

BOOK REVIEW

The Making of NIPSA: A History of the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance: 1919-1974

Terry Cradden, December Publications: Belfast, 1998, Paper Stg. £9.99, xiv + 215 pp.

Reviewed by Jackie Sinclair, Department of Industrial Relations & Human Resources, Graduate School of Business, University College Dublin.

Although Irish commentaries on the trade union and labour movement are plentiful, they tend to dominate in three areas. These are firstly biographical treatments of 'the great leaders' such as Connolly and Larkin; secondly, historical, yet contextualised treatments of formative events such as Padraig Yates's recent book on the 1913 Lock-Out, and writings in Donal Nevin's edited collections. Finally, trade union history is presented in a generic sense, such as in works by Andrew Boyd, Mary Daly, and Emmet O'Connor, although these writers often provide specialised histories as well. Terry Cradden's own contribution on the trade union movement in Northern Ireland appears in Nevin's *Trade Union Century*. For academic researchers and other interested parties, there are of course valuable references for both general and specialist areas in the *Journal of Irish Labour History*, *Saothar*.

Studies of individual trade unions and their histories tend to be less prevalent, although there are histories of the ICTU and its forerunner such as that by Fergus D'Arcy. Those works that do exist tend to focus on the larger unions, e.g. the Irish Transport and General Workers' and the Amalgamated, Transport and General Workers' Unions, or the Irish Women Workers' Union history written by Mary Jones. Others do exist for ship workers and other, smaller unions such as farm

labourers and shop workers. Apart from Martin Maguire's recent book of the local government and public services union in the Republic however, and a few teacher union histories, the field tends to be dominated by private sector as well as general unions. Terry Cradden's contribution on this significant Northern Ireland union is therefore particularly welcome.

This informative and thoroughly-researched book provides testament to the members, activists and paid officials of the civil service and local authority trade unions and staff associations which, following a series of alliances and eventual merger, came to form the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance — NIPSA. Described as the largest and most significant of 'home-grown' trade unions in Northern Ireland, NIPSA evolved from the various component organisations of public officers', local authority and civil service unions. While other trade unions in the North were to dwindle or unable to resist mergers with British or Irish based unions, NIPSA obviously flourished, being established as a federation of some 20,000 members in the mid-1970s but becoming a single union, ironically, in response to Conservative industrial relations legislation. Cradden provides us with an astonishing wealth of detail, methodically sifted primarily from archive material, union/staff association journals, minutes of meetings and annual reports. He charts the development of the constituent unions chronologically, from the partition of Ireland onwards, detailing the intra- and inter-union relations that form the background to the series of co-operative efforts between the organisations.

Several major themes are recurrent throughout the period leading up to NIPSA's formation, to which Cradden attaches significance in the shaping of the constituent unions' structures, internal organisation and activities, as they gradually adopted behaviour that was more recognisably 'unionate'. Firstly, relations with the employers influenced how the unions organised and positioned themselves in defence of pay, conditions and job security. They faced intransigence from the employers centrally, with resistance to Whitley machinery until after the Second World War, and a lack of commitment by Unionist governments to workplace democracy. Government pay restraint from the 1960s, and reorganisation of the public service functions of Northern Ireland were also significant, especially following 'political disturbances' from the late 1960s. In local government, the Ulster Public Officers' Association had a frustrating time with the macho management at Belfast and (London)Derry Corporations, and with the wartime tribunal system set up to deal with grievances. Cradden highlights the role of employers (who appear a

far cry from the legendary 'model employer' supposedly associated with the public sector) as instrumental in the increased 'unionateness' and political astuteness of the various associations; they became more willing to at least *threaten* industrial action, and learned to utilise political contacts such as Labour MPs, and newspaper campaigns, to their advantage.

Secondly, a major influence in the formation of the alliance was the prospect (or threat of) merger with British-based unions, mooted as far back as the 1920s when the UPOA made approaches to NALGO, the British local government union for white collar workers. Merger discussions took place with four civil service unions in Britain during the 1960s but the Northern Ireland associations remained intact, wisely Cradden suggests, since problems would have been created by new rivalries and probably a diminished role on the Northern Ireland Whitley Committee. The alliance of the Northern Ireland unions resulted, he concludes, not from any 'grand design', but from a combination of the pragmatism and skill of leaders such as Brendan Harkin and George Hodgkins, backed by a core of activists.

Another major theme that the book highlights, and which appears influential in each union's development, is the contradiction in self-image, social attitudes and political allegiances of the membership. Wrangles took place continually over the question of equal pay for women, and the marriage bar was supported by some factions, even after the employers had abandoned it. Cradden includes some cringe-making extracts from the civil service union journals that reveal attitudes to women and race which were, of course, far from politically correct, including 'cover girl' contests, and racist references. In addition, often revealed was a steadfast loyalty to the British Empire and the King. For example, singing of the national anthem followed a demonstration over threatened pay cuts in 1931! Cradden is at pains to point out, with reference to George Bain's White Collar Unionism, their shared identity and consciousness in common with that of other white collar union members. Yet there was awareness of the ruling English elite that dominated the upper echelons of the civil service, and the members saw themselves 'certainly as operating in an Irish milieu' (p.27). Few Roman Catholics however were to be found in the civil service, at least until the 1960s. During the eruption of 'the troubles', different sections of the membership were involved in civil disobedience or industrial action in support of Unionist protests on the one hand, while others walked out in protest over the Bloody Sunday shootings.

Fourthly, Cradden highlights the continued emphasis on 'professionalism' that the unions maintained such as the appointment of paid officers, the maintaining of office premises and other features of "bureaucratisation". In his chapter 'The Decline of Amateurism', he describes what this meant from the late 1920s when a succession of full-time officers, often with colonial/army backgrounds, was appointed. It was with some consternation therefore that the appointment of Brendan Harkin to the Northern Ireland Civil Service Association was greeted (by sections of the membership as well as government) in the early 1950s. With a strong background in the labour movement, including experience as a convenor at Harland and Wolff, he was also from a Catholic/nationalist background. Unsurprisingly therefore, opposition by factions of NICA's membership produced bitterness, especially over some of Harkin's activities. He played a significant part on ICTU's Northern Ireland Committee, participating in the 1972 conference held to launch their peace programme at which an end to internment was called for. Harkin always remained committed to a unified trade union body and, with his negotiating skills and what Cradden describes as panache, survived the disquiet expressed by some of the membership. Ironically, the final stages of the alliance were being completed against a turbulent background, including bomb damage to union buildings, rioting and internment.

Cradden does discuss these developments with a depth and rigour which is deserved, and acknowledges both the role of human agency, as well as structures in forming and reforming the unions' reorganisation, and shaping the consciousness and activities of the membership. If anything, however some key developments are perhaps buried within such a wealth of detail. For example, the struggle to gain Whitley machinery for individual government departments was finally achieved in 1971, after resistance on the part of the employers for 25 years. In addition, the affiliation of the alliance unions to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions was probably instrumental in sustaining them, offering a further incentive to remain separate from UK unions since they gained representation on the Northern Ireland Committee and thus, influence on 'social contract' type issues such as social policy and economic planning. Whilst Cradden does justice to some of these developments, they might be overlooked amidst the relatively minor detail that often appears alongside major events in the evolution of NIPSA.

This book would be of benefit to not only scholars, but those with a general interest in labour history, public sector employment or trade

union development. Indeed, those with knowledge of contemporary industrial relations would recognise some historical parallels. The current General Secretary's Foreword notes that many of the problems encountered by the various unions that came to form NIPSA are 'depressingly familiar'. Questions of 'employee representatives' as opposed to trade union representatives, and resistance to union recognition, he rightly reminds us are nothing new. Added to these could be other resurgent themes of our times such as fragmentation of national bargaining, periodic decline in membership levels, and an emphasis on 'employee loyalty and commitment' to the employer.

Copyright of Irish Journal of Management is the property of Irish Journal of Management and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.