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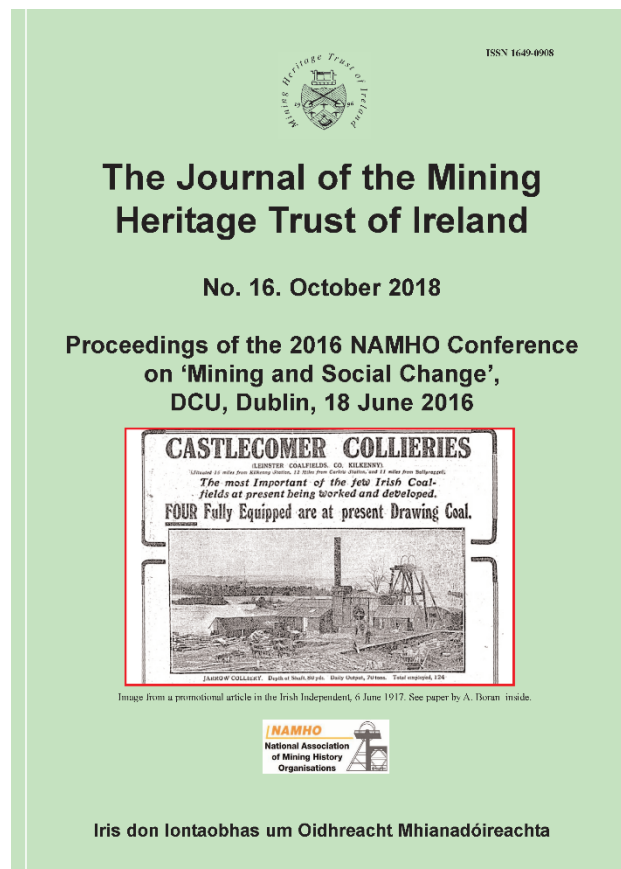
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NIXIE BORAN, MINING AND SOCIAL CHANGE: A CASE STUDY OF THE CASTLECOMER MINERS, 1927-35

by Anne Boran

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Abstract: This paper examines social and political relations in the Castlecomer coalfield in the middle years of the Irish Free State. It looks at how social relations changed in response to increasing resistance by miners to the working, wage and living conditions imposed upon them. In 1930, the Castlecomer miners organised a trade union, the Mine and Quarry Workers' Union, that was inspired by explicit anti-capitalist thinking linked to the wider ideological and political struggles taking place within Irish republicanism. This paper looks at how miner resistance provoked reactions from the powerful Irish institutions of Church, State and landlord/mine-owner, as well as antagonism and conflicts within the local community. My contribution emphasises the role of context and particularly of IRA influences on events. *Journal of the Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland*, 16, 2018 39-45.

BACKGROUND

The geographical area of Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny coincides with what was, from the 17th to the 20th century, the estate of the English landlord family, the Wandesfordes. It was an area of 22,000 acres that had been held by the O'Brenans in ancient times. The Wandesfordes set about exploiting the dual resources of land and coal and producing an income from the estate. They encouraged English immigrants to settle there, some of whom became miners.



Figure 1. Nicholas Boran in 1934 when he was aged 29.

COAL, LAND AND SOCIETY

Castlecomer is the site of one of Ireland's few workable coalfields and the Wandesforde family owned most of the mining rights. The high quality anthracite coal was commercially exploited from the late 17th century until the closure of the final mine in 1969.

In the 19th century the Wandesfordes began to 'rationalise' their tenanted land, formerly managed by middlemen, into a direct tenant system and seized the opportunity of the Famine to implement 'landlord-assisted emigration' which cleared the estate of almost half of the population. After the Wyndham Land Act of 1903 the farmland mostly passed into the hands of small owners, but the Wandesfordes retained ownership of the mines on the estate. Captain Richard Henry Prior-Wandesforde who succeeded as landlord in 1901 consolidated the mines under his control in 1905 when the last leases came up for renewal (Prior-Wandesforde Papers). There were five main mines and they employed between 800 and 1000 men. Working conditions were inherently poor and the coalfield always found it difficult to compete with British imports because of its remote location and poor transport facilities. Wandesforde brought progressive ideas to mining in the early twentieth century and even set up a Co-operative Stores in the heart of the mining district. He was, however, inherently hostile to any attempt by miners to better pay and conditions.

The mass of small farmers in the Castlecomer area, with acreages between 5 and 50 acres, could not make a living from farming alone. Few other work opportunities existed and many small farmers' families depended on work in the mines for survival. Nevertheless, those with land saw themselves as being of a higher status than the landless miners. They tended not to work underground, but to take surface jobs that allowed them to combine farm work with waged employment. Though sharing some experiences with the miners, small farm conservatism



Figure 2. Jarrow Colliery in the Castlecomer Coalfield in 1917. Image: from a promotional article in the *Irish Independent*, 6 June 1917

kept them aloof. The land was their anchor, source of status and frequently associated with educational aspirations beyond primary school level. In addition, they were not exposed to the health risks of those who worked underground. Having succeeded in gaining land ownership they were unlikely to be very tolerant of any ideology that rejected it.

The miners were central to the local economy, supporting a superstructure of shopkeepers, small businesses and pubs. Local opinion captures the complexity of attitudes versus reality relations. One local, reflecting on the situation said-

'Workers had hard cash, farmers had property but no cash. At times, they (the farmers dependent on farming) may have been hungry, not able to afford meat, but there was a snobbery or pride in the land even though the whole economy depended on the mines. Dirty pound notes supported the shopkeepers.' (Meally 1995)

An ex-miner added 'They had nothing but they still looked down on us' (Brennan Roe 1995).

Miners, though less homogeneous than is sometimes supposed, tended to be more cohesive as a group. Diversified by function and levels of pay, they were united by a sense of mutual dependence and risk and so forged strong bonds, family (Brennan 1995) and worker (Walsh and Walsh 1999), particularly those who worked underground. An ex-miner described work in the mine as 'Wicked. I hated it. My father hated it, for the simple

reason that we were slaves' (Brennan Roe 1995).

To sum up, there was a mutual dependency between the groups, yet cohesion tended to be within each group, not between them. An exception to this was during the War of Independence when the eleven North Kilkenny Battalions that made up the North Kilkenny Brigade were composed of a mix of miners, farmers and sons of business people (mainly shop-keepers from Castlecomer town), the latter two groups with a background in the Gaelic League and Land League resistance.

LEADERSHIP SHAPED THROUGH FAILURE

There were two attempts to organise the Castlecomer miners in the early 20th century, the first in 1907 into a Miners' Federation (*Kilkenny People* 2 November 1907), the second in 1919 under the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. Both failed to gain concessions from the mine-owner. The first successful organisation took place in the late 1920s when Nicholas (Nixie) Boran emerged as the leader of the Kilkenny miners. Boran's family straddled the status boundary between the miners and small farmers. As a bright schoolboy, Nicholas (b. 1904) was recruited to the Juniorate of the Christian Brothers. Boran sensed, however, that the life would not suit him and returned home after 2 years. Times were hard and in 1918, at the age of 14, he went to work at the local mines. It was a turbulent time with the War of Independence, the Truce and some attempt at miner organisation. In June 1921 mine supplies were ambushed by the IRA (Delaney 1956), in September 1921

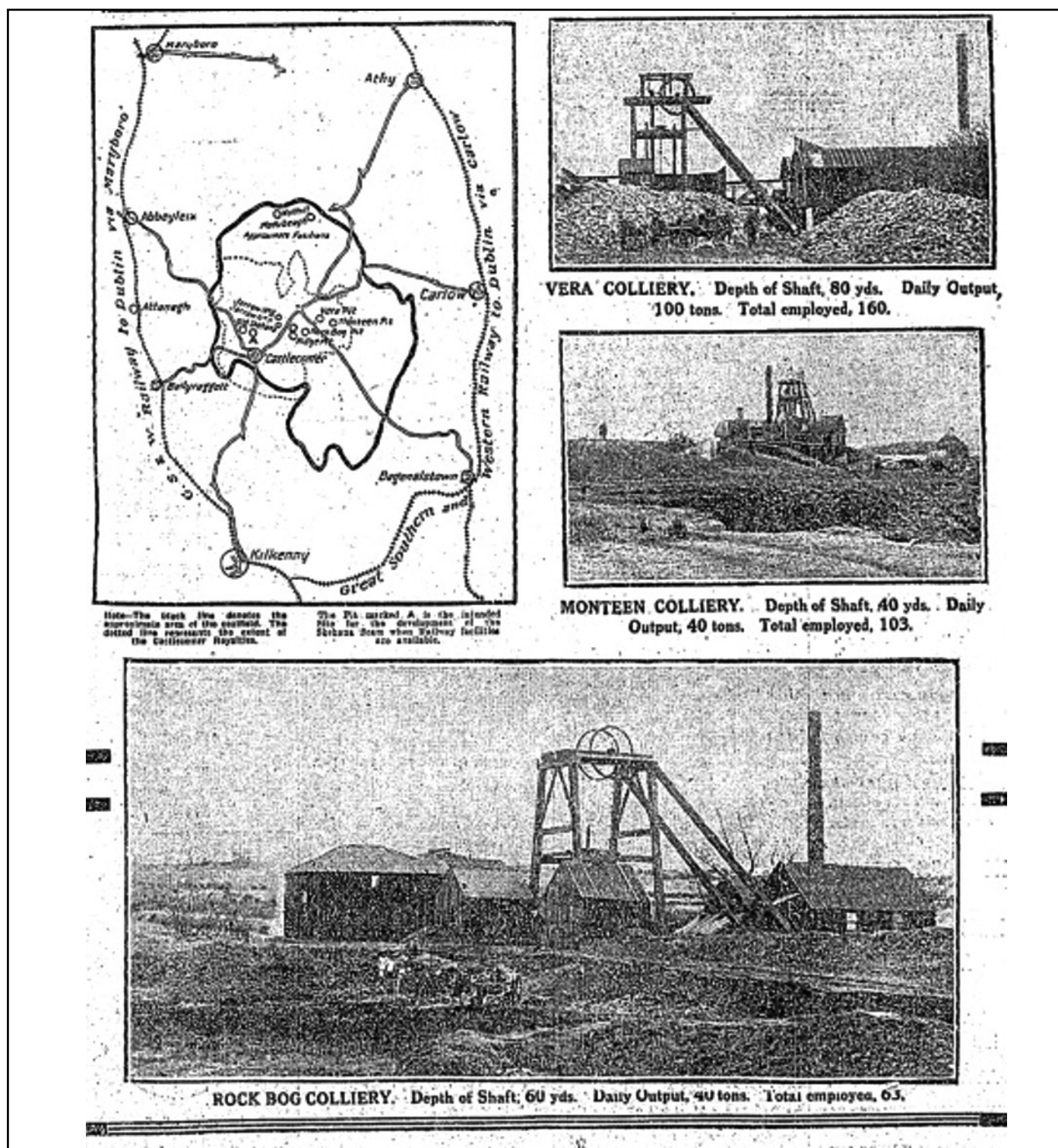


Figure 3. The Castlecomer Coalfield and Vera, Monteen and Rock Bog Collieries, 1917, when Boran went to work in the mines. Image: from a promotional article in the *Irish Independent*, 6 June 1917.

two pit managers were kidnapped for two months (*Freeman's Journal* 26 September 1921) and the aerial ropeway taking coal from several mines to the railway was sabotaged in February 1922 (*Kilkenny People* 1 July 1922), bringing production to a halt for several months. The IRA leadership, recognising the importance of the coal industry to livelihoods in the area, defended management on the last two occasions and tried to discipline its members by interrogations and the imposition of martial law. Some elements (carters were particularly under suspicion because of the threat to their livelihoods) (*Kilkenny People* 1 July 1922) were, however, prepared to use IRA membership to force attention on their grievances.

In June 1922, at the age of eighteen, Boran escaped the turmoil and unemployment in the pits by joining the new Free State army just before the Civil War began. He was sent into action in Tipperary but in December of that year, when stationed in Carrick, he deserted to the IRA Republican side, joining Dan Breen's men in Tipperary (Second Southern Division 1922). He spent the next five years on the run and emerged in 1927 as something of a republican hero, having survived wounding, capture (Limerick Command 1923), the death sentence and escape (Waterford Command 1923). He had had first-hand experience of failure and survival against the odds.

LEFT-WING INFLUENCE

In 1930, Thomas Bell (a communist organiser in Dublin) said 'There has developed inside the IRA a group which sees that the only force that can carry the revolution forward is the proletariat and poor farmers' (Bell 1930). Given his background in farming and mining, such aspirations inspired Boran's rationale for positive change in Ireland. Previous accounts have overlooked the full significance of his involvement in the IRA. He had direct links with communist/nationalist leaders like Peadar O'Donnell who were struggling to formulate a coherent political strategy in the face of the ideological divisions and factional infighting within the IRA. Boran was also inspired by Connolly's combination of nationalism and socialism. Whilst on the run he almost certainly got to know significant figures in the movement, whilst his work pattern on return - jobs in two mines and another year as an insurance agent - suggests a deliberate strategy of local activism and the development of widespread local contacts. There is evidence, in fact, that he was still an officer commanding the Castlecomer Company of the IRA at the same time as he was organising the miners (Moss Twomey Papers 1930). Boran's work in Kilkenny was useful to the IRA's left-wing faction by providing real rank-and-file grounding to bolster its position in the movement's ideological struggles. Taking a job underground in the mines in 1927, he threw himself into the miners' struggle. The miners felt that they had gained little from independence. The IRA leadership in the area generally went on to lead some of the key institutions of the Irish Free State or returned to farming or business. The miners, however, faced unchanged conditions in the mines and either went into the army or emigrated.

Boran understood this. He was described as 'a big tall lad with an extraordinary depth to him, a man of great integrity and very well read' (Boran E. 1995). He was courageous and had a streak of recklessness. Having been 'Purely and simply anti-imperialist', he later said, he 'rapidly developed a strong anti-capitalist bias' and felt he 'had to act to do something to defend the sections he was working with' (Boran N. 1957). He called a strike in May 1928 after several reductions in the price of coal and subsequently in miners' wages and was immediately sacked.

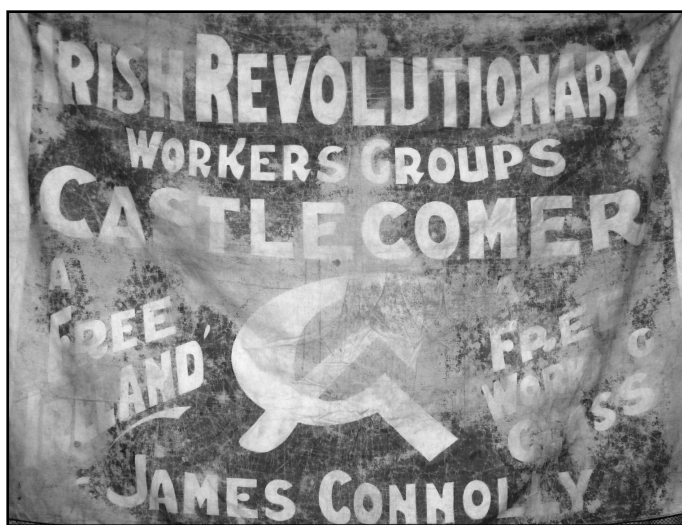


Figure 4. Revolutionary Workers Group banner 1930. A remarkable survival, this banner came to light in 2011, stored away in Boran's house.

The men nevertheless went out on strike until he was re-instated. For the miners, accustomed to having wages and conditions dictated to them by the mine agent, this small victory marked his emergence as the miners' leader.

He began organising a local union in 1930 because he 'could not get unity for either of the big unions' (Boran N. 1957). However since nationalist left-wing activists looked to Moscow for guidance on strategy and since Comintern policy at the time was to reject 'reformist' unions and set up revolutionary ones, it is likely that this policy line was a strong influence. The formation of a local branch of the Revolutionary Worker's Group demonstrates that Boran was keen to link local, national and international struggles.

TRIP TO RUSSIA

In 1930 the new RWG branch was invited to send a delegate to the Red International of Labour Unions' Congress in Moscow and Boran went - without informing his IRA superiors (Moss Twomey Papers 1930). He was refused a passport because of the Free State government's hostility to his Communist links and also because of his IRA involvement, but Boran stowed away on a cargo ship and got to Russia.

After the conference he spent three months travelling in the USSR, visiting mining areas and collectives. Some local opinion suggests that he only saw the better side of the Soviet Union, whereas others believe he was somewhat disillusioned by some of what he saw (Brennan Roe 1995). He returned in November 1930 and was arrested by the Gardaí. He was taken for questioning to the local Garda station where supporters and miners protested while he was searched and questioned. He refused to answer Gardaí questions about 'whether he had been to Russia and whether he had a passport' (Department of Justice 1930) and emerged to cheers from supporters. Whatever his political agenda, Boran's success lay in a real ability to secure loyalty and enthusiasm from many of the rank-and-file miners. In December 1930 the miners set up the Mine and Quarry Workers' Union, adopting a constitution from United Mineworkers of Scotland whose secretary, Bill Allen, Boran had met in Russia. Boran was the elected chairman. He later said the constitution was 'very extreme', but that 'any anti-capitalist revolutionary language appealed' to them (Boran N. 1957). Bob Stewart of the United Mineworkers of Scotland and a prominent member of the British Communist Party, as well as a Comintern envoy, visited Moneenroe in December 1930 (*Workers' Voice*, 3 January 1931). Boran proclaimed that the union intended to affiliate itself to the Red International of Labour Unions, because of its avowed goal of overthrowing the capitalist system (*Kilkenny Journal* 28 April 1931). This was very much in line with Comintern policy directives of the time of non-co-operation with 'reformist unions'. Reaction from the power structures was immediate. The company refused him a job but the miners then elected him as checkweighman in February 1931, a position paid for by the miners themselves (*Workers' Voice* 28 February 1931).

These developments frightened the Catholic Church, confronted with a network of organisations overtly promoting a communist view of the world right in the centre of the local community. The Church closed ranks with both the employer and

the State. The demonisation of the movement had begun even before Boran's return from Moscow. Fr Cavanagh, the local parish priest, condemned the Moscow trip as paid for by 'red gold' and Boran as 'little better than the gent with the cloven hoof' (*Workers' Voice* 20 December 1930). He preached against the evils of communism, organised visits by priests to the local schools to warn the children about it and visited activists' homes. When one miner, Jimmy Walsh, said that he was entitled to his opinion, Fr Cavanagh replied that he was too ignorant to have an opinion (*Workers' Voice* 20 December 1930). Although the miners supported the Church financially, it was seen to be engaged in a war against them and to be supporting the employer. The Police raided Walsh's home (*Workers' Voice* 20 December 1930, 'Kilkenny Miners Fight').

The miners were resilient. Boran published their grievances in the *Worker's Voice* and the paper was sold outside the Church in Moneenroe. The first demands of the new union concerned the price charged for miners' own coal supply, the living conditions of miners and the company's harsh clocking-on rules. Other grievances included coal categories sold on the market but not accounted for in miners' wages and Company infringements of the Coal Mines Regulation Act 1908 by extending miners' working hours by up to three hours (*Workers' Voice* 26 November 1932). Management refused to consider these issues.

MEDIA BATTLE

A fierce media war was fought in *The Kilkenny Journal*. Boran highlighted the conditions of the workers and the harshness of their lives. Fr Coleman, a Dominican from the Black Abbey Priory in Kilkenny, led the fight against communism, inviting speakers and refugees from Russia to participate. Others poured scorn on the miners and particularly on Boran, calling him Boransky and dismissing his claims about Russia. It was said Boran 'only saw the Soviet show places, the veneer that hides the devilry beneath' (*Kilkenny Journal* 18 July 1931, 'The Truth about Russia'). Supporters of the Church's position highlighted the ungodly nature of the miners' organisation, the oppression of the Church in Russia and the risks to god-fearing people. Boran tried to appease the Church, by arguing that the fight was against the mine owner and capitalism, not the Church (*Kilkenny Journal* 18 July 1931). The Church was having none of it and focused on the threat to Catholicism.

The launch of Saor Éire in September 1931 compounded hostile reactions. A project of the left-wing faction, it was only briefly accepted by the mainstream IRA. Its aim was to deliver a Workers' Republic with the confiscation of agricultural land, the abolition of private property and the nationalisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Boran was elected to the executive (*Irish Press* 28 September 1931). Free State reaction came in the form of the Public Safety Act in October 1931, which banned Saor Éire, left wing organisations and the IRA. A military tribunal was established with powers to impose the death penalty for anti-state activities. An encyclical from the Bishops of Ireland followed a day later condemning Saor Éire and the IRA as 'sinful and irreligious' (*Irish Independent* 19 October 1931). In raids by the Criminal Investigations Department (CID), Boran, his brother Martin and three brothers from Clogh were picked up together with 'a rifle, ammunition and a quantity of seditious literature on

Boran's premises' (*Kilkenny People* 14 November 1931). Boran, presumably because he feared being taken out of circulation, then signed a statement agreeing to keep the peace and dissociate from every organisation prohibited by the Government (Department of Justice 1931). He was freed the same day. Other Communists and IRA members went on the run, were arrested, imprisoned or fled the country.

THE STRIKE OF 1932

The depression impacted heavily on the mining community. In 1931 wage-rates were reduced and in 1932 the miners were put on a two-day week. The Union canvassed for a halt to the importation of coal. Although the full working week was reinstated later in 1932, wage rates were reduced again. In October 1932, the union called a strike, demanding a wage rise of 3d per ton for trammers, the most exploited of mine workers. The new union had no funds and was soon feeling the pinch. There was some national support, and Peadar O'Donnell linked the miners' struggle to the land question in order to generate some farmer sympathy by condemning Wandesforde as 'A bullock-cow rancher-mine owner who had flung 400 Irish families on the scrapheap.' (*An Phoblacht* November 1932). Boran also played the colonial, nationalist card - calculated to unite all factions - linking present conditions to the long battle against 'An imperialist mine owner, a planter for whom Castlecomer is but a pocket borough; he owns every sod of it.' (*Workers' Voice* 12 November 1932). The miners were refused the use of local schools or churches for meetings. This added to their sense of anger and frustration because schools, church and the parochial house had been built in the main through miners' contributions, taken directly from their wages.

Because the miners' earnings underpinned the local economy, the business people of the town had a vested interest in ending the strike. The local shopkeepers asked the Labour and Fianna Fáil TDs for Kilkenny to act as mediators. Because of the purchasing power of the miners and despite the Church's hostility to the union, political pressure persuaded Wandesforde to concede something. The men were offered a small wage increase, which was accepted and the strike ended after 6 weeks on November 20, 1932. It was a small victory but an important one in that Wandesforde prided himself on never giving in to demands or strikes.

Boran made it sound like a collective victory for miners, farmers and the working class in general:

'The fight has been a triumph of militant rank and file leadership. It has shown how the working farmers in the countryside and the industrial workers of the cities regardless of trade unions or officials could support the fight for their class.' (*Irish Workers' Voice* 31 December 1932).

Still angered by the refusal of a meeting place by the local church, the miners now felt empowered to proclaim that they would withhold their wage contributions to the Church and build their own hall (*Irish Workers' Voice* 7 January 1933). The idea of a meeting place where communist ideas could be discussed and absorbed by the faithful infuriated the Church and this time it was all-out war. Fr Cavanagh led the attack against the union, and the Bishop of Ossory, Dr Collier, added the

weight of the whole diocese. On Sunday 11 December 1932 the Bishop preached in a crowded Moneenroe Church on the evils of Communism. The Gardaí were present, conveying the impression that the bishop risked physical harm from such dangerous men. Big farmers from the area staunchly supported the Church's position and organised a patrol to prevent Boran and his companions from going to Mass. At least one of those protecting Boran was armed and is reported to have said that 'The first to go near Boran, I will drop him dead.' (Brennan Roe 1995).

The miners were not prevented from entering the church. Awareness of the IRA elements within the union led the authorities and their friends to back down. Although the Church felt strong enough to demonise the miners as communists, it still had to be wary of their leaders' local reputation in the republican struggle as well as the persistent post-Civil War antagonisms in the area where many of the miners held Republican sympathies and felt betrayed by the Free State.

Dr Collier attacked the Mine and Quarry Workers' Union, the Revolutionary Workers' Group and the *Irish Workers' Voice* as the unholy trinity. The sermon was guaranteed to create maximum polarisation within the community. The miners' leaders

walked out of the church in protest but many women returned home to confront husbands and sons. If the bishop said that you could not be a catholic and a communist and that communism was the work of the devil, then why were their men folk going against the Church?

The Bishop issued a pastoral letter in January 1933, which claimed the union was a 'Soviet Union cell'. The whole 'communist' organisation was put under the ban of the Church. No Catholic could be a member of the union, nor buy, sell or support a communist journal or paper. Those who had been led astray were invited to return to the bosom of the Church and the 'leaders and agents of Bolshevism' were warned that the Church would fight them. On the issue of union claims that they had no fight with the Church, only with capitalism, the pastoral letter clarified its position:

'They [the union leaders] make it a point to be seen at Church, at Mass, at Devotions and then at the Sacraments ... They say to the worker; I am a Communist, but I am also a Catholic. I go to church just as you do. Now, to dispose of this subtle dishonesty for once and all, I authoritatively say: no Catholic can be a Communist, no Communist can be a Catholic. For the formal professed Communists, any attendance at Church



MINERS I.T.G.W.U. 1935

Front- **Michael Delaney(Doonane): Jimmy Walsh(Moneenroe): Joe Brennan"Long" Nixie Boran(Moneenroe)**

Jimmy Kelly(Moneenroe): Martin Brennan"Roe"(Sidegate): Mickey Loughlin .

Back- **John Fitzgerald(Railyard): Frank Dormer(Clogh): Jack Kavanagh(Maryville): Edward Brennan "Darby"**

John Fitzgearld"Trammer": Louis Phillips(Clogh): Tom Brennan"Halad"(Castlecomer): Joe Fitzgearld(Railyard).

Figure 5. Members of the IT&GWU Branch Committee, Moneenroe, most of whom had been foundation members of the Mine and Quarry Workers' Union.

or Sacrament is a mockery, a sacrilege, a profanation of holy things and must not lead people astray' (Collier 1933).

The ban was generally interpreted to mean excommunication by the Church. The situation was disastrous for the union, publicly shamed and humiliated. There were local meetings and a protest march against it, and family pressure was brought to bear on members to pull out. The Bishop was pleased with the parishioners, praised their vigilance and encouraged them to join the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (IT&GWU) as 'a lawful union for Catholics' (*Kilkenny Journal* 7 January 1933, Bishop of Ossory's letter to the Parish Priest of Clogh, Fr Grant). Alderman Patterson, 'official Labour candidate' praised the Bishop's intervention and added his support to a new branch of the IT&GWU (*Kilkenny Journal* 14 January 1933). A public meeting was arranged, chaired by a prominent local farmer, at which the parish priest and the local organiser of the IT&GWU were present. Boran and his companions were invited with a view to getting them to abandon their own union and join the IT&GWU. Boran was asked to denounce communism, which he refused to do saying that he would denounce only capitalism and imperialism since he was an avowed enemy of both and that he stood for the Irish working class (*Irish Workers' Voice* 21 January 1933). The mood was ugly and the crowd threatening but some of the miners were thought to be armed and IRA membership amongst union activists seems to have created a stand-off so that those opposed to them hesitated to attack them physically. The union appealed for support from other unions but given past verbal attacks on 'reformist unions' they received no tangible support from that direction.

It was only a matter of time before the Mine and Quarry Workers' Union floundered. Members dropped out, leaving a core of committed activists. They recognised that they had been, in effect, beaten by a combination of Church, State, farmer and mine owner, and they entered into negotiations with the IT&GWU with a view to incorporation. The miners and IRA members had already got behind De Valera's bid for power in January 1932 and in March repressive legislation was revoked and prisoners released. Repression on communism continued and a weakened IRA shrank from socialist ambitions. The miners became a separate branch of the IT&GWU in 1933 and Boran became the branch chairman in 1935.

Although Boran was a delegate at the launching conference of the Second Communist Party of Ireland in June 1933 and was elected to the central committee, he joined the Labour Party in 1934. He moved rapidly to a more reformist position. This may partly be explained by his frustration at the failure of socialist movements to understand the complexities of the Irish situation in general and local complexities in particular. He also married and inherited the family farm around this time, both moderating influences perhaps! Generally the tone and agenda became one of reform and communist and IRA links faded. The opposing coalition of State, Church and landlord had succeeded in crushing the communist threat. Even so, the miners learned from their experiences and held successful strikes in 1940, 1943 and 1949.

The whole episode left a wound in the community. It was seldom spoken of openly, except in more recent times when time had lent some distance to events. The last mine closed in 1969 with the loss of 340 jobs. In 2005 an apology from the current bishop to the miners helped soften residual anger at past treatment.

For a short period in the 1930s the miners spearheaded a radical challenge to the status quo of the time. Their radicalism drew on ideas that made sense of their exploitation and on activists who provided them with a voice and support. The forces aligned against them made sure they were defeated but there was a great sense of pride in their subsequent achievements. They created a legacy that was in evidence at Boran's 40-year anniversary celebrations a few years ago, when Moneenroe Hall was full to overflowing with ex-miners, their children and grandchildren all talking about their history.

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