Bank centre, Dublin, p. 6; Ian Finlay, *The labour court “... not an ordinary court of law”: a history of fifty years of the labour court from 1946 to 1996* (Dublin, 1996), p. 17.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

two trade union representative bodies in Ireland. Following the establishment of the CIU, Lemass had issued instructions to his civil servants and government departments that the CIU was to be regarded as having equal status with the ITUC and should be invited to make nominations to committees and government bodies, as required.¹⁶⁷ Accordingly, he requested each congress to nominate one workers' member and this situation continued until the two congresses merged in 1959.¹⁶⁸

The court was empowered to investigate trade disputes which existed or were anticipated. It could arrange mediation by a conciliation officer or, with consent, refer a dispute to arbitration. The 1946 Act required the court, having investigated a dispute, to make a recommendation which had due regard to the public interest and industrial peace.¹⁶⁹ McCarthy points out that there is much to indicate that there was in the 1940s in Ireland a substantial awareness of the labour court systems in other countries.¹⁷⁰ Yet, Mortished, who was appointed the first chairperson of the Labour Court,¹⁷¹ noted a degree of uniqueness in the Irish legislation in an address on the topic in 1947:

There are so many countries which have set up minimum-wage-fixing machinery, systems of conciliation and arbitration, and Labour Courts, and there are so many differences both in principle and in details of structure and working that it is extremely difficult to bring out any general pattern against which our legislation might be fitted.¹⁷²

It was somewhat ironic that a government which invested a significant commitment to reform of labour relations should deny its own civil and public servants access to the provisions of the 1946 Act and, as a consequence, the Labour Court.¹⁷³ Its previously determined refusal to concede civil service unions' demands for a conciliation and arbitration scheme within the civil service led to the dissolution of the Dáil and forced a general election in 1938.¹⁷⁴ Senior civil servants, particularly

¹⁶⁷ Dept. of Industry and Commerce to Maurice Moynihan, 13 July 1945 (NAI, D/T, S13700); Puirseil, *Labour party*, p. 119.

¹⁶⁸ Finlay, *The labour court*, p. 18.

¹⁶⁹ *DD*, 25 June 1946, vol. 101, no. 17, cols. 2366-7; Finlay, *The labour court*, p. 17; Owens, 'The labour court', p. 7.

¹⁷⁰ McCarthy, *Trade unions*, p. 531.

¹⁷¹ Hourican, 'Mortished, Ronald James Patrick' in *DIB*.

¹⁷² Mortished, 'The industrial relations Act', p. 680.

¹⁷³ Owens, 'The labour court', pp 12-13.

¹⁷⁴ Maguire, *Civil service*, p. 217.

those within the Department of Finance, exerted significant influence over government policy in this regard, fearing that such concessions to their staff and staff representatives would undermine their authority and control. They also had a distain for trade unionism. Finance viewed itself as the adjudicator in all staffing matters within the civil service. H.P. Boland, assistant secretary, Establishment Section in Finance, described trade union demands for an 'Arbitration Tribunal' within the civil service as 'amazing impudence'.¹⁷⁵ Duly convinced by the representations from his senior civil servants, the minister concluded that all staffing matters within the civil service 'fall to be considered and determined within the civil service itself' and the matter would therefore remain the preserve of the Minister for Finance.¹⁷⁶

The establishment of the Labour Court was one of Lemass's most significant achievements in the area of structural reform of labour relations, particularly since it was managed during a period of internal trade union rancour and it closely followed recent international developments. The timing of its establishment was critical since the previous six years had witnessed the statutory control of wages and some mechanism was required to ensure the orderly process of wage claims which were expected to arise following the repeal of the Wages Standstill Order in 1946 – the same year the Labour Court was established.¹⁷⁷ The 1946 Act had the effect of placing both employers and workers on the same stage and essentially operating under the same rules. It reflected Lemass's view that workers and employers were equal partners and on the same side, despite appearances to the contrary.¹⁷⁸ At its first meeting, the Labour Court issued a statement stressing its independence. It emphasised the fact that it was not an ordinary court of law but 'a court of reasonableness and fair dealing and of as high a degree of social justice as circumstances permit us to obtain.'¹⁷⁹ One interesting commentary on the establishment of the Labour Court was from the writer James Plunkett, a former trade union official, who described it as a symbol of the victory of trade unionism and

¹⁷⁵ H.P. Boland, Asst. Sec., to James McElligott, Sec., Dept. of Finance, 20 Nov. 1934 (NAI, D/F, Establishment Files, E109/134/34).

¹⁷⁶ MacEntee to de Valera, 2 Jan. 1935 (Ibid.); *DD*, 25 June 1946, vol. 101, no. 17, cols. 2377-79.

¹⁷⁷ Fanning, *Finance*, p. 396.

¹⁷⁸ Tom Garvin, *Judging Lemass: the measure of the man* (Dublin, 2009), p. 176.

¹⁷⁹ Finlay, *The labour court*, pp 22-3.

viewed it as ‘the beginning of a new stage in labour relations, with its machinery for direct negotiation and conciliation representing new privileges for trade unionism, but also putting on its shoulders new responsibilities.’¹⁸⁰

As mentioned earlier, the Labour Court became the cornerstone of free collective bargaining and labour relations adversarialism. Its establishment greatly assisted in legitimising the role of trade unions and the conduct of collective bargaining. It also facilitated the increasingly orthodox doctrine that good labour relations practices should be based on strong worker and employer consultation and it paved the way for the professionalization of Irish management, the evolution of public policy on labour relations and the growth of labour relations education.¹⁸¹ The effectiveness of the 1946 Act as an instrument of labour relations reform is evident in the fact that the next most significant piece of collective labour relations legislation in Ireland did not appear until the enactment of the Industrial Relations Act in 1990. Since its establishment the Labour Court has been robust enough to meet the challenges of a rapidly developing industrial, economic and social environment in Ireland and has become, as O’Shea describes it, ‘something of a venerable institution on the industrial relations landscape.’¹⁸²

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Despite identifying a range of challenges which needed to be addressed – the uneasy relationship between the industrial side and political side of the organisation, the establishment of two governments on the island of Ireland, the multiplicity of trade unions, the conflict between Irish and British-based unions and the difficulty of trade union organisation in small urban centres and rural areas – the trade union movement struggled in its pursuit of reform. Its attempts to reform were hampered by a lack of vision, leadership and responsibility. It was also stymied by sectionalisation, self-centred individualism, disunity and dissention within its ranks. A growing sense of nationalism and Irish identity among the Irish-based unions was challenged and restrained by the continuing strength of the British-based unions within Congress. Its

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁸¹ W.K. Roche, ‘Industrial relations’ in Donal Nevin (ed.), *Trade union century* (Dublin, 1994), pp 138-42.

¹⁸² Joseph Wallace, Patrick Gunnigle, Gerard McMahon and Michelle O’Sullivan, *Industrial relations in Ireland* (4th ed., Dublin, 2013), p. 33; O’Shea, ‘Government and trade unions’, p. 229.

failed attempts to reform served only to illustrate the dysfunctional nature of the organisation and the intensity and bitterness of internal divisions. The Trade Union Acts brought regulation to trade unionism, but little by way of reform. They are probably best remembered for further heightening the tensions between Larkin and O'Brien and Irish and British-based unions. This legislation also had the effect of demonstrating that trade union reform was not and could not be an entirely labour/trade union controlled process despite the view of self-ownership held by the trade union movement up to the late 1930s.

Lemass prepared and conditioned the trade union movement for the reform of labour relations procedures by encouraging them to accept responsibility and leadership while at the same time emphasising the equality of their partnership with employers in the conduct of labour relations and the value of their place within the framework of Irish society. Although it may not have been planned or foreseen, Lemass's strategy for trade union and labour relations reform prepared the foundations for social partnership. However, attempts to reform labour relations procedures were challenged by the split in the ITUC and the creation of two separate trade union governing bodies – the ITUC and the CIU. Fears of a return to pre-war trade union militancy and a significant increase in demands for wage increases, suppressed during the Emergency, were a compelling reason for Lemass's determination to oversee the introduction of the Industrial Relations Act 1946. His astute handling of the matter was based on broad and open consultation, an understanding of trade union attitudes and fears, and a willingness to engage, listen, negotiate and compromise. Despite some objections, the Industrial Relations Act 1946 and the structures provided therein were broadly welcomed not only by the labour and trade union movement but by all elements of Irish society. The Act revolutionised labour relations in Ireland; it became the cornerstone of free collective bargaining and the bedrock for the gradual evolution of labour relations practices and procedures.

Conclusion

This dissertation explores the nature and development of labour relations in independent Ireland from the foundation of the state to the establishment of the Labour Court. It examines how successive governments and the trade union movement engaged with one another and contributed, in various ways, to the development of Ireland's labour relations norms. This evolution was frequently difficult, divisive and halting. Despite manifest early flaws a set of workable labour relations processes did emerge in the early post-Second World War period that served Ireland well and stood up to international comparison. Three interrelated research questions underpin this study. The first examines how the Irish Civil War produced a hostile government response to labour demands that lingered on for a decade. The second broad theme focuses on unemployment and how it affected the development of labour relations in Ireland. The approaches of Cumann na nGaedheal before 1932 and Fianna Fáil after that year contrasted sharply. Lastly, this dissertation assesses how Irish trade unionism developed in independent Ireland and influenced government policy on labour relations and trade unionism itself.

To state the obvious, civil war is hardly an environment conducive to the practice of labour relations and so it proved in Ireland. Notwithstanding the formidable challenges facing an inexperienced government fearful for the survival of the state, the government's response to the postal and farm labourers' disputes was belligerent. This hostility mirrored its view of anti-Treaty republicans. The government's disdain for one was as strong as its contempt for the other. In the aftermath of the Civil War, striking postal workers were as much casualties of political victimisation and vindictiveness as republicans. The government, wrongly, held that both political and labour unrest were driven by the same elements of society. Consequently, labour unrest was viewed as disloyalty and a danger to the interests of the state and society. That position underscored Cumann na nGaedheal's general hostility towards trade unionism and labour relations, an aspect of the administration that has not sufficiently been explored in the existing historiography. In reality, government concern that labour unrest had the potential to spark a social revolution had no foundation because, as this dissertation demonstrates, the organisation of

labour was weak, dysfunctional and riven with internal divisions. The farm labourers' strike in Waterford is significant because it amply demonstrated the government's unswerving support for strong middle-class farmers determined to push down costs, and, in particular, wages. The forces of the state, both political and military, were utilised to achieve that goal. During the early 1920s trade union expectations and government objectives were utterly incompatible. The former resisted wage cuts while the latter facilitated them. Both actors viewed one another with suspicion and antagonism. The Civil War victors committed themselves to a long-term policy of maximising the incomes of farmers and frustrating the hopes and expectations of thousands of unskilled workers who sought some relief from persistent poverty.

That the Civil War strikes effectively set the tone for Cumann na nGaedheal's subsequent attitude to labour unrest was evident during the labour dispute on the Shannon Scheme between 1925 and 1927. This was an unequal battle between the trade unions and a government determined to prevail. The dispute demonstrated the absence of the most basic features of labour relations such as dialogue, consultation, negotiation and respect. Cumann na nGaedheal's attention to detail in respect of the engineering and construction aspects of the Scheme was in marked contrast to its total lack of attention to its manpower requirements. This was not just a question of numbers of men with shovels but also rates of wages, conditions of employment, skills requirements, training, living conditions, and grievance procedures. A labour relations process was utterly absent from the Scheme. Consultation and negotiation with trade unions in respect of working conditions were dismissed as unnecessary by the government and not its responsibility. Furthermore, a government-labour agreement, the 'fair wages clause', which was intended to protect the interests of workers from unscrupulous practices, was cynically manipulated by the government to support farming interests and to keep the costs associated with the Scheme to a minimum. This was at the expense of unskilled workers. Widespread unemployment was also a significant factor in forcing the acceptance of low wages.

The Shannon Scheme was an opportunity to set a national standard for basic labour relations norms. However, Cumann na nGaedheal's civil war mentality was so embedded and intractable that such a possibility was far removed from its

consideration. There is little evidence of any adherence to labour relations norms prior to 1932. A notable feature of Cumann na nGaedheal's approach to labour issues, which impacted on government and public affairs, was a determination to maintain control. It was, effectively, a rejection of any input from other stakeholders. It is not surprising, therefore, that there was also an absence of any progressive social and labour legislation or initiatives during Cumann na nGaedheal's period in government.

Disinterest and inflexibility also marked the party's approach to unemployment, the dominant social problem of the time and a neglected subject in the historiography. Cumann na nGaedheal's tactics of deflecting problems and delaying decisions were exemplified in its response to the unemployment problem during the 1920s. Committees and reports on unemployment gathered dust and were cast aside. In addition, the government's conscious utilisation of erroneous unemployment data and its reluctance to accept responsibility for the effects of unemployment represented not only contempt for labour relations but a dereliction of its social responsibilities. By contrast, on taking office in 1932 Fianna Fáil promptly secured the confidence of the labour movement by a combination of actions. Its response to the financial needs of the unemployed through the enactment of the Unemployment Assistance Act 1933 can be viewed as an amalgam of political expediency, social responsibility and an endorsement of labour's advocacy on behalf of the unemployed. It was also revolutionary in that it established a new relationship between the state and society. In addition, a government strategy to address unemployment through the protection and development of Irish industry was swiftly implemented and appeared to unite Fianna Fáil and Labour in a sense of new found nationalism. Joint opposition to the threat of fascism during the Second World War also helped to strengthen their relationship. These positive developments were also accompanied by more direct and frequent contacts between government and trade union leaders, causing some in the labour movement to complain that such frequent meetings were making too great a demand on their time. Consultation and action were a marked feature of Fianna Fáil's handling of the unemployment problem; this was in sharp contrast to Cumann na nGaedheal. Yet, a solid working relationship

between Fianna Fáil and the trade unions was threatened by increasing trade union militancy and internal divisions within trade unionism.

The escalation of divisions and inter-union unrest within the trade union movement during the 1930s not only threatened the future of trade unionism, it also posed a serious obstacle to Fianna Fáil's plans for industrial development and job creation. These divisions were exacerbated by a growing sense of nationalism among Irish-based trade unions and inflamed by some elements within Fianna Fáil. The persistence of the theme of reform in the history of the Irish trade union movement underscores its dysfunctional nature. Reform was hampered by a lack of leadership and responsibility and compounded by sectionalism and self-centred individualism. The trade union movement's failure to reform its structures eventually led to government intervention in the form of the Trade Union Acts 1941 and 1942. These measures were the first significant attempt at both trade union and labour relations reform since the establishment of the IFS. However, the success of the legislation was limited due to the government's attempts, especially under the 1941 Act, to exploit the divisions between Irish and British-based unions. Although Fianna Fáil's efforts to promote Irish-based trade unionism at the expense of British-based unions created deeper divisions which eventually split the Irish Trade Union Congress, Fianna Fáil was clearly of the view, as was the ITGWU, that the success of orderly trade unionism and national development would be more likely if trade unionism in Ireland was based on indigenous unions. This also offered protection from external left wing influences which might be facilitated by British-based unions. Ultimately, the inevitable split between Irish and British-based unions did not deter Seán Lemass from radically modernising labour relations structures in Ireland.

This dissertation demonstrates that the development of modern labour relations within government discourse and policy can be traced to the formation of the Fianna Fáil government in 1932. In this, the role of Lemass was vital. The emergence of the basic norms of labour relations within Fianna Fáil's social and labour considerations was deliberate, planned, swift and effective. It was evident in the Unemployment Assistance Act 1933 and the Conditions of Employment Act 1936. Both pieces of legislation reflected Fianna Fáil's industrial concerns but they also

represented, for the first time, a new social charter between the state, trade unions and their members. The introduction of the Industrial Relations Act 1946, which provided for the establishment of the Labour Court, enhanced and supported the labour relations process through the provision of dispute prevention and resolution services. This was a clear recognition by government that industrial development and industrial peace were contingent on the acceptance and practice of recognised labour relations procedures. It is also evident that the government was cognisant of labour relations developments in other countries as many states had introduced similar arrangements during the inter-war period.

The Industrial Relations Act 1946 and the establishment of the Labour Court revolutionised labour relations in Ireland; both became the cornerstone and the bedrock for the gradual evolution of labour relations practices and procedures. This legislation was also part of Lemass's desire for a wider and more inclusive labour relations platform. Over time this approach evolved to become a social partnership between unions, employers and government and laid the foundations for inclusive collective bargaining. Lemass's successful social and economic initiatives in the 1960s can be attributed to these foundations, something not adequately revealed in the current historiography.¹ Severely bruised by years of internal conflict, the trade union movement welcomed the legislation as a form of salvation from itself and an opportunity to rehabilitate. The 1946 Act and the Labour Court symbolised the advent of a more tolerant and supportive approach to both labour relations and trade unionism on the part of the Irish state and also afforded the trade union movement the opportunity to claim a respected role in Irish social and economic life.

When first contemplating doctoral research, this historian was surprised at the extent to which the history of labour relations in Ireland has not been the focus of any sustained analysis. It was as if the well-known catch-cry prior to independence that 'Labour must wait' had also been applied to the history of labour relations! As has

¹ Note: Although the 1960s was marked by industrial strife and trade union campaigns for wage increases, the Irish economy went through a period of expansion during that decade with a new focus on international trade, foreign investment in industry and government investment in education. Industry saw productivity improvements through mechanisation and specialisation and trade was liberalised with the 1965 Anglo-Irish Trade Agreement. See Central Statistics Office. 'Historical earnings 1938-2015'. (<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-hes/hes2015/aiw/>) (accessed 20 Nov. 2019).

been shown, both labour relations and trade unionism were unwelcome guests in independent Ireland until 1932. A change of government that year was accompanied by significant changes in the state's attitude towards labour relations and trade unionism – from one of hostility, intransigence and suppression to one of acceptance and accommodation. Only in 1945 was trade unionism finally recognised as 'an integral part of the national organisation' and entitled to 'its right place in the democratic life of the Nation'.² This owed much to the vision of Lemass and demonstrated the significance of individual leadership as there were some in his party, such as MacEntee, who would have preferred to have taken a more conservative approach. Since 1945 trade unionism has become a recognised player, although a little unruly and difficult at times, in the determination and shape of social, economic and labour policies. It is noteworthy that trade unions witnessed significant growth since the Labour Court was established and the movement swiftly became one of the most powerful pressure groups in Irish society. One reason for this growth can be attributed to the organised labour and industrial environment created by the Industrial Relations Act 1946 and the Labour Court which facilitated the greater cohesion of the trade union movement in negotiating increases in pay and improvements in conditions of employment.³ There is a tendency to take for granted the principles and tenets which have defined the nature of orderly labour relations in Ireland since 1946. As this dissertation has revealed, after many missteps those practices evolved slowly and not without a human cost. In that domain, at least, labour's long wait had ended.

² Lemass at meeting of William Rooney Fianna Fáil cumann, 12 Feb. 1943 (NAI, D/T, S13027).

³ See Brian Hillery, 'Industrial relations: compromise and conflict' in Donal Nevin (ed.), *Trade unions and change in Irish society* (Dublin and Cork, 1980), p. 47; Wallace, Gunnigle, McMahon and O'Sullivan, *Industrial relations in Ireland*, p. 50.

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Dublin Diocesan Archives

Archbishop Edward Byrne papers

Archbishop John Charles McQuaid papers

Irish Labour History Society Archives

Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party Annual Reports, 1931-46

Postal Strike 1922/Irish Postal Union papers

Irish Military Archives

Bureau of Military History Collection

Civil War Operations and Intelligence Reports Collection/Waterford Command

Departmental A Files: Postal Strike 1922 – Protection of staff and premises and action of military

Departmental A Files: Farm labourers strikes – Protection for strikers.

National Archives of Ireland

Cabinet minutes

Chief Secretary's Office Registered papers

Department of Agriculture and Food
Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction
Department of An Taoiseach
Department of Communications
Department of Finance
Department of Justice
Department of Labour
Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress Annual reports, 1913-25
Irish Trade Union Congress minutes
Irish Trade Union Congress papers
Provisional government minutes
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James G. Douglas papers
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Thomas Kennedy papers
Patricia Lynch and R.M. Fox papers
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Fianna Fáil papers

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Seán Lemass interviews

Seán MacEntee papers

Patrick McGilligan papers

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