Clerys result shows the power of workers united

By Ethel Buckley

The victory has again proved the truth of Larkin’s words: ‘The great only appear great because we are on our knees. Let us rise!’

This they achieved and in doing so they have set an important example for workers throughout Ireland. The dramatic press conference in the Mansion House on 21st March last brought one phase of our struggle to a satisfactory conclusion but other battles continue, including the battle to secure legislative change to ensure that what happened at Clerys can never happen again.

The Clerys settlement also includes important clauses setting out a framework for co-operation between developers, communities and unions. We must now work to ensure that these clauses are delivered on. So we can re-establish the capital’s inner city as an area where business thrives, workers are assured fair working conditions and local communities directly benefit from its redevelopment.

This is in line with the aims of SIPTU’s Working City Initiative. This campaign emerged from the Justice for the Clerys Workers struggle and will now continue as an important part of our union’s fight for social and economic progress.

The victory of the Clerys workers has once again proved the truth of the words cast in bronze that are attached to the statue of our union’s founder, Jim Larkin, which stands directly opposite the main entrance to the store: “The great only appear great because we are on our knees. Let us rise!”

Dramatic end to relentless 21-month battle

By Scott Millar

AFTER a relentless 21-month battle, the members of the Justice for the Clerys Workers Campaign declared victory following a meeting with the Natrium director, Deirdre Foley, on 21st March.

Foley was among those who controversially took ownership of the department store in June 2015, in a move which led to its closure and the loss of several hundred jobs. The deal that finally settled the long-running dispute includes a goodwill payment for those formerly directly employed by Clerys and clauses to ensure that inner-city Dublin communities benefit from the site’s redevelopment.

SIPTU’s shop steward and Justice for the Clerys Workers Campaign spokesman, Gerry Markey, said: “We had one key demand in our campaign and that was to meet with the department store’s new owner. Deirdre Foley. This goal was achieved when Ms Foley held a private meeting with Ethel Buckley and myself and then met other workers in the Mansion House on 21st March, before she took part in a press conference to publicly ratify the deal to bring this long-running dispute to an end.

“What the members of the Justice for the Clerys Workers Campaign, which was organised though our union, SIPTU, have achieved is a clear indication of what is possible when workers stand together and fight for what is right.”

The deal to resolve the dispute which had been the subject of national media attention, came about dramatically, hours into a public hearing by An Bord Pleanála into the redevelopment of the Clerys site.

The hearing, at which SIPTU was the sole objector to the redevelopment, began at 10.00 a.m. on 20th March in the Bord Pleanála offices in central Dublin. At 3.00 p.m., SIPTU Services Division Organiser, Ethel Buckley, announced that the union was withdrawing its objection. It emerged that the objection was withdrawn because a comprehensive agreement had been secured between the union and the developer, Natrium.

Central to establishing a process to bring the two sides together was the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Brendan Carr. He said, “It will be the role of the office of Lord Mayor in the coming years to ensure that a proper balance is maintained between the interests of business and workers in the Clerys development. It is hoped that the framework agreed for this development may also become a template for others concerned with regeneration projects in our city. Such an approach is in the best interests of the citizens of Dublin.”

Natrium Director Deirdre Foley speaks at the press conference on 21st March. Also pictured are Lord Mayor of Dublin Brendan Carr, and SIPTU’s Ethel Buckley and Gerry Markey. Picture: Leah Farrell/RollingNews.ie

CLERYS

Justice for the Clerys Workers

12 June - The consortium Natrium takes over Clerys in the early hours of the morning. The company is liquidated almost immediately. Staff, 130 of them directed employed and more than 300 working for concession holders, are informed at 5.30 p.m. that their jobs are gone and they must be off the premises by 6pm.

13 June - At a meeting in Liberty Hall the Justice for Clerys Workers (J4CW) campaign is launched, the workers then march to the department store and hold a protest. It receives widespread media attention.

16 June - More than 1,000 people and several prominent politicians attend the first in a regular series of protests outside the store. At the protest a petition calling for justice for the Clerys workers is launched. Within 24 hours more than 5,000 people have signed it.

19 June - Clerys workers protest outside the offices of O’Reilly, a part-owner of Natrium, in Harcourt Terrace, Dublin 2.

29 June - At the request of the J4CW campaign, Dublin City Council convenes a special meeting to discuss the closure. A motion is passed supporting the workers and calling for the renewal of the Special Planning Control Scheme for O’Connell Street and Environs, which includes references to Clerys, which was due to expire.

6 July - A delegation, led by ICTU General Secretary, Patrica King, meets with Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Richard Bruton, to propose changes to the law that would require employers to enter a 30 day period of consultation with workers before redundancies could occur.

7 July - Minister for Business and Employment, Ged Nash, publishes a report into ‘The Sale and Liquidation of Clerys’. Its conclusion makes clear that the investigation into the events that resulted in the closure of Clerys is at a “preliminary stage”.

21 July - Clerys workers begin holding regular protests outside the registered
Protest at Clerys in June 2016

9 December - Dublin City Council grants planning permission to the Clerys development, despite more than 67 objections being lodged by former workers, councillors, neighbouring businesses and SIPTU.

20 August - Clerys workers hold a protest to mark 10 weeks of silence from the new owners. They announce their petition now has 18,000 signatures.

1 September - A SIPTU Workers Rights Centre legal expert is appointed to sit on a Committee of Investigation to oversee the liquidation process of the company that operated Clerys department store.

27 October - Former Clerys workers begin holding regular protests outside the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation on Kildare Street, Dublin 2, to highlight their call for a change in the law to ensure no other workers can lose their jobs in a similar manner. Over the coming weeks they are joined by representatives of several ICTU affiliated unions.

2016

4 January - An hour-long TV documentary on the history and closure of Clerys is broadcast on RTE One.

13 January - Dublin City Council renews the Scheme of Special Planning Control for the O’Connell Street area. Following a lobbying campaign by SIPTU, it includes reference to Clerys and an objective that workers are assured fair working conditions in this “area of special significance to the Irish Nation.”

14 January - The Government announces a review of company and employment law, by experts Kevin Duffy and Nessa Cahiil.

26 April – The Duffy-Cahiil Report is published. It recommends a series of legal changes to prevent another situation similar to the Clerys closure.

11 June - Time for Justice demand that operated Clerys department store.

16 January - SIPTU lodges an appeal with An Bord Pleanála to mark the granting of planning permission for the Clerys development with An Bord Pleanála. Among the union’s main objections is that the development contravenes the Special Planning Control Scheme for the O’Connell Street area.

2 February – Dublin City Council passes an emergency motion calling on the Lord Mayor, Brendan Carr, to use his office to find a solution to the Clerys dispute.

22 February – An Bord Pleanála announces it will hold a public Oral Hearing concerning the Clerys development.

20 March - On the opening day of the Bord Pleanála Oral Hearing, SIPTU withdraws its objection to the development.

22 April - The Justice for Clerys Workers campaign is presented with the James Larkin Thirst for Justice Award at the Labour Party conference in Wexford.

A SIX-WEEK strike action by SIPTU members in Tim Hastings Volkswagen Garage in Westport, Co Mayo, ended in late March with an agreement brokered by the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC). SIPTU Organiser, Ashling Dunne, said: “Our members are very pleased that a just and fair resolution was reached in this dispute. This outcome was achieved only due to the overwhelming support the workers received from the local community in Westport and from SIPTU members across the country.

“The support of local politicians from Westport and the wider county Mayo area was also crucial.”

The strike began on 3rd February due to a dispute concerning the payment of redundancy entitlements and the implementation of a Labour Court recommendation. In late March, a WRC conciliation conference was attended by SIPTU representatives and management. The proposals for the resolution of the dispute which emerged from this meeting were then accepted in a ballot of the workers.

SIPTU members travelled from across the country to attend a rally in Westport on 4th March in support of the strike action. Among those who showed their solidarity was SIPTU General President Jack O’Connor. Representatives from IMPACT trade union, the Communications Workers Union and members of the local community, SIPTU Sector Organiser, Teresa Hannick, said: “The Hastings workers believe the support they received at this rally from trade unionists and the general public, played a significant role in bringing the dispute to a close. Strike actions are always difficult experiences and our members were very pleased to be able to return to their normal lives following the resolution of this dispute.”

The terms of the settlement are confidential.