

Michael D - trade union activist, socialist, politician and poet

By Frank Connolly

He is well known as a successful former Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, as the long standing Labour TD for Galway, as an accomplished writer and poet, and as a politician who stood up for human rights across the globe at times when it was neither popular nor profitable to do so.

What is not so well known is that Michael D Higgins has also been an active trade unionist all his working life and a founding member of the Education branch, first of the Workers Union of Ireland (WUI), then the FWUI and finally of SIPTU since the merger in 1990.

Michael D., who was recently selected by a comfortable majority as the Labour Party candidate in the Presidential election campaign, has a long record of political radicalism and trade union activity and intends to be “authentic” to himself and his beliefs during the next few months of campaigning.

His trade unionism can be traced back to the first job he secured with the ESB in Galway city after leaving school in county Clare in the late 1950s. The unfairness of Irish society for working people and the poor was evident to the young Higgins when he realised that his Leaving Certificate result of over 90% in the seven honours papers he took were not enough to guarantee him a place in teaching training college, not to mind university, at the time. When he left school he worked in a local factory while awaiting his results and his next move.

“Effectively, even though I had seven honours in the Leaving and I’d over 90% in every one of the subjects no-one from my situation ever considered going to third level or university that time. I worked in a factory in Shannon with my brother. He worked in SPS, I worked in Progress International. We both were working in the Shannon Industrial Estate for a short period.

“I stayed for a few months and I had a call to train in Drumcondra (teacher training college). Even though I did that interview and had sufficient marks to be able to get in the fact is you had to pay a deposit for blankets which we didn’t have at the time.”

Instead, he took a position with the ESB in Galway and became a member of the, only recently formed, ESB Officers Association while working as a Grade A clerk.

Two years later, he entered University College Galway where he edited the students newspaper and served as President of the Students Union at a time of growing radicalisation of young people influenced by the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam war movements in the US. After graduating, Michael D went to do post-graduate studies at Indiana University where he witnessed at first hand the demonstrations against the Vietnam war. On his return to Ireland and post-graduate studies in UCG he was asked to research the working conditions of dockers in Galway who were organised in the ITGWU.

“I spent nearly a full year talking to dockers and their families. I reported on their basic safety and human facilities on the docks such as the toilets, wash rooms, what happened when it was raining where people took refuge in the potato yards. I looked at the casual labour system. and dock labour. I interviewed all 78 dockers and the widows of many dockers. It gave me a great insight into the tough conditions endured by those workers and also showed me the importance of using my social science knowledge in a practical way. I also witnessed how my predecessor as a Labour TD in Galway, Gilbert Lynch, who was elected in 1923, was so admired by the workers and poor of the city. When he moved as a trade union official from the Transport Union to the ATGWU the dockers moved with him,” Michael D recalled.

During the period of his post graduate studies he also spent time at Manchester University and became embroiled in the many shades of British left wing politics and protest of the time including some memorable demonstrations against the arch Tory racist, Enoch Powell. He particularly enjoyed the speeches of the fiery Labour MP, Michael Foot.

After taking up a teaching post in UCG, the first lay appointment in the social sciences in the college, he immediately joined the Workers Union of Ireland where he helped to form what became the long established Education branch of the union.

“I applied to join a general trade union because the rest of the staff were in a general trade union and I ended up in the WUI. I was a junior lecturer in sociology and political science. I applied to join the Transport Union but they didn't have a category under which I could be recruited so I went to the WUI. They said 'fine' but they didn't have a third level teaching section at the time so I set about forming one. I founded the teaching section in UCG and I visited all the third level colleges in Ireland recruiting members. That was about

1969-71 and at the same time the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) was stirring itself and their recruiting person was Kader Asmal. So the two of us used to appear together at third level colleges not just in the Republic but in Coleraine and Queens in the North as well. Effectively, he got everyone above associate professor and up and I got people from associate professor down. I got about 200 members that time so I was chairman then of the teaching section of the WUI that became the FWUI that became SIPTU.”

It was not long before the newly established union section was forced into confrontation at UCG where a strike was called over the refusal of the College to negotiate.

“There is a very famous photograph of one of our very early strikes which was on the front page of the Irish Press. It is a photograph of myself with long hair and a big long black jumper and Tony Christofides. The strike was about the right of junior lecturers to have a say in structuring their courses, setting their exam questions and attending faculty. I designed the strike about academic participation and democracy but it turned into a recognition dispute because the authorities wouldn’t negotiate with us.”

The management took out injunctions against named WUI strikers forcing Michael D to rotate the 30 pickets around the four different entrances to the college.

“I kept rotating them from the front gate because the front gate was where the management served the injunctions so that I would shift people to the back gate and to the side gate. This was because the injunction had to be served individually on the strikers.”

The WUI won the dispute and the famous photograph ended up on the office wall of the then shop steward and later President of UCG, Iggy Moriarty, one of those the college sought to injunct.

“I’m still a member of the teaching section. I’m 43 years or whatever now in the Union,” Michael D said.

Given his experiences and developing socialist political ideology his progress from lecturer and trade union activist to full-time Labour politician was perhaps inevitable and for over three decades he has been a voice for the poor and the oppressed in Ireland and across the world travelling to many places where human rights were long forgotten. His solidarity work took him, mainly during the 1980’s, to Nicaragua, El Salvador, Western Sahara, Gaza, Chile and Cambodia where he highlighted humanitarian concerns and protected human

rights activists in the line of fire.

During a visit last year to Colombia with Trocaire he suffered a broken leg which did not prevent him, however, from completing the visit and contributing to an important report on the widespread abuse of human rights defenders in a country where they and trade unionists are more likely to be assassinated by officially sanctioned death squads than in any other country in the world.

As Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht in the coalition government of the 1990's he proved that film, television, music and other creative activities could create many, highly skilled jobs despite the assertion by former PD leader that he would "go mad" in the department. When he took the post in 1992 the value of film activity to the economy was just £11.7 million and when he left in 1997 it reached £187 million with thousands of jobs in place. He personally negotiated the contract with the producers of Braveheart and other films to ensure that grant aid and tax incentives maximised Irish participation across a range of skills. He established TG4 which has proven, despite his detractors, to be a successful and important addition to public broadcasting in the country

Controversially, and to the dismay of those elements in politics and the media hostile to the prospect of a peace process in the North involving dialogue with Sinn Fein, he lifted the long running Section 31 broadcasting ban on party spokespeople.

In what is likely to be his final, and perhaps greatest, political battle he is aware that some of those same elements will seek to savage his prospects for the presidency but he is not prepared to dilute his principles or message. He is quite open to endorsement by any progressive party or organisation, including Sinn Fein, which has yet to decide which if any candidate to support in the race for the Park.

"As far as I am concerned the Labour Party has put me in the field and I welcome any support I get from any quarter. I also welcome the fact that the Fine Gael candidate, Gay Mitchell, has said he wants to promote his Christian Democrat ideology as it gives me an opportunity to debate why my views on the social economy and the need to get away from the right wing positions that have got us into our current state are more appropriate for the Irish people. I'm a socialist and I'm happy with that."