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# Off the Rails: The Story of the ILDA

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## Off the Rails: The Story of the ILDA

"The Disturbing 'Rise' of World Income Inequality," NBER Working paper No. 8904, April 2002), reports that in the last two decades, within-country inequality has risen, although trade liberalization itself was not the main cause of this deterioration. Marco Vivarelli is more sanguine and confirms previous results on the weak relationship between foreign direct investment and within-country inequality. Still, at the early stages of trade opening, greater imports imply greater inequality. In perhaps the most original contribution, Enrico Santarelli and Paolo Figini examine the effect of globalization on both relative poverty (poverty with respect to levels of income) and absolute poverty (poverty with respect to a certain bundle of goods and services). The novelty of their approach lies in the exploitation of a rich new data set for 120 middle- and low-income countries. Their conclusions are mixed. The absolute level of poverty is independent of openness. As for relative poverty, it tends to be unaffected by trade openness, but greater financial integration has had a negative impact.

The final chapters, by Sanjay Reddy, Augustin Kwasi Fosu, and John Langmore, and the editors' own conclusions, examine the policy implications of the volume's findings and related research. The authors are pragmatic in their recommendations. The impact of trade liberalization on employment and poverty depends critically on the social infrastructure in place. National governments in rich and poor countries have a role to play in ensuring that resources are devoted to education, health, and transport systems. Innovation policies need to be developed because of the inherent bias of technical change. As for welfare, workers in LDCs, like those in developed countries, cannot face the forces of globalization without a safety net to fall back on. International organizations need to ensure that poorer countries have the required resources and information to meet these goals. The volume concludes that, while the standard trade model is a good starting point, market forces alone cannot guarantee that the benefits of globalization are realized and distributed equitably.

Despite its breadth and depth, the volume has little to say on the relations among geography, growth, and globalization, or on child labor and women's work. That said, *Understanding Globalization, Employment, and Poverty Reduction* will be read profitably by researchers and policy-makers. I hope that skeptics of

globalization will also consult these contributions, if only to be convinced that economists, too, are reasonable people.

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### Labor History

*Off the Rails: The Story of the ILDA.* By Brendan Ogle. Dublin: Curragh Press, 2003. 352 pp. ISBN 1-85607-906-6, \$29.95 (paper).

Brendan Ogle, the leader and founder of the Irish Locomotive Drivers' Association (ILDA), recounts the turbulent events that led to the three-month lockout by Iarnród Éireann, Ireland's national rail system. The story is reminiscent of the great Dublin lockout of 1913, when the controversial but charismatic union leader James Larkin led workers in a titanic struggle against employers who sought to destroy Larkin and his union.

But the story of the ILDA does not take place during the rough and tumble days of early industrialization in Ireland. Indeed, by the summer of 2000, when the rail dispute erupted on the national scene, Ireland had navigated thirteen years of Social Partnership agreements and enjoyed unprecedented economic growth. All of the powerful actors in the Irish industrial relations system, unions, employers, and government, fully supported the national-level negotiations process and the agreements it produced.

In the summer of 2000, when Ogle and his band of fellow ILDA members fought against changes to the working conditions for train drivers, they faced stiff resistance from Iarnród Éireann. Such an industrial dispute was hardly new to labor relations in Ireland. However, the protest by this small, independent group of workers became a symbol of resistance, reflecting an undercurrent among rank-and-file workers who felt that the national agreements had resulted in years of wage constraints and work intensification, with few benefits to workers and their unions. Conversely, the institutions and regulatory bodies that formed the new industrial relations landscape under partnership closed ranks against the dissidents. As a result, although the industrial action involved just 118

drivers, the dispute grew very bitter and had much broader implications than simply a disruption of rail service.

The ILDA story begins, like so many episodes in Irish history, with betrayal. In 1994, two unions represented the train drivers at Iarnród Éireann, the Services Industrial Professional & Technical Union (SIPTU) and the National Bus and Rail Union (NBRU). In negotiations that year, Iarnród Éireann proposed changes to long-standing practices among locomotive drivers. Train drivers in both unions were adamantly opposed to management's proposal, rejecting the offer by 98%. The company announced it would implement the terms without agreement, and both unions prepared for industrial action. Shortly before the strike was set to begin, the Labor Court intervened to mediate the dispute and recommended a settlement. The train drivers had not yet realized how much the bargaining environment had changed in Ireland, particularly since the Industrial Relations Act of 1990. They would soon find out.

The Labor Court issued a recommendation that Ogle describes as worse than the original proposal that the drivers rejected. More important, the court advised that all employees of Iarnród Éireann, not just the drivers, vote on the proposed changes to drivers' mileage pay formula. SIPTU followed the court's recommendation and the changes were approved. The outcome, which became known as the "1994 productivity agreement," set in motion a chain of events that led to the breakaway union effort and the three-month lockout in 2000.

Train drivers spent months and years challenging the conduct of the vote and attempting to persuade Iarnród Éireann and SIPTU to reverse the mileage pay changes. Members of SIPTU and NBRU formed the National Locomotive Drivers' Committee (NLDC), an internal reform organization dedicated to preventing a repeat of the 1994 balloting process and protecting the interests of locomotive drivers. Ogle himself became shop steward for the SIPTU drivers at the Athlone station and was involved in national bargaining. The drivers never overcame their sense of betrayal, and by 1998 internal reform efforts were abandoned in favor of a breakaway, independent union for locomotive drivers.

Members of the newly formed ILDA quickly found that all of the institutions of Ireland's industrial relations system were aligned against them. Regulations created by the Industrial

Relations Act of 1990 made it impossible for the ILDA to gain official certification as a negotiating agent for the drivers. Management used the new regulations to their full advantage, suing the national executive committee for illegal strikes and excluding the ILDA from negotiations. In 2000, ILDA members were not allowed to vote on management's proposals unless they quit the breakaway union and rejoined SIPTU or NBRU. Mediation services through the Labor Courts appeared more concerned with containing the breakaway union than with settling the issues in dispute.

Ogle sharply criticizes every sector in the new Irish industrial relations system. Not surprisingly, Iarnród Éireann's managers, the courts, and the media are all targets of Ogle's ire. However, he reserves his harshest criticism for his fellow trade unionists and, in particular, for his former union, SIPTU. Ogle and his colleagues in the ILDA may have expected conflicts with management and unflattering newspaper reports of passengers stranded as a result of industrial action. But the sense that their former union had betrayed them, abetting the deterioration of working conditions and the use of undemocratic procedures, instilled deep bitterness in the internecine conflict.

The strength of the book lies in Ogle's richly detailed account of the issues at stake, the personalities involved, and the bitter emotions that regularly boiled over in the dispute. Ogle's story of personal struggle and collective action provides an engaging look at Ireland's Social Partnership from below. The author's splendid storytelling kept me engaged throughout the long chronology of meetings, court hearings, and other events that shaped the creation of the ILDA. The author does not attempt to present an academic analysis, and you will not find a detailed set of policy recommendations or comparative examples of workers' experiences under Social Partnership in other sectors of the economy; but if you want an insightful, at times gritty, account of how rank-and-file train drivers view the institutions of Ireland's industrial relations system under Social Partnership, *Off The Rails* provides it.

The most noticeable weakness of the book is the author's lack of critical reflection on the events. Some measure of self-criticism for the mistakes of the ILDA would have added more depth to the story and clarified the important lessons to be drawn. Still, the story of the ILDA provides an uncensored account of Ogle's maturation and development as a union leader, in-

cluding the highs and the lows, the triumphs and defeats.

I can highly recommend this book to scholars interested in the effects of national level agreements on local labor relations practices. Academics studying transformations in industrial relations systems will also find Ogle's reports from the front lines valuable. For labor historians and practitioners, *Off the Rails* will

be a very enjoyable read with important lessons on the nature of industrial conflict and union democracy.

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