
PARTEEN

to organise or not?

BY MICHAEL McCARTHY



This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. On January 4, 1909, at a meeting of dockers held in the Trades Hall, Dublin, Jim Larkin set up his new union. Up to then, all quay workers belonged to the National Union of Dock Labourers which was English-based, with its headquarters in Liverpool. The newly-formed break-away union was to be markedly Irish and open to most grades of workers, but excluding women. Tom Foran was the union's first president and Larkin was appointed secretary. Headquarters were set up in Beresford Place in the Northumberland Hotel, later to be named Liberty Hall.

The Dublin initiative in breaking away from the NUDL was followed in other parts of the country. Branches of the ITGWU were set up in the port towns of Wexford, Waterford, Cork, Sligo and Belfast. Membership grew rapidly, particularly in Dublin, and when the lock-out took place there in 1913 it was estimated that over 20,000 wage-earners were thrown idle by the employers in their attempt to smash the Transport Union. Undoubtedly, the strike severely weakened the union, its coffers were empty and shortly afterwards Larkin, a sick man, left for America on a fund-raising tour which was due to last for a year. The "tour" lasted nine years. James Connolly took over as acting general secretary even though it was Larkin's wish that P.T. Daly take the post. Putting it mildly, Larkin and Connolly seldom saw eye to eye, and the latter had grown tired of Larkin's ego-tripping, unpredictability and incoherent approach to the problems of labour. In Connolly's short term of office, before he was executed on May 12, 1916, for his part in the Rising, he bequeathed to the union a socialist philosophical base to be used as the canon and cutting edge for it ever after. At the end of 1916, the union, sorely in debt, consisted of just

10 branches and its headquarters, Liberty Hall, had been destroyed in the Rising.

But the annual report for 1918 claimed: "Easter week saved the Union. It cancelled out the reaction from 1913, and removed bitter prejudices which had blocked its progress. It linked up the Labour Movement with the age-long aspirations of the Irish people for emancipation from political and social thralldom, and formed a national moratorium under cover of which it was able to make a fresh start on better terms with increased membership".

The years 1917 and 1918 were inspiring times for workers and a stirring period for the union. The Rising had given its own fillip to workers' spirits. Then the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 acted as a global catalyst. Tom Johnson, of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, and later to be leader of the Labour Party, spelt out the message of that revolution: "It means that as society is based upon labour, labour shall rule". Some parts of the country took that message more seriously than others and set up workers' councils or soviets, based on the Russian model, using physical force to do so if necessary. Clare had two of these councils, one in Broadford, the other in Kilfenora.

The 87th branch of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union was set up in Parteen on June 8, 1918. Patrick C. Clear, who ran the local post office, was registered as secretary. Meetings were held in the school near Parteen bridge and later moved to an old shed on a plot of ground known as "No Man's Land".

The branch remittance to head office for its first year was £39-7-2 which would indicate a considerable membership. In fact, folk memory has it that everyone was in "the Union".

The Parteen branch was the second to be established in Clare. The first branch was founded at Newmarket-on-Fergus on May 25, 1918, a mere fortnight before the Parteen one. But

the Newmarket branch lapsed shortly afterwards and was not revived until August 29, 1919. Other centres in Clare were quick to introduce the union. Clonlara started its own branch with Tom Molony as secretary; Cratloe followed, with Tom Gleeson as secretary; then O'Brien's Bridge with Francis Duggan of Bridgetown as secretary; Scariff had Martin Gildea as secretary. By 1920 union records show that Clare had 22 branches — nine in mid-Clare, nine in the east and four in the west. Unfortunately, the typed membership list attached to the manuscript in the National Library containing details of branches in Clare has been lost. Without this list it is impossible to reconstruct accurately the early days of individual branches in the county.

One may well ask why did a branch of the union appear in Parteen since it was not an industrial area. In 1918, Parteen had little to boast of apart from the Lax Weir which employed a couple of men from the village. Sadly, since then the weir has atrophied. But in those days, the main employers in the locality were the few "big houses" which had their quota of coachmen, domestics and gardeners; agricultural labourers and tradesmen would also have been plentiful in and about the village. The factories of nearby Limerick would have absorbed whatever spare labour there was, and even though the city was heavily unionised as the general strike against militarism of 1919 was to show, the focus for employees activities would have been the factory floor and not their home area. Neither was there any great land agitation in the place at the time; the so-called "landless men" had made no impact as yet. Nor is there any indication that Parteen had a branch of the Trade and Labour Union or its successors, the District Labour Association and the District Cottiers' Association. The Shannon Scheme, which was later to transform and even "transplant" the village, had not yet been proposed. Apart from a brief in-



Parteen waterway

dustrial dispute connected with fishermen on the Shannon early in the century, there is no other record of industrial action in the locality. So, why then was there a branch of the ITGWU established in Parteen?

It is very difficult to pin down a specific reason. The end of World War 1 had brought demobilisation and the fear of recession. Thousands of former soldiers had crowded on to the job market causing greater unemployment and threatening those who already had jobs. The union offered some protection to workers, particularly as many employers were inclined to favour the men who had given service to the Empire; in certain sectors it also gave the prospect of betterment.

The anti-conscription campaign of 1918 helped in its own way to heighten consciousness against British rule. As a result of a meeting between the delegation of the Mansion House Conference, which included Dublin's Lord Mayor O'Neill, de Valera, Dillon, Healy and William O'Brien, and the Catholic Hierarchy, the bishops decided that an announcement would be made at public Masses, in every parish of the country, of a meeting to be held for the purpose of administering a pledge against compulsory conscription. The labour movement, of course, was also busy in this regard. A general one-day strike was called for April 23. The country responded enthusiastically to both initiatives.

Another reason for the founding of a

branch in the parish could have been that the trade union organisation and structure provided an acceptable face for other activities mainly of a republican nature. The local Volunteers were quite active and came under the leadership of the famous Brennan brothers of the East Clare Brigade who lived only a few short miles away in the neighbouring twin parish of Meelick. St. Thomas' Island, reportedly, was a favourite meeting place for the Volunteers and it was also used for hiding caches of arms, as there were subterranean passages there. A "Junior" version of the Volunteers also existed in the parish in the form of the scouts (Fianna Eireann), who were used in the gathering of intelligence. There is no doubt that the Transport Union, ever since Connolly's time, had provided a vehicle for republican thought and action; the main local link was the Limerick branch, whose O'Connell Street premises also served as headquarters for the IRA's mid-Limerick Brigade.

It is interesting to note that there was a post office connection with some of this activity.

Pat Clear, the union secretary, was the Parteen postmaster. A telegraphist at the Limerick G.P.O., Bobby Byrne, was a prominent trade unionist and a delegate to the Limerick Trades' Council. He was also a leading republican and was sentenced to 12 months imprisonment after a revolver and ammunition had been found in his house.

Byrne was shot during a rescue attempt at the Limerick Union Hospital, and was brought by the rescue-party to a house in Knockalisheen, less than two miles from Parteen, but died shortly afterwards. On April 9, 1919, the British military authorities proclaimed the city of Limerick a special military area. The Trades' Council, urged on by the republican forces, took immediate and militant action. A general strike was declared which lasted for 11 days.

The same year Michael Brennan and about twenty Volunteers raided the GPO in Limerick and got away with £1,500; they needed the money for arms and, as Brennan later reminisced, he could see no objection to the British providing that money! The raid was successful, primarily because of intelligence supplied to Brennan by Jack Coughlan, a post office employee; in fact, Coughlan was an important wheel in Brennan's very efficient machine.

Most, if not all, of the credit for the founding of a branch at Parteen must be attributed to Pat Clear, the secretary. "A man ahead of his time" is how he is best remembered in the area. Sometimes one hears the qualification, "In those days he was considered a bit of a communist". A "communist" then and for many years afterwards, was a nomenclature for describing someone who was different, who did not fit comfortably into the tram-tracked categories of political life, and who was prepared to challenge the vested interests and shibboleths of

society. Clear's politics were republican and labour. His family had been in the area for many years, some of them teaching in the local school which for a while was an agricultural school. At any rate, union records show that Clear was an organiser of no mean ability and that the interests of the working class were his constant priority.

Even though most of the union's Clare branches were set up in the countryside the most notable successes were recorded in the towns. From newspaper reports one can see that the most militant trade unionists in 1918 and 1919 were shop assistants, asylum workers, law clerks and domestic workers. Agricultural labourers, even though they totalled 40,000 in the union by 1920, could not be induced to make a wage demand in Clare until late 1920. But the union was remarkably successful with other classes of workers: a wage rise of 33-45% was won for trained domestics; 50-125% for shop assistants; 75% for boatmen on the Shannon; road workers in the county were now (1920) getting £1-15-0 to £2-8-0 weekly, compared to 12/- before the war. These achievements were reflected in press reports. A Parteen correspondent wrote in **The Voice of Labour**: "Full steam ahead with this branch. Careless members are stumping up all round. The road workers have through our vigilance department got their working benefit".

The improved fortunes and increased activity of the union, generally, were reflected in the annual report for 1919. Total receipts amounted to £74,474-14-10. The report also noted, "The influenza epidemic, which did dreadful havoc in many of the Irish towns, was chiefly responsible for raising the outlay on Mortality Benefit to £3,281-10-0." Parteen branch is not listed among the recipients of this benefit which would indicate that its members escaped the worst of the epidemic. In fact, the year 1919 marked the highest point in financial terms for the Parteen branch, with its remittance to Head Office totalling £88-4-0, which was double the figure for the year 1918. The following year, 1920, saw £82-12-8 being forwarded to Liberty Hall, now rebuilt after having been demolished during the Rising.

The year 1921 marked the beginning of the end, in financial terms, for Parteen branch. Only £51-3-7 was forwarded to Head Office, with £4-10-0 received from Dublin. There are a variety of reasons for this drop in remittance. Firstly, the Black and Tan terror campaign which seriously disrupted social life in the country began in September 1920; the Transport Union was singled out for indiscriminate harassment. Branch offices were frequently raided and burned down by the crown forces. Senior executives of the Union

were arrested and imprisoned. For example, William O'Brien, general treasurer, was arrested in Dublin and later released on hunger strike from Wormwood Scrubs jail; Cathal O'Shanon, editor of **The Voice of Labour**, was picked up in London and later released on hunger strike from Mountjoy Jail. In reply to harassment at local level, the East Clare Brigade defended and counter-attacked as best it could. An ambush on the Black and Tans at Glenwood left six of the Auxiliaries dead and their transport in flames. In reprisal, thirty-six houses in the locality were set on fire.

The net effect on the Transport Union of this campaign of terror was that membership dropped throughout the country and so did attendance at branch meetings. Consequently, finance suffered and hence the decreased remittance to Head Office. A second reason for the drop in returns was that money was scarce anyway. The country was in the grip of post-war recession which was hitting employers and employees alike. Agricultural prices reflected the decline in the economy as did unemployment figures — 58,000 were out of work at the end of 1920, rising to 113,000 at the end of 1921. The agrarian agitation which hit Clare in early 1920 disappeared practically, and the radical trade unionism which characterised the previous two years was replaced by a more cautious, conciliatory and tentative approach. The annual report for 1921 reluctantly admitted:

"To assert that no wage reductions were sustained in Ireland during the year under review would be too sweeping, for in a few districts organised men had to give away something, but this was almost altogether due to good Union men suffering for the sins of slackers, and it can safely be declared that, where organisation was good, wages were not impaired, and that, all round, a standard of life far superior to the inadequate pre-war one was still secured".

There were other events happening in Parteen during 1921 which were a cause for concern. **The Voice of Labour** carried the following brief report:

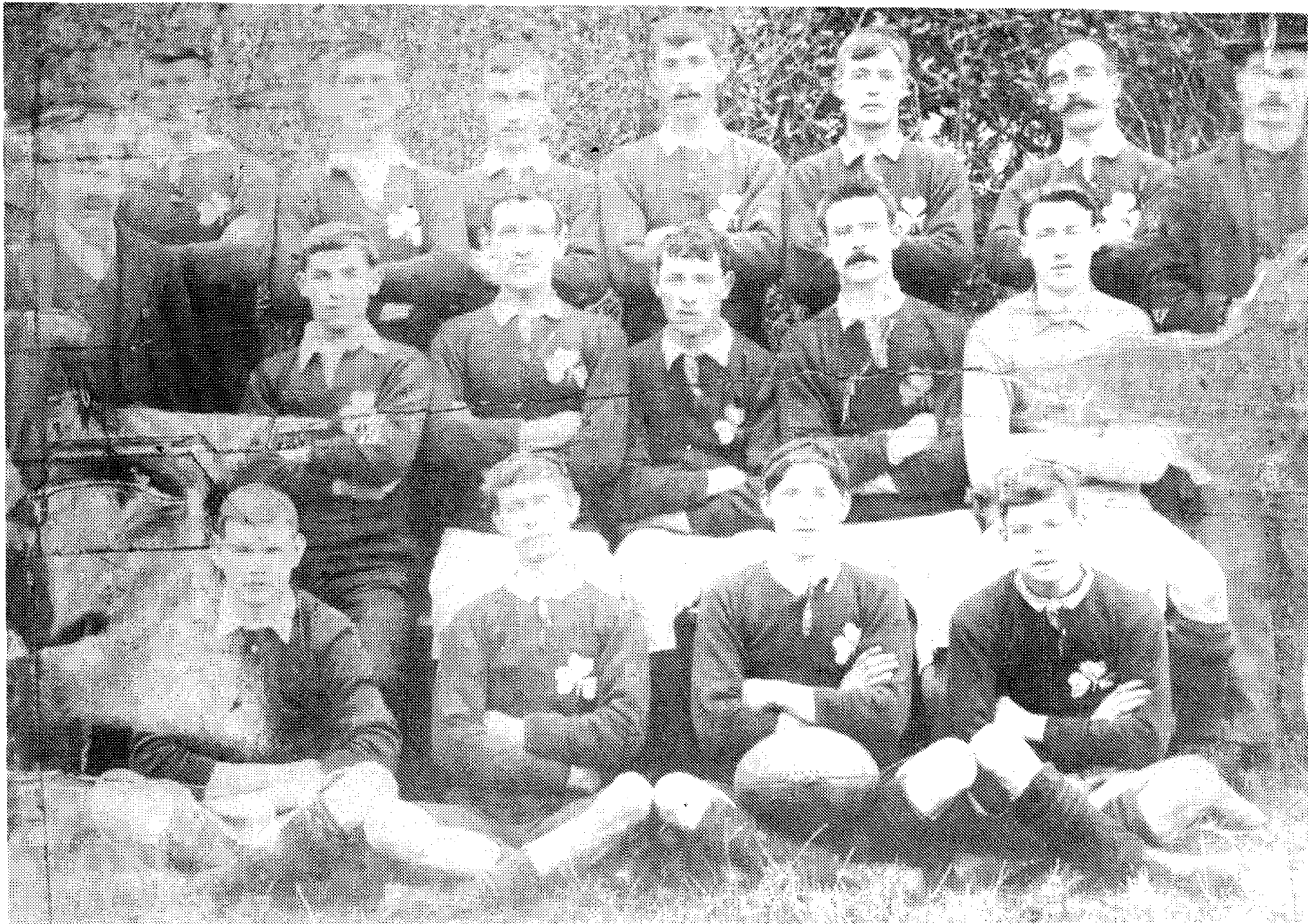
"Pa Lane made an attempt to come at the blind side of the Parteen boys by employing another non-Union man, but Tommy Philips was too yorkey for him. Good man Philips! Nearly as good as Guinane's slobdoleger to Moroney".

This was followed by another rather cryptic note on November 12: "Canon Russell, P.P., and the local teachers have processed three members of Parteen branch (writes a local correspondent) for £50 damages. With the Editor's permission, we will prove in next week's issue to the satisfaction of everybody, who the aggressors

really are".

For one reason or another, nothing on Parteen appeared in the next issue, but the promised disclosures did appear in the issue for November 26 under the heading "Workers Fighting Bosses on All Ireland Fronts". The report began by stating that the branch had been started three and a half years ago and that meetings had been held weekly in the local school. This was allowed to continue for eight months until:

"Fr. Russell, P.P. shifted us from the school 'for fear the Commissioners of National Education would come at him'. We asked that Board for permission, and they referred us to Fr. Russell and stated that they wouldn't interfere. Fr. Russell was approached again and wouldn't budge. Fr. Russell was asked for an old house near the chapel, and he answered by dismantling this old house. Shortly afterwards, our branch took refuge in an old disused shed on the school premises; spent £10 in improving same; cut weeds and nettles, which were six feet high, near it and held meetings there. Result: Secretary Clear processed for £50 damages, ejection, etc. Fancy, being processed for £50 after spending £10 on improvements! The proceedings in the County Court were a farce. 'Our solicitor admitted' that defendant 'only' did £5 damage. It would be interesting to know who paid for his 'admission'. Needless to say, the case was appealed to a higher court, and it came before Lord Justice O'Connor. That gentleman swept aside the charge of stealing and housebreaking and gave Fr. Russell possession of the shed and all the tall nettles we hadn't time to cut. His Lordship also stated that Fr. Russell should be proud to have a branch of the ITGWU in his parish, and prouder still that its members wouldn't tolerate any slur on them. As it was pointed out to the judge that the school, sheds, and two acres of land, were given for the education of the poor of the parish, he instructed the secretary how to get possession if we have a claim. We should get in touch with the Commissioners of Charitable Donations and Bequests, he advised. This we did. We understand that the Charity was not registered with these Commissioners. When we got notified of this, our branch held a special meeting and decided that its members, representing the poor of Parteen had a greater claim on the sheds and land than the farmers and people outside the parish, and then and there took possession of their own. Canon Russell, P.P., Mr. Kyran Kelly, N.T., and Miss O'Sullivan, N.T., are the plaintiffs in the case now to



The Parteen rugby team. Pat Clear is seated third from right in the middle row.

be tried. The only alternative for our branch was to get an injunction against Canon Russell for breach of trust. This would cost £50 at least, we are informed.

In spite of the fact that we are being driven from post to pillar — even though we have been wrongly accused and charges brought against us which haven't been substantiated or withdrawn — we are ready to give up full and complete possession of this property to Canon Russell provided he uses it in the interests of the poor of Parteen".

This report was followed by another from Parteen on December 10:

"Every department in Parteen is manned by the Boss Class. The District court which tried our Schools Allotment case was ruled by "Canon" law. Still we hold the fort, and we intend to. Some of the bosses got our Flag and made ribbons of it at a local re-union of the Die-hards". The Die-hards were hard-line Republicans.

The **Voice of Labour** carried another report from Parteen on December 17, 1921, which indicated that things were not likely to improve in the district for some time: "We are looking forward to a glorious peace in Parteen. A Parish Court has been formed. At its formation, the Very Rev. Canon Russell stated that he expects

to have to go to law from time to time with the labourers'. Fellow workers, the labouring class represent over 60% of his parishioners. Wouldn't someone tell him to let the farmers do their own dirty work".

The annual general meeting of the branch was held on January 6, 1922. **The Voice of Labour** carried the following brief note announcing the meeting: "Members of the defunct Gardeners' Society and Motor Workers' Union have promised to join OBU. Drastic changes are to be made in the personnel of branch committee. That's all". Unfortunately, **The Voice of Labour** did not carry a report of the proceedings of the annual general meeting so we know very little about what changes were made.

Apparently the branch was still quite healthy three months later when the **Limerick Echo** carried a report of a meeting presided over by Michael Keegan. A decision was taken at the meeting to press the Meelick District Council to formulate a scheme for the erection of 20 labourers' cottages. A number of houses, which had previously been condemned by sanitary inspectors were still being occupied by labourers and their families. Mr. E. O'Brien, vice-chairman of the Council, attended the meeting and promised to help.

The Voice of Labour for May 20 contained an interesting report from neighbouring Clonlara: "A big procession was held on National Stoppage Day, May 1st. The Red Flag headed the parade and all businesses closed in the area as well as the local creamery".

The year 1922 saw the withdrawal of British forces from Ireland and the acceptance of the Treaty. It also saw the most bitter Civil War which resulted in the deaths of nearly 5,000 Irishmen. It was a most difficult time for the ITGWU. Members of the union were divided into pro- and anti-Treaty loyalties. The fact that the economy was in tatters and that unemployment was rife contributed to the general chaos and compounded the difficulties for the ITGWU.

Parteen had its own disruptive spell during this time. A curfew was imposed in the Blackwater area. The **Limerick Echo** and the **Limerick Leader** carried the following proclamation:

"Owing to the continuous disturbance and firing of shots in the Blackwater area over land disputes, we the undersigned, while regretting having to take such action, feel it our duty, under the circumstances, to proclaim curfew on Blackwater es-

tate and that all people therein remain indoors from 8.00 p.m. to 5.00 a.m. And we therefore order that all persons in possession of arms in the proclaimed area will hand them to the Company Captain of their area. All persons not complying with this order shall be seriously dealt with. Signed: Commandant Naughton

Captain Larkin

Captain Ryan. 2 Bats, 3rd Brig., 1st. Western Division".

Cattle driving had also begun to reappear in the area which would indicate that men's minds were far from constitutional politics at the time.

General Michael Brennan, along with three other generals of the regular IRA, made the following proclamation in Ennis on Wednesday, April 26, 1922, and it was carried by the local newspapers on the following day:

"Owing to the increasing frequency of cattle driving in Clare and the danger of very serious trouble arising from it we find it necessary to call an immediate truce to cattle driving and interference with land for a period of three months until there is a settled government in the country. At the end of that period we pledge our honour to use all our influence with the Ministry of Agriculture to have our lands which ought to be the peoples' property purchased and divided. We pledge ourselves to use all our influence to obtain land for every man who has a moral or legal claim to it. We issue a solemn warning that persons engaging in cattle driving between this and August will do so at their peril, as drastic action will be taken to enforce this proclamation".

These proclamations, by and large, seemed to have worked and the only record of subsequent collective action by Parteen men was the burning of the local RIC barracks in July, 1922.

In October of the same year **The Voice of Labour** had this report from Parteen: "Here we are bobbing up again after a very black summer, with our old enemy Pa Lane in the offing all the time. He has allied himself with two other farmers, and all three have Labour Exchange importees. Well, well! There was a time when they wouldn't have to pass Martin Clohessy's for a man. Afraid we will have to pay another visit to the boiler house to disinfect it. A couple of more feelers wouldn't be out of place just to show that we are not downhearted and to scatter the vermin".

In spite of the varied turbulence of 1922, Pat Clear skillfully piloted the branch through its difficulties, returning a creditable £52-18-0 to Head Office for the year, receiving £11-5-0 in benefit. This remittance was considerably down on previous years but one could expect some shortfall when

prevailing circumstances are taken into account.

On a wider canvas, 1922 also saw the setting up of the ITGWU Council. The **Clare Champion** of February 22 reported on a meeting which had taken place in Liberty Hall, Ennis, on February 19, attended by two delegates from each branch in the county. Paddy Hogan TD was appointed President of the Council, James O'Donnell, vice-President, and Michael MacMahon, Secretary. Hogan was also the founding secretary of the Ennis branch of the union, established on February 18, 1919. An executive of 12 was appointed to the council which was to prepare the rules and constitution for the new body; these would be submitted to the next general meeting for approval. The establishment of the Council reflects a move by the Transport Union, not only in Clare, but elsewhere, to distance itself from Trades' Councils, principally because of the antagonism between the "One Big Union" and the many smaller councils of lesser unions. Some leading ITGWU officials looked on many of the trades councils, Ennis Council included, as being reactionary and an unnecessary brake on them in the pursuit of their own political and economic goals.

Parteen branch shared the common depressing lot of practically all other branches in 1923 when the economic fortunes of the country were at their lowest. Unemployment was rampant and wages had plummeted. Internally, the union was also in trouble. Larkin had just returned from America where his labour activities had caused him to spend a term in Sing Sing prison. His homecoming resembled the Rip van Winkle saga. Even though, technically, he was still general secretary of the union and was quite prepared to wield power, very few were prepared to accept him. By March 1924 he was expelled from the union and within a short time the internal affairs of the ITGWU were given a public airing as O'Brien and Larkin fought it out in the courts. It was a sad period and led to the founding of the Federated Workers' Union of Ireland. The One Big Union had fractured, irrevocably.

In 1923, Parteen branch was also having quite a traumatic time. The only official indication of this trauma is contained in the annual report. Returns to Head Office totalled £48-16-6, while £13-10-0 was received from Dublin. More significantly, Pat Clear's name was omitted from the list of branch secretaries; no secretary is named in the annual report. Neither is there a secretary named for the following year when returns had dropped to £6-15-9. Nor is there one mentioned for 1925 when there was no remittance recorded. A report in **The Voice of Labour** of February 17, 1923, provides an ex-

planation for this downward spiral:

"We don't wish to minimise the fact that this Branch has had a very severe shaking owing to unemployment, importation of workers, and general disorganisation. Several movements have been got up in this area to benefit the 'small man' during the past 25 years. Through the instrumentality of the 'upper ten' those movements are not in existence today. Consequently, when this Branch was put in motion the first thing it discovered was that the majority of wage earners were ashamed to admit what their conditions of labour were.

Now the 'upper ten' appear to be on the ascendant again, and unless vigorous steps are taken to combat their designs on our Union our last state will be worse than our first.

We have extended the operations of the Branch over practically the whole of the Meelick Rural District and formed Sections of Clonlara, O'Brien's Bridge, Cratloe, and Parteen with a Central Committee to meet every month. A Vigilance Committee has also been elected to commence operations immediately.

Mr. Patrick Hyland, Clonlara, and Mr. Edmund Power, O'Brien's Bridge, are respectively our new Chairman and Vice-chairman".

From the court case already mentioned, one can deduce that the "upper ten" refers to certain of the landed gentry and local clergy who would prefer to be rid of the union; a vigilance committee was already in existence for the local branch, but with the fusion of branches in this new arrangement, the committee was given a wider base and a larger spread. The amalgamation of a number of branches was in line with current union policy to move away from the five miles radius which had been the norm for single branches heretofore.

The last and final report in **The Voice of Labour** on the Parteen branch is dated February 24, 1923, under the heading "Reconstruction in Parteen". It begins by stating that the duty of the vigilance committee was to look up slackers. But even here things were not going well. "It was arranged that two men from Cratloe and two from Parteen would meet at Cratloe to commence operations. The Parteen men did not arrive yet. Why? O'Brien's Bridge and Clonlara at the other end are working well. More Power Ned!" Unfortunately, for the next two years **The Voice of Labour** contains no record of union activities in Parteen. The only source of information is the annual reports and these are quite anorexic. The report for 1925 would seem to indicate that by then the branch had died as there is no entry under "remittance", nor is there any

entry under "branch secretary".

Greater things, however, were afoot in the parish. By August, 1925, work had begun on the Shannon Scheme. Parteen was to become the venue for one of the most vicious trade disputes which, for a time, jeopardised the whole electrification project. The parties to the dispute were the Government and the thousands of navvies represented by the Transport Union. Mick McCarthy from Head Office was sent to Limerick to organise the site. At issue was the rate of pay set by the Government at 32/- a week, which, the workforce claimed was the rate of pay for agricultural labourers and not for navvies. Even if the local branch of the union was in existence at the time, there was no way it could handle a dispute of such magnitude; practically speaking, it would have become superfluous or would have been sidelined. The Government was determined to have its way at no further cost to the state, claiming that it could not afford a penny more. The army was called in to protect German workers. Joe McGrath, one-time Transport Union official in the Insurance Section, former Minister with the Cosgrave administration and then out of work, was the subject of a secret report compiled by Dr. Tommy McLaughlin, Siemens' Irish representative, and sent to the headquarters of the German contractors in Berlin, recommending McGrath for the job of Director of Labour in Limerick. Needless to say, he got it. Emmet Dalton was of the opinion that McGrath took the job in Limerick on the condition that he was given the Irish Sweepstake by Cosgrave when the contract was completed. At any rate, McGrath, through the use of scabs, broke the will of the strikers and got the project going again. The Government saw to it that the contract was completed on time.

The disruption of social life in the area due to the Shannon Scheme made it very difficult to hold meetings. Space was at a premium for the hundreds of men and their families, many of whom lived in pig-sties, barns, stables, and huts made out of tar barrels. The question of reserving a shed for union meetings while men, women and children lived in sub-human conditions would have seemed anomalous, to say the least.

One man whose personal and family life was severely disrupted as a result of the scheme was Pat Clear, the former branch secretary. His house and post office near Parteen Bridge were demolished to make way for the Tail Race. Moreover, the post office work was taken from him and transferred to Ardnacrusha in what many saw as a political move. Curiously enough, the Transport Union never took up his case, even though a similar set of circumstances were to result in the later,



celebrated case of the Battle of Baltinglass.

Little else of note can be found concerning the union in the area for the duration of the building of the Shannon Scheme. The strike was lost by the workers, who were forced to capitulate in bitter exhaustion. Subsequently, the site was visited by Cathal O'Shannon and Paddy Hogan and they encouraged workers to join the O.B.U. This might justifiably be seen as a rather empty gesture in view of how the union had handled the strike, but it is an interesting act to consider in the light of what was to follow, particularly the behaviour of certain union officials.

The Shannon Scheme was in operation by Christmas 1929 and many of the men who had been employed in the construction were let go. By 1932 a pattern of employment had established itself at the power station. In August of that same year, Patrick Clear, former secretary of the local branch, wrote a pencilled letter to Liberty Hall, Dublin:

A chara,

I am in communication with Mr. P. Hogan TD (Clare) in regard to starting a branch of the union here and I shall be glad to know if Head Office would sanction same. Workers on the Shannon Scheme from this locality have gained a footing and are still recruited for work at Ardnacrusha so that a committee of employed workers could form the nucleus of a new branch of about 100 or 150 members.

Please let me know the views of your Executive.

(Signed) Patrick Clear.

In response, Thomas Kennedy, the vice-president of the union, promptly wrote to John Conroy, secretary of the Limerick branch, asking for the latter's opinion on Clear's suggestion and whether he had any contact with the area. Conroy replied on September 1:

"A chara,

We are inviting Patrick Clear to attend Branch Committee meeting tomorrow night to find out what he has in mind about forming a branch there. This area includes the Shannon works. As soon as we discuss the matter with P. Clear I will send you full particulars.

(Signed) J. Conroy".

On the same day Kennedy acknowledged this note and waited.

Within the week, John Conroy wrote again from Limerick, this time to William O'Brien, general secretary:

"A chara,

Enclosed herewith a letter from P. Clear. This does not sound hopeful, but still he feels that some attempt should be made to organise the area. I understand that the labourers employed on the Shannon Scheme have only 8½ pence per hour and if we were to organise them we would be bound to have considerable trouble. As you will know, the Trades Council here, the Trade Union Congress, the Executive Committee and the representatives of the Labour Party have been trying for some time to get Government to bring about Trade Union conditions on the job, but so far nothing has been done.

Please advise in time for Branch Committee meeting on Tuesday night.

(Signed) J. Conroy".

Liberty Hall replied on the following day:

"Dear Comrade,

We have your letter and also P. Clear's on Parteen. As this would involve serious responsibility, we are unable to give you a reply in time for your meeting tomorrow night, but we are giving the matter the serious consideration it requires.

We return you Clear's letter".

A separate note, obviously then intended for Union executive's eyes only, was appended to the copy of this letter in the union's file. The note reads:

"Parteen

To organise or not?

General Secretary not inclined to organise owing to possibility of unprofitable dispute".

So ended Patrick Clear's initiative. His campaign through the years to improve working and living conditions was terminated in the interests of institutional bureaucracy. The Transport Union at this period had embarked on a very introverted course. Gradualism had replaced the earlier vigour and thrust of the trade union movement, and as far as the ITGWU was concerned, the vision of Connolly was effectively dead and buried. Membership had dropped from 100,000 to 20,000 which, to some degree, at least, reflected the union policy of consolidation rather than expansion. Small branches, such as the one in Parteen which was about to restart, became expendable, thus reducing membership further and thereby weakening the labour movement generally. The names of Cratloe, Clonlara, Scariff, Sixmilebridge, and many others, disappeared from the ITGWU books, but perhaps none has a more unfitting obituary than Parteen, which is provided by the last, pathetic note in the union file — "To organise or not?..."