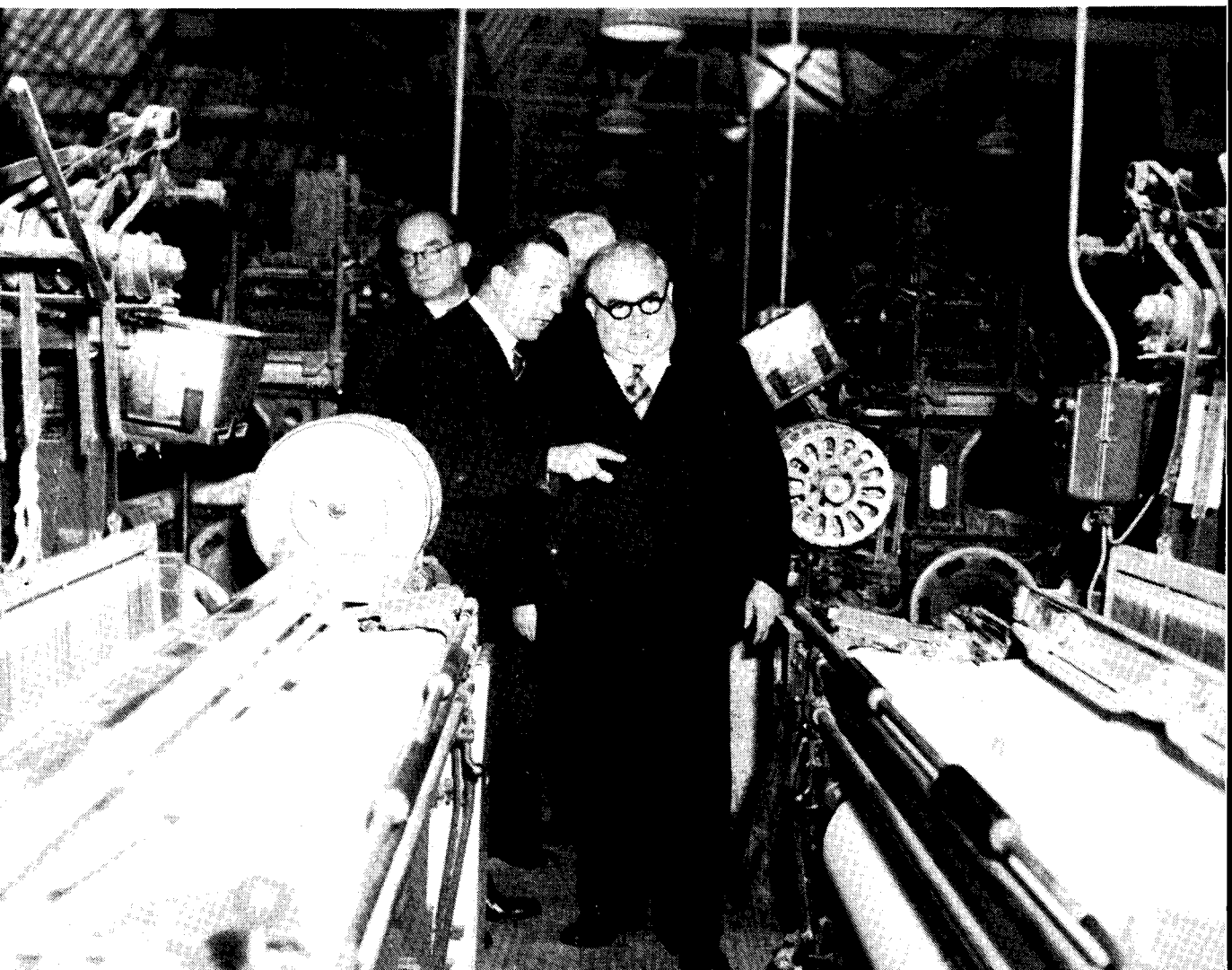
SAOTHAR 11

JOURNAL OF THE IRISH LABOUR HISTORY SOCIETY

1986



Reminiscence

A Shop Steward Remembers

Malachy Gray

Introduction

Malachy Gray is one of the most interesting veterans of the labour movement in Northern Ireland. A lifelong socialist, a former member of the Communist Party, an activist in the unemployed movement of the thirties, a shop steward in the shipyard in the forties, he is now a leader of the Old Age Pensioners movement and of the Retired Members Branch of the Amalgamated Transport and General Worker's Union (ATGWU) in Belfast. Malachy is often to be seen on television and to be heard at meetings speaking about the parallels between the problems of the working class today and those of his younger days.

His career is, in many ways, unique. He came to industrial militancy from outside industry, as a left-wing writer and orator. He became a shop steward in the notoriously loyalist shipyard, despite being from a Catholic background and a well-known Communist. This was only possible because of the special conditions which operated in Northern Ireland during the early 1940s. The need for war production opened the doors of the factories and the shipyard to thousands of people who had no background in industry. Trade union organisation was weak because of the long years of the Depression, but the entry of the USSR into the war, and into an alliance with the United Kingdom, cut the ground from under the feet of those who might have been disposed to witch-hunt the 'Reds' who set about reviving it.

The labour movement in Northern Ireland at this time was in a strong position, similar to that which prevailed in Britain. James Hinton has chronicled the growth of the 'Second Shop Stewards' Movement' in Britain during the Second World War. He has shown how a subtle dialectic developed between the growth of a strong, grass-roots, trade union organisation and collaboration by trade unionists with management, in promoting production.

The Joint Production Committees which Malachy mentions were composed of representatives of the workforce and of management. Their primary purpose was to overcome obstacles to production, but they also entrenched the power of shop stewards and provided a forum in which workers' grievances could be raised. The new strength of shop stewards was further enhanced by the development of unofficial committees, which brought together stewards from different factories and workplaces, ensuring co-ordination and a levelling-up of wages and conditions. Rank and file newspapers such as New Propeller, *published by shop stewards in the aircraft industry in Britain, and* Trade Union Searchlight, *published in Northern Ireland, helped to strengthen these links and provided a forum for left-wing ideas.*

Within the unions, shop stewards strengthened communications between full-time officials and members on the shop floor, thus making the unions more accountable. Many shop stewards went on to become full time officials, putting a new generation of politically conscious leaders into the upper ranks of the trade union movement. The role of the 'Second Shop Stewards' Movement' in shaping trade unionism in the United Kingdom in the last forty years cannot be stressed enough. Northern Ireland's participation in this phase of trade unionism underlines the fact that, although there is one labour movement in Ireland, there are significant differences between North and South, not all of which are to do with the strength of working class loyalism.

This reminiscence from Malachy is a vivid document of experience, in which he recalls a number of the key personalities of the 1940s, and his own reactions to developments. By itself it is only one piece of evidence about an important phase of the history of the labour movement in the North; but it is a neglected phase and, in publishing his recollections, we hope that others will be stimulated to do further research and study.

'You will live in bug incubators for the rest of your lives unless you stand up and fight for decent homes and jobs'. The orator spoke with passion and indignation at a public meeting around the Custom House steps in the year 1934.[1] I was on my way to the Heysham boat with an older brother who was heading for London to seek employment when the speaker caught my attention. My brother was impatient to get on board to find a handy place to sleep during the voyage so I walked away from the steps.

On saying goodbye to my brother I returned to the meeting to hear the next speaker, Tommy Geehan, who had been the Outdoor Relief Workers (ODR) strike leader in 1932[2] He made a convincing plea for the organisation of the unemployed into a strong movement. The audience was small and not very enthusiastic. Indeed there was heckling from some determined Protestants who objected to what they called the Fenian background of the two speakers.

I later found out that 'Slumdom Jack' McMullen was the other speaker and the expert on the breeding of bugs.[3] It must have been about then that I became convinced of the need to do something to bring about political and social change in Northern Ireland. In short, to extend the elementary principles of civil rights.

The late Sam Thompson, the playwright, recalled the same period in a discussion about our common years of poverty during boyhood in Belfast.[4] Sam told me of the election meetings held at his street corner in East Belfast. When a man asked the Unionist candidate — 'What about the unemployed?'. The Unionist candidate replied — 'Chase that Republican out of here. Drive on to the next meeting'. 'It was a handy way of dealing with the subject', commented Sam rather sourly.

The issue of unemployment has always been at the centre of political life in Northern Ireland. The poor have always been with us. I well recall the tremendous struggles of the ODR in 1932. In fact the struggle for civil rights began in earnest that year as the ODR workers, the unemployed engaged on relief schemes, organised mass demonstrations and strikes which frightened the wits out of the Unionist Party.

Hungry Protestants and Catholics united in angry protests to demand some semblance of decent living. It has been estimated that there were more unemployed then than now (over 20%) because thousands of men and women did not even bother to register, or were struck off the register,at the Employment Exchanges.

Few jobs were available; not ships but grass was showing on the slipways of Harland and Wolff's shipyard. The Craigavon Government would not declare Northern Ireland a 'Distressed Area' as it might have been bad publicity for the Unionist Party. Poverty and misery abounded and young mothers aged long before their time.

As a result of the strikes scales of benefit for married men were increased from 8 shillings per week to 24 shillings and 32 shillings. Single men and women secured a rate of 18 shillings weekly. Riotous living indeed! Just as important was the raising of the self respect and dignity of the unemployed.

The notorious Mrs. Lily Coleman, Unionist member of the Poor Law Guardians, was a symbol of the times. She was a righteous Christian and a proper protector of the public purse. The unfortunates who came before her when applying for relief were subjected to severe questioning in a sneering and hectoring manner. One man, with a large family did silence her when she commented that there was no poverty under the blankets. In a fit of rage he

shouted, 'Look, Mrs. Coleman, it's fuck or freeze in this climate'. The incident entered the folklore of Belfast life and was often referred to at public meetings.

The year 1935 was an ugly period in Northern Ireland's history. Sir Dawson Bates, the Minister of Home Affairs, had sworn that never again would the Unionist Party allow a repetition of October 1932. In fact, during the ODR strike permission was given for the police to open fire in the Nationalist areas. Two Catholics were shot dead by the police but no such action took place in Unionist areas. It was an act of deliberate policy by the Government. From 1932 onwards there was continued sectarian incitement in the press and from the political platforms. The Catholic Bishops were more concerned about the dangers of Communism.

One unemployed workers leader, Val Morahan, told me of his experience in visiting Dundalk around that period to assist in organising an unemployed workers movement there.[5] Before he could speak to a fair sized audience one of the local priests marched in and declared in a loud voice, 'All those for Christ follow me'. He was left with an almost empty hall. The suffocating stupidity of Catholic Nationalism versus Protestant Unionism diverted attention from the harsh and evil effects of the world economic crisis upon ordinary people.

The spectacle of Catholics and Protestants shooting and killing each other in 1935 cut right across the positive results of the unemployed struggles by both sections of the people. It was a dangerous and trying time. But for some young men and women it was a challenge to try and change the political set up in Northern Ireland. I could readily understand Jonathan Swift's 'savage indignation' at the state of affairs in the Ireland of his time.

I went in search of those who thought and wanted to act as I did. By 1936 the rise of fascism in Europe with the attendant dangers of war was a cause of additional concern. By then I was attending lectures at the local branch of the National Council of Labour Colleges on working class history and Marxist economics.[6] To try to understand the reasons for unemployment was the great incentive. Our tutor was Jack Dorricott, a professed Marxist and former miner from Newcastle-on-Tyne.[7] The Labour Hall in York Street held Sunday night meetings. The most often invited speakers were Peadar O'Donnell, T. A. Jackson, the British Marxist historian, and Harry Midgley, the local Labour Party leader. The latter was not popular as an individual but he always aroused controversy and consequent argument and discussion. Jack MacGougan and Victor Halley, leaders of the Socialist Party were the organisers of these political debates.[8]

It was the tiny Communist Party with about fifty members which captured my imagination. It had the aura of the remnants of the ODR strike leaders as its main public speakers. It was really an agitational organisation even if the local speakers were not great orators. But the speakers who came across from Britain were outstanding. Tom Mann, the leader of the London Dock strike in 1889, Willie Gallacher, MP, Arthur Horner and Harry Pollitt, the leader of the British Communist Party. In my opinion the latter was the finest orator I've ever heard. When dealing with fascism and the challenge to democratic rights, on the dangers of war so soon after the slaughter of 1914-18, and on the need to solve the unemployment problem he spoke with great eloquence and confidence. He had an answer to everything—or so it seemed. From Dublin came Seán Murray who analysed simply and clearly, (as I thought then), the problems facing the Irish working class. Seán was a fine lecturer but not as a speaker at mass meetings.[9]

I wasn't sure what to do but an opening to take part in political action came from an unexpected quarter. Davy McLean, owner of the Progressive Bookshop in Union Street early in 1937 asked me to work for him as organiser of the monthly Left Book Club.[10] I jumped at the chance as the defence of the Spanish Republic was right at the centre of the Left Book Clubs' activities. It wasn't long until my political education was up-dated as the Book Club brought together so many activists in the political and industrial wings of the London movement.

It was then that I met two outstanding shop stewards, Tom Crothers and John Higgins, who

were employed in the aircraft industry. Like so many of their generation they were embittered by the misery of unemployment and poverty. By developing industrial democracy they thought political democracy could be extended in Northern Ireland. They were in contact with an unoffical body, the National Council of Shop Stewards, which had gained some strength in the engineering industries in Britain. As both men were members of the Communist Party they were under close supervision by the police and they suspected that their mail was being read. They asked me to receive correspondence on their behalf at the bookshop and I agreed. So began my association with militant trades unionism and the rebuilding of strong workshop organisation to try to overcome the disasters of 1935 and recover some of the gains won over in 1932.

I had a lot to learn, particularly from Harry Midgley, on how not to behave in the political life of Northern Ireland. Early in 1938 he lost his Stormont parliamentary seat in Dock due to the intervention of a Nationalist Party candidate. He was accused of not defending the Catholics of the area during 1935 against sectarianism and very high unemployment. Inside the labour movement he was thought to be too friendly with the Unionist Party in the Belfast City Council on which he was an Alderman. However, Midgley championed the cause of the Spanish Republic and helped to organise hospitality and shelter for Spanish refugees.

I was a member of several committees trying to raise funds and public support for the Spanish Republic and to counter the pro-Franco propaganda circulating in Ireland. During the summer of 1938 we organised a united front meeting at the Custom House steps with speakers from the Labour, Socialist and Communist parties. Midgley opposed the suggestion that I should act as chairman. He took over the meeting and launched into a stinging attack on the Catholic Church: the other speakers following in the same vein. The real betrayal of democracy by the Chamberlain Government was set aside, and not explained. This was the first public manifestation of the direction in which Midgley was going that finally landed him in the Unionist Party and the Orange Order. Not only that, he left his mark upon the Northern Ireland Labour Party.

Different bodies of unemployed workers were organised in the late 1930s and I spoke on all of their platforms. The courage and sincerity of the organisers was as manifest as their strong Republican Socialist beliefs. It was obvious that these bodies held little attraction for the Unionist workers who were jobless. In the early months of the 1940s a group of trade unionists from the shipyard and the aircraft factory raised sufficient funds to publish a monthly paper, *Trade Union Searchlight*. I was appointed editor as I was then doing free lance journalism. The best thing we achieved was to organise support for a strike for union recognition and better conditions by women workers in Ewarts Mill in North Belfast. They worked long hours for low wages. The base for union organisation was widened. Shortly afterwards I obtained employment in Harland and Wolff's shipyard and began the difficult job of organising the semi-skilled and the unskilled workers in the ship repair department into the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union. I then had to face the test of putting the theories I had been taught into practice.

Before long I was visited by the RUC political squad and warned about my future conduct. That did not deter me as in a short period of time I was elected shop steward. However, a few smart boys had been there before me who had either been promoted or had skipped off with the union dues. Inside a year I had somehow convinced the lads that I was not made for a gaffer's job, nor did I fiddle the funds. Indeed I was able to assist in the extension of union organisation into other departments. A lot of obstacles had to be overcome. I was a Falls Road 'red' with a reputation as a political agitator. Many of the men were cowed by long years of idleness. Foremen and management imposed strict discipline while working conditions were unhealthy and dangerous. Militancy was not yet the order of the day. Few shop stewards were prepared to publicly voice their opinions. There were strong divisions between some of the highly skilled craft unions, and they in turn were antagonistic toward the general workers' unions.

However, the entry of the Soviet Union into the war after the Nazi invasion in June, 1941 had the effect of an electric charge upon left-wing unionists. Gone were the suspicions of a sell-out by the Tories and hopes were raised for the defeat of Nazism and Fascism. It was not long until an effort was made to create a united shop stewards movement in the shipyard. A start was made by organising a mass meeting of workers beside one of the dry docks during a meal break — quite close to the dry toilets in use at that time. We chalked our notices about the meeting on every available wall around the shipyard. Several thousand workers gathered as I began to speak on the need to improve some of the dangerous and primitive working conditions and of the unity of shop stewards to get results for their members.

At that moment two harbour policemen forced their way towards the platform. We had taken the precaution of surrounding the platform with a group of shop stewards and activists. The hardest-faced shop steward stopped the policemen before they could reach me and he asked what were their intentions. 'We are going to arrest that man', said the braver of the two. 'Don't you realise that meetings are prohibited by harbour bye-law on shipyard property?'. My hard-faced colleague replied, 'Don't you realise there is no water in that dry dock? There will be a general strike if you touch that man?'. After some hesitation the policemen moved to the back of the crowd. The bluff worked and so we established the right of trade unionists to hold mass meetings. Industrial democracy was under way in the shipyard for the first time since the 1919 strike for the 44-hour week.

Soon afterwards an unofficial body entitled the 'Shop Stewards Movement' was set up in Belfast. In a short time we made contacts in every industrial area in Northern Ireland and shop stewards' committees were organised. Practical co-operation was arranged with the main engineering districts in Britain. Giant strides took place under the leadership of Jimmy Morrow and John Higgins, the two AEU senior shop stewards from the aircraft factory. There was a complete change in union organisation and policies. Masses of workers poured into the new industries and union membership soared. The old traditions whereby trade union officials negotiated and took most of the decisions during the mass unemployment days, were altered in a decisive fashion. More and more the ordinary members were involved in decision-making by the holding of workshop meetings. The shop stewards then reported these decisions to officials and district committees for satisfaction.

Confidence was the keynote in the whole labour movement then. There was a tremendous rise in the membership of the Communist and Labour parties. By 1943 the Communist Party had almost 1,000 members and many of them were active to some degree in the trade union movement. I was chairman of the Party's industrial committee and chairman of the shop stewards' organisation in the shipyard. In the Communist Party's weekly paper, *Unity*, it was stressed that the outcome of the war should mean greater democratic rights for ordinary people. The creation of a strong trade union movement would be the essential element in safeguarding the rights of the working class and help in creating full employment. Above all, the defeat of fascism, would weld together all the democratic forces in Northern Ireland; and assist in breaking down the divisions that had been cultivated between the Unionist and Nationalist sections of the people.

There were to be many disappointments and setbacks to these aspirations. During 1944 a very serious division in the trade union movement took place. A resolution to attend a world trade union conference was passed at the Annual Conference of the Irish Trade Union Congress that year. The Irish based unions objected strongly, on the grounds of Irish neutrality, and shortly afterwards withdrew from the Irish TUC and set up the Congress of Irish Unions. It was a serious reverse to the progress and strengthening of trade unionism, North and South, and the building of a larger movement.

Around this time policies were being prepared for the post-war period and for the changeover to peacetime industry and production pamphlets and memoranda were issued, particularly for the shipbuilding and engineering industries. The role of the Joint Production Committees had given many trade unionists the opportunity to understand the practical side

of the management of industry. Managerial function was the sacred right of the employers — so we were told!

At the end of the war the landslide victory for the Labour Party in Britain was not repeated in Northern Ireland. Despite a majority anti-Unionist Party vote in Belfast, the rural areas maintained the status quo. There was overwhelming bitterness in the whole Labour Movement at the return of a Unionist government despite the tremendous activity of the war years.

There was plenty to do in fighting against the redundancies arising from the changeover from wartime to peacetime industries. By this time the shop stewards' movement had become an integral part of the trade union machinery. The leading shop stewards, by this time, had become union officials or executive members. Mass demonstrations on the 'Right to Work' were a regular feature of the post-war years. One of the outstanding leaders to emerge was Andy Barr, who in later years was to be elected President of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

I was elected to the National Executive of the Irish TUC, largely due to my advocacy of policies for industrial development, North and South, and for the unity of the trade union movement. I began a close association and friendship with Jim Larkin (junior) on the executive. He had the vision to put forward the kind of policies that would heal the trade union split and would prepare the way for a United Labour Movement with a strong political base, North and South.

But that is another story for another day.

Notes

1. The area around the Custom House steps in Belfast was the city's Speakers' Corner until the 1960s.
2. Tommy Geehan was one of Belfast's best known Communists. An unemployed textile worker, he helped in forming Belfast's first Communist group in 1930. He had previously been a leader of the strongly anti-Partitionist West Belfast branch of the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP). He was elected to the Central Committee of the newly-formed Communist Party of Ireland in 1933. He became the Secretary of the Outdoor Relief Workers' (ODR) Committee in 1932 and was one of the leaders of the ODR Strike of October that year. He resigned from the CP during World War II and died in the early 1960s.
3. 'Slumdom Jack' McMullen was an independent socialist agitator with anarchist leanings. He specialised in exposing the atrocious housing conditions in Belfast, hence his nickname.
4. Sam Thompson, a shipyard worker and member of the NILP, became a playwright in the late 1950s after working on some documentaries for the BBC. His first play, *Over The Bridge*, was considered so controversial that the Group Theatre refused to put it on without changes which Thompson was unwilling to make. It subsequently played to packed houses in the Grand Opera House and was revived in 1985 by the Arts Theatre, in a version edited by Paddy Devlin.
5. Val Morahan was one of the leaders of the ODR Strike in East Belfast. A courageous militant, he was sentenced to six months imprisonment for sedition in 1933, and then again in 1940 to 18 months, for possession of a CP manifesto urging an escalation of the class struggle. This was reduced to three months on appeal. He subsequently got a job in the shipyard but was unable to adjust to the new CP line of collaboration in the war effort. He was expelled for ultra-leftism and died shortly after.
6. The National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC) began in 1905 with a dispute in Ruskin College, Oxford, which then, as now, offered residential courses in liberal studies to working class students; particularly trade union activists, who had no formal educational qualifications. A group of left-wing students quit Ruskin in protest at the anti-Marxist content of the lectures and the dismissal of the Principal. They set up the Central Labour College, supported by the Syndicalist wing of the trade union movement, in rivalry with Ruskin and the Workers' Educational Association. The NCLC developed from the CLC when the emphasis shifted from residential courses to correspondence courses and local classes. In the 1960s it merged with the TUC Educational Service.
7. Jack Dorricott was the Northern Ireland tutor of the NCLC. He was an important background influence and gave a political education to a generation of Labour Movement leaders in Northern Ireland.
8. The Socialist party was formed by Northern Ireland members of the British-based Independent Labour Party when the latter disaffiliated from the British Labour Party. A large section of the membership of the ILP opposed the break and wanted to continue as the Socialist conscience of, and a ginger group within, the Labour Party; they set up successor organisations and the Socialist Party was the Northern Ireland equivalent. It was affiliated to the NILP but most of its members supported the setting up of branches of the Irish Labour Party in

the North when the NILP adopted a pro-Partition policy in 1949, and the Socialist Party ceased to exist as a separate organisation. Victor Halley and JackMacGougan, who had been prominent in organising support for the Spanish Republic, took a leading part in the split from the NILP; the latter became General Secretary of the National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers.

9. Seán Murray was Ireland's leading Communist for nearly thirty years. A County Antrim man, he was an IRA Commandant during the War of Independence, and in 1924 became Secretary of the London Branch of James Larkin's Irish Worker League. In 1928 he went to the Lenin School in Moscow, along with Jim Larkin, Jr., where he was trained in Marxism. In 1933 he became General Secretary of the newly-formed Communist Party of Ireland and in 1935 he represented the CPI at the Comintern Congress. In 1941 an exclusion order from Northern Ireland was lifted, after eight years, and he moved to Belfast where he got a job in the shipyard and became a shop steward. He was Organiser of the Communist Party of Northern Ireland 1950-61 and died in 1961.
10. Davy McLean was the main purveyor of left-wing literature in Belfast during the thirties and forties. He was the local agent for the Left Book Club, created by Victor Gollancz, which published cheap editions of a wide range of books. The Club was supported by a network of local discussion groups which drew in a very wide spectrum of the left in the United Kingdom.