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# ‘Strike Patterns in Three Irish Firms: A Comparative Analysis’

**Liam Cullinane**

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There is a reasonably strong body of industrial relations literature in Ireland. However, there have been few attempts to combine this literature with the practice of Irish labour history. On the one hand, ‘the awareness of industrial relations literature among labour historians still appears to be limited’, meanwhile much of the work produced within the discipline of industrial relations ‘tends to be ahistoric with little emphasis on interest in past trends. The subject is purposefully more present and future-minded.’[1] It is unfortunate that this is the case, given the undoubted benefit that could be reaped from the marrying of both disciplines, as evidenced by the successful synthesis of industrial relations analysis and historical research which has been an important feature, for example, of Australian labour history.[2] This article will take just such an approach to the historical development of plant-level industrial relations by conducting a comparative analysis of strikes and industrial relations in three Irish factories over the course of the twentieth century: Irish Steel (1939–95), Sunbeam (1927–90) and the Ford Marina Plant (1919–84).

This essay will employ a Marxist theoretical framework in its analysis of industrial relations. At the core of this approach is the observation, articulated by Richard Hyman, that ‘work relations (within capitalism) are an inevitable source of dispute. The interests of employees are in large part opposed to those of their employers: hence both parties seek to wield power and mobilise

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[1] Teresa Brannick, Francis Devine and Aidan Kelly, ‘Social Statistics for Labour Historians: Strike Statistics, 1922-99’, *Saothar*, 25 (2000), 114.

[2] In Australia, labour historians were frequently employed by Industrial Relations departments which utilised a multi-disciplinary approach involving law, sociology and history. The two largest Industrial Relations journals also frequently published articles on labour history. As such the connection between the two disciplines in the Australian context is notable. See Greg Patmore, ‘Australia’ in Joan Allen, Alan Campbell and John McIlroy (eds), *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives* (Pontypool, 2010), 231–61.

resources in order to ensure the predominance of their own interests.'[3] Conflict, according to this model, is a fundamental and endemic aspect of industrial relations. However, Hyman's Marxist analysis of capitalist work relations does not imply a continual and unending industrial warfare. As another analyst comments: 'A basic antagonism between capital and labour need not imply that capitalists and workers will meet as opposing classes with clearly opposed interests. But neither should analysis go to the other extreme of denying that structurally based antagonisms exist.'[4] In other words, 'Workers do not simply enter work and then seek means of resistance. Instead, they find means of living with the system as they find it.'[5]

Owners of industry attempt to organise their firms in such a way as to generate profit and minimise conflict with their workforce. Workers, when engaging with their employers, 'make rational decisions based on their astute assessment of the meagre economic and ideological alternatives available to them.'[6] Whether these decisions involve resistance to, or accommodation with, management varies depending on a variety of factors. Strikes, while the most visible and dramatic aspects of industrial relations, are simply one expression of the relations between management and the workforce. Indeed, even in the most militant of workplaces, strikes are an exception, a disruption of the normal relations on the factory floor and their occurrence can only be understood properly in the context of long-term changes and processes both within the firm and society. The nature and development of industrial relations within individual firms are determined by a multitude of internal and external factors. In the case of the former, the character of the workforce (including bargaining strength, inherited political and industrial traditions etc.), the strategies pursued by management, the nature of the labour process, and the economic fortunes of the firm itself determine how workers and employers seek to pursue their respective interests. External factors are also significant and interact with these internal processes. Government policy, macro-economic changes, national-level collective bargaining and the varying strength of the trade-union movement all influence plant-level actors in their relationships with each other and affect the likelihood of overt expressions of conflict, such as strikes and lockouts. This article will incorporate all these

[3] Richard Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction* (London, 1975), 187.

[4] P. K. Edwards, *Conflict at Work: A Materialist Analysis of Workplace Relations* (Oxford, 1986), 55.

[5] Ibid., 42.

[6] Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto, 1995), 140.

factors in its analysis when examining the overall development of industrial relations in the three firms over the course of their existence, before, through a process of comparison, contrast and analysis, determining how and why the record of strikes and industrial relations in each firm assumed the contours they did, utilising extensive primary research in doing so.[7]

## The Factories

The significance of Sunbeam, Irish Steel and the Ford Marina Plant in the local history of Cork are well attested to. In a country where, in 1958, there were only thirty-one manufacturing establishments employing over 500 people in the entire state, these three firms were industrial giants, each employing several hundred people under the same roof.[8] The Ford Marina Plant was the earliest of these firms to be established, beginning tractor production as Henry Ford and Sons Ltd (technically an independent firm though under direct control of the Ford Motor Company) in 1919. The decision to establish the Irish branch was primarily determined by sentimental and patriotic motives on the part of Henry Ford, who could trace his ancestry back to Cork.[9] Throughout the 1920s, the Ford plant was an island of industry in a city otherwise characterised by commerce and agriculture, at its height employing 7,000 workers.[10] By 1932 however, the tractor production experiment at Cork had proven to be a failure and Ford made the decision to cease manufacturing operations at the Marina Plant.[11] Acting quickly, the new Fianna Fáil government introduced import duties and tariffs which made it uneconomical for firms to import cars, thus creating a small car assembly industry in Ireland.[12] The company,

[7] This research involved dozen of oral history interviews, conducted by the author, Miriam Nyhan, the University College Cork Women's Oral History Project and the Cork Folklore Project. It also involved the in-depth examination of business records relating to all three firms and the utilisation of local and national media records.

[8] David O'Mahony, *The Irish Economy: An Introductory Description* (Cork, 1962), 31. Employment in Irish Steel peaked at 1,100 while Sunbeam in 1967 was employing 1,600 people at Millfield. Employment in the Ford plant in the post-war period varied between 400 and 700 employees.

[9] See Thomas Grimes, 'Starting Ireland on the Road to Industry: Henry Ford in Cork', Ph.D thesis (NUI Maynooth, 2008), 38–59.

[10] The exact number is 6,924. Pearce to G.S Hibberson, 26 February 1930, Benson Ford Research Centre (hereafter BFRC) Myra Wilkins Papers, Acc. 880 Box 7.

[11] Percival Perry to Edsel B. Ford, 15 April 1932, BFRC, Nevins and Hill Series, Acc.572, Box 18.

[12] Percival Perry to Charles Sorensen, 3 June 1932, BFRC, Nevins and Hill, Acc.572, Box

not wanting to lose their access to the Irish market, switched their operations to car assembly and continued to maintain the Marina Plant on this basis until the removal of tariffs in 1984, when the company finally closed the Marina Plant for good.

The protectionist policies which forced Ford to maintain their Irish operations were successful in generating manufacturing industry in Ireland more generally. Local industrialist William Dwyer, for example, set up the Sunbeam Hosiery Company in 1927. Initially employing just fifty or so people, the introduction of tariff protections for the textiles and clothing industries allowed the firm to expand massively. By the end of the Second World War the company had a workforce of 1,000 people and had moved to larger premises at Millfield, where it remained until closure.[13] Sunbeam continued to grow in the post-war period, eventually becoming a multinational with over twenty subsidiary companies spread across Britain and Ireland and nearly 1,600 people employed in the original Millfield factory.[14] However, despite the success of the company in these years, the epoch of free trade (beginning with the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement of 1965) was not kind to the firm. Experiencing over a decade of crisis, the company shrank consistently until the original factory was finally closed in 1990. Like Sunbeam, Irish Steel was a product of Fianna Fáil's import-substitution policies. Established as a private company in 1939, the steel mill quickly failed, primarily due to the impact of the Second World War in obstructing the procurement of supplies. In 1947 the company was nationalised and resumed steel production under state ownership. Under generous tariffs and a monopoly on domestic scrap, the company remained modestly profitable until EEC membership and an international steel recession in the 1970s and 1980s threw the company into a crisis from which it never recovered.[15] Struggling through the next two decades with the help of expensive bailouts, the firm was finally sold off to Indian Multinational ISPAT in 1995 for just £1, before the plant closed completely in 2001.

As such, while all three plants varied in their ownership and product,

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[13] Sunbeam Wolsey Limited 22nd Annual Report, 1950, Cork City and County Archives (hereafter CCCA), Sunbeam Business Records, B505/ Bundle 63 /1.

[14] The precise number was 1,655. Committee on Industrial Progress – Questionnaire on the Hosiery Manufacturing Industry, October, 1968, CCCA, Sunbeam Business Records, B505/BND 13/TEMP 127.

[15] Irish Steel was the only steel mill in the world to use entirely scrap rather than ferrous raw materials in its production process.

they were all (from 1932 onwards) import-substitution companies based on protectionism. Although there has been a great deal written on the relationship between plant-size and militancy, numbers employed were not a major differentiating factor as all three factories employed broadly similar numbers.[16] Additionally, the location of each industry was unlikely to be a major determinant factor in a comparison of industrial relations; Sunbeam and Ford were located within a few miles of each other in the same city. While Irish Steel was located on an island about twenty-two kilometres from the city and drew its workforce primarily from the small town of Cobh and the Lower Harbour region, the industry did not have the characteristics of pit villages or similar single-industry communities that Kerr, Siegel and others have claimed are naturally prone to militancy and strike-propensity.[17] One significant difference however was the gender composition of the workforce. Ford and Irish Steel were predominantly male workplaces while Sunbeam had a majority female workforce. However, as we shall observe, this factor does not seem to have rendered the firm any less liable to industrial conflict than Irish Steel or Ford.

## Industrial Relations in the Ford Marina Plant

The system of industrial relations in the Henry Ford and Sons plant derived from the policies employed by the Ford Motor Company internationally. In the early period of the firm (1920s and 1930s) Fordism in both Europe and America was characterised by a combination of high wage rates, strict discipline and a hire and fire system that offered little job security for employees and ensured that unionisation was a difficult prospect. The oral testimony of workers who were employed by Ford prior to unionisation in 1949 stresses the authoritarian nature of work in the factory during this period. One employee recalled from conversations with his father, who was employed in the plant from 1919 until

[16] See, for example, Geoffrey K. Ingham, *Size of Industrial Organisation and Worker Behaviour* (Cambridge, 1970). Each factory, after 1932, employed workforces ranging from 500 to 1,600 people.

[17] Kerr and Siegel argued that industries in isolated areas with a workforce and community concentrated in single industries (Harlan County, South Wales etc.) were more likely to produce industrial militancy and conflict. See George Kerr and Abraham Siegel 'The Interindustry Propensity to Strike – An International Comparison' in Arthur Kornhauser, Robert Dubin and Arthur M. Ross (eds), *Industrial Conflict* (London, 1954), 189–212.

the late 1930s, that 'conditions were very strict and difficult' and were 'nearly as bad when I started there in 1948.'[18] Bob Elliott noted that the factory was 'a tough place to work' and compared the factory in the pre-union days to a 'reform school' in terms of strictness.[19] Michael V. O'Donoghue, who began work in the factory in 1919, commented that while he was initially attracted to the high wages in the factory, he 'very shortly regretted' his decision.[20] The Ford Motor Company also imported its stringent anti-unionism to their Cork concern. Bob Elliott described how he hid his union allegiances while working in the factory in the same period: 'I was belonging to a union when I went there after about six months. But you kept that in your pocket and you didn't say anything to anybody'.[21] Gus McLaughlin, a Ford worker involved in the unionisation of both the Cork and Dagenham factories, recalls being told by manager John O'Neill just prior to a recognition strike 1949: 'Well you can go back to Connolly Hall [the regional headquarters of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU)] tomorrow and tell them that there'll be no shop steward ever stand in this company.'[22]

There were some variations on this system in Cork though. Since European Ford managers 'saw advantages in seeking a contented labour force through allowing self-help welfare activities in the factory' and because of the belief of Cork management in the 'careful organisation and assumption of responsibilities in respect of . . . improving conditions of living of employees', management policies in the Marina plant bore some hallmarks of the Welfare Capitalism introduced by Ford during the 'five-dollar day' reforms.[23] As such, the factory provided healthcare facilities, a saving and loans scheme and a Workers' Representation Council to militate against trade union penetration.[24] The company also delivered leisure opportunities, such as Irish-language classes and a football team.[25] There was even an attempt by Managing Director Edward Grace to embark on a housing scheme, though this was shot down

[18] Miriam Nyhan, Interview with Gus McLaughlin, 2 August 2003.

[19] Miriam Nyhan, Interview with Bob Elliott, 22 January 2003.

[20] Bureau of Military History: Michael V. O'Donoghue Witness Statement, WS 1,741, File S 2676.

[21] Nyhan, Bob Elliott.

[22] Author's Interview with Gus McLoughlin, 29 July 2013.

[23] Steven Tolliday, 'Management and Labour in Britain, 1896-1939' in Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds), *Between Fordism and Flexibility* (Oxford, 1992), 35; Percival Perry to Henry Ford, Report on Establishing a Plant in Cork, 15 February 1913, BFRC, Henry Ford Office, Acc. 62 Box 59.

[24] BFRC: Fordson Worker, 15 November 1920. Sorensen Acc. 38 Box 43

[25] Ibid.

by his superiors.[26]

The pre-war history of the Irish Ford operation, which was a large and desirable employer in an area which suffered from high levels of unemployment and emigration, was largely free of strikes. Only two exceptions existed to this industrial quietude. The first occurred in October 1920, at the height of the Irish War of Independence, when the employees of the plant ignored instructions from management by abandoning their posts and attending a protest against the incarceration of Republican Lord Mayor Terence MacSwiney, then on hunger strike in Brixton Prison. Following this incident, the entire workforce were locked out and grudgingly re-employed only after declaring that they would not desert their posts again.[27] The hunger strike affair represented an importance case of mass resistance to managerial authority but, importantly, was directed at the British authorities rather than at the Ford Company. Indeed, just a few years later, when the company was in dispute with Cork Corporation over the terms of a lease agreement, the workforce held a demonstration to evidence their loyalty to the firm and express their opposition to the actions of the council in potentially placing their jobs in jeopardy.[28] The only time industrial action, traditionally defined, was taken by Ford workers occurred in 1932, when the company attempted to initiate a 10 per cent cut in wages across its British and Irish possessions, the result of which was simultaneous strike actions in both the Cork and Dagenham facilities and a victory for the workers, despite the absence of trade-union organisation.[29]

While the 1932 strike represented the prelude to a more sustained, albeit unsuccessful, campaign of industrial organisation in the Dagenham plant that occurred the following year, this would not be repeated in Cork. In 1932, the company had intended to cease manufacturing operations at the Marina Plant and transfer all Irish production to Dagenham. However, the sudden imposition of import duties on cars that year forced Ford to retain Cork as an assembly centre for the small Irish market. The Marina Plant's transformation from manufacturing to assembly operations resulted in a significant reduction in the workforce, as well as initiating a process of transferring Irish Ford workers in Cork to other Ford facilities in Britain. The outbreak of war intensified this trend, with local management at one point applying for 500 travelling permits

[26] Grimes, 'Henry Ford in Cork', 116–24.

[27] Ibid, 177–80.

[28] Dan Fitzgerald to Henry Ford, 2 March 1922. BFRC, Charles E. Sorensen Records Series, Acc.38 Box 45.

[29] See *Irish Times*, 2-9 April 1932. The strike succeeded in limiting the pay cuts only to the highest pay grades within the factory.

for current or former Marina workers to take up employment in England.[30] The prospects of earning considerably higher wages in Britain, alongside the fact that travelling permits had to be acquired through official company channels, militated against attempts at strikes or unionisation and, in contrast to Dagenham, there is no evidence for industrial action of any description in the Marina between 1932 and the end of the war.

In the early post-war period however, the prospects for unionisation in the plant were considerably improved by a variety of factors. The most important of these was the fact that the Ford Company had finally been forced to accept the organisation of its workforce, with the United Auto Workers winning a hard fought recognition strike in Detroit in 1941.[31] British workers followed the example of their American counterparts, culminating in the recognition of trade unions in Dagenham by 1943.[32] In the domestic context, the end of the war had seen the government introduce a series of measures, such as a Labour Court, and increased centralised bargaining which gave trade unions respectability, facilitating organisation and expansion.[33] Additionally, the experience of Irish Ford workers in the recognition strikes in Dagenham and elsewhere likely had the effect of increasing confidence and trade union commitment among returning employees.[34] Marina Plant workers held their first recognition strike in 1949, culminating in complete recognition and the creation of permanent negotiating structures by 1950.[35]

Following the achievement of union recognition, industrial relations in Ford became notably less dramatic. Following a relatively significant strike action taken in late 1954, the company remained free from significant industrial conflict for the remainder of its existence. Both Myriam Nyhan and the present author noted in their interviews with former Ford workers that interviewees were reluctant to describe the frequent unofficial industrial action taken by the workforce as 'strikes', preferring 'walkouts' or other, less potent,

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[30] John O'Neill to A. S. McCanna, Office of the Minister for Industry and Commerce, 7 July 1941, National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NAI), Department of the Taoiseach (hereafter TAOIS), 3/ S578 B

[31] Huw Beynon, *Working For Ford* (Wakefield, 1975), 37.

[32] Miriam Nyhanm, *Are You Still Below? The Ford Marina Plant, Cork, 1917–1984* (Cork, 2007), 82.

[33] Christopher Coleman-Doyle, 'Industrial Relations in Post-World War 2 Ireland, 1946–1950', MPhil dissertation, (University College Cork, 1999), 11.

[34] Gus McLoughlin for example was involved in both the Dagenham and Cork recognition strikes.

[35] *Liberty*, 3 (April–May, 1950).

terms.[36] Similarly, they were dismissive of these walkouts or their significance and, in general, demonstrated a notable sense of loyalty to the Ford Company and an awareness of their prestige as the highest-paid manufacturing workers in the city. Indeed, wages never seem to have been a major source of dispute in the company after 1954 and conflicts relating to the labour process could often be conducted through informal methods such as the 'blacking' of cars.[37] Regardless, the low production demands of the Cork plant, meant that the minor, unofficial disputes which were a fact of life for the factory in the post-unionisation period, never had a significant impact on the firm's profitability or ability to meet orders. Contrasting sharply with Ford factories in Britain, relations between management and labour in the Marina plant from 1954 until closure in 1984 were notably cordial and free from major conflict. Indeed, the Industrial Development Authority later commented that the 'Ford plant in Cork had probably the best record of all the company's plants throughout the world' in relation to strike levels.[38]

## Industrial Relations in Sunbeam

William Dwyer was well known in Cork for his 'progressive' employment policies, employing a variation of industrial paternalism in his management of the Sunbeam factory at Millfield. This industrial relations strategy is described by Andrea Tone as being 'anchored in the reality of employer provision and the expectation of employee deference, guided by a familial metaphor accentuating reciprocity, mutuality and obligation.'[39] Paternalism entailed a broad spectrum of practices including 'company-provided housing, stores, schools, churches, libraries, hospitals, summer camps, recreational and social activities, holiday gifts, paid vacations, savings-and-loan associations, stock-buying options, profit-sharing plans, medical and life insurance, pensions, training and promotion opportunities, and representation councils.'[40] Sunbeam paternalism bore some resemblance to the Ford Company's provision of

[36] Nyhan, *Are You Still Below?*, 82.

[37] Extra cars placed on the line would be ignored by the workforce until they reached the end without being assembled.

[38] *Evening Echo*, 25 August 1977.

[39] Andrea Tone, *The Business of Benevolence: Industrial Paternalism in Progressive America* (London, 1997), 1.

[40] Walter Licht, 'Fringe Benefits: A Review Essay on the American Workplace', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 53 (1998), 168.

welfare and leisure programmes, but was based on a more personal relationship between the workforce and the Dwyer family rather than with a monolithic and bureaucratic entity like the Ford Motor Company.

The success of Dwyer's strategy of paternalism is reflected in the popular memory of the Sunbeam workforce, who were almost unanimous in their opinions of William Dwyer and his successor Declan Dwyer. Workers recalled them as being 'excellent employers', 'very good people', 'marvellous' and 'very respectful and very decent and nice to their . . . employees'.[41] Indeed, the provisions afforded to employees were generous. These included an on-site doctor, nurse, dentist and dispensary, baths for employee usage, sickness benefits, marriage and mortality grants, a canteen, social outings subsidised by the company, sports teams, housing provisions, tennis courts, a company shop and better pay and working conditions than other firms. During the Second World War employees were even provided with an air-raid shelter capable of protecting the entire workforce in the unlikely event of Cork being bombed. Dwyer, in a similar fashion to other paternalist employers, acted as a patron of the local community, through actions such the re-construction of the Church of the Annunciation in Blackpool, the building of the Farranree Community Hall and patronage of numerous local charities.[42] The success of these actions in cementing William Dwyer's popularity was reflected in the vote he received during his brief foray into politics when he was elected as an independent candidate for Cork City in the 1944 general election, topping the poll with 11,000 first preferences.[43]

The paternalist system operated in Sunbeam was influenced by a number of sources. These included a pre-existing tradition of paternalism among local industrialists, particularly within the textiles and clothing industries. Industrial and welfare policies in the plant were also rooted in Catholic social teaching. Máire Leane and Elizabeth Kiely write that: 'William Dwyer was … a devout Catholic, who embraced Catholic social teaching on the duty of employers to workers, as enunciated in the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*' which 'advised of the need to cultivate greater solidarity between capitalist employers and workers.'[44] Indeed, Dwyer's introduction of a Social Service's Society received the support of the clergy when the local bishop 'gave his cordial approval

[41] Greta Kiely, 8 October 1997. Cork Folklore Project (hereafter CFP), SR97; Madge Barry, 28 August 1997, CFP, SR95; Peggy Payne, 5 August 1998, CFP, SR224.

[42] *Irish Independent*, 21 December 1944; *Irish Times,* 11 May 1951.

[43] *Southern Star*, 6 April 1946.

[44] Máire Leane and Elizabeth Kiely, *Irish Women at Work 1930-1960: An Oral History* (Sallins, 2012), 197.

and blessing' to the undertaking, noting that 'in the last fifty years especially, the Church had exercised a very important influence on the relations between employer and employee.'[45] Similarly, Reverend T. J. O'Donnell, a member of An Rioghacht, a Catholic lay organisation dedicated to the implementation of the papal encyclicals, noted that it was 'gratifying to see that their Irish companies, like Sunbeam Wolsey, were showing that a Catholic country was putting into practice the principles of their sociology.'[46]

Early examinations of paternalism regarded the practice as nothing more than an anti-union ploy, a 'padded glove over an iron fist'.[47] This was clearly not the case in Sunbeam. The Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) commanded the loyalties of the majority of the Sunbeam workforce and was well established there by the outbreak of the Second World War. Supervisory, maintenance and warehouse staff were also unionised. While many firms saw paternalism as a way of holding off the challenge of trade unions and ensuring the domination of employers in their industry, others 'accepted unionism in principle and in practice.'[48] William Dwyer clearly fell into the latter category, once even describing himself as 'trade unionist dyed in the wool.'[49] Dwyer's paternalism and cultivation of positive relations with the trade-union movement was reflected in the tributes paid to him by the Cork Worker's Council on his death, who described him as 'one of the most progressive men in the country' and noted that 'Cork would be the poorer by his passing.'[50] Additionally *Liberty*, the ITGWU magazine, frequently carried advertisements for Sunbeam, Seafield Fabrics and other companies owned by the Dwyers, a privilege reserved only for those firms that the union considered to have positive relations with the labour movement. More importantly from the company's perspective, Dwyer's 1949 boast that 'I have spent a long life in business trying to avoid strikes and I am glad to say in the last twenty-one years no strike has occurred' was largely accurate. [51]

As late as 1966, the Cork Economic Development Council was using Sunbeam as an example of friendly labour relations in the city in order to attract foreign investment, boasting that the firm had not experienced a strike

[45] *Evening Echo*, 15 April 1943.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Tone, *The Business of Benevolence*, 3.
[48] Ibid.
[49] *Irish Press*, 13 January 1939.
[50] Cork Trades Council Minutes, 10 May 1951, CCCA, U216/1/11
[51] *Irish Times*, 9 September 1949.

since 1945.[52] Within just a few years this situation had changed drastically. There were rumblings as early as early as 1968 when members of the National Electrical and Engineering Trade Union (NEETU) picketed the premises. Even though the dispute only concerned the hosiery mechanical workers, a small minority of the total workforce, between 800 and 900 employees refused to pass the picket. One local newspaper commented that the strike was 'believed to be the first major shutdown at the Sunbeam factory for many years though there have been minor disputes and unofficial stoppages.'[53] Three years later an even bigger stoppage occurred when 1,200 workers took unofficial strike action over the dismissal of a technician. Following the outbreak of the strike a company spokesman opined that 'it was difficult to believe that a union of the size and stature of the ITGWU could not effectively control its members' and that 'this type of tactic had become prevalent of late in the company.'[54]

These clashes however were mere preludes to the 'big strike' of 1975. The dispute began when the company attempted to introduce a three-day working week in three departments in Millfield. The ITGWU rejected this proposal and demanded redundancies on a first in, last out basis instead. However, when workers in the half-hose, nylon-knitting and underwear divisions arrived at the plant on Monday 6 January 1975, they found their departments shut.[55] The following Saturday, ITGWU members in the plant voted 'overwhelmingly' in favour of strike action.[56] The following Monday, there was a complete stoppage at the factory when 700 workers in the affected sections withdrew their labour.[57] 100 clerical workers were also put out of work due to the effects of the dispute. Two aspects of the strike which stand out were the militancy of the workers and the intransigence of management. In the case of the workforce, the strikers organised a march from the city centre to the plant where they then proceeded to occupy the boardroom. They remained there for the following two nights with the official backing of the ITGWU.[58] When office staff attempted to access the building, the workers barricaded the corridors to prevent them from entering.[59] In the case of management,

[52] Cork Economic Development Council, 'City of Cork – Community Monograph – Facts for Industry' (First Draft, June 1966), CCCA, B505 / BND 20/2 TEMP 102.
[53] *Evening Echo*. 19 February 1968.
[54] Ibid., 3 May 1971.
[55] Ibid., 6 January 1975.
[56] Ibid., 11 January 1975.
[57] Ibid., 13 January 1975.
[58] Ibid., 4 February and 7 February 1975.
[59] Ibid., 5 February 1975.

the board had repeatedly ignored Labour Court recommendations and consistently insisted that the ITGWU meet with departmental managers rather than company representatives.[60] On 21 February 1975 the strikers voted to return to work in return in exchange for some concessions from management. The strike had lasted nearly six weeks.[61] In the space of just ten years Sunbeam had transformed from an island of industrial peace to one of the most strike-afflicted factories in the city.

## Industrial Relations in Irish Steel

Irish Steel's first few two decades of state ownership were largely free from significant strike activity. In the early years of the company, the lack of a steelmaking tradition in Ireland meant that the workforce consisted of a mixture of unskilled local labour and foreign technicians with backgrounds in the steel industry. Management experienced trouble with these predominantly British employees in the early years of the firm. The directors, in their 1949 annual report, complained that the foreign experts were 'arrogant', 'insubordinate' and 'not disposed to pass on their knowledge to local workers.'[62] Poor relations between these foreign technicians and management meant that 'the Directors had to intensify their efforts to loosen the grip which these non-Irish workers have over the industry.'[63] The matter came to a head in December 1948 when one of the English workers was fired for malicious damage and most of the foreign personnel left the company with him.[64] Most of the skilled positions were quickly filled by Irishmen trained in local technical schools and the number of non-national technicians in the firm fell from fifty to just eight.[65] Relations with the Irish workers appear to have been far more cordial with management reporting that, aside from the troublesome skilled Englishmen, 'All the workers are members of Trade Unions and up to the present, reasonably satisfactory relations exist between these Unions and the Company.'[66]

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[60] Ibid., 29 January 1975.

[61] Ibid., 21 February 1975.

[62] *Irish Steel Holdings Limited – Director's Report*, 1949, NAI, Department of Industry and Commerce (hereafter IND), 10/28.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

When Irish Steel came under state control in 1947, it inherited the union structures of the private company. Most of the workforce was organised in the ITGWU, while the tradesmen employed in the factory belonged to a number of craft unions catering for each individual trade, a similar structure to that which prevailed in Sunbeam and Ford. Management, in the early years of the firm, often adopted a hard line that contrasted sharply with the approach developed in later years. In 1954, for example, there was an unofficial strike in the merchant mill. The general manager responded by sacking the strikers and used a mixture of non-unionised mill labour and 'gallant volunteers' from the unorganised office staff in order to break the strike.[67] No sympathetic action emerged from the other sections of the plant and the strikers were forced to capitulate after ten days.[68] Most of these workers were re-employed but the ringleaders were immediately dismissed. Chairman Sarsfield Hogan, recalling the incident in 1980, noted that it was memorable only for the fact that 'in the light of present-day management/labour attitudes, it seems incredible that it ever could have happened.'[69]

In spite of this tough management attitude, the ITGWU managed to consolidate its position greatly during the 1950s, culminating in the recognition of a 'closed shop' in 1957.[70] The strengthening of the ITGWU's hand, combined with the power of the craft unions, led to a steady increase in the wages paid in the firm. Hogan opined that 'on many grounds, the company would have preferred to deal with a single well-organised union.'[71] The multiplicity of craft unions, combined with strong ITGWU organisation in the plant, led to leapfrogging in wage negotiations. The tradesmen in the plant possessed considerable industrial strength. They were primarily employed in maintenance and without them the furnaces could not be kept in operation. Thus, despite representing a small minority of the total workforce, the craft-workers were capable of halting production in the firm entirely. While the craft unions consistently negotiated significant pay increases, the ITGWU also ensured that the pay of their unskilled members would increase in what Hogan described as 'tug of war.'[72] The maintenance of differentials meant that a pay increase for any section of the workforce would be immediately followed by claims from other sections. As such, the wages of both the skilled and

[67] Sarsfield Hogan, *A History of Irish Steel* (Dublin, 1980), 89.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid., 97.
[71] Ibid., 96.
[72] Ibid.

unskilled workers in the plant rose consistently. In the early years of the firm, the wages of unskilled workers were tied to those of builder's labourers in the Cork area, a sum lower than the generally higher than average wages received by workers in larger manufacturing concerns. By the end of the 1950s, the general workforce was receiving a wage equivalent to that received by workers in general and, by the mid-1980s, the average wage in Irish Steel was nearly a third higher than the average industrial wage.[73]

The lack of strike action in this period, combined with the consistent increase in wages for both skilled and unskilled workers, suggest that management policy in Irish Steel was to avoid industrial action by acceding to the demands made by the unions in the firm. One former employee tells a story regarding one of the shop stewards among the craft workers who approached the wages department regarding the late payment of wages to tradesmen. The shop steward questioned the manager in charge of wages about the issue, threatening an overtime ban or even strike action unless the issue was resolved:

> 'Oh yeah,' he said. 'Yeah, there's a shortage this way. We'll fix it up next week.'
>
> 'You won't.' he said 'You'll fix it up today' he [the shop steward] said. 'And tomorrow' he said. 'Is Friday. And those men had better be paid by tomorrow night, before they leave here tomorrow evening'
>
> So your man went away with his tail between his legs and he had the money ready for them the next day.[74]

Whatever the accuracy of the precise details of the anecdote, it illustrates both the power of the craft unions, and management's apparent desire to keep the workforce satisfied for fear of the possibility of strike action. Worker militancy combined with high wage rates was a general feature of Irish semi-state industries where 'the monopoly power of the trade unions' was employed in order 'to produce wage levels above what are necessary to clear labour markets.'[75] It is also the case, stated simplistically, albeit accurately, by Susan Milner that 'State-owned companies are never permitted to be as ruthless

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[73] Frank Barry and Joe Durkan, *TEAM and Irish Steel: An Application of the Declining High Wages Industries Literature* (Dublin, 1995), 12.

[74] Author's interview with Robert Walsh, 19 August 2013.

[75] John Bristow, 'State-Sponsored Bodies' in Frank Little (ed.), *Unequal Achievement: The Irish Experience, 1975–1982* (Dublin, 1982), 175.

as private companies' and are more likely to acceded to demands for wages increases.[76] The relationship between the craft workers and management in Irish Steel indeed bears a striking resemblance to that of other semi-state companies like the Electricity Supply Board, which were also characterised by high wages and militancy, particularly on the part of skilled workers.

Prior to 1977, the strike pattern in Irish Steel was typical of other Irish manufacturing centres, characterised primarily by small, unofficial strikes which were quickly and easily resolved:

> Donal Brady: There was a few small strikes there [over] small, niggly little things.[77]
>
> Robert Walsh: In all the years that I was there, a strike might last for two or three hours, might last for a day, I don't think there was ever any strike, any other strike that lasted more than a day, maybe forty-eight hours at the most. [78]
>
> Jim Shealy: There had been other strikes, lightning strikes, they would have been over, you know, some minor issue that could be, ah, resolved within twenty-four or forty-eight hours.[79]

This pattern was not unusual however, in post-war industrial relations in Ireland, where brief, unofficial strikes were a regular fact of life (also reflected in the Ford plant and at Sunbeam). However, in 1977, the relatively peaceful industrial relations in Irish Steel were shattered by the outbreak of a devastating and lengthy strike.

In March of that year, the company's eighty-seven craftsmen, consisting of fitters, electricians, plumbers and other skilled workers, placed two pickets on the Irish Steel plant. The tradesmen sought full implementation of a pay increase agreement made in 1972 and to ensure relativity of 20 per cent with the unskilled workers in the factory. The remainder of the workforce, numbering 700 general operatives and office staff, were instructed by their unions to ignore the picket and did so, entering work as usual.[80] The strike revealed in stark terms the power and organisation of the craftsmen. Despite the participation of just a few dozen men, the strike lasted for six months

[76] Susan Milner, *The Effect of Protection on Irish Steel and the EC Steel Industry*, MA dissertation (University College Cork, 1995), 24.

[77] Author's Interview with Donal Brady, 26 November 2013.

[78] Robert Walsh.

[79] Author's Interview with Jim Shealy, 23 September 2013.

[80] *Evening Echo*, 26 March 1977.

and was successful in shutting down the factory within three weeks of pickets being placed, resulting in the lay-off of the entire workforce.[81] The strike was unusually divisive, particularly as a key demand of the strikers was the maintenance of relativity with the general workforce. As one employee recalls: 'It created a lot of hardship for the people out on strike and, some of the people that were on strike, their brothers were general operatives and they were on the dole so it kind of ate into families, in Cobh, so it was a bit like the civil war.'[82]

The sheer number of craft unions, catering for a small number of workers, and the fact that most of these unions were not affiliated to the Irish Trades Union Congress and therefore existed outside of national bargaining structures, made resolution difficult. Additionally, the Strike Committee established by the workers themselves was well organised and militant, organising sympathetic strikes in other firms and raising money to supplement their meagre strike pay.[83] When the strike was finally resolved, six months after it began, with the negotiation of a pay increase for the craft workers just short of the 20 per cent they had initially demanded, the company attributed £700,000 in direct trading losses to the tradesmen's withdrawal of labour, which had forced complete cessation of production for nearly the entire duration of the dispute.[84] Following the resolution of the 1977 strike, the craftsmen remained militant in their attitude to wage negotiations throughout the 1980s, though never again taking official strike action. During these years, the power of the tradesmen was greatly reduced until 1994 when there was a major campaign to reduce labour costs before privatising the company, which finally broke the power of the craft unions at Irish Steel.[85]

## Analysis

As this study has demonstrated, there are both commonalities and divergences in the record of strikes and industrial relations of the Ford Marina Plant, Sunbeam and Irish Steel. All three experienced a generally low level of strikes in the period from their establishment until the late 1960s. However, between

[81] Ibid., 19 April 1977.

[82] Author's interview with James Cronin, 25 June 2013.

[83] Donal Brady.

[84] Hogan, *A History of Irish Steel*, 204.

[85] Tim Hastings, *Irish Semi-States in Crisis: The Challenge for Industrial Relations in the ESB and Other Major Semi-State Companies* (Dublin, 1994), 7–9.

1965 and 1980, the industrial relations record of both Sunbeam and Irish Steel changed dramatically, culminating in two large strikes in both firms within a three-year period. Ford however, diverges at this point. Unusually for a Ford plant, or for the auto assembly industry in general, the pattern of strike activity between 1960 and closure in 1984 consisted entirely of brief, quickly resolved, unofficial industrial actions with no strikes of significant scale or length. After the peak in strike occurrence in both Sunbeam and Irish Steel throughout the 1970s, both companies returned to quiescence with little in the way of overt industrial conflict for the remainder of their existence.

How then do we account for this pattern? The policies of protectionism and import-substitution introduced in the 1930s are central to any such discussion. These policies, according to Brian Girvin, allowed such significant expansion in manufacturing employment that 'by 1939 virtually a new class had been created.'[86] The protectionist development strategy also altered the balance of power in industrial relations, meaning that 'business was in a weaker position than labour. Fianna Fáil policies gave to the working class a certain security by modifying the impact of the market and reducing the fear of uncertainty … The new business community was wholly dependent on the tariff system to survive … and were consequently far more dependent on the state and had less autonomy than labour.'[87] It was these factors that meant that Irish Steel was unionised from its inception while Sunbeam was organised early in its history, without the need to resort to a recognition strike, contrasting sharply with the harsh anti-union attitude of the export-orientated Ford Company in the 1920s. Additionally, the monopoly position of the protected industries allowed security of employment, good wages and other benefits for workers that would have been difficult or impossible in a situation where competition would have necessitated the maintenance of low labour costs.

The worsening of industrial relations in both Sunbeam and Irish Steel during the 1970s corresponds to broader trends within Irish strike patterns. Aidan Kelly and Teresa Brannick, in a study of strike-proneness within British companies operating in Ireland, noted that the strike-propensity of these companies increased dramatically, from a relatively quiescent period during the 1960s to a much more turbulent one in the 1970s. Investigating the matter closely through aggregate strike data, Kelly and Brannick found that the significance of the declining industrial relations record of a company was not

[86] Brian Girvin, 'Industrialisation and the Irish Working Class since 1922', *Saothar*, 10 (1984), 33.

[87] Ibid.

related to the nationality of their ownership, but rather to the character of the industries such firms were engaged in. British manufacturing operations in Ireland, they found, were concentrated in protected industries such as food, drink, textiles and tobacco:

> Most of these companies remained on in Ireland and continued to trade profitably … They also developed satisfactory relationships with their workers, which is clearly in evidence for the strike performance data for the 1960s … For almost forty years they supplied the Irish market relatively free from competition, but by the end of the 1960s, they began to experience difficulties which threatened their very survival.[88]

The effect of these economic changes was significant: 'The resulting industrial conflict can be viewed, therefore, as a sharp disjunction in the traditional relationship between the companies and their employees, which became manifested in the wholesale change in management strategies.'[89]

These trends were reflected in the companies under examination here. In the case of Sunbeam, manager Tom Scott, who began his career in the textiles industry in Huddersfield, highlighted the differences between the highly competitive British industry and the conditions he found in Sunbeam during the 1950s, 'sheltered from the harsh, cruel world of competition', noting in particular that labour attitudes, union influence and the generous fringe benefits in the factory were radically different from the free-trade conditions he had experienced in the British industry.[90] In the 1970s, the influence of free trade and EEC membership devastated the company. The 1975 annual report of the Sunbeam group demonstrated the scale of this decline with chairman C. O. Stanley reporting a loss of £855,000 and the closure of several subsidiary companies.[91] The success of the policy of paternalism in Sunbeam was based on a number of factors, but the most important of these were the provision of higher than average wages and extensive fringe benefits, which were themselves predicated on the profitability of the company and its ability to engage in capital and current expenditure beyond the purely business needs of the firm. Under protectionism, Sunbeam's monopoly position within the

[88] Aidan Kelly and Teresa Brannick, 'Explaining the Strike Proneness of British Companies in Ireland', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 26 (1988), 48.

[89] Ibid., 52.

[90] Author's interview with Tom Scott, 18 December 2012.

[91] Sunbeam Annual Report, 1975, CCCA, B505/ BND 29 / 1 / TEMP 65.

Irish market and insulation from foreign competition ensured the company's stability, profitability and prosperity. Once these conditions changed and the company was forced to introduce redundancies, short-time working and other cost-cutting measures, the company's positive relations with the workforce were fatally undermined as employees took strike action to defend the conditions they had enjoyed in the days of protectionism. The ability of workers to engage in this kind of resistance was aided by the fact that the period coincided with a peak in trade-union membership in the Republic of Ireland, facilitating strike activity.[92] In 1975, the year of the 'big strike' in the Millfield factory, there were strikes right across the Sunbeam Group of companies 'due to our inability to pay increases which would only create further losses and unemployment.'[93] Paternalism, once deprived of its economic base, simply collapsed.

These sudden structural changes in the employment relationship are reflected in the popular memory of Sunbeam workers, whose recollections present a narrative where the era of paternalist management under the Dwyers acquires the reputation of a 'golden age' for the factory, in sharp contrast to the strife and insecurity of the seventies and eighties when control passed away from the Dwyer family. Catherine O'Callaghan, who worked in Sunbeam from 1975 to 1984, attributed the 'fall of the Sunbeam empire' to distant shareholders and other interests 'only in there at the time to feather their own nest and [who] didn't really care about what happened, the actual company at the end of the day' in distinct contrast to when the company was 'in their [The Dwyers'] own house'.[94] Madge Barry expressed the common opinion that 'they should have kept it as a Dwyer establishment and they would have, they'd still be going today if they had done that.'[95] In reality, the memory of a Dwyer 'golden age' followed by the destruction of the company by distant interests reflected the changes wrought by the introduction of free trade, which simply happened to coincide with the phasing out of Dwyer involvement with the company.

Irish Steel's industrial relations history was similarly influenced by the protections under which it existed. The 'tug of war' between the craft and general unions, alongside the industrial might of the tradesmen, led to

[92] Trade union membership in Ireland increased by over 50 per cent between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s, with density peaking at 55 per cent in 1980. See Joseph Wallace, Patrick Gunnigle and Gerard McMahon, *Industrial Relations in Ireland*, 3rd Edition (Dublin, 2004), 11.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Catherine O'Callaghan, 29 April, 1997, CFP, SR93.

[95] Madge Barry, 28 August 1997, CFP, SR95.

steadily increasing wages throughout the protectionist period of the firm. While defended from competition by tariffs and the vital scrap monopoly, the company could afford these pay increases. However, the advent of EEC membership, combined with an international steel recession, forced a change of policy within the company. In 1976, for example, chairman Kevin McCourt was complaining that the volume of exports sales had fallen by 53 per cent with home sales declining by 14 per cent.[96] By 1977, the firm was in negotiations with the EEC for its survival, and with the Irish government for an extensive investment package that would allow it to update its plant and remain viable under the new conditions in which it found itself. Additionally, the company was about to be deprived of the vital scrap monopoly, which would have the effect of immediately increasing prices for all products. As such, Irish Steel was under pressure to prevent increasing labour costs and maintain profitability in order to survive. When the craft workers pressed their claim for a wage increase in 1977, the company's refusal to accept their demands represented a sea change in management policy which had, until that point, been to acquiesce to worker demands. The result was the devastating strike of 1977, the length and severity of which came as a surprise to both strikers and management.

The brief period of industrial conflict experienced by both Sunbeam and Irish Steel during the 1970s contrast sharply with the Marina Plant. The most obvious explanation for this divergence lies in the fact that, unlike its counterparts in clothing, textiles and steel production, the Ford plant was able to benefit from a reprieve in the introduction of free trade, tariff protections for the factory being extended until 1984. In its early years, the employees of the company accepted strict discipline of the factory, the denial of trade-union rights and the monotony of the assembly line process in exchange for exceptionally high wages at a time of high unemployment. The importance of wages is emphasised by the fact that the only non-political industrial dispute to occur in the factory prior to unionisation was in response to a pay cut at a period when the Ford company was forced to reduce labour costs right across its companies due to the effects of the great depression.

Ford's transformation into a protected industry later that year ensured its profitability and its ability to maintain high wage levels, while the extension of tariff protections for the industry until 1984 allowed it to maintain these levels until closure. As such, the company did not find it necessary to

[96] Irish Steel, Chairman's Review, 16 November 1976, NAI, TAOIS 2006/133/79.

dramatically alter management policy or introduce redundancies, pay cuts or major changes in working conditions even as Sunbeam and Irish Steel were forced to restructure in response to free-trade conditions. As one former worker remarked of the early 1980s, a period of high unemployment in Ireland generally, 'there was no recession in Fords.'[97] The minor industrial disputes that the factory did experience mainly related to control of the labour process and were generally resolved without recourse to serious strike action. While the industrial relations tribulations in the 1970s of Sunbeam and Irish Steel can be attributed to the difficulties created by a significant shift in work practices and conditions, necessitated by a changing economic context, Ford never encountered such a transition. When tariffs were removed, the company simply ended its operations in Ireland with a single and total closure combined with generous redundancy packages which satisfied the plant's workforce and precluded the possibility of an occupation over severance terms along the lines of the nearby Dunlops' factory, which closed in the same period.[98]

Therefore the experience of the Ford Marina plant, as well as both Sunbeam and Irish Steel, suggests that the course of macro-level industrial development in Ireland was the most important factor in determining work relations in all three companies. The policies of protectionism and import-substitution first introduced in the 1930s had the effect of mediating class antagonisms within manufacturing industry. These policies ensured that capitalists like William Dwyer and others were granted a semi-monopoly position and guaranteed profitability through insulation from foreign competition. Workers in these same industries benefited from relatively good wages, security of employment and other benefits which were made possible by import-substitution policies, militating against industrial conflict. With the advent of free trade however, these cosy relations were fundamentally transformed, as management sought to reduce labour costs and enforce more stringent working conditions in order to maintain their profits in a difficult new environment. Without the intervention of the state through import-substitution to mitigate the possibility of class conflict in the old protected industries, antagonisms erupted in spectacular fashion. Crucially, the ability of workers to resist management authority was aided by economic growth and high trade-union density. Resistance, rather than compliance, was a rational response to engagement with management. By the end of the 1970s, however, the economic position of workers had weakened greatly. High unemployment generally, combined with the constant

[97] Author's interview with Michael Lenihan, 31 January 2013.
[98] Author's interview with Michael Lenihan, 31 January 2013.

threat of closure in the cases of Sunbeam and Irish Steel, militated against the possibility of strike action during the 1980s as workers became increasingly disempowered and largely unable to win gains through resistance, reflecting the beginning of a broader decline in Irish strike activity which has continued to the present day.

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