

# The Castlecomer Mine & Quarry Union

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By Pat Feeley

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The **Workers' Voice** paints a fairly gloomy picture of life in the Kilkenny coalfield in 1932 - the miners working a two day week and living in 'vile, unsanitary' huts under the threat of eviction.

In July Nicholas Boran was a witness in a compensation case involving a miner named Buggy, whose right thumb had been injured in an accident in the pits. The company were offering compensation based on the man's average weekly earnings for the previous year but Boran pointed out that this offer was unfair as he had been idle on half-time for long periods during that time. As a result of his submission an increased allowance of 33/- a week was awarded to Buggy. This was seen as a victory for the union. (29)

Throughout the autumn of 1932 things were bad at the colliery, with the management claiming there was no sale for the tons of coal piled high in the yards and the miners continuing to work a two day week.

In September the trammers threatened to strike unless there was a wage increase of 3d a ton and Boran handed in notice to this effect. Around this time also there was an increase in the union membership. The road workers of Ballyragget formed a branch, and confidence was high amongst the leadership. The company reacted by ignoring the strike threat and making no offer.

Boran wrote that there was widespread discontent and that the trammers were particularly unhappy about their lot. He claimed that the rates in the Jarrow and Skehana seams fell well short of what the miners should be getting in accordance with the sliding scale. (30)

The company continued to ignore the union's threats and demands and on October 17 an all-out strike of the 400 miners, supported by the militant Mine and Quarry Union, took place.

The strikers held a rally in the square in Castlecomer to put their case and to appeal for support. They marched in formation through the town to the music of melodeons. At the meeting, chaired by Boran, Peadar O'Donnell and Michael Farrell called on the workers and small farmers to come to their aid. (31) The secretary to the company, Captain Gahan, walked up the street during the meeting but the miners were disciplined and there were no shouts or jeers. (32)

The strike began with a militant flourish but the men and their families were soon in difficulties. The Union had no funds and by the third week the strikers, were feeling the pinch. Local shopkeepers and publicans were canvassed for food and money and collectors were sent out to raise funds and organise support. Peadar O'Donnell approached some of the Dublin bakeries for bread and two car loads of loaves were sent down to Kilkenny. The Dublin Trades Council on the other hand refused assistance because the Union was not affiliated to Congress.

In an attempt to settle the dispute the Department of Industry and Commerce invited Boran and the other leaders to a meeting in Dublin. The Department officials suggested a return to work pending a conference of all concerned but the strike committee would not agree to

this and no settlement was reached.

Peadar O'Donnell urged support for the strikers at street meetings in Dublin, and the strike committee appealed to the Nation for help. The appeal, which appeared in the papers, said that the workers, whose average weekly wage was about 30 shillings, had been locked out by the company and that the heavers, the men working the coal face, were deprived of half their output by a company policy of not paying for coal that passed through an 1¼" screen. It went on to say that the miners had aired their grievances over the years to no avail and now found that at a time when there was a demand for native coal (the economic war had begun) there was an actual disimprovement in their conditions. (33)

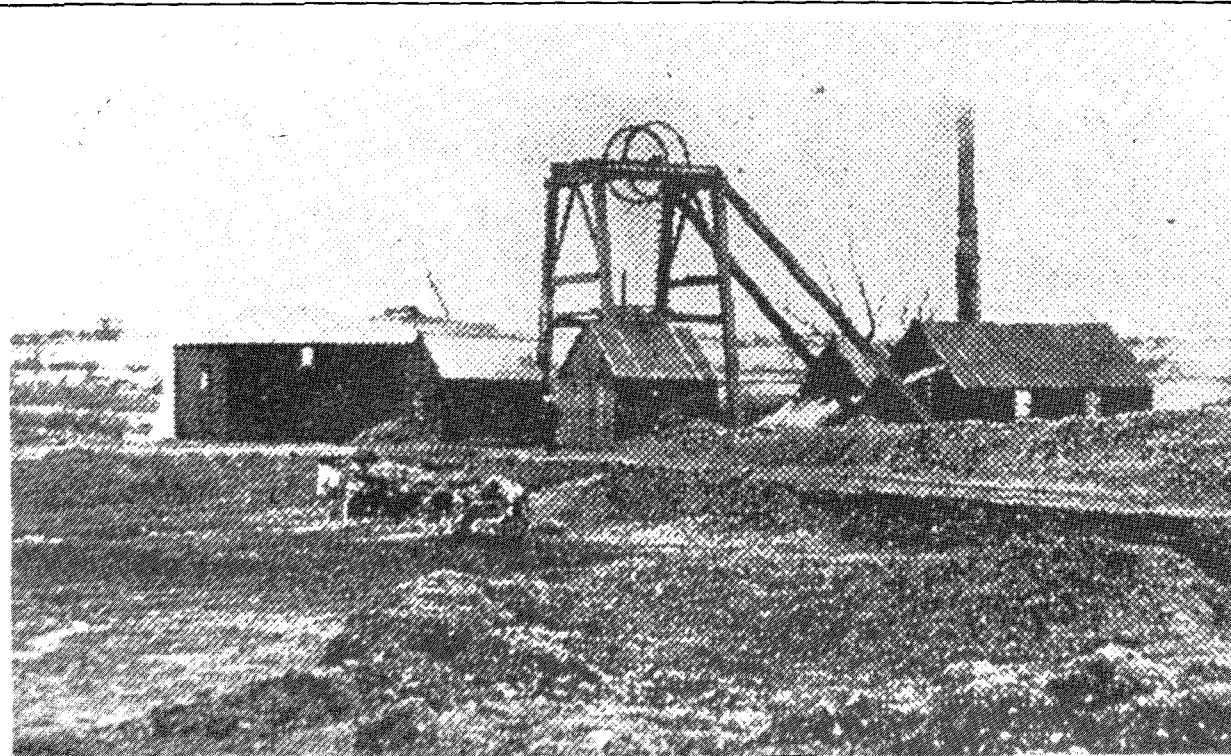
In an interview with the **Irish Independent** Capt. Gahan said that the contract under which the miners worked was unaltered for years and that conditions had not changed. He therefore queried the reasons for the strike and pointed out that the clean coal agreement in the Castlecomer colliery was the same as that in other collieries abroad.

Boran replied to this, saying that the conditions of the contract had been forced on the miners, that they had for long resented them and were now on strike against them. Referring to the clean coal contract he said that two saleable commodities were passing through the screen and were in fact being sold to the public but the miners were not being paid for these at all. The company, he said, were in breach of the Coal Miners Regulation Act, as he had previously brought to their attention, with the miners working up to 12 hour shifts in order to earn a living wage. (34)

A Distress Committee was set up and collectors were dispatched throughout Kilkenny and the neighbouring counties to collect food and money. The strikers were said to be fighting in their bare feet, and an appeal was made to workers and republicans to support them. (35)

Writing in **An Phoblacht** Peadar O'Donnell said that 400 Irish families had been flung on the scrap heap by a 'bullock - cow rancher - mine owner' and that the men, in the sixth week of their strike, were without food or money. (36)

At this point moves were made to bring the dispute to an end, and industrial peace was restored through the intervention of the local shopkeepers who asked the government to send in mediators. The Labour T.D. William Davin, and Sean Gibbons, a Fianna Fail T.D. for Kilkenny, both local men, were chosen as the go-betweens. They met and had discussions with both sides and arising from these two resolutions were put to the strikers. The first, which was defeated, was that the men would return to work pending a conference. The second, which was carried, was that there would be no return to work without some agreed increase in tonnage rates. After further discussions the company offered two ½d in-



Rock Bog Colliery.

creases in the tonnage rates. This offer was put to the men and accepted. The strike was over.

The Union leaders boasted of the miners' glorious victory. There was in fact very little glory. The strikers had been brought to their knees through lack of funds and were glad of any offer that allowed them to return to work with some semblance of dignity. The strike, however, had important long term effects.

Nixie Boran took a triumphant stance and spoke of the 'glorious' strike and the fine victory. He thanked the Dublin workers who had supported them and condemned the Dublin Trades Council for refusing to come to their aid.

Flushed with success, as they saw it, the Union committee began to discuss the building of a workers' hall. During the strike they had been refused the use of the school and the old church by the priest and had to hold their meetings in the open air. The miners were angry about this as they had contributed to the building fund for the school and the new church in Moneenroe (which had been officially opened by Dr. Collier two years previously) and were determined that in future they would not be dependant on the clergy for a meeting place. The clergy naturally saw this independent mindedness as a further challenge to their power and authority.

It was at this point that Dr. Collier, the Bishop of Ossory, intervened directly. On a wet, blustery Sunday morning he travelled to Moneenroe to warn the people against communism and to denounce the activities of the revolutionaries. He condemned the Union and the R.W.G. and called the **Workers' Voice** the voice of the devil. After Mass the congregation were asked to renew their baptismal vows. This is the highly charged ceremony which begins with the priest asking: "Do you renounce Satan?" The faithful replying: "We do renounce him." The priest asking: "And all his works?" The people replying: "We do renounce them". And so on.

While Boran, John Fitzgerald and the other radical miners left the church when this began saying that it was being used to direct the anger of the people against them. (37)

Fr. Cavanagh, who had been transferred from the parish of Clogh to a city parish in Kilkenny, continued to be one of the most vocal denouncers of communism in the diocese. Early in November he preached a sermon on private property. Private property, he said, was an indisputable natural right of man but the communists and socialists were opposed to it and would abolish it if they had their way. Communism was the greatest evil of the time and the faithful, he said, should know and understand Catholic teaching on it in order to effectively combat it.

On the following Sunday he spoke again on the same subject. Communists, he said, were the avowed enemies of Catholicism and religion and guilty of sacrilege, desecration and sacerdotal murder. He advised the people to defeat them. Rhetorically he asked why should he speak of communism to the faithful and devoted Catholics of Kilkenny? Were there communists and anti-God men and women amongst them? Quite the opposite, he believed there was not one in the parish who would not die for the faith. He was just warning them in advance because the communists had made a lodgement in the country and had sent delegates to Moscow to convey fraternal greetings to the Russians. The communists, he warned, would drench the world in blood and bring untold misery to ordinary people. (38)

Canon Cavanagh's sermon was another indication of the rising concern and anger amongst the clergy at what they saw as the increasing boldness of the radical miners as shown by the public meeting in the Town Hall, the six week strike and now the talks of building a workers' hall.

Cavanagh, who later became Dean of the diocese, made a name for himself at this time as a strong opponent of socialism, first as parish priest of Clogh and later as canon of St. Canice's parish in Kilkenny city.

The final blow for the Mine and Quarry Union came in the form of a pastoral from Dr. Collier, in early January 1933. This began by saying that the clergy of the diocese of Ossory had to be especially on their guard against communist activity because there was a large coal mining district in the county which attracted communist in-

terest. Recently they had observed, the bishop said, a communist push (the strike) which had the 'marks of the beast' - secret inspiration from outside, paid agitators, anti-religious propaganda and incitements to looting and rioting.

This was not so. The strike resulted from long standing discontent about conditions of work and pay and took place at this particular time because of the militancy of the new union. There were no paid agitators in the coal field and the strike leaders would have been opposed to any form of riot or community strife.

The pastoral went on to say that the communist objective was to break up the established trade unions and this had been done in Kilkenny with poisoned lies, throwing labour back a hundred years.

(This note of concern for the labour movement was not usual in episcopal pastorals).

The machinery of communism, the bishop said, was in the district in the form of a 'Soviet Union cell' which had the backing of a party paper. He therefore placed the whole communist organisation in the diocese under the ban of the Church and mentioned specifically The Revolutionary Workers' Group (and 'every local union, cell or contact') and The **Workers' Voice**. No Catholic could be a member of such a union nor buy, sell or support a communist journal or paper.

It appealed to those who were Catholics and had been led astray to return to the bosom of the Church and warned, 'the leaders and agents of Bolshevism' that the Church would fight them and that the people of Ossory would not stand under the 'Red Flag of Communism' but with their bishop and priests under the 'Standard of Christ'. (39)

All supporters and members of the R.W.G. and the Mine and Quarry union were now under the ban of the church. The Church had publicly condemned them. This would have had repercussions in any Irish community in the 1930s. In Moneenroe the socialists were accused of bringing shame to the parish and they and their families were given the cold shoulder. There was continuous pressure on them from relatives and friends to publicly recant and conform. The communist miners were the talk of the whole county and for many years afterwards, in the minds of many Kilkenny people, a certain stigma attached to Moneenroe and its people.

A miner, C. Brennan Roe, writing in the **Workers' Voice** said that Wandesforde, the mine owner, having failed to defeat the miners in the strike had engineered the pastoral through his friendship with Fr. Grant the parish priest of Clogh. (40)

This friendship certainly existed and both were strongly opposed to the revolutionary miners and their activities. However, independent of this, the bishop and the clergy saw socialism as a threat to the faith, and a danger to the establishment, and were determined to crush it at every opportunity.

After the pastoral had been read in the churches, a protest march was called for Moneenroe. The parishioners marched through the mining district to demonstrate their opposition to the Union and its members. A meeting was called and Boran and the others were invited to attend. The meeting was held in the old church and was chaired by Nicholas Roe, a big farmer and a prominent local supporter of McDermott's Centre Party. The hall was packed with big farmers. The parish priest, Fr. Grant, and Mr. Gill, the local organiser for the Transport Union were also on the platform. The purpose of the meeting was to get Boran and the others to repudiate communism and to agree to rejoin the I.T.G.W.U.

The speakers condemned the miners for turning their backs on their religion and Boran was asked to denounce communism. He refused, saying he stood for the Irish

working class, was the avowed enemy of capitalism and would denounce only capitalism and imperialism. The crowd began to mutter and moved towards him. Some of Boran's group were armed and the atmosphere was tense. However, the meeting concluded without violence.

In the weeks that followed the socialists came under increasing pressure from their neighbours, relatives and friends. As a result of this a good number resigned from the Union and others dropped out quietly. Boran was left with a small group of loyal supporters but the Union was broken.

Discussions were held with the I.T.G.W.U. with a view to taking in the members of the Mine and Quarry Union and it was finally agreed that they would come in as a separate branch with Boran as their spokesman.

Commenting on the break up, the **Workers' Voice** blamed a combination of the Prior-Wandesfordes and the Church. This was probably the case.

As the Union was disbanding a lively debate on communism was taking place in the letter pages of the local papers.

Early in January a miner, Thomas Walshe, wrote a letter to the **Kilkenny Journal** saying that there were no communists, nor communism, in Moneenroe. Walshe was a founder member of the Union, secretary of the local branch, a member of the Revolutionary Groups and prominently identified with revolutionary socialism in the area. He was not believed when he said there were no communists in Moneenroe.

The best informed letters of the controversy were written by a correspondent, who signed himself 'Tirconaill'.

The first of these letters appeared in January, with the writer asking if what Walshe had said was true and who had brought Stewart the communist to Moneenroe, the Indian communist Saklatvala to Kilkenny and Fr. O'Regan to Railyard, where he had advocated support for the red Union. Who distributed the **Workers' Voice**, the 'dirty rag' of a paper that had called Fr. Cavanagh 'unCatholic and unmanly'? And why had Walshe not disassociated himself from the banned organisation of which he was a well known member?

Walshe replied the following week saying he had been pleased to meet Saklatvala who was anti-imperialist, and he accused 'Tirconaill' of raking over dead ashes in an attempt to denigrate the strike leaders who had won a victory for the miners.

In a further letter 'Tirconaill' accused Walshe of deception in saying that communism was unheard of in the colliery before the strike and quoted from the **Workers' Voice**, which commenting on the formation of the Union, referred to the leader as 'a local communist'.

At this point Walshe withdrew from the controversy saying that the workers had a right to their beliefs and that he would not make any further replies to anonymous correspondents.

Letters from readers in Dublin and from as far away as the United States appeared attacking Walshe and the socialists.

A miner wrote that hunger and poverty were the real evils in Moneenroe and not communism. He suggested that a correspondent who had promised to supply the authorities with the names of all the communists in Moneenroe would be better employed making a list of families that were hungry and living in 'cowsheds'.

The letters continued throughout March, but as they were at this stage all coming from the one side, they were becoming repetitious and the readers were losing interest.

'Tirconaill' suggested that since he had by this time proved that there was communism in the county, it was unnecessary to continue the correspondence. The editor closed the column to the subject soon afterwards.

The question has to be asked as to why militant socialism erupted in this part of north Kilkenny in the early 'thirties. Firstly it has to be said that wages and conditions in the mines were bad and had not changed much over the years. The Wandesfordes exercised an almost feudal power in the area and it was inevitable that this would be challenged at some time. The emergence of a strong leader like Boran brought the challenge forward.

The Mine and Quarry Union was a political trade union. It was founded and led by the Revolutionary Workers' Groups. This was a radical departure as political trade unions have never been a feature of the labour movement in Britain or Ireland. The miners did not, however, view it from that aspect. They were simply disenchanted with the I.T.G.W.U. and looked to the new union to improve their situation.

The majority of the miners were not communists. A small minority were. But most of them neither understood nor believed in it. However, when the Dublin communists came offering help they welcomed them, especially as they were an organised group with a newspaper which would be used to publicise and support their cause. Later when the miners came under fire from the Church some of them accused the communists of exploiting their grievances for their own ends. This was less than fair as they had initially welcomed their support and benefitted greatly from it.

Needless to say the militant union was a red rag to the political and clerical establishment, and the leaders of the communist movement showed a certain naivete in believing that it would be allowed to function and carry on.

The communists of the time were championing the most depressed sections of the working class. In Britain they were organising hunger marches to draw attention to the evils of unemployment. In Ireland, too, they were involved with the unemployed and had started the Irish National Unemployed Movement. In Belfast they were championing the Outdoor Relief Workers and in Kilkenny the miners. Through their support for these issues they hoped to recruit new members and build up the party. Coal mining districts were traditionally a good recruiting ground.

The Irish communists of the time were militant and revolutionary in their thinking. Many of them were under the influence of the Russian revolution and spoke of the capitalist collapse and of the imminence of revolution in Ireland. (41) Outlining the programme for the workers' republic in **The Irish Case for Communism** Sean Murray wrote of nationalisation without compensation of all big farms, estates and industry, confiscation of the property of all 'national traitors' and the abolition of parliament. (42) This was the stuff of revolution, but there was no revolutionary situation and no real support for the R.W.G.

The socialists of the time failed, as did others of later generations, to fuse their ideology with the culture and traditions of the country. They made no attempt to shape and adapt it to Irish conditions. Because of this they failed to make any relevant political sense.

The Mine and Quarry Union had an important influence on the future of the mining community. The trammers' strike came to be regarded as the first serious blow struck against the power of the Prior-Wandesfordes and the first step on the road towards improved conditions.

In 1934 there were three further strike and as a result of this continuous agitation wages and working conditions began to improve. In 1939 pit baths, buildings where the men could shower and change after work, were introduced. In succeeding years increased mechanization made the work easier. Electrically operated machines were introduced: a digger to dig the

coal on the pit face and fillers to shovel it onto a rubberised belt, which fed another conveyor belt at right angles to it and which delivered the coal to an underground roadway. Here trains of tubs were waiting to bring it to the surface where it was screened and graded.

The miners credited Boran with initiating the improvements that took place in the colliery and his prestige increased as time went by. In 1935 he was elected chairman of the Castlecomer Branch of the I.T.G.W.U. In 1946 he was appointed local branch secretary. He became a member of the national executive in the 'fifties, a position he retained up to his death. In 1956 he was a delegate to the I.L.O. conference in Geneva and spoke on automation in industry. When the coal company was in financial difficulties in the 'sixties, he was brought onto the board of management to keep the industry going and to save jobs. This move failed and the pits closed down in 1969.

He retained a strong interest in the community and introduced at different times a fuel scheme and a co-operative society. He agitated endlessly for improvements in safety precautions and had pneumoconiosis recognised as a miners' disease and subject to compensation. Boran died in November 1971 and his contribution to the Castlecomer area was acknowledged in speeches and tributes by a cross-section of the population.

Bishop Collier continued to denounce communism in the coalfield. At a confirmation ceremony in Clogh in 1935 he referred to the left wingers as 'stookawns and serpents from the devil'.

The Irish Mine and Quarry Workers' Union lasted just over two years but played an important part in radicalising the thinking of the miners and in bringing about improvements in their conditions and way of life.

(Concluded).

#### SOURCES

- (29) The Kilkenny Journal, 23/7/1932.
- (30) Irish Workers' Voice, 15/10/1932.
- (31) Ibid, 29/10/1932.
- (32) Interview, Michael Farrell, Castlecomer, 1979.
- (33) Irish Workers' Voice, 19/11/1932.
- (34) Ibid, 26/11/1932.
- (35) Ibid, 5/11/1932.
- (36) An Phoblact, 26/11/1932.
- (37) Interview, Joe Fitzgerald, Moneenroe, 1979.
- (38) The Kilkenny Journal, 26/11/1932.
- (39) The Kilkenny Journal, 7/1/1932.
- (40) Irish Workers' Voice, 28/1/1932.
- (41) Speaking at a meeting in the Mansion House to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the establishment of the U.S.S.R., Peadar O'Donnell, regarded as one of the principal left wing socialists, said they were in the 'edge of greater happenings than anyone realised. At the same meeting Jim Larkin Junr., one of the leaders of the R.W.G., lamented that unlike their counterparts in the Red Army Irish workers could not parade openly with arms. (Irish Independent 12/11/1932).
- (42) "The Irish Case for Communism" by Sean Murray. Published Jan. 1933. Cork Workers' Club (reprint).

