

This exhibition provides insight into how the National College of Ireland contributed to industrial relations in Ireland in the twentieth century. It explores how industrial relations evolved during the Irish Free State period. It also examines the mid-twentieth century, where major changes in industry, government policy, and trade union organisation allowed new questions to be raised about working life, education, and the role of women in society.



The College, which was founded in 1951 as the Catholic Workers' College, was greatly influenced by Catholic social teaching. It sought to widen access to labour education for the working classes. It evolved alongside the shifting nature of the Irish industrial landscape and responded to new challenges and opportunities in employment and education. This exhibition showcases how education has played a central role in shaping industrial relations and in expanding opportunities throughout Ireland.

It demonstrates how the National College of Ireland developed from its industrial relations beginnings into the modern institution it is today, which offers a wide range of courses to a diverse student population.

Setting The Scene

At the birth of Saorstát Éireann, or the Irish Free State, in 1922, industrial relations in Ireland were at a crossroads. For the labour movement, the political idealism and industrial radicalism of the revolutionary period had ebbed away, compounded by a nasty post-war economic slump. On



the other side, employers were attempting to drive costs and wages down. This led to disputes on the docks, and farm strikes, which in turn sparked major unrest by urban workers against wage cuts in August 1923. In the middle of this was the Cumann na nGaedhal government, which wavered between curtailing employers' more extreme measures and facing down postal strikes.

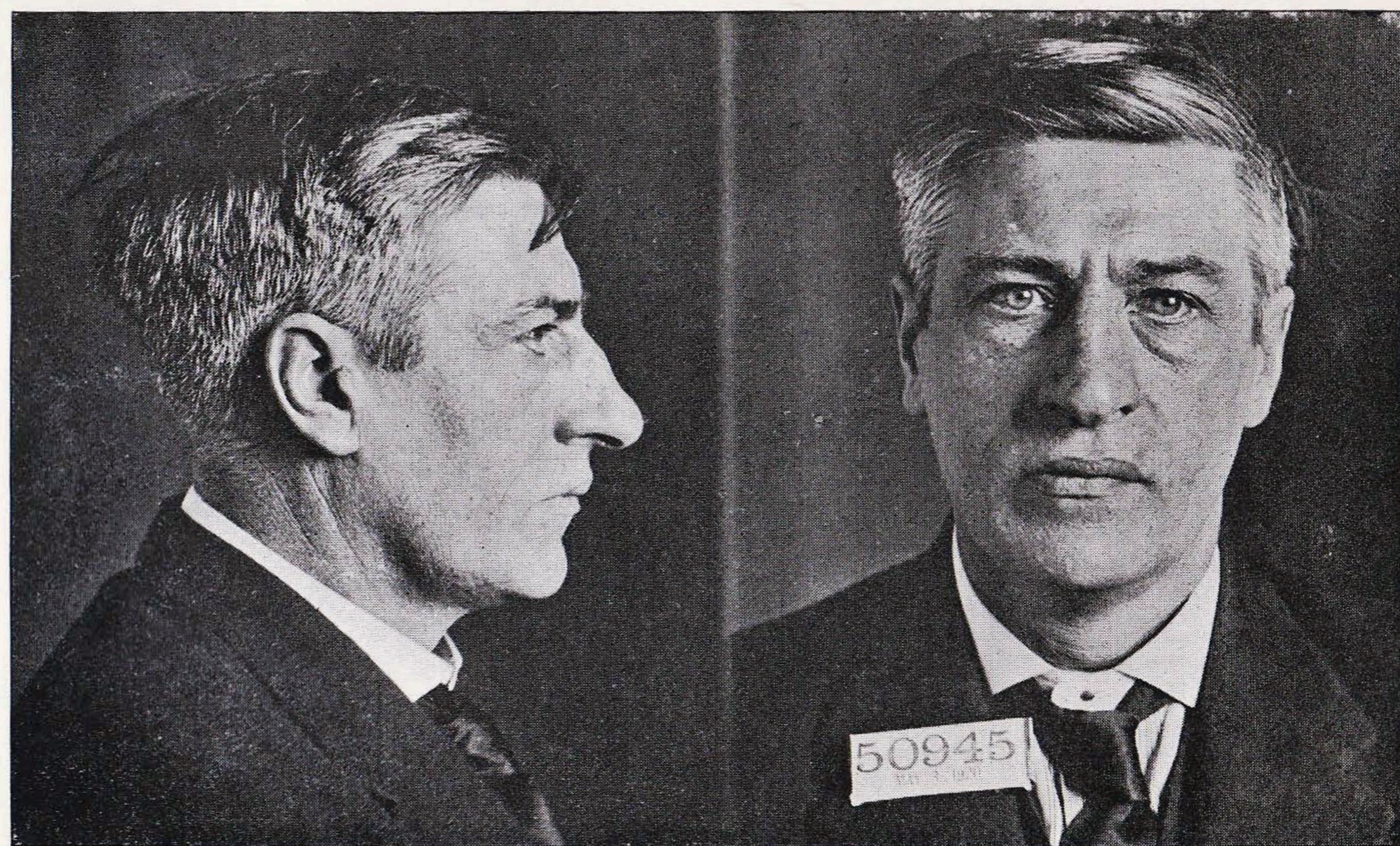
Government initiatives included the creation of a 600-man corps of armed special police, to combat striker tactics. The 1920s and early 1930s were characterised by the state perceiving labour disputes through the lens of the civil war emergency, high unemployment, and the failure of unions to influence government industrial policy, which was exacerbated by inter-union rivalry. A bitter strike over labourers' wages on the Shannon Hydro-electric Scheme, 1925-1927, encapsulated the problems. Low wages, the scourge of unemployment, class discrimination, and the exploitation of unskilled workers by employers, aided by the government, ably demonstrated the problems the state was faced with.

The government refused to negotiate with unions, sided with employers, reneged on labour agreements, and disavowed responsibility for good labour relations. This highlighted the fractured relationship between unions and the government and the significant issues with its approach.

The Return of The King

Jim Larkin returned to Ireland in April 1923 after his near decade long sojourn in the United States, which included several years in prison. Soon after his return he clashed with the more moderate William O'Brien, who had taken over leadership of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (I.T.G.W.U.). Due to faction fighting within the union hierarchy, the I.T.G.W.U. split and Larkin went on to lead the Workers' Union of Ireland (W.U.I.). Larkin and the W.U.I. became involved in the Shannon Scheme dispute.

These inter-union rivalries were characteristic of the 1920s and 1930s. The period was marked by unions weakened by in-fighting. This included an ongoing feud between the I.T.G.W.U. and the British-based Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union. These rivalries led to increased unemployment as different unions looked for exclusive representation in trade and used strike action in an attempt to obtain it. This was exacerbated by failed strike action by unions, which therefore influenced government policy to resist labour demands. Membership of unions affiliated to Irish Trade Union Congress fell from 189,000 in 1922 to 95,000 in 1932. The turmoil in the union movement was matched by the siege mentality of Cumann na nGaedheal. Something had to change.



JAMES LARKIN

Member of the Executive Committee of Left Wing Section Socialist Party.
Arrested on charge of Criminal Anarchy by the direction of the Committee, November 8, 1919, tried, convicted and sentenced to State Prison for not less than five years nor more than ten years.

A Revolution Postponed?

Despite being in the vanguard of the revolutionary years the position of women in the Free State might be described as 'more of the same'. While they had successfully obtained the right to vote, women increasingly faced banishment from public life. Not all women, of course. The resolute veterans of the suffrage and national struggles, such as Helena Moloney, continued to prevail, through sheer force of will. The tendency was, however, for women to be consigned to relative exclusion from the public realm, and confinement within the domestic. A series of acts and measures, such as the Juries Act (1924), Civil Service Regulation (Amendment) Bill (1925), and the infamous marriage bar sought to limit women's participation outside the home and restrict their career prospects.



Pictured are Irish Women Worker's Union (I.W.W.U.) members in 1939.

The I.W.W.U., led by Louie Bennett, was involved in some of the key battles to improve the conditions of women workers during the Free State years – in the face of male prejudice from employers, and the trade union movement. In 1945 the union organised a successful strike for improved conditions and won the entitlement, subsequently enjoyed by all Irish workers, to two weeks paid annual holidays. The union was a focus for wider battles in society to improve women's lives. In 1937, the I.W.W.U. objected to passages in the new Constitution, joined by the Irish Women Graduates' Association and others. The I.W.G.A. observed that:

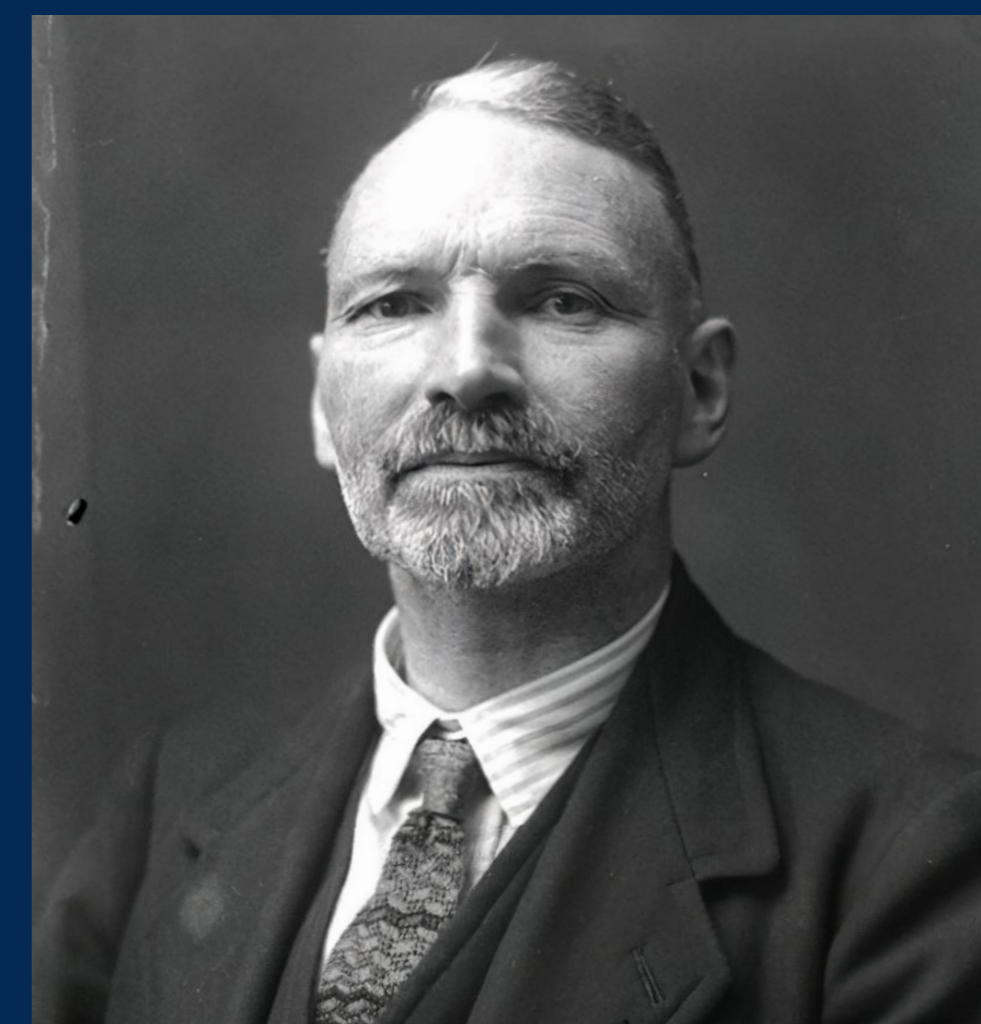
"The omission of the principle of equal rights and opportunities enunciated in the Proclamation of 1916 and confirmed in Article 3 of the Constitution of the Saorstát Éireann was deplored as sinister and retrogressive".

Bennett pointed out that article 41.2(l) should be amended to acknowledge 'women's work for the home'. It was, she asserted, unfavourable to have in the constitution a clause that makes it 'appear that only women within the home can contribute to the common good'.

The campaign to change the wording of the constitution was a failure. The constitution passed, and most opinions during the debate were in favour of it. Subsequent campaigning was focussed on the rights of wives and mothers, via the Irish Housewives Association. Avowedly feminist campaigns would not be resurrected until the 1960s.

A New Perspective

Positive change came when employers, trade unions, and the Fianna Fáil government all revised their approach to labour relations in the 1940s. The passage of the Trade Union Act in 1941 led to the consolidation of employers' associations, and the establishment of the Federated Union of Employers in 1942. This streamlined affiliated employers' approaches to industrial relations and put the focus



William O'Brien

on negotiations rather than facing down disputes. The presence of Séan Lemass as the Minister for Industry and Commerce helped the situation greatly. Lemass's sympathetic approach to unions and working people led to trust in the government amongst trade union leaders. It also facilitated their active involvement in the repositioning of unions within the social and economic mainstream of Irish life. Faction fighting amongst unions diminished to a very large extent, which was helped by the dwindling existence of unions affiliated to British combinations. This was helped by the efforts of more moderate union leaders, such as William O'Brien (pictured).

The Industrial Relations Act of 1946 was the fruit of all this work. The preamble of the Act speaks for itself:

"An Act 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, and to provide for certain other matters connected with the matters aforesaid".

At the heart of the Act was the Labour Court, a body with government appointees, and employer and union representatives, focused on dispute resolution within a consensual labour relations scene. Industrial relations in the Irish polity had come full circle. From a battleground forged in Syndicalism and national revolution, to a rational system designed to resolve employer-worker differences in the new Republic of Ireland.