

Andrew Boyd

The Rise of the Irish Trade Unions





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ANDREW BOYD

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England has always been regarded as the birthplace of trade unionism yet the oldest existing trade union document is the 1788 minutes book of the Belfast Cabinetmakers' Club. The records of the Irish Parliament show that there were 'combinations' of workmen in early eighteenth century Dublin — a law to ban them was passed in 1729.

Severe laws, the pillory and the birch failed to suppress the rising tide of Irish trade unionism. It survived and its emergence is interwoven with the political history of the country. Daniel O'Connell in his day was an enemy. So was Parnell: 'What is trade unionism but the anlordism of labor? I would not tolerate, if I were at the head of government, such bodies as trade unions.' Michael Davitt, on the other hand, promoted them. At the beginning of this century Jim Larkin became a world symbol of Labour leadership. The Irish Citizen Army formed by James Connolly and members of the ITGWU joined the Republican Army in the rising in 1916. In 1918 the Irish Trades Union Congress organised a general strike against conscription. In Northern Ireland, a few of the more dedicated trade unionists have, for generations, fought an almost hopeless battle against the corrupting influence of the Unionist Party and the Orange Order.

The Irish were also prominent activists in the trade union movement abroad. In England Fergus O'Connor and the Chartists. John Doherty from Donegal was a pioneer union leader in Manchester. Robert Smillie of Belfast became leader of the Scottish coalminers, while the Fenian Frank Roney was for years a union organiser in California.

Fascinating in its insights into Irish history.
The Irish News.

over: Jim Larkin in Dublin, 1923



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