



# Labour Problems in Northern Ireland

by

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*The social policy of the newly formed government of Northern Ireland is expressed partly in laws previously passed by the Imperial Parliament, partly in its own legislation, which already includes Acts on unemployment insurance, health insurance, workmen's compensation, and trade boards. All this legislation, forming what may be called a "social code", is administered by a single Ministry, the Ministry of Labour. During its first three years of existence much of the efforts of this Ministry have had to be concentrated on the problem of unemployment. A Development Commission is engaged in examining the possibilities of the further industrial development of Northern Ireland, and relief works of public utility have been undertaken on a large scale; the effect of these measures and of a scheme for providing loans towards works of capital construction has been a substantial reduction in the volume of unemployment and the distress caused by it. In addition, strong advisory committees have been appointed to deal with the trade board system and with employment exchanges and unemployment insurance, which have helped to secure for the new Ministry the active support of the industrial community.*

**T**HE Government of Northern Ireland established under the Government of Ireland Act, 1920, began its career in 1921. The Cabinet was formed in June and the Parliament was opened by His Majesty the King in July, while the actual administrative responsibility was taken over from the Imperial Government a few months later.

The Northern Government has during its career encountered many and varied problems, some of them of extreme complexity and difficulty, and among them those connected with labour are not the least important.

Northern Ireland consists of the six Northern Counties of Ireland. Its population of 1,284,000 comprises more than one-third of the total population of Ireland. Its principal cities are Belfast,

with a population of about 480,000, and Londonderry, with a population of 47,000. There are a number of other towns with from 5,000 to 15,000 inhabitants, while the remainder of the population is in the country districts. Agriculture, carried on very largely by small farmers, occupies a large proportion of the population. In addition, Ulster is the home of important manufacturing industries. It is the boast of Belfast that it has the largest shipyard, the largest ropeworks, the largest linen factory, the largest tobacco factory, and the largest distillery in the world, and before the war it used to be able to add that it had the lowest unemployment and the smallest poor rate in the United Kingdom. In its shipyards have been built many of the famous ocean steamers, such as the White Star liner "Olympic", one of the world's greatest ships. Last September there was launched the largest liner built anywhere since the war, a vessel of 30,000 tons belonging to the Holland-America Line. Both in Belfast and in the rest of Ulster the linen trade is conducted on a comprehensive scale. The industry comprises the production of flax, the spinning of yarn, the weaving of cloth, and its making up into articles such as shirts, tablecloths, towels, and handkerchiefs. There is a substantial engineering industry, which derives much of its work from the shipyards and the textile trades. While these industries, after agriculture, occupy the majority of the industrial population, there are as well other textile factories, chemical works, mineral water factories, bakeries, and laundries, while in certain districts active fisheries exist. Altogether in Northern Ireland there are 6,700 factories and workshops.

There is further a very considerable distributive trade. Seven daily passenger services are maintained to and from Great Britain in addition to several other regular sailings. From all the ports of Ulster there is a large export of agricultural produce, cattle, potatoes, dairy produce, and at the same time there is regular ~~importation of coal~~. As may be supposed, the bulk of the manu-factured articles produced in Ulster are exported, not merely to Great Britain and the Continent, but to all parts of the globe. The use of Irish linen, practically all of which is made in Ulster, is indeed co-extensive with civilisation.

The most interesting of the recent industrial developments in Ulster is the exploitation of its coal resources. Coal deposits have long been known to exist in Ulster, but their quality and extent were doubtful. They have not been properly worked until recently, when two shafts to a depth of one thousand feet have been sunk.

and coal is now being raised. The industrial possibilities of this enterprise are obvious.

In all these industries 260,000 workpeople are engaged. That is the number of workers insured under the Unemployment Insurance Scheme, which covers all industries with the important exceptions of agriculture and domestic service. The majority of these workers is distributed as follows :

Industry	Numbers of workers
Shipbuilding	30,000
Engineering	9,000
Linen	90,000
Building	17,000
Food and drink	12,000
Distributive trades	20,000

The organisation of industry from the point of view of industrial relations has developed on similar lines to that in Great Britain. There are associations of the spinning, weaving, and making-up textile trades which comprise practically every employer, and in most of the other industries employers' organisations exist which can commit the whole body of employers to a particular course. The workers are for the most part in the British trade unions. The Federation of Engineering and Shipbuilding Trades, with its constituent craft unions, operates in Northern Ireland as in Great Britain. The dockers, the sailors, and the railwaymen are in the same organisations as their colleagues in Great Britain. English unions such as the Workers' Union and the National Amalgamated Union of Labour have a considerable membership in Ulster, while the organisations in the linen trade, though mostly separate from those of the textile trades in Great Britain, are affiliated and work in close sympathy with them.

The relations between employers and employed are frank and friendly, and Northern Ireland has been singularly free in recent years from stoppages of work due to trade disputes.

In circumstances of this kind when labour problems arise, as they must, it is the duty of the Ministry of Labour, in so far as the Government is concerned, to deal with them. These problems range themselves into well-defined groups. In the sphere of industrial relations the Ministry of Labour must play its part in preventing trade disputes and in protecting the workers against avoidable disabilities arising from their employment. It must see that they are not sweated while they are at work or worked ex-

cessively long hours, that the conditions of their work are as safe and healthy as is possible, and that the unscrupulous employer does not gain an advantage over his commercial rivals. In the sphere of employment and industrial insurance the Ministry administers two insurance funds, one to provide against sickness and disablement and the other against unemployment, while it maintains a system of employment exchanges which bring together those who want workers and those who want work.

The duties and responsibilities of the Ministry are prescribed by Acts of Parliament, many of which are of course the Imperial Acts which were in force before the Northern Ireland Government came into existence and remain in operation until amended. Those passed by the Northern Parliament comprise five Acts relating to unemployment insurance, two to health insurance, and a Workmen's Compensation Act — all on parallel lines with the Imperial legislation — while a new Trade Boards Act has been passed, of a somewhat similar nature to the Imperial legislation but more flexible and better suited to a comparatively small area such as Northern Ireland.

The actual Acts of Parliament administered by the Ministry of Labour are as follows : the Factory Acts ; the Truck Acts ; the Workmen's Compensation Acts ; the Employers' Liability Act ; the Unemployment Insurance Acts ; the National Health Insurance Acts ; the Trade Boards Act ; the Industrial Courts Act ; the Conciliation Act.

The work of the Ministry points clearly to an organisation of four departments, namely : (1) Industrial Relations ; (2) Employment and Insurance ; (3) Inspection ; (4) Finance.

To the Industrial Relations Department are entrusted the functions of the state in the conciliation of industrial disputes and the administration of the factory legislation and the Trade Boards Act. The Employment and Insurance Department is charged with the duty of taking such steps as are practicable to promote employment, and it administers the Health Insurance and Unemployment Insurance scheme, together with the employment exchanges. The Inspection Department secures compliance with the various Acts, while the Finance Department, in addition to disbursing the monies provided by Parliament, administers the Health and Unemployment Insurance Funds, the whole amounting to about two and a half million pounds a year.

An interesting feature of this organisation is that there are combined in one Ministry all the services required by what may be

described as the "social code". As is well known, since the beginning of the industrial system in the early years of the nineteenth century there has grown up a code of legislation of which the various constituent parts have the common object of removing avoidable hardships incidental to that system. All this legislation is administered together in Northern Ireland by one Ministry only, and this arrangement has been found to work out satisfactorily in practice. Further, the old system of having separate sets of inspectors for each group of Acts of Parliament — one for the Factory Acts, another for the Insurance Acts and another for trade board trades — has been abandoned and the whole of the inspection is done by one combined staff, a small proportion of whom are technically qualified officials who can deal with those questions (mainly arising under the Factory and Trade Boards Acts) which involve technical matters.

These responsibilities and duties would scarcely be light at any time, but when one considers the circumstances existing in 1921 when the Northern Government took up the reins they were and are much more difficult than they might otherwise have been. In the summer of 1921, out of a quarter of a million insured workers 63,000 were totally unemployed and 45,000 were on short time. This situation, formidable and menacing in itself, was also a peculiarly difficult legacy for a new Government which had to create its own system of administration. A strenuous effort was made without delay to increase employment and bring about an improvement in trade. The heavy unemployment was largely due to world causes of a kind which the Northern Government was powerless to influence. Ulster was particularly at a disadvantage since, as will have been seen, it is so largely dependent on two industries — linen and shipbuilding. The linen trade had lost many of its markets during the war, its energies being devoted to the production of war material, principally aeroplane cloth. The shipyards shared in the general slump in the shipbuilding industry due to the shrinkage of trade and the decline in freights.

Of the measures taken to improve trade two may be mentioned. Under the Loans Guarantee Act arrangements are made by which capital — amounting so far to well over £3,000,000 — at reasonable rates of interest is guaranteed to firms willing to undertake works of capital construction. By this means, among other things, large ships were put in hand and the effect of the depression in the shipbuilding industry was greatly minimised. This Act is administered by the Ministry of Finance.

A Development Commission representative of employers and labour, whose duty it is to examine the possibilities of the further industrial development of Northern Ireland, was established. This Commission has already produced a number of reports and is still engaged in its task. It has recommended measures in regard to the development of the new coal industry which has been mentioned above ; it has dealt with roads and mineral deposits ; it has suggested a procedure now incorporated in an Act of Parliament to maintain the high standard of Northern Ireland eggs, and it is considering, among other things, power and transport, afforestation, land reclamation and drainage, rural industries, and several other matters. Its recommendations have been put in force by the Government, and while the results cannot be accurately estimated in terms of employment there is no doubt that they are substantial and increasing.

In the meantime, recognising that any measures which could be taken to improve trade would necessarily be slow in their operation, the Ministry of Labour decided to institute relief works on a large scale. In this it secured the whole-hearted co-operation of local authorities throughout Northern Ireland, and the Imperial Government, recognising the urgency of the situation, gave considerable financial help. The Ministry pays part of the wages of unemployed men specially taken on by the local authority (50 per cent. in the case of revenue-producing works and 60 per cent. in the case of non-revenue-producing works), and great care has been exercised to secure that the works put in hand are of real public utility. Of these a large variety has been undertaken. They comprise the erection of 1,500 working-class dwellings, the reconstruction and extension of the Belfast tramway track, the building of a Cancer Observation Hospital and a Museum and Art Gallery, hospital extensions, works to prevent flooding of low-lying areas, water supplies, road improvements, extension of parks, recreation grounds, and cemeteries, reclamation of land, improvements to harbours, the construction of an aerodrome, and so on.

The capital value of the works is not far short of £3,000,000. So far more than 15,000 different jobs have been provided, while as many as 5,000 men have been employed on the works at one time. A large volume of new work has also been created by the manufacture of the necessary materials ; its extent is difficult to estimate, but it must be nearly as great as the amount of work provided directly. The employment exchanges supply the labour ; a preference is given to married ex-soldiers, and men who have been longest out of work are given work first.

These works have been of substantial relief to those who have suffered most from unemployment and they have undoubtedly prevented many families from falling into destitution and hopeless debt as well as from loss of skill and general deterioration.

The combined effect of these measures and of an appreciable improvement in the linen trade has been that in the early part of this year the number of totally unemployed persons was brought down to the neighbourhood of 35,000, of whom 28,000 were men, while short time has to all intents and purposes disappeared. The linen trade is in a fairly satisfactory condition and the shipbuilding trade now shows welcome signs of revival. If ship construction could be resumed on a normal scale the worst difficulties of unemployment would quickly be surmounted.

Another of the difficulties of the Ministry in the early stages consisted in the widespread criticism of some of the principal activities which it inherited. Severe censure was directed against the system of trade boards, under which compulsory minimum wages are fixed by a board of employers and workers in trades in which sweating has existed or in which, from the nature of work, it might arise. It was complained that the prevalent statutory rates were too high and created unemployment and that the procedure for changing them was too slow; indeed the abolition or at the least the temporary suspension of the system was called for in many influential quarters. Before taking action, however, the Ministry appointed in 1921 a strong Advisory Committee consisting of representative employers, trade union leaders, and others. This Committee heard a good deal of evidence and gave very careful consideration to the whole matter, and finally produced an unanimous report to which in due course effect was given by a new Act of Parliament. The Committee recommended that trade boards be retained or established in any trade where the Minister of Labour is satisfied that the rate of wages is unduly low as compared with that in other employments and that having regard to other conditions, in particular the degree of organisation prevailing in the trade, it is expedient that a trade board should exist. The Minister was also given power to suspend a trade board temporarily or withdraw it altogether in the event of a trade becoming sufficiently organised not to require the trade board machinery. For time workers a compulsory time rate was to be fixed and for piece workers a compulsory time rate which the piece rates paid must be capable of yielding, while other rates such as outworkers' rates, overtime rates, and statutory piece rates might be fixed

if the board so desired. The length of time taken to fix, vary, or cancel rates was considerably reduced. It was arranged that the boards were to consist of equal numbers of representatives of employers and employed, together with a neutral chairman but no other neutral members. So far the new system, which is applied to eighteen trades, appears to be working satisfactorily, and the criticisms which were vigorous and widespread before the appointment of the Committee have now entirely disappeared.

Similar criticism was applied to the employment exchanges and the unemployment insurance system. It was said that the exchanges were useless in finding jobs, since neither employers nor workers liked to use them, and it was contended that the unemployment insurance benefits were the subject of widespread abuse and should be brought to an end at the earliest possible moment. Again an influential and representative Committee was set up. All sorts of interests and opinions were represented on it and evidence was heard from anyone who cared to come forward. The principal recommendations of this Committee were that unemployment insurance should continue to be a feature of the industrial life of Northern Ireland and that the system should be administered in the main on parallel lines with Great Britain. The Committee further advised that insurance by industries was not practicable in Northern Ireland. It urged employers to notify as many vacancies as possible to the exchanges and generally to co-operate with them, and it advised that in connection with each employment exchange a local employment committee, consisting of representatives of employers and employed and the general public, should be set up in each exchange area. These recommendations have been carried out to the great advantage of all concerned, with the result that it can fairly be said that the abuse of unemployment benefit has been almost entirely stamped out, and there is general recognition that with proper administration the unemployment insurance system should be maintained.

Both of these Committees have been of the greatest possible assistance to the Ministry in its work. Their representative character gave weight to their recommendations, and their unanimity has enabled the Ministry to carry on its work with the active support and sympathy of the industrial community.

Another matter of interest was the cost of living. Repeated allegations were made that the cost of living in Northern Ireland was considerably and unnecessarily higher than in Great Britain, and finally the Ministry decided to set up a Committee of Enquiry.



The Committee — composed of representatives of employers, workers, and others, including the Professor of Economics at the Queen's University, Belfast — spent a considerable time in hearing evidence and collecting information, and finally came to the unanimous conclusion that there was no large difference in the cost of living in Northern Ireland as compared with Great Britain. A number of recommendations on subsidiary matters were also made.

It is perhaps unnecessary to describe in detail the remainder of the work of the Ministry which has proceeded without serious criticism or difficulty. The National Health Insurance scheme is worked in Northern Ireland in the same way as in Great Britain, with the exception that medical benefits are not provided. This exception, which was inherited by the Northern Government, is due to the fact that an elaborate system of poor law medical assistance exists. The question whether medical benefits should, however, be instituted is being seriously considered at the present time. Many of the insured persons in Ulster are members of societies in Great Britain, and the scheme is in all essentials part and parcel of the British scheme.

Unemployment insurance, as has been indicated above, is maintained on parallel lines with Great Britain. To finance this scheme for a small area such as Ulster, dependent in the main on two trades which have suffered violent fluctuations on account of war conditions, is by no means easy. The same result would be experienced by any comparatively small industrial area which was required to maintain an unemployment fund separate from the main fund administered by the Imperial Government. It is hoped, however, that in time this difficulty will be overcome. In the meantime Northern Ireland has the same benefit provisions and the same contributions as Great Britain.

The administration of the Factory Acts and Workmen's Compensation and Truck Acts is carried on by similar methods to those adopted in Great Britain and with similar results.

From the point of view of the International Labour Organisation Northern Ireland is not, of course, a separate Member, being represented by the Imperial Government, which is responsible for Ulster's foreign policy, as it is for many other services, such as defence, railways, collection of taxes, posts and telegraphs, and other matters. The Conventions and Recommendations of the International Labour Conferences are observed in Northern Ireland to the same degree as in Great Britain. The 48-hour week is the

rule here as in Great Britain, and instances in the different industrial undertakings of longer work not specially remunerated are extremely rare. Employment exchanges and unemployment insurance are provided, and the prohibition of night work for women and young persons, together with the agricultural Conventions relating to the minimum age for employment, the rights of association, and workmen's compensation, is in force. Adequate arrangements have been made for maintaining contact through the Imperial Government with the deliberations of the Organisation.

It is the earnest desire of the Government of Northern Ireland that the social standards of its people should be as high as those in Great Britain. It feels that Northern Ireland is an industrial country which has the same needs and the same difficulties as the rest of the United Kingdom of which it forms an integral part. Its object is not realised without an effort, but it is an effort which the Northern Government has so far successfully made and an effort which it intends to maintain.

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