

Labour history on Irish waterways - snippets - 1 - 1922

30 August 2010

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The early 1920â€™s period in Ireland was one of not only political turmoil, but considerable labour unrest. Conditions for workers were severe and these two items under discussion during that time, indicate some of the hardships.

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Dublin Lock-keepers - January 1922

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â€œList of boats and numbers and the hour they passed through one of the Dublin locks from Monday morning 9th January 1922, starting at 4am until 7.30pm Sunday 15th January. We have also to attend to water, keep it racked off so as not to delay boats or allow it to flood the lands on either sides of the Grand Canal. Trade being slack, there is a lot of boats idle. If they were all working, lock-keeperâ€™s rest time would be very short. We have to buy extra firing to keep going all night and allowed nothing extra, all coming out of our wages (the smallest of any man in Ireland). We have notice our wages will be cut 10%. We will have no cut. We would want a man to help us to do night work, then we would be done with slavery on the Grand Canalâ€™. Signed â€œDublin lock-keepers

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Summary

Day
Out
In

Mon
9
14

Tue
12
3

Wed
10
8

Thu
9
9

Fri
8
7

Sat
8
5

Sun
1
2

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The hand-written list gives the boat number, time locked through and whether it was an In or Out boat. Some of the boats

listed still exist today. See image below.

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Lock-keepers annual holidays

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In May 1922 the Tralee Branch secretary wrote to head office asking:

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â€œDo men in charge of locks have holidays and how are they treated about such days as Christmas day, St. Patrickâ€™s day etc., do they get paid or did they get time off?â€•

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On May 23rd the General President replied:

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â€œA Chara:- Re yours of 21st inst, the Grand Canal Co. men, at any rate, are not allowed any holidays. They have to work every day the year round, as the water has to be racked off at set periods every day. Even on the day of the General stoppage, this work had to be done, as otherwise the canal would probably overflow its banks. They are not paid anything extra for holidays, as the fact that they have to work every day of the year is supposed to be taken into consideration when their wages are being fixed. Fraternally yoursâ€•

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In a further letter on May 28th, amongst other business, the Tralee secretary enquires-

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â€œLet me know if employees of the Newry Canal have holidays?â€•

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A letter from the Newry branch secretary reads-

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â€œA Chara, your letter re canal employees received this morning. The men here are employed by the â€˜Newry Port and Harbour Trustâ€™. There are a number of the men employed as labourers, with a separate gang for turning locks at â€˜Fathom where canal starts. The lock-men have Â£2-16-6 per week; canal workers Â£2-9-0 per week. The men are members of the English union. Just yesterday there was a stoppage in this depot over a reduction in wages. As a strike at the locks would mean cutting off all shipping to Newry the union agreed to accept a reduction of 3 shillings per week and the men returned to work today. They get six holidays (church holidays) in the year and are paid for sameâ€•

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The return letter to Tralee with the above forwarded details, contains the following reprimand:-

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â€œWe notice you lately reverting to the old habit of writing about several matters on the same sheet. Your letter of 28th inst. refers to no less than five different subjects. When you do this it means that extracts from your letter have to be made here for the different files and a needless waste of time and labour and delay in reply to you. Would you kindly note this.

Yours fraternallyâ€•

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Different times indeed!

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Joe Treacy.

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Bibliography: Extracts from Irish Transport and General Workersâ€™ Union, Canal Section files of the 1920â€™s. Files held at Labour History Museum and Archive, Beggars Bush, Dublin.

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