

The Controversial History of the TWU

By Joseph Doyle

One-Hundred-Ninety-First Street was considered one of the warmest stations in the subway. It had an elevator so there was no cold wind coming in and it's one of the deepest stations. During the Depression I'd come in down in the early morning-- it's a big station and a quarter of that station's floor would be covered with newspapers and men sleeping in them. We used to talk about it in the crew barn; thinking about back in Ireland, thinking that we'd see men cold, frozen, standing with a pile of apples in the corner.

--Gerald O'Reilly

With the publication last year of Shirley Quill's memoirs of her late husband, Mike Quill, Himself, there are now a half dozen interpretations of the history of the Transport Workers Union in print or circulating privately. They range from the popular 1968 biography, *The Man Who Ran the Subways*, to a would-be Broadway play, to have starred Carroll O'Connor as Mike Quill. Each interprets the history of the T.W.U. in a wildly different fashion - the one common element being, unfortunately, the short shrift given to any sort of rank-and-file point of view.

Quill's ebullient personality is probably to blame for most of these works skewing away from the experience of the ordinary subway worker. Half the works depict Quill single-handedly building the T.W.U., the other half argue, interestingly enough, the primacy of the Communist party, U.S.A., in building the union. The rank-and-file gets scant, or token attention in all of these works, and slides out of view entirely in the heat of argument about the importance of the Communist Party in founding the union.

The story of how the T.W.U. came into being was common knowledge years ago, and yet today very few people seem willing to believe it. Up until the mid-1930s transit workers of New York City worked seven days a week-- a split shift of up to 14 hours every day of the year except July 4th, their one paid holiday. That cold fact, in everyday life, translated (within the transit industry's predominantly Irish Catholic work force) to never being able to attend Sunday Mass; married men who never saw their children awake; and a generation of post Civil War Irish immigrants who had no social life, no home life and who knew nothing of America but the view from the window of their subway train.

When one looks at the founding of the Transport Workers Union from the point of view of a rank-and-file transit worker, the leadership of the fledgling union assumes secondary importance, and working conditions ((a seven day work week, uncertainty of employment and man-killing* hours) become central, causal factors in explaining how the union came into being. Retired trolleyman, Tim Griffin, who went to work for the Brooklyn Manhattan Transit Company (B.M.T.) in 1930, recalls his first seven years on the job, before the union came in as "seven years of hell":

You'd come in [to the crew hall] at 4 o'clock in the morning. That would be the first report. And you wouldn't get any work. You'd sit around there maybe till three or four o'clock in the afternoon.



TWU founders, Douglas MacMahon and Michael Quill, assist strikers.

You'd be lucky if you got a day or two days work a week.

You had no regular set hours. Sometimes I wouldn't come home till half past three in the morning and I'd have to come in again at 5 o'clock for report. Sometimes I'd sit in the depot [instead of going home]. Come home. Got to sleep. Get up. Go to work.

The rank-and-file point of view has limitations. Rank and filers were largely unaware of some of the machinations and political maneuverings that built their own union. On the other hand, the most important factor driving the union forward - intolerable working conditions - stands out vividly from this perspective. The history of the founding of the T.W.U. can be clearly traced through the experiences of an individual like Tim Griffin:

I put in some brutal hours... It used to just about pay my board. If I got lucky and got an extra day, I'd set that aside to send home. I was spending nothing. Any cent I could spare I had to send home. They didn't have any way of making money at home.

The rank-and-file experience elucidates a second striking feature of the organizing years of the T.W.U., the preponderance of recent emigrants, from Ireland, in the transit industry. Tim Griffin's experiences profile a whole generation exiled from Ireland after the 1922-1923 Civil War, either for political, or as was the case for Griffin, economic reasons:

I had to leave Ireland, there was no way to earn a bite to eat. It was the worst time Ireland's had since the Famine.

Every week you'd get a letter you know [from Ireland]. They usen't say anything at all about how hard things were--but they didn't have to. We knew the situation. They didn't complain about anything. They used to say "Thank God that we aren't starving anyhow". They never knew how hard it was here, either, 'cause we never told them.

Figures on how many Irish there actually were in New York's transit system are imprecise. Historian Josh A. Freeman estimates that at the time of the organizing drive, in the early 1930s, roughly half the work force had been born in Ireland. Larry Barran, an early participant in the organizing drive, recalls an amusing job interview, applying for work with the I.R.T. Writing down his birthplace as New York City, Barran's interviewer looked at his application, tore it up, and told him to list a town in Ireland if he wanted the job. Over in Brooklyn, Tim Griffin estimates "over 80% of the men in the crew hall where he shaped up for work were Irish born. (Freeman's figures indicate a lower figure overall for the B.M.T., about 50%).

As for Irish Americans, Griffin acknowledges that there were a fair number, but he points out:

At that time the Depression hadn't hit hard enough and it was beneath the dignity of the Americans to take jobs for the cops, [transit] and the fire department. It was only when things got bad that they started.

Griffin describes the Brooklyn crew hall where he reported for work as a large room with benches along the side, a few pool tables, and often as many as a hundred men waiting around. It was one of nine B.M.T. trolley depots. The scene was replicated in the other boroughs. The I.R.T. depot where Gerald O'Reilly (one of the founders of the T.W.U.) shaped up for work, held hundreds of men waiting around all day for work. Griffin recalls there was little talk of politics and little reading:

Mostly just sit around and talk. Do a little bit of cursing, of course.

Griffin recalls a good number of the men in his crew hall, himself included, read only Irish newspapers during the interminable waiting around for jobs:

Most of us weren't interested in the news here. We hadn't been long enough in this country to be interested. We weren't able to go around to see this country. It was years before I knew my way around Brooklyn. We'd spent all of our time stuck in this one depot. That was our America-- all there in the depot all day long.

One of the worst things about the job, in Griffin's recollection, was constant harassment from supervisors and patrons. Customers would complain in writing to the B.M.T. main office, often about trivial disputes they had with conductors (over validation of transfers, for example). The letters exaggerated, occasionally even fabricated incidents. The conductor or motorman named in the complaint was automatically suspended until he had gone to the complainant's home and gotten the letter of complaint signed, acknowledging that an apology had been received. Protests of innocence were useless, the word of a customer was always taken over the word of an employee.

There was little recourse. The B.M.T., as well as the I.R.T. and the private bus companies, had an elaborate system of company spies, "Dollar-a-day men," as they were called. Quoting Griffin:

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All photographs courtesy of the T.W.U.

They got an extra dollar a day to hang around and inform on anything they heard. To tell you what it was like: One time the guys were talking --the toilets were downstairs-- And there was a bunch of them down there talking about how a couple of them had gotten a dirty deal. One guy said: "What we need in this place is a good union." So he went upstairs and he was up there a short while and the dispatcher stuck his head in the window and said: "Reagan, come on in. The boss wants to talk to you inside." He went in. The boss said, "So you want to see a good union on this property, Johnny Regan." He said, "Who told you that?" He said, "Never mind who told me that. Whoever told-- you said it."

Against this formidable espionage system a union organizing drive managed to get underway.

Somebody would say to you "See the light?" That meant, "Did you join the union yet?". For a long time, I didn't know what they meant by, "See the light?" They didn't know me well enough to know if they could trust me or not.

Union organizers secretly left T.W.U. buttons lying around on the benches in the crew hall, in the motorman's cab on the trains, tucked out of sight on the floor of the bathroom in the crew hall. Griffin recalls:

The union always managed to see that you got them without sticking your neck out... When you picked it up. That was all. You wouldn't say to anyone that you were going to join, 'cause you didn't know who'd see you.

We put it [the button] under the lapel of our coat, under the collar-- hidden from sight. If the boss ever got one glimpse of it there, that was it. You were out. Well nobody was going to go looking under the collar of your coat. But it gave the organizers a way-- you see, you never knew who you were talking to.

Griffin is generous in his praise of Mike Quill, Austin Hogan, Douglas MacMahon and others who did "stick their necks out." He recalls Quill and the other T.W.U. leaders lost their jobs and had to survive on the charity of friends for years until the union got established. To him, the organizing drive was a marvel of tactics, organizational ability and secrecy. It appeared in his crew hall *deus ex machina*, swept up the membership and was voted in as bargaining agent before the B.M.T. could do anything to stop it.

Griffin disputes that the Communist Party had a role in organizing the union. He believes Quill answered his accusers decisively in the 1940s "shoving the accusation down their throats". Griffin attributes the decision by MacMahon, Hogan and several others to leave office when charged with Communist ties, to a generous impulse on their part, "to take the heat off the union". He assumes those who left office had dealings with the Communist Party - the Communist Party in his opinion had an unrivalled record at the time for organizing ability - but he doubts that they were Communists themselves.

Gerald O'Reilly, one of the acknowledged founders of the Transport Workers Union, wrote a short memoir two years ago which is an interesting complement to Tim Griffin's rank-and-file perspective on the history of the union. O'Reilly, along with Quill and a dozen other Irish emigres who coalesced in 1933 to form the nucleus of



TWU's founder Michael Quill (left) confers with C.I.O. President John L. Lewis at the first TWU Convention held in Madison Square Garden in 1937.

the T.W.U., met in the "Irish Workers Clubs" organized in Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx by IRA veteran James Gratton, an Irish-born socialist. O'Reilly and Quill also belonged to the Clan-na-Gael. On leaving Ireland, they had transferred their IRA membership over to the American branch, the Clan-na-Gael. Quill had extensive contacts in a number of Irish social and fraternal organizations as well. He was a very popular figure in the Irish American community and master of ceremonies for Clan-na-Gael ceilidhs.

According to Sean Cronin, in a very interesting essay, James Connolly and the T.W.U.A.: The Ideological Links with Mike Quill and His Associates, the blueprint for the T.W.U. came directly from the writings of James Connolly. Connolly's writings were the focus of Gratton's Worker's Club meetings. Connolly had witnessed the unsuccessful 1907 streetcar strike, and written a prescription for remedying the strike's failure- industrial unionism.

Connolly reported the unsuccessful 1907 New York trolley strike in the I.W.W. Industrial Union Bulletin. He concluded that the failure of the power plant workers, who were in a different union from that of the trolleyman, to support the strike was the cause of defeat and that transit workers would never have bargaining power with their bosses until all were in a single industrial union.

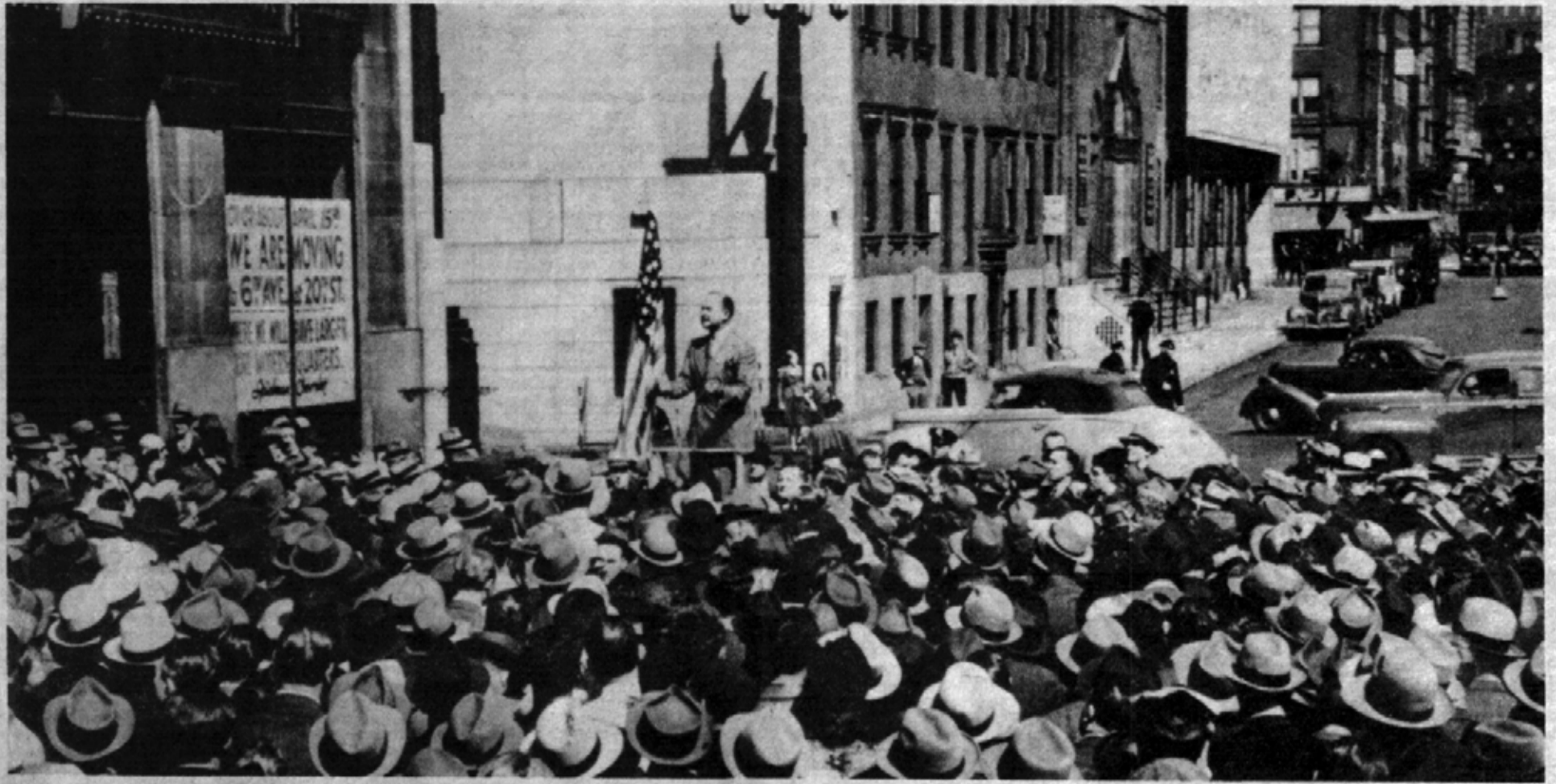
Starting with a core of individuals belonging to the Clan-na-Gael, who trusted each other completely (having gone through the ordeal of the Irish Civil War, hunger strikes in Free State prisons and years of unemployment), the nucleus of what became the T.W.U. was able to branch out from a base of near-perfect secrecy. Improvising on Connolly's plan for forming a union, sympathizers were recruited in every division of the Interborough Rapid Transit, the I.R.T. When enough supporters had been enlisted to make the sprint for union recognition and to go public with their union drive, the organizers put out quiet feelers for money and organizational support. Gerald O'Reilly recalls being turned down by the Irish fraternal groups he assumed would be their natural allies in an organizing campaign - the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick and others; the organizers turned for help to the Communist Party. At the time, the Communist Party had a campaign of their own to try and organize the transit industry. Support from the Communist Party was quickly forthcoming. It was agreed that a half

dozen full-time organizers would have their salaries paid by the Communist Party, including Quill, John Santo (who up to that time had headed the C.P. transit Drive), a lawyer, a publicist and even someone to run a mimeograph machine.

The Man Who Ran the Subways (L. Whittemore; Holt Rhinehart, Winston, N.Y. 1968) reverses this chronology, arguing it was the Communist Party that recruited Quill, Austin Hogan, Douglas MacMahon and others to the first meeting of what became the T.W.U. Gerald O'Reilly and others from the Clan-na-Gael organizing group contend that they dated the beginning of the T.W.U. to the first meeting with organizer Santo, out of courtesy to Santo and the Communist Party organizers who joined forces with the Clan-na-Gael/James Gratton group at that time. Shirley Quill in Mike Quill, Himself, also gives credit to the Communist Party for bringing the future organizers of the union together, as does Joshua Freeman in his article, "Catholics, Communists and Republicans: Irish Workers and the Organization of the Transport Workers Union".

I think all three are mistaken. Gerald O'Reilly's version, elaborated in Sean Cronin's work, is closer to the truth. O'Reilly's version also fits most convincingly with Tim Griffin's experience. Whittemore's chief source was John Santo, the Communist Party organizer in the transit industry. Naturally, he tended to see the C.P. contribution to the formation of the T.W.U. as crucial. Mike Quill, Himself, does not convincingly make the argument that the Communist Party was the prime mover. In fact, the book as a whole is unconvincing, reading like snatches of hearsay and half-remembered anecdotes strung together to fill out a deeply flawed history of the union. On the other hand, Joshua Freeman argues the primacy of the C.P. in forming the union, and thoroughly documents his arguments, but skips lightly over the nuances of how the T.W.U. organizers won over the transit work force.

While the Communist Party supplied critical resources to the organizing campaign: money, legal help, leaflets--the union was, as Tim Griffin articulates so convincingly, built on a person-to-person basis. Quill,



TWU, cont'd.

O'Reilly, and the Clan-na-Gael organizers were uniquely capable of spreading the gospel of organization to the mostly Irish conductors, motormen and lowest paid workers in the New York transit system. Freeman argues the Communist Party played a key role in organizing the repair shops and higher-paid workers in the transit system. Certainly the C.P. played a key role in the shops and throughout the union, but as volunteer organizer Vic Blowski recalls, there were a number of individuals like himself who were organizing in the repair shops without any affiliation to the Communist Party. They spent every waking hour organizing for the union simply because they believed in labor unions and that the transit industry desperately needed one.

One can argue that the T.W.U. founders came together in James Gratton's Irish Workers Club study sessions under the auspices of the Communist Party. The counter argument is persuasive: Larry Barran recalls the Irish Workers Clubs he attended in the early 1930s were full of East European garment workers, and practically no Irish. When James Gratton was deported from Ireland in 1933, he transformed the Clubs overnight. In addition, as Sean Cronin points out, Quill had spent years prior to that weighing possible ways the industry could be organized.

Would the transit industry have been organized were it not for the support of the Communist Party? The question recurs in the auto industry, the C.I.O. maritime industries, and throughout the resurgent labor movement of the 1930s. All of the founders of the T.W.U. are generous in their praise for the support of the Communist Party, and unquestionably Communist organizers throughout the Congress of Industrial Organizations were unstinting in their efforts to build the CIO. But the question, by implication, credits leaders with building the T.W.U. and slights the men and women who made up the T.W.U. and voted it in as their bargaining agent. Tim Griffin's last word on the subject re-emphasizes the fact that individual rank-and-file transit workers decided for themselves that they wanted a union. Griffin recalls another incident involving co-worker Johnny Regan, who on the day after the union recognition vote was openly displaying his T.W.U. button for the first time.

The same boss called him into his office: "Johnny Regan, I can understand some of these young hotheads joining the union, but I'm amazed that a long-edited fellow like yourself ever let Mike Quill talk you into this Communist union."

"Mr. Johnson," he said, "Mike Quill any other Mike couldn't talk me into anything I didn't want to join. But, Mr. Johnson, you and the rest of the bosses, the way they treated the men, were the best organizers on the property".

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Equal pay for equal work was an early issue of the T.W.U. Photo, 1941.