

The Northern Ireland Trade Union Movement

By D. W. BLEAKLEY, B.A., DIP. ECON. POL. SC. (OXON.).

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Twenty-eight years ago, this Society listened to a paper on Irish trade unionism.¹ Then, the speaker outlined a movement that was trying to adjust itself to vital political changes that had taken place in the life of the country in the previous few years. Tonight, though we narrow our range to Northern Ireland, we will be examining a movement which is once again going through a period of fundamental adjustment. It will be my task to outline the movement to you ; to show how it carries on its work ; and to consider some of the problems which concern the unions in this region.

First of all, let me make my own position clear. Being an active trade unionist, I accept and approve of the basic principles of the movement, and I am convinced that no industrial community can function well, unless there is in its midst a strong trade union organisation that is recognised by all as an essential element in modern society.

When trade unions began in Northern Ireland no one can say, and, as in Britain, their history before the 19th century is one that can never be written. Local records show that our earliest societies were formed to meet immediate "wants." These "wants" varied. Sometimes it was "a social pint of beer" that drew men together. At other times they met to exchange information about employment. Most often it was the desire to help one another in moments of sickness or bereavement that caused men to form clubs, societies, combinations or unions as they were variously called.

Northern Ireland had many such societies. Indeed, the earliest record of a woodworkers trade club in the British Isles is that of the Belfast Cabinetmakers of 1788.² During the period of the Combination Acts, prosecutions took place against societies in Antrim, Down, Derry and Armagh. After the repeal of the Acts, trade union organisation was widespread, though opposition to the movement continued. These early combinations were, of course, small, but, by the middle of the last century, unions were organising in the textile, engineering, printing, and building industries. These unions developed on a local, Irish, or United Kingdom basis, and today we have examples of all three types in our midst.

Union Structure.

Union structure in Northern Ireland is much the same as elsewhere

¹Trade Union Organisation in Ireland: R. J. P. Mortished (*Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, October, 1927).

²cf. Our Society's History (Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers). S. Higenbottan, p. 2.

in these islands. The basic unit is the branch and every recruit enters by joining a local branch of the society covering his trade or industry. Qualifications for membership are laid down in union rules and these, especially among the craft unions, are strictly adhered to. In periods of redundancy the "books" are occasionally closed and no new members are then admitted. It is through the branch meeting (usually weekly or fortnightly) that the member makes his voice heard on union affairs, and it is also through the branch that graduation to higher office takes place. There are hundreds of trade union branches in Northern Ireland. Some are tiny; some like Belfast No. 1 Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, with 2,500 members, are very large.

Each union arranges the composition of its branches to suit its own particular needs. The Electrical Trades Union, for example, organises on a largely geographical basis. With 7 branches in Belfast (one reserved for semi-skilled members) and 11 throughout the Province, this union permits entrants to join any of its branches. Consequently, newcomers tend to choose the branch which meets nearest to their home or place of work. On the other hand, the general union we have already mentioned, U.S.D.A.W. (22 branches in Northern Ireland, 8 of which in Belfast) tries to group its members on a trade basis (e.g., bacon curing), or in common employer units (e.g., Co-operative Society or Robinson and Cleavers).

Branch government in Northern Ireland follows the pattern general in Britain. The branch is the local agent of the union, and it is controlled by officers (Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer and Committee) who are elected at quarterly or annual intervals. Where possible complaints are dealt with at branch level without reference to a higher body, and it is up to the officers to see that members are given the protection and carry out the obligations of membership. Where an issue cannot be resolved at the branch meeting it normally proceeds to the District Committee, which is a co-ordinating body for the union branches within the area. The amount of autonomy which such committees have varies from union to union, and according to the nature of the subject under review. When the District Committee cannot reach a decision, the matter can be referred to the National Executive. In many cases Northern Ireland is directly represented on the national body.

Membership.

Trade union membership changes from day to day as members fall out of or come into benefit. The principal sources for Northern Ireland membership figures are the Registrar of Friendly Societies (N.I.), the British and Irish Trade Union Congresses, the Ministry of Labour and National Insurance (N.I.), and, above all, the local offices of the unions themselves. All these sources have been resorted to in this paper.

Over the past 40 years there have been many fluctuations in Northern Ireland membership. During and after the first world war local membership rose rapidly and reached a peak in 1921. Thereafter there was a falling off in membership. This drop was accelerated by the failure of the General Strike of 1926 and the decline continued throughout the early thirties. With the recovery in industry

unions regained strength, and during the period of the second world war, and immediately after, Northern Ireland membership broke all previous records. Last year's figure is the highest ever (200,000, of which 40,000 were females). A recent survey³ in the Ministry of Labour Gazette would seem to indicate that in Northern Ireland we have reached our peak membership and may not achieve a new record for some time.

*Membership of T.U's. registered in N.I. or G.B.*⁴

<i>Year</i>	<i>No. of Unions</i>	<i>Membership</i>
1927	71	65,500
1929	67	63,000
1933	67	56,000
1941	72	109,000
1945	78	142,000
1953 (all unions, British, N. Ireland and Eire based)	92	200,000

The 92 unions which organise in Northern Ireland divide into three groups: those registered in Great Britain, those registered in Northern Ireland, and those with headquarters in Eire.

About 90% of Northern Ireland trade unionists belong to British based unions and the following list shows their composition:—

English and Scottish Unions Operating in Northern Ireland.
(69 in number).

<i>Union</i>	<i>Membership</i>
Amalgamated Engineering Union	17,190
Amalgamated Slaters', Tilers and Roofing Operatives Society	119
Amalgamated Society of Lithographic Printers of G.B. & Ir.	288
Amalgamated Society of Woodcutting Machinists	656
Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers	7,568
Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union ..	73,260
Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers of G.B. & Ir.	2,139
Amalgamated Union of Foundry Workers of G.B. & Ir.	873
Associated Blacksmiths', Forge and Smithy Workers' Society	373
Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen	not available
Association of Building Technicians	6
Association of Engineering and shipbuilding Draughtsmen	1,216
Association of Scientific Workers	53
Association of Supervisory Staffs, Executives and Technicians	1,206
British Broadcasting Corporation Staff Association ..	147
Civil Service Clerical Association	not available
Civil Service Union	349
Clerical and Administrative Workers' Union	2,000
Electrical Power Engineers' Association	216
Electrical Trades Union	5,453
Engineer Surveyors' Association	42

³ *Ministry of Labour Gazette*, November, 1953. Vol. LXI, No. 11, p. 379.

⁴ *cf. Ulster Year Books*, and Reports of Registrar of Friendly Societies (N.I.).

<i>Union</i>	<i>Membership</i>
Fire Brigades Union	501
Guild of Insurance Officials	387
Inland Revenue Staff Federation	510
Iron, Steel and Metal Dressers' Trade Society	76
Medical Practitioners' Union	210
National Society of Painters	2,538
National Society of Life Assurance Workers	27
National Association of Theatrical and Kine Employees	492
National Federation of Insurance Workers	1,158
National Association of Operative Plasterers	964
National League of the Blind, G.B. and Ireland	146
National Society of Brushmakers	90
National Society of Coppersmiths, Braziers and Metal Workers	360
National Society of Electrotypers and Stenographers	35
National Society of Pottery Workers	not available
National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives	500
National Union of Co-operative Officials	34
National Union of Furniture Trade Operatives	1,383
National Union of General and Municipal Workers	12,434
National Union of Gold, Silver and Allied Trades	49
National Union of Hosiery Workers	550
National Union of Journalists	114
National Union of Operative Heating, Domestic and Ventilating Engineers and General Metal Workers	167
National Union of Packing Case Makers	not available
National Union of Press Telegraphists	21
National Union of Printing, Bookbinding and Paper Workers	1,487
National Union of Scalemakers	29
National Union of Seamen	3,000
National Union of Sheetmetal Workers and Braziers	900
National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers	6,651
National Union of Vehicle Builders	1,006
Plumbing Trades Union	1,944
Post Office Engineering Union	545
Prison Officers' Association	29
Shipconstructors' and Shipwrights' Association	1,347
Society of Lithographic Artists, Designers, Engravers and Process Workers	70
Society of Technical Civil Servants	29
Transport Salaried Staffs Association	1,695
Typographical Association	1,129
Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers	6,335
United Patternmakers' Association	329
United Society of Boilermakers' and Iron and Steel Ship Builders	3,664
Union of Post Office Workers	2,742
Pearl Federation	35
Prudential Staff Union	370
Refuge Field Staff Association	109
Royal Liver Employees Union	130

This list comprises the most important section of Northern Irish trade unionism, and, except for a few "company" unions, all come

within Webb's definition of a trade union as: "A continuous association of wage — or salary — earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives."

The next grouping is that of trade unions with registered or chief offices in Northern Ireland. There are 18 such unions and their membership is 27,000.

Northern Ireland Unions.

(18 in number).

<i>Union</i>	<i>Membership</i>
Belfast Bread Servers' Trade Union	750
Belfast Coopers' Trade Union	59
Belfast Operative Bakers, Society	1,180
Clothpassers and Winding Masters, Trade Society	59
Flax and Other Textile Workers, Trade Union	570
Loom-overlookers, Trade Union	590
Lurgan Hemmers and Veiners and General Workers, Trade Union	999
Northern Ireland Musicians' Association	319
Northern Ireland Textile Workers' Trade Union	2,407
Portadown, Banbridge and District Textile Workers' Trade Union	373
Power-loom Yarndressers' Trade Society	191
Ulster Transport and Allied Operatives' Union	8,031
Ulster Teachers' Union	2,730
Northern Ireland Civil Service Association	5,058
North of Ireland Operative Butchers and Allied Workers' Association	480
Belfast Corporation Senior Officers' Association	not available
Ulster Chemists' Association	not available
Ulster Public Officers' Association	2,700

In addition to this group of 18 unions, 9 small teaching associations join with the two main teaching organisations in the work of the Federal Council of Teachers in Northern Ireland. It should also be noted that some of the Northern Ireland textile unions, and the unions in the bread and baking trades form part of larger unions.

Most Northern Ireland based unions tend to be regional in outlook and take little part in the work of the trade union movement as a whole. The four largest local unions, U.T. & A.O.U., N.I.C.S.A., U.T.U., and U.P.O.A. are not affiliated to the Irish T.U.C. or the Belfast Trades Council, though, in the case of the civil servants there are legal reasons preventing co-operation with other trade unions.

The final group of unions covers those with headquarters in Eire. There are 5 such unions and total membership is 8,700.

Trade Unions with Headquarters in Eire and Operating in N.I.
(5 in number).

<i>Union</i>	<i>Membership</i>
Irish National Teachers' Organisation	1,288
Irish Bank Officials' Association	1,604
Irish Transport and General Workers' Union	2,825
Irish Bakers', Confectioners' and Allied Workers' Amalgamated Union	not available
National Association of Transport Employees	2,961

The final union in this list is an interesting newcomer that last year replaced the British National Union of Railwaymen. The N.U.R., after 67 years in Ireland, decided to withdraw from the country, and it co-operated in the formation of the new association, giving it a substantial sum of money to set it on its feet. This was a most important decision from the point of view of Northern Ireland trade unionists, and it has given rise to a great deal of discussion.

Analysis of Numbers.

It will be seen from these figures that the A.T.G.W.U. dominates the Northern Ireland trade union scene as it does in Britain. 40% of our trade unionists are in the Transport Union, and the A.E.U., as second largest union, has only 17,190 members, while the N.U.G.M.W. is third with 12,434. Six other unions have more than 5,000 members. These are (4 British based) N.U.T.G.W., U.S.D.A.W., A.S.W., and E.T.U., and (2 Northern Ireland based) U.T.A.O.U., and N.I.C.S.A. A recent break-down of the union figures⁵ by the Irish T.U.C. reveals the following pattern:—

<i>No. in Union.</i>	<i>No. of such Unions.</i>	<i>Total membership</i>
100 or less	17	778
101 — 250	12	1,965
251 — 500	7	2,637
501 — 1,000	11	7,620
1,001 — 1,500	9	11,132
1,501 — 2,000	7	12,678
2,001 — 3,000	4	10,435
3,001 — 5,000	3	12,144

The tendency in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, is towards concentration of numbers into a few organisations. Thus, out of the 92 unions operating in this region, 70 had memberships below 5,000, and 47 had less than 1,000. With the rising costs of administration, and the growth of large scale and highly mechanised industries, this trend is inevitable and is likely to continue. The following table shows the industrial classification of unions operating in Northern Ireland as recorded by the Irish T.U.C.:—

<i>Industry</i>	<i>No. of Unions</i>	<i>Membership</i>
General unions	4	95,941
Manual workers :		
(a) craft	30	52,135
(b) mixed	13	17,334
Postal Services	2	9,373
Civil Service	5	
Distribution, Offices	5	10,135
Insurance, Banking	4	2,891
Professions, Services	14	6,060
		193,869

⁵ *Trade Union Information* (Irish T.U.C.), April, 1953, p. 4.

Federations.

With so many unions operating in close proximity to one another it is natural that the need for joint machinery, to deal with problems common to all, should have been recognised. The answer to the problem was found in the second half of the 19th century when federations of unions inside certain industries were formed. Federations covering engineering, building, printing, teaching, and the civil service operate in Northern Ireland.

The most important federation in this part of the United Kingdom is the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions. The Confederation covers workers in ship-building, ship-repairing, railway workshops, engineering and allied industries. The Confederation Rule Book states that it has as its objects the organisation of "all workers in the shipbuilding and engineering industries into their appropriate unions," and the negotiation of "general agreements concerning wages and working conditions on behalf of the workers in the said industries." Affiliation to the Confederation is on a national basis, and the work of the organisation throughout the country is carried out by 48 District Committees. There is a District Committee in Belfast (No. 43) and the local branches of 25 national unions are affiliated to it.

The other powerful federation operating in Northern Ireland is the National Federation of Building Trade Operatives. Founded in 1918, this body is the most highly developed of the trade federations. It covers unions in building and construction and employs full-time regional officers to look after its affairs. The Federation has a great deal of authority in regard to strike action, and it conducts most of the national wage negotiations for the industry.

Since a good many delegates to the District Committees of these bodies are trade union officials, the decisions arrived at exert a considerable influence on local industry.

Trades Councils.

Another form of union co-operation practised in Northern Ireland is that afforded by the organisation of Trades Councils. Councils date back to at least 1860, and they are an older form of inter-union partnership than the national federations. They differ from the federation in that they are essentially local in character. They are formed by the affiliation of branches of unions, and generally the national headquarters of trade unions allow their branches to take the decision to affiliate on their own initiative. The functions of trades councils have changed with the growth of the movement. At one time, their activities covered every sphere of trade union work: wage negotiations, conditions of employment, strikes and political activities. As national trade union organisation has developed the councils have withdrawn themselves from affairs that are more tightly the business of the individual union or the trades federation. Now the average trades council concentrates on subjects of more general—though not less vital—interest to trade unionists.

Northern Ireland has Trades Councils covering Belfast, Londonderry, Newry, Bangor, Ballymena, Omagh, Strabane, Portadown and Coleraine. By far the most important of these is the Belfast and District Trades Union Council, founded in 1881. The affiliated

membership of this body is 25,000, and this is made up of 115 branch affiliations from 54 unions. The government of the Council is in the hands of an annually elected committee of 18 members, and the Council is one of the few in the Kingdom to have the services of a full-time Secretary.⁶

The work of our Trades Councils is varied. The report of the Belfast T.U.C. for last year shows that the monthly meetings considered business in connection with education, transport, unemployment, national assistance, tuberculosis, art gallery facilities, flooding, housing, car-parks, bus-shelters, equal pay, and the problems of scholarship students at the Queen's University. Few of these subjects would come within the scope of the trade federation. The Councils, therefore, give the branch delegate an opportunity to introduce such topics, and, in effect, serve as a trade union parliament for the rank and file.

Congress.

The most all embracing form of trade union co-operation comes through affiliation to the Trades Union Congress, and most trade unionists in Northern Ireland are affiliated, through their unions, to the Irish T.U.C. The Irish Congress was formed in 1894 in order that subjects of specifically Irish concern might receive more attention than they did at meetings of the British T.U.C.. Belfast delegates and donations were to the fore in the early days of the Irish Congress, and, ever since, Northern Ireland has had a great deal of influence in the affairs of the organisation. In all, there are 298,000 Irish trade unionists affiliated to the Congress, and of these 175,000, or nearly 60%, come from the North. Of the 62 unions in Congress, 43 have their chief offices in the United Kingdom, and these include most of the British craft unions, with the exceptions of the United Pattern-makers' Association, the Shipwrights' Association, the Amalgamated Society of Woodcutting Machinists and a few unions in the printing trade. Of the Eire based unions operating in the North, only the Irish Bank Officials' Association remains outside the central trade union body. As has already been explained, the three largest Northern Ireland based unions also remain outside.

The control of Congress business lies in the hands of a National Executive Committee of 15 members elected by the annual meeting of trade union delegates. However, since 1945 a special committee, known as the Northern Committee, has had control of the Northern Ireland business of the Congress. This committee of 10 members is elected each year by I.T.U.C. unions in the Six-Counties, and it is recognised by the unions as the central body for trade union affairs in the North. An Annual Conference of Northern trade unionists is held each June, and matters of special interest to the region are discussed. However, the work of the Conference and of the Northern Committee is severely hampered due to the fact that there is no full-time staff or central office to serve the North.

Political Affiliation.

There is one other important link in trade union structure to note, and that is the political one. Northern Ireland trade unionists were

⁶ cf. Annual Reports of Belfast Trades Council.

among the first in the Kingdom to advocate the use of political methods to achieve trade union aims, and as early as 1885 the Belfast Trades Council was active in local politics. The formation in Britain of the Labour Representation Committee was followed by similar action in Northern Ireland, and from then on, we have had a "step by step" policy with Britain in trade union political arrangements.

The political agent of the trade unions in this area is the Northern Ireland Labour Party, and to this Party 22 unions are affiliated. This figure includes most of the important British unions with the exception of the A.T.G.W.U. No Northern Ireland based union is affiliated and only one that is Eire based.

List of Unions Affiliated to the Northern Ireland Labour Party.

<i>British Unions</i>	<i>Affiliated Membership</i>
Amalgamated Engineering Union	2,334
Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers	1,280
Clerical and Administrative Workers, Union	90
Electrical Trades Union	1,537
National Society of Painters	500
National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives	90
National Union of General and Municipal Workers	600
National Union of Tailors' and Garment Workers	435
National Union of Vehicle Builders	650
Transport and Salaried Staffs Association	1,363
Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers	3,045
Union of Post Office Workers	2,732
Association of Engineering and Shipbuilding Draughtsmen	390
Boilermakers' Labour Group	90
United Patternmakers' Association	300
National Union of Printing, Bookbinding and Paper Workers	90
National Union of Seamen	200
Association of Locomotive, Engineers and Firemen	90
National Union of Foundry Workers	250
National Union of Sheetmetal Workers and Braziers	—
Typographical Association	108
<i>Eire Based</i>	
National Association of Transport Employees	465
	16,639

Since affiliation is on the basis of members who pay a political levy on top of their weekly trade union subscription, the trade union politically affiliated membership is far below total membership. But a voting strength of 17,000 is quite enough to give unions in Northern Ireland an important voice in the framing of Labour Party policy. Furthermore, out of a Labour Party Executive Committee of 18 members, 8 places are reserved for trade union nominees. These 8 are elected by a trade union ballot.

Government and Unions.

Thus far we have been considering the internal affairs of the unions and the relations which exist between the different parts of the movement. On the whole, internal relations are cordial and rather similar

to those existing in trade union circles across the water. But when we come to examine union-Government relationships, the same cordiality cannot be discerned. Indeed, few would pretend that Northern Ireland's trade union movement and Northern Ireland's Government treat each other with the respect and trust that has become a feature of British industrial relations during the past fourteen years. There are many reasons for this local situation. Some are historical; many are party-political, but these lie outside the scope of our examination. However, two of the issues on which our Government and our unions disagree are considered by the unions as matters of fundamental importance, and, as such, they must be examined.

Firstly, the question of the continued existence of the 1927 Trade Disputes and Trade Union Act. This Act was passed in Northern Ireland in order to introduce locally restrictions similar to those imposed in Great Britain following the General Strike of 1926. It was argued by Government supporters that, seeing most trade unionists in Northern Ireland belonged to British unions, uniformity of the law was desirable. In the words of the then Attorney-General: "The Government can see no reason why these unions should not be subject to the same limitations in Northern Ireland that they are subject to in Great Britain."⁷

From its inception, the measure was regarded by the British trade union movement as a challenge to the right of trade unionists to organise freely, and, in the eyes of trade unionists, the Act became the symbol of the State's unwillingness to grant unions their full status in society. Northern Ireland trade unionists joined their British colleagues in demanding the repeal of the Act, and for 27 years annual trade union conferences in Ulster have passed resolutions of protest. Since the repeal of the Act in Britain, trade unions in this Province have been even more insistent in their demand, and the refusal of the Government to bring trade union law into line with that of Britain has not made for smoother relations between unions and Government.

The Government, for its part, claims that there is no evidence that trade unionists desire the removal of the Act. The unions retort that the T.U.C., the trade federations, trades councils and individual unions (including the civil servants) have all called for repeal. "If this be not evidence," they ask, "what is?" Members of British unions feel especially aggrieved and, with the converse in mind, they recall the justifying phrase of the chief Government spokesman in 1927: "... what is illegal in Great Britain should not be legal here."⁸

It is difficult to see what useful purpose the Act serves. Since most of our trade unionists come under the control of British headquarters, it is better that one law should cover all. Nor is there any evidence that trade unions in this part of the world are more turbulent than those across the water. On the contrary; the General Strike was not widespread in Northern Ireland, and since 1926 our industrial life has been relatively peaceful.

One other argument adduced against the Act is that it is probably

⁷ Parliamentary Debates, Northern Ireland. Official Report, Vol. 8 (1927) Col. 2071.

⁸ *Ibid.*; Col. 2082.

a contravention of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which guarantees freedom of association. Since the United Kingdom is a signatory, on our behalf, to that Declaration, it may well be that in retaining the Act we cause embarrassment to our representatives. This argument against the Act carries even more weight when used in relation to our obligations under the I.L.O. Convention.

However, the most cogent objection of all is that the Act, while serving no useful purpose, undoubtedly does a great deal of harm by causing needless friction between unions and the Northern Ireland Government. The Act is an unpleasant reminder of a past that is best forgotten. Even before the war, trade unionists looked on such a curb to their activities as something medieval. By present day standards the Act is positively pre-historic. As such it should be dispatched to the legislative museum without delay.

Another problem in Government-union relations arises over the position of the Northern Committee of the Irish T.U.C. As has already been explained, the trade unions regard the Committee as the central trade union body in Northern Ireland. The precise attitude of the Northern Ireland Government to this Committee is not quite clear, but the present position would seem to be one of partial non-recognition. "Partial," because there is some confusion as to whether it is the Government as a whole, or merely one Department of it, that has closed the door. We know, for example, that the Northern Committee has been received by the Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Commerce has invited the Committee to submit nominations for the Tourist Board, and the Ministry of Education has corresponded with the Committee from time to time. However, the most important Ministry from the point of view of the unions is Labour, and this Department has consistently refused to meet the Committee on the grounds that the headquarters of the Irish T.U.C. is in a foreign country. Here again the unions join issue sharply, and insist that they alone have the right to choose their own representatives. This attitude is typically and traditionally trade union.⁹

The view of the Ministry of Labour that organisations must, in order to receive recognition, be based in the territory covered by the Government, is a doctrine that does not fit in with trade union thought. Trade unions in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, in the world, are primarily economic, not political, organisations, and they tend to be international in outlook. In the trade union world it is not regarded as unusual for a union to be linked to organisations outside its own political boundaries. One cannot, for example, imagine Sir Walter Monckton refusing to meet a delegation from the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, merely because that body is controlled mainly by trade unions outside the United Kingdom. An even more pertinent illustration exists in the fact that the American Federation of Labour and the Congress of industrial Organisations operate freely in the Dominion of Canada, even though both bodies are headquartered in a foreign country—the United States.

A deadlock exists between the Northern Ireland Ministry of Labour and the unions on this question. As both sides regard the issue as one of principal a solution is not likely to be easily come by. The ensuing friction can have unfortunate consequences. A clear example

⁹ cf. Irish Trade Union Congress, Annual Report, 1952, pp. 154-155.

of this is provided in the non-participation of the trade union movement in the work of the Local Employment Committees.

The Ministry of Labour, of course, meets individual unions and receives delegations from the main federations on questions affecting their members, but the non-recognition of the over-all body, the Northern Committee, leads to endless friction between Government and trade union representatives and prevents the building up of the confidence and respect that are so essential in modern industrial relations.

The Future.

But perhaps the greatest problem confronting Northern Ireland trade unionists today is that of working out a relationship with a central trade union body of a nature that will meet the needs of trade unionists in this area. In this respect, Northern Ireland has been particularly unfortunate. We have several times got off to a false start, and at a point in our evolution when the nature of the central organisation of our movement would normally be clearly defined we find ourselves still seeking a solution. A hundred years ago the problem had hardly arisen, and, in the main, union outlook was local, and co-terminus with Belfast or the county of residence. Later, with the growth of nationally organised unions, our local movement was reshaped to fit into a United Kingdom structure, and the British T.U.C. was generally accepted as the centre-piece. In the '90's this centre-piece was replaced by the Irish T.U.C. and it remains so to this day. But, since the political division of Ireland it has become increasingly difficult to secure the co-ordination which is the prime function of a central organisation, and undue strain has often been put upon a body that was originally designed to meet the needs of a different Ireland.

The need for re-adjustment has come to the fore in discussions around what has been termed as the problem of Irish trade union unity. These discussions have arisen as a result of a split which occurred in the Irish trade union movement in 1944. In that year a group of unions broke away from the Irish T.U.C. and formed a rival body, the Congress of Irish Unions. The C.I.U. (170,000 strong) argues that unions in Ireland should be under Irish control, and they point out (and object to) the fact that the majority of unions affiliated to the Irish T.U.C. have their headquarters in Britain. This situation, they contend, is not in the best interests of Irish trade unionism. The majority of Northern trade unionists do not accept this reasoning. They have no desire to break with their fellow trade unionists in Britain, and they back up their case with impressive economic arguments.

Since the break away of the C.I.U., efforts have been made to bring the two parts together again, and, in May, 1953, the National Executive of the Irish T.U.C. passed a resolution declaring that it was anxious to secure a united movement. It therefore proposed that discussions be opened on the subject. The C.I.U. answered by reiterating its "unanimous desire for trade union unity on the basis of the Irish trade union movement being wholly Irish based and controlled," and stating that the C.I.U. was prepared "at all

times to attend any conference convened with this objective in view."¹⁰ Since that date talks have taken place between trade union leaders and more will follow in the coming months. During these discussions there will be many problems to overcome. Not the least of these will be the difficulty of arriving at a formula that will satisfy the desire of C.I.U. for "trade union unity on the basis of the Irish trade union movement being wholly Irish based and controlled," and yet, make it possible for trade unionists in the North to continue their British union membership on the present basis.

The withdrawal of the N.U.R. from Ireland has encouraged suggestions that the friction between the C.I.U. and the T.U.C. could be ended if other British unions were to follow the example of the railwaymen and hand over their membership to Irish based organisations.¹¹ This may be so, but such a solution would undoubtedly be rejected by the great majority of trade unionists in Northern Ireland. For one thing, those who call for the withdrawal of British unions base their arguments on assumptions (many of them political) which do not find general acceptance in this region. As we have already noted, there is no evidence that members of British unions operating in the North desire to sever their connections with the British mainland. On the contrary; the value of the link is realised and there is a widespread desire to retain it. In fact, Northern Ireland trade unionists feel they have nothing to gain by leaving their British unions for Irish based organisations. Many unions would lose a great deal in a break with Britain. None more so than those unions whose membership in the South is small or non-existent.

In these circumstances any scheme designed to persuade the C.I.U. to "return to the fold" should be one that does not tamper with existing trade union organisation in Northern Ireland. Anything less than this would be ignoring the fact that the present trade union split is one that originated in and exists in the Twenty-Six counties. North of the border there is no trade union disunity worth talking about. Here we have a united movement operating effectively under able leaders, who have found the link with Britain a help and not a hindrance.

With these things in mind, it seems reasonable to suggest that the only solution that is likely to endure will be one that recognises the realities of the situation. These prompt one to suggest that a federal remedy may be the most effective. Under such a scheme a T.U.C. would be set up for the 319,000 members in the South of Ireland. This body would be controlled by and would be responsible to the trade unionists of the Twenty-Six counties. Since there are only 46,000 members of British unions in Eire, it could not be argued that such a T.U.C. was dominated by British interests. A Northern Ireland T.U.C. could then be set up to look after the interests of trade unionists in the North. This body, like the Southern body, would be quite autonomous and would be controlled by the trade union membership in Northern Ireland. The Northern Government could not assert

¹⁰ cf. Joint Memorandum on Trade Union Unity (published by Joint Committee of Irish T.U.C. and The Congress of Irish Unions, April, 1954), p. 4.

¹¹ cf. *Irish Trade Union Congress, Annual Report, 1952*. Debate on Trade Union Organisation, pp. 195-204.

that such a T.U.C. was "foreign" for there are only 8,700 trade unionists in the North belonging to unions based outside the United Kingdom. Under such an arrangement each part of Ireland would be served by its own central trade union organisation. Matters affecting both parts of the country could be looked after by a joint committee of the two bodies. Later this committee might be enlarged to include representatives from the British T.U.C., and so trade union co-operation would be achieved on the widest possible scale.

Such a system of reorganisation would go a long way to clearing up the present unsatisfactory position, and it would have the merit of recognising certain basic differences of opinion which undoubtedly exist.

What the outcome of the discussion will be we cannot yet say. However, the trade union movement is a democratic organisation. The argument will go on in trade union halls up and down the land, and eventually the opinion of the individual member will make itself felt on the making of policy.

Thus we leave off where we started. At the basic unit. At the branch with the rank and file member. It is in the allegiance of these members that the strength of the Northern Ireland trade union movement lies. The movement itself is like a stout cable that has been made up of many strands. The strands have been bound together along a rope-walk of time and struggle. They are held together by a prudent idealism born out of hard experience. There is every indication that the cable is strong enough to stand any strain that lies ahead.