

Barr, Andrew (Andy)

by Lawrence William White

Barr, Andrew (Andy) (1913–2003), trade unionist and communist, was born 23 September 1913 at 29 Cluan Place, off Mountpottinger Road, Ballymacarrett, Belfast, second child among two sons and five daughters (two other children died in infancy) of Andrew Barr (d. 1986, aged 98), a bookbinder from Ballymena, Co. Antrim, and his wife Margaret (née Watson), a box maker in the printing trade. Both parents, while pro-partition, were devoid of sectarian bigotry and narrow provincialism; the family took annual summer holidays in southern Ireland. His father was an active trade unionist with socialist convictions, in whose Left Book Club collection young Barr read widely. Owing largely to his mother's influence, the household were strictly observant presbyterians; Barr credited unwavering attendance till age 18 at four church services every Sunday as the ironic basis of his adult atheism.

Educated at Madrid St. elementary school, Barr was apprenticed at age 14 at Musgrave's engineering works, Albert Bridge Rd, initially as a fitter, then as a sheet metal worker. In the last year of his apprenticeship (1933) he joined the National Union of Sheet Metal Workers (NUSMW). Dissatisfied with conditions at Musgrave's (he suffered permanent hearing impairment in one ear), in 1938 he secured employment at Shorts aircraft factory, where in 1942 he was elected a shop steward. He helped organise a works committee at Shorts of the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions (CSEU), and became its first secretary; by fostering close relations among craft and general unions, the committee eased tensions over skills dilution, a contentious issue under wartime conditions. He was also a member of the port shop stewards' committee, thus helping lay the foundations of the strong shop stewards' organisation that was an enduring feature of industrial relations within Shorts and throughout the shipyard.

In June 1942 Barr joined the Communist Party of Northern Ireland (CPNI), part of a wartime membership surge that peaked at some 1,000, mostly skilled protestant workers. As a communist shop steward he implemented the party's policy of maintaining unimpeded production of armaments for the allied war effort against Nazi Germany; on many occasions he acted to soothe worker unrest and counter shop-steward militants, seeking thereby to maintain industrial peace and avoid strikes. He helped negotiate productivity deals, which attained some gains in wages and benefits for his members, and involved worker participation in joint production committees with government and employers.

As CPNI membership, influence, and electoral support collapsed in the cold-war climate of the latter 1940s, Barr and fellow party activists concentrated on industrial politics, and expanded their roles within the mainstream trade-union movement.

Barr was elected shop stewards' convenor at Shorts (1946–53), and represented the Irish members of the NUSMW on the union's Scottish district committee; on formation of a separate Northern Ireland district, he became chairman of the district committee (1947), and was elected to the union's national executive committee (1948). Amid post-war tensions over demarcation, Barr, though an official of a small craft union of relatively well paid workers, resisted craft elitism, and fought, in accord with socialist principle, for full employment for all workers, not just for the interests of a skilled sector. He was twice dismissed by Shorts for trade union activity (ostensibly for conducting union meetings during working hours). The first occasion resulted in the securing of shop floor rights for the CSEU in all the main engineering and shipyard shops (1948). On the second occasion (when, ironically, he was urging a return to work during a demarcation dispute), eight other senior shop stewards were likewise dismissed for speaking in his defence; after a ten-week support strike of 10,000 workers in five Shorts shops, all nine men were reinstated, and won cases over unfair dismissal (1949–50).

As attitudes within trade union structures toward communists relaxed after the death of Stalin (1953), Barr became a full-time trade union official as Northern Ireland district secretary of the NUSMW (1953–78). Though his union was small (claiming only 2,000 Irish members at its peak in 1970), the office was a base for his advancement within the CSEU, of which he became Northern Ireland vice-president (1952–6), and president (1956–78), representing a membership of some 40,000. He was prominent in efforts to protect jobs in the shipyard and the broader armaments industry, including two mass campaigns to prevent the threatened closure of Shorts: over a proposal to transfer the factory to Rochester (mid 1950s), and a government decision to close the factory on foot of the 1965 Plowden report on the aircraft industry. Barr was national president (Great Britain and Ireland) of the NUSMW (1964–5), the first Irish person to hold the office. His leftist initiatives encountered stiff resistance from catholic actionists among the union's English membership.

In 1954 Barr was elected an executive member of the Northern Ireland Committee (NIC) of the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC). He participated in the discussions that resulted in reunification of the Irish trade union movement under the 1959 merger of the ITUC and the Congress of Irish Unions to form the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU); his arguments, as an executive of a British-based union, for all-Ireland trade union unity carried great weight in both countries. He played a central role in securing recognition of the NIC by the Stormont government (1964), and served as NIC chairman (1966–7). Nonetheless he was ambivalent about the NIC's achievements, positing that its close working relationship with government benefited the state more than workers, and led to 'economist type of thinking' that 'blunts the edge of the ... class struggle' (Devine, 103). He performed lengthy service on the Belfast and District Trades Union Council (a more leftist body than the NIC), served on the ITUC/ICTU executive (1956–63, 1965–6, 1968–78), and was a frequent delegate to the British Trade Union Congress. Though long excluded from the office owing to his communism (notwithstanding his seniority on the congress

executive), he became president of ICTU (1974–5); his belated selection was seen as a tribute to his behind-the-scenes service on numerous congress committees, and his public role combating sectarian divisions throughout the Northern Ireland troubles of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Chairman of the CPNI by the early 1960s, Barr twice stood for the party in the Stormont elections in Belfast (Bloomfield), winning 1,207 votes (12%) in 1953, but a mere 308 (2.5%) in 1965. He articulated the CPNI line both by supporting the Warsaw Pact intervention in Hungary (1956) (which he deemed necessary to forestall a right-wing counter-revolution), and by opposing the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia. On the reconstitution of the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI) by the merger of the CPNI and the southern-based Irish Workers' Party (1970), he became first chairman of the all-Ireland body. When the CPI split in 1975 he continued as chairman, despite his identification with a democratic socialist 'Eurocommunist' perspective, as against the more rigidly pro-Moscow position of the party's general secretary, Michael O'Riordan (1917–2006), who thereafter dominated the organisation.

Barr's engagement with the Northern Ireland troubles was an expression of CPNI policy regarding partition and the national question. Seeking progress within partition, the CPNI since the mid 1940s pursued a line of uniting protestant and catholic workers in a campaign for social and economic justice, and for full civil and democratic rights. Realisation of a normal, bourgeois democracy in Northern Ireland was posited as a necessary pre-condition for the eventual reunification and independence of Ireland, which in turn would be a prior stage to realisation of a socialist Ireland. In accordance with this line, Barr actively supported the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) from its inception in January 1967. When the civil-rights campaign took a more militant direction, characterised by mass demonstrations and marches, and confrontations with the security forces, the CPNI played a temporising role, seeking, in Barr's words, to influence the movement 'along sensible lines that could perhaps be accepted by the protestant population' (Devine, 105). Amid intensified sectarian conflict in 1970, Barr organised trade-union resistance to the expulsion of catholic workers from the shipyard and other workplaces by loyalist gangs, and opposed calls for a separate Ulster trades union congress. He supported the continued presence of British troops in the province, insisting that it was Westminster's duty to reform Northern Ireland's political structures, since Stormont had failed to do so. He fronted the CP campaign urging a bill of rights for Northern Ireland, securing support for the idea from the NICRA (February 1970), the TUC (September 1971), and the affiliated unions of the NIC (February 1972). Denouncing the introduction of internment (August 1971), he resigned in protest as ICTU representative on the Northern Ireland Economic Council, and visited interned trade unionists. He opposed abolition of the Stormont parliament, and thereafter continually called for restoration of devolved government under a bill of democratic rights.

Barr and the CPI opposed the 1973 Sunningdale agreement (contending that the power-sharing executive established thereunder had been granted no effective powers to share), but then castigated the British Labour government for failing to take strong measures to save the executive in the face of concerted loyalist opposition. Defying the loyalist work stoppage, spearheaded by the Ulster Workers' Council (UWC), that ultimately brought down the executive, Barr organised and led a back-to-work march into the shipyard (21 May 1974). While his courage was manifest (the two hundred marchers ran the gauntlet of a large, jeering, missile-throwing mob; at the outset, Barr removed his spectacles, quipping 'These'll be a liability'), his judgement was questionable: the small attendance only demonstrated the scale of the stoppage, and fortified UWC resolve. After the collapse of Sunningdale, Barr joined other trade union leaders, both north and south, in calling on the British government to declare an intent to disengage from Northern Ireland; the demand, which envisioned an 'orderly withdrawal' of troops, and a transition period during which Westminster would establish full civil rights and democratic government in Northern Ireland, became a cornerstone of subsequent CPI policy. Barr was prominent in the NIC's 'better life for all' campaign, a joint trade-union initiative against violence and sectarianism (launched January 1976).

Barr maintained that the two traits most essential to a trade union official were a level head and fire in one's belly; his stated ambition was 'to see the workers inherit the earth'. After retiring from full-time trade union work in 1978, he chaired the Northern Ireland Health and Safety Executive (1978–83). He remained politically active on such issues as pensioners' rights, Cuban solidarity, opposition to apartheid in South Africa, and third world development. During the 1980s he supported the Gorbachev reforms in the USSR. He ascribed the dismantlement of the USSR to misuse of the opportunities afforded under the communist system, and predicted that capitalism would seek aggressively to roll back the gains made by workers worldwide since 1917.

Barr married (1941) Dorothy ('Dotsy') Adrain (d. 1989), a warper in a garment factory; they had one son and two daughters. His recreations included reading, walking, swimming, gymnasium exercise, and ballroom dancing (the latter a shared enthusiasm with his wife). He resided for many years in Ballymacormick, Bangor, Co. Down. He died 30 March 2003.

ITWW; *Ir. Times*, 7–8 July 1975 (profile by Michael McInerney); *Ir. Times*, 2 Apr. 1977 (interview with Eugene McEldowney); Mike Milotte, *Communism in modern Ireland: the pursuit of the workers' republic since 1916* (1984); Francis Devine, 'An undiminished dream: Andy Barr, communist trade unionist', *Saothar*, xvi (1991), 95–111; Don Anderson, *Fourteen May days: inside the loyalist strike of 1974* (1994); Donal Nevin (ed.), *Trade union century* (1994), 439, 442, 446; *Ir. Times*, 5, 9 Apr.

2003; *Saothar*, xxix (2004), 7–10 (obit. by Francis Devine); Joe Bowers, ‘Andy Barr 1913–2003: a funeral tribute...’, CPI website, www.comunistpartyofireland.ie (reprinted from *Unity*, xv, no. 14 (12 Apr. 2003), 5–7); anon., ‘Some famous Irish communists: Andy Barr (1923–2003)’, *ibid.* (website accessed May 2009)

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