

# A glimpse into the past



Although now the largest representative body for nurses and midwives in the country, the INMO was not always as widely accepted, writes **Mark Loughrey**

THE Irish Nurses' Union, declared to be the world's first trade union for hospital nurses, was founded as a branch of the Irish Women Workers' Union in Dublin in 1919.<sup>1</sup> Despite its name, the new union consisted mainly of midwives and was founded to address frustrations with poor pay, long hours and poor working conditions.

As an example of some of the workplace conditions which prevailed, some hospitals stipulated that nurses add one extra hour to their shifts in order to repay any holiday or sick leave time they took.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, a comment in *The British Journal of Nursing* that a 'society for the prevention of cruelty to nurses was badly needed' appeared apt.<sup>3</sup>

However, the new union proved controversial. Much of this controversy stemmed from a fear that the unionisation of nurses and midwives might precipitate a strike. Considering this, at the union's inaugural public meeting, one nurse said, to applause: "My first duty is to my patient, and I shall not allow any person to get me to decline my responsibility to my patient."<sup>4</sup>

There was the suggestion that even if unionised nurses did not strike of their own volition, they might be asked to strike sympathetically with other workers.<sup>5</sup> Others worried that hospitals did not have the money to concede to pay increases.<sup>6</sup> This criticism appeared well-founded. For instance, in 1919 Dublin's Adelaide Hospital increased its nurses' pay and reduced

their working hours. However, in the wake of instituting these changes, the hospital took out a series of advertisements in the national press. These ads noted that the concessions made to nurses had cost the hospital £1,000 and that this sum would need to be recouped in voluntary donations lest hospital wards would close.<sup>7</sup>

The prospect of belonging to a trade union did not rest easy with some nurses. One wrote to the union protesting: "Having always looked upon my work as a profession not a trade, I can have no sympathy with any form of 'trades union' even though adopted by a certain class of nurses, so called. I consider the formation of any sort of trades union as degrading to an honourable profession."<sup>8</sup>

But, the Irish Nurses' Union was not deterred. A spokesperson said: "Nurses ... so snobbish as to think they were lowering their professional dignity by joining a trade union [can] go their own way."<sup>9</sup>

Matrons were also taken aback by the venture. One newspaper reported on an early Union meeting: "Matrons were preponderantly vocal at the meeting. Nurses are fairly used to the matrons doing all the talking for and at them. But the matrons did not get things quite all their own way... It is natural, perhaps, that some matrons should feel a little hurt, after so many years of unquestioned dictatorial authority, to find that their subordinates are determined now to have a say.

"Some matrons, I understand, are actually in the position of employers, profiting by low wages at the expense of the nurses ... nurses should be the more heartily in favour of the Irish Nurses' Union the more they find matrons denouncing it."<sup>10</sup>

An interesting criticism of the new union appeared in a commentary in *The Irish Times*. The writer, while readily acknowledging and sympathising with the 'toil', poor pay and poor conditions of 'tender-handed' and 'self-sacrificing' nurses nonetheless disagreed with their action in forming a trade union.<sup>11</sup> The kernel of *The Irish Times'* ire was the very idea of a nurses' trade union, which neither served the 'noble profession', the hospital, nor the public.<sup>12</sup> The writer contended that nurses were about to 'cheapen the magnificent repute which the profession has won for itself' and compared a strike of nurses to a strike of wives.<sup>13</sup>

The nurses and midwives retorted wryly: "That funny paper, *The Irish Times*... comment would really spoil this gem. We are grateful to the newsboy who inadvertently slipped [it] into our letter-box: he enabled us to face a new day joyously."<sup>14</sup>

In sum, the union was undeterred and at its first annual conference declared: "We are still only an infant. It is the first business of an infant to grow. We have grown and grown lusty. We have kicked and crowed. Very soon our fumbling attempts to grapple with the evils that affect the lives of nurses and of the people at large will become stronger and more assured."<sup>15</sup>

Indeed it did grow. The Irish Nurses' Union, now the INMO, is the largest trade union and professional organisation representing nurses and midwives in Ireland.

The INMO will celebrate its centenary in 2019. In advance of this a book documenting its history is being produced. This book will be informed by the INMO's journal and by newspaper cuttings and other archival sources. It will also be informed by interviews with a selection of people who are knowledgeable about the INMO's past.

If you are in a position to inform this book and would like more information on the project then please contact Mark Loughrey: Room B113, Research Unit, School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems, University College Dublin, Dublin 4, or email: mark.loughrey@ucdconnect.ie

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