



Louie Bennett (1870-1956)

Labour Lives No. 2

Louie Bennett (1870-1956), romantic novelist, suffragette, pacifist, and General Secretary of the Irish Women Workers' Union (IWWU), 1917-55, hailed from a family of prosperous Protestant Anglo-Irish merchants. Her father owned Bennett & Son, a fine arts and antiques auctioneering firm, Ormond Quay, Dublin. Her mother was Susan Boulger. The eldest of five sisters (one of whom died as an infant), she also had five brothers.

Bennett was raised at Temple Road, Temple Hill, Blackrock, and educated at Alexandra College, Dublin, and in London and Bonn. In addition to a brief teaching career in the west, she devoted her early years to writing; keeping a diary, 'Memories of Temple Road in the 80s', and publishing two novels, *The Proving of Priscilla* (Harpers, 1902) and *A Prisoner of His Word* (Maunsel, 1908). Influenced by the Pankhursts and Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, she followed her sister and brother Lionel, an engineer, to suffrage meetings, and helped to found the Irishwomen's Suffrage Federation in 1911, and the Irish Women's Reform League. During the 1913 Lockout, Bennett worked for the Ladies Relief Committee. She was an active propagandist against militarism in any form, a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, a delegate to the Women's International Peace Congress, 1915, and joint secretary, with James G. Douglas, of the Union for Democratic Control. As a pacifist, her impressions of James Connolly, written in Easter Week 1916, were critical: 'He thought he saw in the [world] war a chance of grasping freedom for Ireland, and from that moment, Labour took second place in his thoughts...hatred of England is the dominating passion of Connolly's life'.¹ In 1918 she led IWWU members to Dublin City Hall to sign the pledge against conscription and, as a member of the Women's Peace Committee, mediated during the Civil War. Bennett wrote numerous letters and articles in the *Irish Citizen* on conditions of women workers, violence, and links between suffrage and nationalism. Her attempt to transform the *Irish Citizen* into a feminist labour paper led to conflict with Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington and its closure in September 1920. A 'pacifist first and before everything', Bennett supported the League of Nations and defended Soviet Russia in the 1920s. Later, she advocated Irish unity, helping to form the Irish Association, and writing its 'Suggestions for a public statement', and a 'Proposal for Labour policy to promote a re-united Ireland' in January 1955.

Bennett became involved with trade unions at the age of forty three because the 'Irish woman worker was a neglected factor in industry, exploited and shamefully underpaid'. In 1916 Thomas Foran persuaded her to become General Secretary of the IWWU. She insisted the IWWU remained independent of Liberty Hall and paid rent on its first premises on Eden Quay. As General Secretary, she never drew a salary; family money enabled her to work 'voluntarily'. When she moved permanently to Killiney, she built a second bungalow with tennis courts, which she gave to union members for 'holidays'.

Bennett was elected first woman President of the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) in 1931, and when Congress split in 1945 kept the IWWU within the ITUC, and was co-opted onto its executive in April 1945. In 1946, she was elected Vice-President, becoming President again in 1947. She remained on the executive until 1950. An active member of the Labour Party, she was a member of Dún Laoghaire Borough Council in 1943 but stood unsuccessfully for Dublin Co. Council and the Dáil in 1944. She had refused to stand in 1918 when nominated by Labour – the first woman candidate to be nominated that year. She was a founder of the People's College in 1948, and was instrumental in the formation of a national housing group in 1943, the Housing Council in 1949, and the Lower Prices Council, 1949-50.

Bennett's clearest ideas on trade unions and the unionization of women workers coincided with her editorship of the *Irish Citizen* in 1920. She organized the IWWU on a single-sex basis.

It is futile to deny a latent antagonism between the sexes in the world of industry. There is a disposition amongst men workers not only to keep women in inferior and subordinate positions, but even to drive them out of industry altogether...in mixed trade unions the men are practically always the dominant element.²

She was forthright on equal rights and 'equal pay for equal work', yet reassured men that unionized women workers would never seek to 'encroach on the men's sphere':

Naturally, I have no desire to put a spoke in the wheel of women's employment. But this modern tendency to draw women into industry in increasing numbers is of no real advantage to them. It has not raised their status as workers nor their wage standard. It is a menace to family life, and in so far as it has blocked the employment of men it has intensified poverty amongst the working class.³

She abhorred industrial or class conflict, favouring producer-consumer co-operatives and vocational organization, and was strongly influenced by Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931). In a minority opinion to the *Report of the Commission on Vocational Organization* (1944) she wrote, praising Muintir na Tíre: 'I certainly want to see our society system built up on Christian principles...'.⁴ In June 1952 the IWWU published the Pope's 'Discourse to the Congress of the World Union of Organizations of Catholic Women' as *Peace and Fraternity (A Call for Action Addressed to Every Woman of Every Nation)*.

Bennett's views were guided by strong moral values and often went against the current. She argued against tariff protection in 1924 and, single-handedly on the Congress executive, against Labour Party co-operation with Fianna Fáil in 1928. Throughout the 1920s she opposed separating the industrial and political wings of Congress, fearing the undue influence of electoral activity. She died in November 1956 at Killiney. She never married.

Ellen Hazelkorn

Bibliography

R.M. Fox, *Louie Bennett: Her Life and Times* (Dublin, 1958)
National Library of Ireland, Sheehy Skeffington papers

Notes

1. R.M. Fox, *Louie Bennett: Her Life and Times* (Dublin, 1958), p.47.
2. Louie Bennett, 'Is an Irish Women Workers' Union needed?', *Irish Citizen*, November 1919.
3. Presidential address, *ITUC Annual Report*, 1932, p.23.
4. *ITUC Annual Report*, 1948, p.191.