

Darby, Tom

by Terry Clavin

Darby, Tom (1928–2009), trade unionist, was born in Kinnegad, Co. Westmeath, on 28 February 1928, one of seven children of James Darby, a labourer, and his wife Rachel (née Keenan). His family was poor and, after leaving Kinnegad national school at age 14, he worked locally as a turf cutter for Bord na Mona and as a labourer for the Land Commission. Through personal connections, he secured a job in 1949 with CIÉ's Dublin bus service, working as a conductor based in the Clontarf garage. In 1952 he married Ellen Lenehan of Mylerstown, Co. Kildare, later settling in Beaumont, Dublin. Unsuccessfully seeking promotion, he avoided union activities initially, before quickly ascending to the ITGWU's Dublin bus branch committee, being its delegate at the 1961 annual conference.

This permitted a disillusioning insight into the workings of his union, intensified by his widely shared disgust at the ITGWU's irresolute opposition to CIÉ's attempted imposition of driver-only buses during 1962–3. He organised pickets during the busmen's unofficial strike in May 1962, and was among those Clontarf busmen who responded to the other unions' reluctance to take in such a mutinous cohort by initiating a breakaway union. They secretly registered the Dublin City Busmen's Union on 28 August 1963, announcing its creation in October.

Emerging as the new union's guiding spirit by virtue of his energy and forcefulness, Darby endeared himself to his followers by incautiously quitting his CIÉ job to pursue his duties as general secretary. Amid widespread scepticism concerning the union's viability and spurious rumours of communist influences, expectations of rapidly gaining 1,000 recruits proved overly optimistic. Thus, when Cork and Limerick busmen requested membership, Darby jettisoned one of his main grievances – the subsidisation of provincial bus services by the Dublin ones – and effected a name change to the National Busmen's Union (NBU; latterly, the National Busworkers' Union). Boosted by this provincial influx, during 1964 he accumulated 1,200 members (800 from the ITGWU) and the £1,000 needed for a negotiating licence.

Throughout, he condemned large general unions for allowing an unaccountable bureaucracy to manipulate balloting procedures and play different grades of workers off each other. The NBU turned away bus cleaners and maintenance workers to concentrate on drivers and conductors, had two salaried officials for its modest premises, and from 1967 obliged representatives to resign if they sought promotion. Darby held conspicuously aloof from management and assiduously toured the bus depots, deriving his authority from close personal relations with members.

To compensate for the financial weaknesses attendant on a narrow membership base, he pioneered the use of serial one-day stoppages upon embarking on his first

serious confrontation with management in 1965. The NBU had numbers sufficient to cripple CIÉ's bus services and, in what proved a recurring pattern, workers in other unions defied their leaders by refusing to cross its pickets. When the management unwisely locked out all NBU workers after their second one-day strike on 12 June, Darby gambled by extending pickets to CIÉ's rail and freight lorry sections, causing significant disruptions. Twelve days later, the NBU won a modest pay increase and significant prestige.

By the 1970s, the 2,600-strong NBU represented the majority of CIÉ's bus workers, benefiting from the bus service's high staff turnover and declining recruitment standards, which led to a continuous influx of young, unmarried employees, naturally drawn towards Darby's militancy. Conversely, his livelihood rested on his popularity with an extremely headstrong and fickle membership, prone to flouting his authority by dragging him into no-warning strikes over petty issues, yet equally quick to resent prolonged stoppages. There were also divisions between the Dublin bus workers and their more moderate provincial colleagues.

While using the picket as his weapon of first resort, Darby channelled his members' anger away from the politically sensitive issue of pay and was anxious to avoid open-ended national strikes, limiting stoppages to one day or to individual depots. He also had frequent recourse to assorted 'work-to-rules'. His guerrilla tactics husbanded scarce resources and avoided provoking either a political backlash or an NBU split, but antagonised the other unions, who believed such tactics achieved little beyond self-promotion, and who were liable to retaliate with a full-scale strike. Indeed, most of the bus strikes in this period were caused by union rivalries.

Due to his members' provision of a widely-used, frontline service and their wage-policy significance as the lowest paid employees in the largest state-run enterprise, Darby enjoyed a profile out of all proportion to his union's size, his gruff shop-steward image and forthright, folksy turn of phrase making for good media copy. He maintained a suitably unglamorous lifestyle, taking the bus to work and relaxing by going turf cutting; his sole bourgeois indulgence was golf. Interested solely in bread-and-butter issues, he disdained 'do-gooders' and initially regarded the prospect of woman bus workers with derision; as an observant Roman catholic, he was irritated by a successful motion at the 1985 NBU national conference for legalising divorce.

In asserting the rights of workers to pursue their sectional interests without reference to the broader labour movement, he was effectively advocating a free market in trade unions – an appalling vista for capitalists and socialists alike. The NBU remained outside the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), establishing in 1973 a small rival entity called the Irish Trade Union Federation in conjunction with its close ally the Marine Port and General Workers' Union. Condemning the annual national wage agreements between the government and ICTU for denying workers their right to strike for pay, he nonetheless acceded to all the agreements bar one.

Aside from subverting trade-union cohesion, the NBU's advent entrenched divisions within the CIÉ workforce, as the conflicting career and social preferences of the largely NBU-supporting younger bus workers and the largely ITGWU-supporting older generation prevented the unions from agreeing positions on necessary changes to work practices. The resulting paralysis thwarted Darby's efforts to resolve fundamental worker grievances such as inadequate pensions and low basic wages.

In 1974 his painstaking negotiation of an agreement for a five-day week unravelled disastrously when ITGWU bus workers, unhappy with the long working days so necessitated, forced their union to renege and strike on 5 May for the continuation of the six-day week. Inter-union animosity deepened when 500 NBU workers followed Darby's advice by attempting to cross the pickets on 24 May and were either repelled or had their buses forced off the road. Although his strike funds were soon exhausted, Darby refused to budge, and the marathon dispute ended inconclusively on 9 July before a short NBU strike in September produced an average working week of 5.4 days.

Necessitating copious overtime, this unsatisfactory compromise persisted for well over a decade and heralded a collapse in worker morale and efficiency. During 1974–84, the Dublin bus services were unreliable and heavily loss-making amid farcically high rates of absenteeism, rumours of systematic fare appropriation, and recurring NBU strikes, typically in defence of egregious disciplinary violations. Though responsibility for this was widely shared, Darby became the main focus of public opprobrium, projecting an attitude of unrepentant, hair-trigger belligerence. If anything, he had mellowed but had to allow for his members' disgruntlement and the advent of a younger generation of ambitious, ideologically motivated NBU representatives.

These pressures compelled him to hazard a national stoppage in January 1979 in pursuit of one of the largest pay claims ever made by any group of workers. A prolonged dispute was anticipated, so its sudden cessation after five days and the workers achievement of a £10 rise in their weekly pay represented a signal propaganda coup for the NBU, its union rivals having accepted the Labour Court's proffered £7 rise. Few grasped that since the money did not relate to basic pay, the settlement was inferior to the Labour Court offer. With the NBU's capacity for disrupting city transport threatened by the impending opening of a light rail system for Dublin commuters, Darby recruited some fifty train drivers during 1979–80, conducting a particularly unpopular and bitter rail strike in 1982 over union recognition rights.

The prolonged recession of the 1980s left the government incapable of subsidising CIÉ to the same extent and the public less tolerant of strikes. Darby recognised this, and in October 1983 the NBU executive disregarded a close ballot requiring industrial action. That the isolated NBU would have been taking a suicidal stand against the credibility of the government's public-sector pay strategy cut no ice with

outraged hardliners. Consequently, Darby authorised an ill-advised strike at the Phibsborough depot in summer 1984, calculating that the inevitable embarrassing defeat would humble his union's wilder spirits.

It also encouraged CIÉ to revive its campaign for driver-only buses at which the Congress unions temporarily sank their differences with Darby and unsuccessfully invited the NBU to join ICTU. Backed by a government ready to licence private operators and deploy army transport, in December 1985 CIÉ began suspending workers who refused to cooperate. Despite the resignation of one executive member and noisy internal resistance, Darby weathered the NBU's acceptance, alongside the other unions, of the phasing-in of driver-only buses in January 1986.

After further clashes between the unions and management during 1987–8, he persuaded the NBU to accept CIÉ's restructuring plan, showing better judgement than the ITGWU leaders who unsuccessfully urged a strike on members. The unions' weakness was confirmed in April 1991, when simultaneous NBU bus and rail strikes were undone by new legislation that more strictly regulated Darby's stock in trade: disputes involving one worker. In a failed strike that autumn over an important point of principle for CIÉ – its use of private operators – he again took a more moderate line than the ICTU unions. His members supported this pragmatism, concealed by fiery rhetoric and continuous low-level skirmishing with management.

On Darby's retirement in 1992, the NBU comfortably retained its position as the CIÉ bus workers' majority union, while a surge in its rail worker membership in the early 1990s prompted its rebranding as the National Bus and Rail Union (NBRU). He was distressed by the NBRU's subsequent quiescence, particularly its acceptance of changes to work practices implemented without the consent of a majority of the CIÉ train drivers concerned. When the Irish Locomotive Drivers' Association staged a doomed strike in summer 2000, Darby encouraged its leader, Brendan Ogle, and embarrassed the NBRU by offering publicly to mediate.

In retirement, Darby attended to his golf and gardening. He died after a long struggle with Parkinson's disease in Beaumont Hospital, Dublin, on 10 November 2009, and was buried in Dardistown cemetery, Co. Dublin. He and his wife had three sons, two of whom joined CIÉ. His will disposed of €312,750.

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