

REPORT OF THE AFL-CIO DELEGATION  
TO  
NORTHERN IRELAND  
AND  
THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

October 1990



*This is an amplification of remarks made by AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Tom Donahue to the August 1990 Executive Council meeting in Chicago.*

An official delegation composed of Vice-Presidents Morton Bahr, John Sweeney, Secretary-Treasurer Tom Donahue and New York State AFL-CIO President Edward J. Cleary visited Ireland June 27 through July 5, 1990 under the auspices of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). Joseph Jamison, director of the Irish-American Labor Coalition and research director of the New York State AFL-CIO, assisted the delegation. The major parts of the tour were: three days of political and trade union contacts in Belfast and Derry, a round of discussions for two days with Irish government leaders in Dublin, and attendance at the annual conference of ICTU in Tralee, County Kerry from July 2 through July 5.

Several members went on to London where there was a meeting with the International Affairs Officer of the British Trades Union Congress (TUC), Michael Walsh. Vice President Bahr addressed a TUC-organized rally in Trafalgar Square to save the National Health Service from further cutbacks by the Thatcher government.

The trip to Ireland had three purposes:

(1) to review the AFL-CIO policy of supporting the MacBride Principles campaign in the United States in light of the new circumstances, namely, passage of a new Fair Employment Act;

(2) to find out the facts of the controversy surrounding the International Fund for Ireland. The fund has spent upwards of \$150 million mainly in Northern Ireland since 1986, and its spending priorities have been questioned by some who claim it discriminates against sections of the nationalist community because of their republican political attitudes and;

(3) to hear Irish government's concerns over the plight of undocumented Irish workers in the United States. The present U.S. immigration law, which reflects the progressive reforms of 1965, set up unintended barriers to Irish immigration. Moreover, the 1986 IRCA law imposes special disabilities on Irish workers who arrived in the United States mainly after the 1982 amnesty cut-off date. At present, tens of thousands of undocumented Irish workers, in fact, have little prospect of legalization in the United States.

Two additional developments served as background to the trip. First was the "Brooke initiative." Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Brooke has initiated discussions with the Unionist parties, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), the main nationalist party in the North, and the Irish government in an effort to break the political deadlock created by Unionist opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The discussions were a constant subject of political speculation during the whole trip.

Second, the visit of Nelson Mandela to Dublin, coupled with the arrival of the near-victorious Irish soccer team from the World Cup semi-finals in Italy, created an atmosphere of jubilation in Dublin which added greatly to the excitement of the tour.

Flying directly into Northern Ireland, delegation leader Tom Donahue met with leader of the Derry Trades Council, the Derry Unemployed Workers group and the Boston-Ireland Ventures. A meeting with John Hume of the Social Democratic and



Labour Party (SDLP) proved impossible because of sudden changes in Mr. Hume's schedule.

Back in Belfast, the delegation met with the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. These union leaders looked for a perspective on the U.S. labor movement 18 months into the Bush Administration, and U.S. trade union views on organizing possibilities, political action, worker participation and race relations.

At a dinner meeting at the home of the U.S. Consul General in Belfast, Mr. Douglas Archard, the discussions mainly turned on the initial results of the new fair employment legislation. The British government had been pressured to adopt new fair employment legislation not only by the political representatives of Irish nationalism and progressive forces in Britain — chiefly in the Labour Party and trade union movement — but also by the American MacBride campaign of which the AFL-CIO has been a key part.

Bob Cooper, the chair of the strengthened Fair Employment Agency, expressed the hope that its enhanced legal powers, data-gathering and enforcement powers would begin to improve the job prospects for Catholics in Northern Ireland. Under the previous fair employment legislation in effect from 1976 through 1989, the unemployment rates of Catholic adult male workers have remained 2-1/2 times higher than that of their Protestant counterparts.

Present at the reception were: Douglas B. Archard, U.S. Consul General; David Fell, Permanent Secretary, Department of Economic Development; John McConnell, Assistant Secretary, Political Affairs, Northern Ireland Office; James Brown, former Mayor, Carrickfergus Borough Council (Democratic Unionist Party Councillor); Dr. Brian Feeny, Belfast City Councillor (Social Democratic and Labor Party); Stephen McBride, Belfast City Councillor (Alliance Party); Terry Carlin, Northern Ireland Officer, Irish Congress of Trade Unions; Bob Cooper, Chairman, Fair Employment Commission; Rev. Harold Allen, Presbyterian Clergyman, and Drew Nelson, Solicitor (Official Unionist Party).

Terry Carlin, Northern Ireland officer of ICTU, organized a meeting with "Making Belfast Work," a coalition of community groups ranging from those that work comfortably with the British government to those that are highly critical of the British government's employment-creation policy. It should be remembered that unemployment as a whole in the six counties averages close to 20 percent and has done so for 20 years. In nationalist (Catholic) ghetto areas, unemployment rates above 60 percent are not unusual. Separately, John Sweeney and Joe Jamison met with "Is Belfast Working?" This is a group of Belfast community activists based in the Falls Road Community Center who are consistently critical of official job creation schemes. Surprisingly, community-led struggles for new kinds of job creation are a new phenomenon in the six counties. There had been a powerful tradition in the Catholic community to conclude that mass unemployment was caused by the fact that the six counties were in the wrong political jurisdiction. Many nationalist leaders would focus solely on the question of sovereignty instead of reformist campaigns to set right the imbalances in job creation between Catholic and Protestant areas and to demand meaningful job creation policies, in place of the dole and short-term make-work schemes.



An important meeting was held with John McGuckian, chairman of the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) and his senior advisor. McGuckian noted the charges that there had been serious cases of political discrimination during the tenure of his predecessor, but stated that in the months since he had taken over the chair of the IFI he had made every effort to ensure consideration of grant requests. (The only exception, he was frank to say, was the political intervention by the two governments when Conway Mill in West Belfast had applied for a grant from the IFI).

The delegation met with Vincent McCormack, an author of the book *Enduring Inequality: Religious Discrimination in Northern Ireland* published by the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL), the chief civil liberties body in the United Kingdom. McCormack was accompanied by John Wadham, the legal officer of the NCCL. There is a renewed interest in Northern Ireland among British civil liberties organizations, and NCCL in particular is raising the level of awareness both in Britain and internationally.

There was a meeting with the Carrickhill Housing Campaign which represents the residents of a public housing slum in West Belfast. As in the case of the Divis project before it, the residents are seeking the demolition of the project and the rehousing of the residents in quality row housing. The project is isolated from other parts of West Belfast by new highway development. It is extremely dilapidated by the standards of housing in Northern Ireland. The republican political loyalties of its residents — campaign activists believe — made it more difficult to get funding for re-housing from the housing authorities.

The delegation visited the Flax Trust, a job creation, training and business incubation effort pioneered by Father Myles Cavanaugh and Sister Mary Turley. This project, which has received IFI funding, is housed in an old linen factory near the sectarian divide. It subsidizes small businesses and provides management services to the ones that show the greatest promise. Job training of various types are also provided.

In Dublin, the delegation met with representatives of the Department of Foreign Affairs who briefed them on the state of the inter-governmental discussions and the Irish government's view of the IFI controversy.

The delegation met with Bertie Ahern, Minister for Labor who discussed the emigration problems facing the 26 counties and the need for relief for the undocumented Irish in the United States.

A highlight of the Dublin part of the tour was the concert for Nelson Mandela. Ireland has an exceptionally strong anti-apartheid movement. Because of Ireland's colonial experience, great numbers of the Irish identify with the struggle of the people of South Africa. Many of the leading political figures of Ireland were present in the hall to greet Winnie Mandela. Irish folksingers of the first calibre entertained the audience.

In Dublin, the delegation visited the All-Ireland Home for the Jewish Aged, a charity of the late Michael Mann, Regional Director, AFL-CIO. Vice President Bahr and Secretary-Treasurer Sweeney are undertaking to help a fund-raising project to modernize and expand this home for the Jewish elderly in Dublin.



In Dublin, Joe Jamison toured the newly constructed Irish Labour History Museum. Since the visit, American labor historians and archivists have been put in touch with their Irish counterparts and a program of technical cooperation is planned.

The conference in Tralee was the centerpiece of the trip. The major issues debated at the conference included the Program for National Recovery, the European Social Charter, public service cutbacks and the need for a statutory minimum wage. The conference heard fraternal delegates from the South African trade union movement and the British TUC. It was presided over by Jimmy Blair of the Amalgamated Engineering Union who represented the ICTU at the 1989 AFL-CIO national convention. The newly elected ICTU president (for a two-year term) is Christopher Kirwan, joint general secretary of the Service, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), the largest Irish union. Kirwan is well known to American trade unionists, and a frequent visitor here. He completed a labor studies program at Rutgers University in the late 1960s. The American delegates to the conference were impressed by the high level of conference debate. Irish trade unionists expressed interest in AFL-CIO initiatives such as the Organizing Institute. Irish trade unionists who planned to visit the United States to study approaches to "worker participation" were assisted.

#### Conclusions and Recommendations:

1. **Fair Employment.** The delegation concluded that the existing AFL-CIO policy, as expressed in the 1989 convention documents, is sound for the present period. In the Report of the AFL-CIO Executive Council it was noted, "While the new Fair Employment Act falls short of the aspirations of Irish trade unionists, we believe our continued support for U.S. corporate compliance with the MacBride code can help to ensure that the law is properly enforced." There is a basis for believing that, by continuing the pressure internationally, the somewhat stronger new law now on the books can make progress toward alleviating the pattern of entrenched sectarian discrimination that still exists in the North. The United States — despite considerable backsliding in the 80s — underwent a civil rights revolution in the 50s and 60s and is still far ahead of Ireland and Britain in its experience with affirmative action. We should encourage community activists and public officials from the north of Ireland to visit the U.S. and to study our experience. It is heartening that the MacBride campaign has been internationalized. In recent years, Norwegian and Canadian capital has made significant investments in the six counties — including areas that were bastions of unfair employment practices. The Canadian and Norwegian trade union movements have recently adopted resolutions on the MacBride principles, following the AFL-CIO's lead.

We look forward to continuing close consultations with ICTU on fair employment issues.

2. **The IFI.** The evidence suggests that, while under its current chairman, progress has been made in ending some of the worst cases of misspending and political discrimination in disbursing IFI funds, a problem still exists. Americans did not agree to allocate their tax money to a fund that discriminates against some Irish people because of their politics. Our delegation concluded that a higher degree of oversight by Congress or some other appropriate body is justified.

On the other hand, it should be borne in mind that the \$150 million dispensed over these last four years is miniscule in the total U.S. foreign aid budget. Moreover, the IFI was the first time the United States has devoted any part of its foreign aid monies



to Ireland. We think IFI funding higher than present levels is justified, provided that it is allocated in a non-discriminatory manner. There is some danger that the present volatile political climate on Capitol Hill, with a struggle over the federal budget and demands for new priorities in US foreign aid, could endanger the whole IFI program. That would be a grievous loss to the Irish people, North and South.

3. **Immigration Policy.** The AFL-CIO has already indicated its support of the Morrison Bill to modify U.S. legal immigration policy. It should not be too difficult to overcome the unintended discriminatory effects of earlier immigration reforms. The legalization of undocumented workers, however, is still a burning issue both for the Irish and other undocumented ethnic groups, and the AFL-CIO had supported a far broader amnesty than that of the 1986 law.

4. **The Brooke Initiative.** It is hard to evaluate a political initiative whose contours are still under wraps.

In 1985 some AFL-CIO leaders expressed support for the Anglo-Irish Agreement insofar as it addressed the problems of inequality, repression, and unemployment. We hoped it would be a stepping stone to fundamental settlement.

It is our hope now that the new power-sharing arrangement apparently under discussion would not have the defects of earlier power-sharing proposals, that it would provide stability and would have all-inclusive support in both sections of the divided North, as well as from the Irish and British governments. In such conditions it could create a framework for real progress on the issues on which we have pressured U.S. companies.

Most of all, we hope that it would create a framework for settling this twenty-year long political crisis on the basis of a reunited Ireland. That is the classical position of the AFL-CIO, reiterated over many decades, and it is still the correct position for democrats the world over.

We express our thanks to Peter Cassells, general secretary of the ICTU, and Terry Carlin, Northern Ireland officer of the ICTU who has labored so long and so effectively with trade unionists from both communities in the search for peace with justice and who was tireless in his concern for our delegation and a patient and sensitive host.