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The American Labour Movement and Northern Ireland

Because of the influence of Irish-Americans, the American Labour movement has always had an abiding interest in Ireland and more recently in the Northern Ireland conflict. East coast unions, like the Longshoremen, the Transport Workers Union, the construction unions etc. have generally demonstrated a simplistic attitude to Northern Ireland which has been exploited by some groups. There are indications, for example, that a fair proportion of the funds used by the Irish National Caucus comes from union sources.

In recent years relations between the Government and those unions interested in Irish affairs have improved. During his visit to New York in June 1982 the then Taoiseach, Mr Haughey, met representatives from several New York based unions from whom he received a warm welcome and promises of support for Irish policy. Teddy Gleason, President of the Longshoremen's Union (and member of the AOH) as well as representatives of the Teamsters Union and the construction industry unions attended. The Ambassador has also had separate meetings with Mr Tom Donohue, Secretary Treasurer of the AFL-CIO, the umbrella group for US trade unions, and with the President of the Longshoremen's Union, Mr Teddy Gleason, with the aim of regularising contact between Irish representatives and the Labour movement. The US trade union movement has set up a body, the Irish-American Labour Coalition, to deal with Irish concerns. While the organisation has some extreme elements within it and has associations with radical Irish-American groups, it nonetheless has many members who are well disposed to the Government. Gleason, who is chairman of the Coalition, recently sent a letter to the Ambassador (text attached) which was widely interpreted as criticism of a decision by the President of the AOH, Joe Roche, to attend a NORAIL function as guest of honour. The letter was drafted by Mr Jim McNamara of his office who keeps in touch with the Embassy. The letter was published with Gleason's agreement. A recent article in the Irish Press (7 March 1983) quoted Gleason as denying that this letter was intended as criticism. This shifting of stance is indicative of the pressure to which Gleason is subject within the Labour movement on Northern Ireland related

Following is the text of my letter to the US Ambassador to

Washington from Mr. Gleason dated March 1, 1983.

matters and it would be unrealistic to expect that he will be able to move any closer to the Government's position of unequivocal condemnation of violence. At the same time, the gestures made by Gleason in recent times have generally been helpful and it is useful to have an indication of support from a man of his influence. Gleason is expected to be in Ireland for St. Patrick's Day this year and efforts will be made to arrange that he is greeted by a member of the Government.

I further stated that the

Issues in which the Labour movement have involved itself are the question of whether US firms operating in Northern Ireland are involved in discriminatory practices and a boycott of British goods.

While others, namely the British Association of Hibernians, may say one thing contradicting their words by their actions, the American Labour Movement is clearly in agreement with the section and its position are consistent with our position.

Anglo-Irish Section

At March 1983 organisation which promotes the use of destruction as a means for solving the problems of Northern Ireland is not speaking for the majority of the people.

Please feel free to contact me if you need any further clarification of our position.

Best of health in the New Year.

Sincerely

Thomas W. Gleason
International Longshoremen's Association
Vice President, AFL-CIO