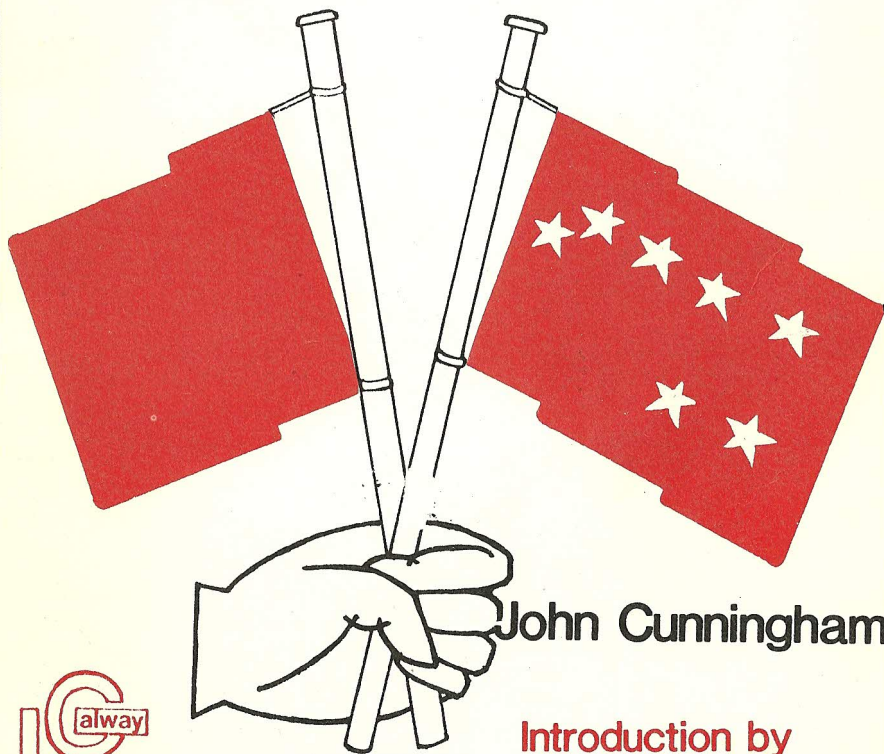


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# mayday!

GALWAY AND THE ORIGINS OF  
INTERNATIONAL LABOUR DAY



John Cunningham

Introduction by  
Michael D. Higgins



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By Michael D.Higgins

The people of Galway are indebted to John Cunningham for tracing the history of May Day as a special day for the International Labour Movement. On that day workers all over the world celebrate their solidarity. In some countries the day is chosen for demonstrations against oppression or dictatorship. In other countries the day is chosen for celebrating the achievements of the trade union movement. But whether it is in struggle or celebration May Day is a special day for working people the world over.

It is appropriate then that John Cunningham has chosen May Day 1987 to continue his investigation of the history of Labour in Galway. It is a complex story of various struggles at shop-floor level and attempts to organize. It is a stirring tale of flags being banned, meetings proscribed, radical resolutions and speeches.

May Day is now celebrated in Galway by a well-organized Galway Council of Trade Unions. It is, however, appropriate to remind ourselves of the brave men and women who established a role for the trade union movement. They would want us to bear in mind the struggles of those not free to organize. We especially remember those executed, tortured, or in prison.

As you read this pamphlet you will get a feeling for a side of Galway history too long neglected. It is the story of men and women who together saw our common struggle with working people everywhere and their designation of a special day for celebration - May Day.

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## BACKGROUND

*The nooses were quickly adjusted, the caps pulled down and a hasty movement made for the traps. Then from behind the hoods came these words:*

*'There will be a time when our voices will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today.'*

The above account, based on eyewitness recollections of the execution of four workers leaders in Chicago in 1887, describes the fate of some early campaigners for the eight-hour day. Commemoration of the innocent victims led to the establishment of May 1st as International Labour Day.

As a response to unemployment caused by technical innovation and immigration the call for a shorter working day to share out the available work, was increasingly taken up by trade unionists in the United States as the last century progressed. National strikes for this purpose were called on May 1st 1886. The positive response of Chicago workers met with a particularly brutal response from the police, aided by Pinkerton agents hired by the employers. Workers were killed as demonstrations were fired upon. On May 4th an alleged anarchist placed a bomb which killed several policemen. No serious attempt was made to capture the person responsible, raising the possibility that it was an *agent provocateur*, but all of the major union leaders were arrested and charged with the crime. A packed jury convicted all eight and sentenced them to death. Three sentences were commuted and one died in prison but subsequently all were pardoned after a nationwide campaign. The pardon came six years too late for Parsons, Engel, Fischer and Spies, the Haymarket Martyrs.

A few years later in July 1889 the Second International met for the first time in Paris. Among the organisers was Frederick Engels and delegates present included representatives from most of the socialist and workers' parties then in existence. A resolution was passed which called on workers throughout the world to observe May Day as a day of international working class solidarity in honour of those executed in Chicago and to make their demand for an eight hour day a reality.

The resolution was put into effect on May 1st 1890 and the day was observed with big demonstrations in Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Germany, Spain, USA, Norway, France and Sweden. In Britain and Ireland, events were held on the following Sunday May 4th. The demonstration was a large one consisting mainly of unskilled workers who had recently begun to organise themselves.

## GALWAY BACKGROUND

May Day was not initially celebrated in Galway. The city was small, the population being approximately a quarter of the present level. There was little industry, the most significant economic activity was centred around the dock and city markets. Trade unionism did however develop. Galway dockers, like their counterparts in other ports throughout the world, began to organise themselves in 1889 and 1890. Skilled trades had their own separate organisations.

If workers didn't march on May Day they did appear with their banners on St Patrick's Day. Shop assistants, members of the local branch of the Irish Drapers Assistants Association, campaigned with the Gaelic League to have the day recognised as a holiday, and they met with success in 1904 when shops remained shut on that day. When the first Trades Council was formed in 1911, it was considered important that workers make a big show in the St Patrick's Day Parade. The executive urged the affiliated unions to take their place in the procession, 'second', (after the bands?) 'not last as heretofore'. The magnificent banner of the Galway Workers and General Labourers Union excited much press comment on these occasions.

The upsurge in Galway union activity in the few years before 1914, which had seen lockouts and general strikes as well as the election of the first Trades Council-nominated Labour candidates, fizzled out somewhat during the First World War. While the unions remained in existence many of their members went to fight in the trenches or on battle-ships, while others went to take up more remunerative employment in the war industries in Britain.

The end of the war saw the opening of the floodgates on union activity. All over Europe soldiers arrived home from

the 'War To End All War' to find that little had changed. The demobilised, who a few months earlier had been toasted in drawing-rooms and on public platforms as heroes, found themselves, in most cases, without employment or income. Recognising the cant and propaganda they had been fed for what it was, many looked to the example of the first workers' state established by the October 1917 revolution in Russia, and there was an outbreak of revolutionary activity in most countries.

Ireland was no exception. People had been mobilised in a massive anti-conscription campaign so workers were amenable to the ideas of the Bolsheviks. Throughout the country, factories and creameries were seized, red flags hoisted and 'Soviets' declared. Wages were rendered negligible by inflation and there was widespread profiteering as merchants took advantage of scarcity, especially as far as food and fuel were concerned.

In this atmosphere the ITGWU, feared by employers for its militant tactics and respected by workers for the same reason, spread throughout the land. Small local unions amalgamated and branches were formed in dispersed rural townlands. The reputation of the union can be gauged from the following incident in the Galway Courthouse in 1919. The magistrate quoted the miracle of the vineyard to a man who felt wronged by the Urban Council over his allotment. The man's solicitor replied, 'They didn't have the Irish Transport and General Worker's Union in those (biblical!) days, my lord.'

MAY 1ST 1919

The Irish Labour Party and Trades Union Congress (then a joint body), of which the ITGWU was becoming a dominant component, decided to put into effect the recent decision of the Berne Conference of the Second Socialist International and declared May 1st Labour Day, a general holiday. Effectively a national strike was called. A complete shutdown was achieved everywhere except Belfast and Limerick, the latter city having just gone back to work after the confrontation between its Trades Council and the British authorities during the Limerick Soviet. The ITGWU was the organiser of events in most parts of the country. The

To all whom it may Concern.

The WORKERS OF IRELAND have  
decided to Celebrate

# LABOUR DAY

(THURSDAY, MAY 1st),

As a **General Holiday**

All work will be suspended for that day  
to demonstrate that the Irish working-class  
joins with the

## INTERNATIONAL LABOUR MOVEMENT

in demanding a

## DEMOCRATIC LEAGUE OF FREE NATIONS

as the necessary condition of permanent  
peace based upon the

## SELF-DETERMINATION

of all peoples including the

## PEOPLE OF IRELAND.

For the National Executive of the  
Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress.

Dellard, Printinghouse,  
Dublin Ltd.

**WM. O'BRIEN, Secretary.**

National poster for May Day 1919.

authorities reacted by placing restrictions on all public demonstrations. In Dublin, the organisers were forced to have a rally in Croke Park rather than a march. The flying of seditious banners, meaning the Red Flag the symbol of Labour, was prohibited. It is significant that at this period in the aftermath of the Russian revolution, the British feared the red flag more than the green.

In Galway there was much debate as to whether the British injunction on the Red Flag should be observed. Some Trades Council delegates thought the ban should be observed while others weren't sure whether the banner was 'consistent with Catholicity' and it was eventually decided to carry only trade union banners. A local legend claims that on the morning in question a group of dockers, led by the young John O'Healy, later to become a major figure in the city's labour movement, defied the ruling. With red flags flying they are reputed to have captured 'Mairtin Mor' McDonagh and J.S. Young, two prominent employers, both, incidentally, tainted by support for British army recruitment efforts during the recent war, and placed them on the Dublin train. The intervention of a Catholic priest however, secured their release. If this incident did occur it was not reported.

The Galway Trades and Labour Council, organiser of the May Day events, had been originally formed in 1911 but allowed to lapse. It had recently been revived after efforts by the National Union of Railwaymen. Prominently involved also were the labourers, carpenters and clerical workers. Galway City was unique at this stage in its lack of an ITGWU branch. It appears that there were a few members, including Thomas Hynes the famous athlete, but the union wasn't firmly established until later in the year. As early as 1912 the Galway Workers and General Labourers Union had considered affiliating with Larkin's union but they joined instead with the Liverpool-based National Union of Dock Labourers. In the county on the other hand, ITGWU branches had been springing up everywhere in the previous twelve months.

May 1st 1919 was not an unusual day in Galway, in one respect at least. It was raining. The weather did not act as a deterrent and crowds began to assemble in the Square at midday and lined up for the start of the demonstration, advertised for 12.30. Again not unusually, somebody was late. The band from the Industrial School in Lower Salthill,

where winter time was still being observed, assumed that all clocks read as their's did and arrived considerably behind schedule. Eventually they joined St Patrick's Band, and the march got under way.

By all accounts it was a remarkable demonstration. The 'Connacht Tribune' described it as 'one of the most impressive public processions ever held in Galway.' It continued: 'the march of all the trades bodies affiliated with Galway Trades Council revealed Labour in its organised capacity, at once disciplined and orderly.' Each of the sixteen groups marched behind its own banner in the following order: Labourers, Women Workers, Clerical Workers, Carpenters, Teachers, Coachbuilders, Painters, Bakers, Mechanics, Tailors, Carters, Drapers' Assistants, Printers, Railwaymen, Grocers' Assistants and Railway Clerks. Also taking part were the students from the Monastery School. The marchers took an hour to make their way through the town, from Eyre Square, through the city streets to Nile Lodge and back to the square via the New Line (now St.Mary's Rd.) and University Rd.

The speeches to the rally afterwards were on the theme decided by the Berne Conference of the Socialist International, i.e., anti-war, for international working class unity and anti-imperialist. Several Sinn Fein speakers were present and one of them L.E.O'Dea, the solicitor previously quoted, proposed the Trades Council resolution to the gathering. It went, 'We the workers of Galway, in mass meeting assembled, declare our adhesion to the principle of the International League of Peoples, as opposed to a league of governments, diplomats and rulers. It must include all nations willing to subscribe to its constitution and must be based on the right of all nations to a free choice of sovereignty, for Ireland and all the other subject nations and the right to self-determination. While giving enthusiastic support to the project of a League of Free Peoples, we declare that a permanent peace must base its foundations in a complete change in the conditions under which the wealth of the world is produced and distributed, that as we repudiate the rights of Imperialist States to exploit nationalities, so we repudiate the right of capitalists to exploit individuals for the purpose of profit. We further declare that the demands of the workers

of Ireland for an improvement upon the standards of living which prevailed in previous days are justified and must be conceded, that until the increase in money wages is so much greater than the increase in the cost of living as to provide a higher standard of life, there can be no satisfaction of the present claims and that in economic affairs the object of the Labour movement must be to win for the workers an ever increasing share of the produce of their combined labour, until the present system which gives control of industry to those who live upon rent, interest and profit is abolished.'

The resolution was seconded by Miss Flower of the Women Workers Union, the only national labour figure present. She went on to condemn the differential between male and female workers wages and urged all women present to get organised and not to be satisfied until their earnings enabled them to live as well as their employers did. Colourful parables to illustrate a point were very much a part of trade union speeches at the time and Miss Flower concluded with the story of the young man, his father-in-law consented on the basis of his having declared earnings of £2 a week. When he produced only £1 at the end of the week his new bride wondered about the remainder. 'Oh, I earn £2 a week all right' was the reply; 'but my employer keeps one of them, so I only take home £1.' Whatever one might think of that story, it was a sufficient explanation of the Marxist theory of value.

Dr Bryan Cusack TD endorsed the resolution and urged Irish trade unionists to take a leading role in directing the power of organised labour throughout the world. In an apparently contradictory statement he went on to condemn the connection with trade unions in other countries. This was a not very veiled attack on the adherence of most city workers to British-based organisations. The point was taken up by Mr Molloy of the local branch of the National Union of Railwaymen. He defended membership of 'English unions' until 'better Irish unions had been established'.

Despite the presence of several Sinn Fein speakers - they dominated proceedings to a greater extent than at most other venues - the occasion was very much a labour one. The republicans found themselves forced, in words at least, to adopt a revolutionary socialist tone. One of them Dr Walsh, who had already proved himself an ally of workers in acting as

the founding treasurer of the Galway Workers and General Labourers Union, justified his participation on the basis that the labour movement should include those who worked either by hand or by brain. He suggested that the distinction might in fact be superfluous as all tasks required use of both.

The May Day strike became an item for discussion at the next County Council meeting when employees who were members of the Irish Clerical Workers Union demanded that they be paid for the day. Although no notice of their absence had been given Councillor Morris felt it was pointless opposing the request as 'once a fellow joins with the Transport Workers, he can tell you what to do'. Morris's sentiments were echoed in a majority vote, so the clerks got their money.

#### GALWAY COUNTY

Demonstrations were also held throughout the county. The ITGWU organised the Tuam event and were annoyed when the Grocer's Assistants went to work, claiming that they had received no instructions from their national headquarters. There was animosity between the two unions in any case. A resolution adopted by the Tuam Trades Council, on the insistence of the ITGWU, supported co-operatives. The Grocer's Assistants backed their employers' opposition to this threat to business and declared they would withdraw from the Trades Council. So, before the demonstration the ITGWU members marched around to all the shops and forced them to close. All participants were supplied with badges depicting the Red Flag, intended as an act of defiance in the face of the authorities' ban on banners of that colour.

The Loughrea march began at three pm. The apparently huge crowd, including many from the surrounding countryside, was led by the Leitrim (the barony, not the county) Pipes Band. At the meeting afterwards, in the Temperance Buildings, P.Duane, the ITGWU secretary, explained why he had reversed a previous decision on the carrying of red flags. He had met with the District Police Inspector and informed him that the union would insist on breaking the law in this regard. However, when he heard that the Ballinasloe workers were obeying the edict he decided to follow suit.

The only serious act of defiance in County Galway occurred in Gort. Was this due to the fact that Liam Mellows used to distribute James Connolly's newspaper 'The Workers' Republic' a few years earlier? In the morning pickets were placed on all establishments daring to open and soon a complete shutdown was effected. It was market day and, as a protest against profiteering, all vegetables and turf was seized. These were then sold to the poor at what was felt to be a fair price and the money was passed on to the trader. The local newspaper columnist in condemning this action and the subsequent march 'behind the banner of materialistic socialism', commented that 'the stealing of turf and farm produce in broad daylight is an example of the carrying into effect of the view that private property is immoral. Thus', he felt, 'Gort workers know full well the significance of the Red Flag.' A meeting outside the Town Hall, addressed by John Nelby, unanimously condemned Fr Cassidy's refusal to open the building and proceedings concluded with the singing of 'The Red Flag'. Later one of the flag bearers, William Bollinger, appeared in court where he was subjected to a lecture from the resident magistrate on the meaning of the Red Flag, and given a short prison sentence and a fine.

The scale and the activities of the May Day 1919 protests illustrate the degree of class-consciousness there was at the time. Workers were aware that there was no such thing as a single 'national interest' and resolutions passed recognised the common interests of the working class throughout the world. On a national level however, Labour increasingly took a back seat to Sinn Fein having already allowed them a free run in the 1918 elections. Consequently when independence was declared a few years later working people found themselves no better off than previously.

The origin of International Labour Day, as we have seen was in the 'eight-hour-day' movement and the struggle against unemployment. Once again technological advances have surpassed other developments in society resulting in idleness for many. If 'the eight-hour-day' was a suitable slogan in the 1890's, might not a struggle for a seven, or even a six-hour-day be appropriate in the 1980's?

## THE RED FLAG

The following is the text of a song widely sung on May Day 1919. It has become one of the major songs of International Labour and is sung, for instance, every year at the close of the British Labour Party's Conference. It was written in 1889 by Jim Connell from County Meath. Connell, a Fenian, Land Leaguer and a socialist had been forced to emigrate to London when he was blacklisted by employers for attempting to unionise Dublin port. He remained in Britain where he died in 1929 aged 76.

The people's flag is deepest red;  
It shrouded oft' our martyred dead,  
And ere their limbs grew stiff and cold  
Their hearts' blood dyed its ev'ry fold.

### *Chorus*

Then raise the scarlet standard high!  
Within its shade we'll live and die!  
Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer  
We'll keep the red flag flying here!

It waved above our infant might,  
When all ahead seemed dark as night;  
It witnessed many a deed and vow; -  
We must not change its colour now!

It well recalls the triumphs past;  
It gives the hope of peace at last.  
The banner bright, the symbol plain  
Of human right and human gain.

With heads uncovered swear we all  
To bear it onward till we fall!  
Come dungeon dark, or gallows grim,  
This song shall be our parting hymn!

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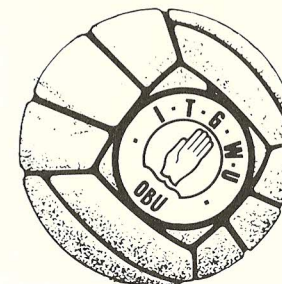
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Civil Aviation	Aerthaisteal sibhialta
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