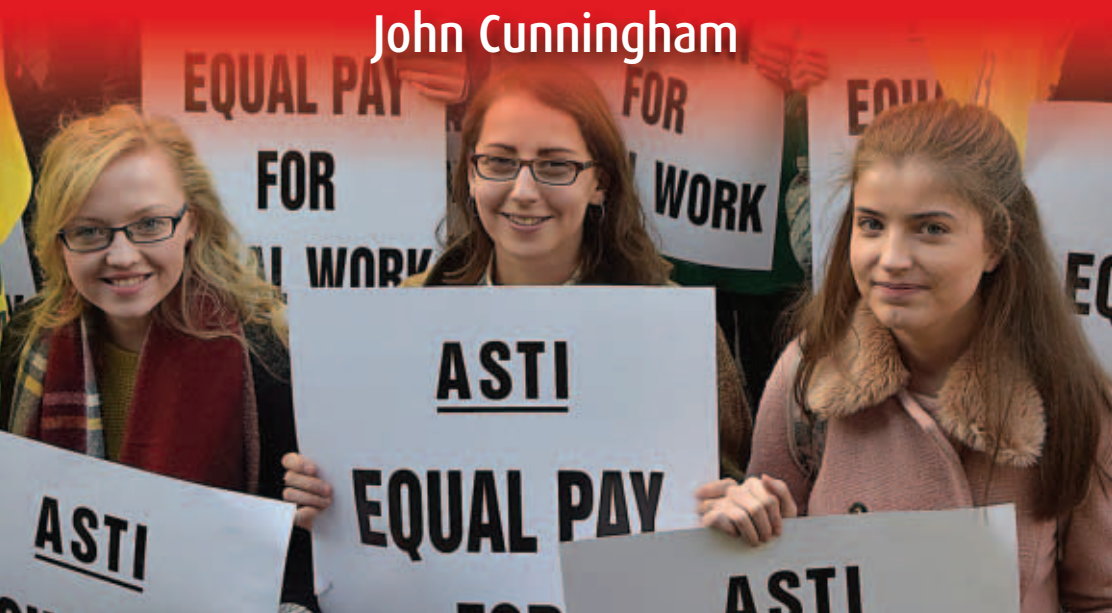




'THE LEADING DEMOCRATIC ASSEMBLY':

*Celebrating the
ASTI's 100th Annual Convention*

John Cunningham



Front Cover Photographs:

Top: Teachers United rally of 20,000 ASTI, INTO and TUI members in Croke Park, 5th December 1985

Bottom: Official strike - Pay Dispute 14 October, 2016

Foreword

For organisations, as for individuals, there can be no sense of identity without remembering what came before. 2022 marks the ASTI's 100th Annual Convention and it is both appropriate and necessary to celebrate, and reflect on, this milestone. Founded in 1909, the ASTI justly claims a distinguished place in the historical account of the Irish nation and its struggle for independence, the Irish trade union movement and, of course, second-level education.

History and commemoration are inextricably linked. The former seeks to understand the past and communicate how the past shapes the world we live in today. Commemoration is in a different space in that it addresses the needs of the present and hopes and fears for the future as much as the past. As we near the end of the national project of the Decade of Centenaries, the many commemorative events at national and local level have deeply enriched all of us in terms of our understanding of the past, its complexities and contradictions, and the many movements and mobilisations that constituted what is now referred to as the 'revolutionary generation'. Teachers at all levels – primary, secondary and University – were to the forefront of that generation, motivated as they were by patriotism, a passion for social justice and a commitment to the liberating premise of education.

On the occasion of its centenary year in 2009, the ASTI commissioned Dr John Cunningham, NUI, Galway, to write a history of the ASTI. Dr Cunningham's 'Unlikely Radicals: Irish Post-Primary Teachers and the ASTI, 1909-2009' is an authoritative account of the Union's growth as a social and political organisation. It is written from the perspective of 'history from below', a type of historical narrative which attempts to account for historical events from the perspective of ordinary people rather than an exclusive focus on leaders. 'Unlikely Radicals' has extensive analysis of ASTI Annual Conventions which it describes as the ASTI's "leading democratic assembly". It highlighted how the selection of delegates, discussion of resolutions, and decisions about candidates for Officer and other positions occupied a large part of the work and attention of Branch meetings. As it does to this day!

The ASTI is once again indebted to Dr Cunningham for this commemorative review of ASTI's Annual Conventions in which he highlights those Conventions at which seminal decisions were made, directions taken and principles affirmed. Some of the issues discussed decades ago remain central to our agenda today – unequal pay, poor working conditions, in-school management, lack of recognition of the importance of the work of teachers, and lack of investment in education. Also unchanged is the commitment of ASTI's members to advancing the teaching profession, promoting quality and equitable education and advocating for social justice.

Above all, what this commemorative publication represents is a testament to the importance of trade unions, their work for members, their focus on the common good, their capacity to achieve change and to influence the direction of the polity and society. We must never lose sight of the power of our collective. *Ní neart go cur le chéile.*

Eamon Dennehy

President, ASTI

The ASTI and its Conventions through the decades

And then in 1980, I got involved in the ASTI for the first time. There was a Convention in Tralee and a colleague asked me would I go down to help out and that's how I got involved. So it was kind of social originally... I was helping out with the stands and with registration and that kind of thing. There was a friend of mine in Dublin who was involved before that, and she said, 'That's you rounded up into the ASTI forever', and there it was, she was right.¹

Lily Cronin, former CEC and Standing Committee member

The recollections of Lily Cronin underline the importance of the annual Convention as the high point of the ASTI calendar. Typically held during the Easter vacation, like those of other teacher unions in Ireland and Britain, ASTI Conventions have served as a forum for democratic decision-making, a rallying point for activists, and a platform to communicate the concerns of teachers to other parties involved in education and to the general public. Their importance is evident from the amount of media attention they attract, but also from the frequency of Convention-related business on the agendas of branches – the formulation of motions, the selection of delegates, and post-Convention reports.² Rotating from year to year through the cities and major towns of Ireland, Conventions are a colossal undertaking which require considerable involvement by branch members. Those in the vicinity of the venue are frequently drawn into the endeavour, in the process experiencing the camaraderie of the occasion, gaining organisational know-how, deepening their understanding of key issues, and becoming familiar with structures and decision-making processes. Like Cronin, who would go on to serve on the Association's Standing Committee, many ASTI activists were first 'rounded up' through their voluntary involvement in arrangements surrounding the Annual Convention.

The occasion of the 100th Convention provides an opportunity to trace the history of the Association with a focus on these great annual gatherings. What follows will focus mainly on a number of key decades in the history

of the ASTI, starting with its foundation, a protracted process which coincided approximately with the struggle for Irish independence, and also with the emergence of the modern trade union movement. Though they were very different organisations, the ASTI and Jim Larkin's ITGWU were founded in the same year, 1909, and both endeavoured during the following decade-and-a-half to secure a footing in the emerging Ireland.³ In the early years of the Association, there were lots of discussions and conflicts, but these did not occur at Convention. The first Convention did not in fact take place until 1923.

Before Conventions

The first General Meeting was not held until July 1910. But it was a memorable one for all concerned, the crowd was so great, and the atmosphere so charged with enthusiasm and derring-do... Paddy Breen of Listowel, Pro Enright of Tralee and I walked to the Mansion House and were shepherded to our places by a tall, slim, keen-eyed chap, who told us his name was de Valera, and he was teaching Maths in Blackrock... Every recommendation was adopted with acclaim. A code of rules was listened to impatiently and adopted forthwith. A CEC was appointed out of hand and a set of minimum demands OK-ed by a show of hands.

Recollections of Killarney teacher, Joseph O'Connor.⁴

Before Conventions there were annual general meetings, the ASTI being small enough in its early years as to accommodate all members in a medium-sized hall. To facilitate as many as possible, these annual meetings were held in Dublin in early July, coinciding with summer courses for art and science teachers. The first such meeting, described above by Joseph O'Connor, was held in the Supper Room of the Mansion House – 'kindly lent by the Lord Mayor'. Among those playing a prominent part was Éamon de Valera, President of the Association's Leinster Council, who proposed one of the major resolutions: 'That the meeting considers the lack of registration to be a most progressive grievance'.⁵ Without registration, anyone might appear in front of a class, and it was a sore point that untrained religious and others were engaged as post-primary teachers, while qualified men and women were precariously employed. Hannah Sheehy Skeffington explained the situation she and other young graduates faced:

*In return for a fixed sum, the teacher devotes her whole time to her pupils ... frequently she instructs the nuns, and having equipped them in certain subjects, she finds her place filled by one of her pupils. Sometimes her pupils enter the convent and supersede her.*⁶

A registration system was eventually announced in 1912, but it was 1918 before it came into effect, with a transition period extending to 1925. Even then, the system was so porous that 47 per cent of secondary teachers were unregistered in the mid-1930s.⁷ Registration, therefore, remained a hot issue at ASTI gatherings.

The Mansion House remained the venue for the Annual General Meeting during the years of war and revolution. In 1916, teachers were confronted by a city in ruins in the aftermath of the Easter Rising.⁸ De Valera was not present, being in prison, though he escaped the fate of another ASTI founder, Thomas MacDonagh, executed in early May. Inevitably a topic of informal discussion, no public reference to the execution was found in reports of the proceedings. To have protested would have risked the suppression of the Association, and anyway the subject would have been controversial internally. There was however an oblique tribute to MacDonagh in the ASTI's periodical in a long and laudatory review of his book, *Literature in Ireland*, which, the reviewer reported, was 'passing through the press as its author met his death at the hands of a file of soldiers in a Dublin barrack yard'.⁹

If the ASTI had a small membership during its early years, this was mainly because the post-primary or Intermediate sector itself was small (primary education had sixteen times the enrolment). It was small also because in Catholic schools there was a preponderance of teaching sisters, brothers and priests, who were ineligible for membership.¹⁰ Post-primary education had been shaped by the Intermediate Education Act of 1878, which provided public funding for schools based on pupils' performance in the state's Intermediate examinations. (An alternative accountability mechanism, state inspection, was unacceptable to the Catholic hierarchy). A highly competitive system evolved, focused on rote learning for examinations, which was denounced by Pádraig Pearse in 1912 as 'a murder machine'.¹¹ It was a system which did not take account of the welfare of so-called 'lay teachers', as those not bound by religious vows were described. For Lord Mayor of Dublin, Lorcan Sherlock, welcoming teachers to the 1912 AGM of the Association, the low salaries and non-

existent pensions were ‘a scandal’. ‘The male teachers’, he continued, ‘received on average £80 a year, and the ladies about £50’, comparing poorly with ‘Corporation porters who were paid in some instances 45s a week [£117 annualised].¹²

The four key demands of the early Association were for standardised salaries, job security, state registration, and service pensions, demands first formulated by the ASTI’s predecessor, the Association of Intermediate and University Teachers (AIUT). Dating from 1897, the AIUT drew attention to the major grievances of the day but it became unrepresentative, and was regarded as a ‘Dublin organisation’ by teachers outside the metropolis.¹³ The dissatisfaction in the provinces prompted meetings in Cork in January 1907 and on St Patrick’s Day 1909, with the objective of establishing ‘an association like the INTO’. Ultimately, the AIUT would agree to cooperate with the Munster initiative and the new departure was consummated at a meeting in the Mansion House in Dublin on 10 July 1909, at which the ASTI was officially established.¹⁴

Out of a wariness lest the Association revert to being ‘a Dublin organisation’ like its predecessor, provincial councils were established for Munster and Leinster in 1910. An Ulster Provincial Council followed in 1914. Men and women were recruited to the Association from the beginning, but due to concern that the specific concerns of women be addressed, a women’s section, known as the Women Teachers’ Association (WTA) was formed, with branches in Dublin (1911) and Belfast (1912). A notable feature of the WTA was the prominent position of Protestants, because there were relatively few ‘lay’ Catholic women regularly employed in the post-primary sector. Professional development was a central concern of the women’s branches, but it was not the only concern. With structures allowing for WTA representation, significant numbers of women were elected onto the Association’s executive, where they raised concerns about pay differentials between men and women teachers.¹⁵

Developments in 1912 placed the ASTI in an uneasy alliance with the Liberal government in opposition to Catholic employers. Accepting the long-articulated necessity for improved salaries, Augustine Birrell, Chief Secretary for Ireland, announced the introduction of Teachers’ Salaries Grants, which would raise the incomes of lay teachers. To avail of the scheme, schools would be obliged to employ a minimum number of lay teachers at a set salary, to concede contractual entitlements, and to comply

with a mooted registration system. Initially denouncing the scheme as anti-clerical in favouring lay teachers over religious, the Catholic employers eventually yielded. It was 1915, however, before the first salary grants were paid, and there was resentment among teachers that the state salary was delayed by several years due to the obduracy of their employers.¹⁶ As things turned out, the Birrell pay boost was swallowed by price inflation in the war years, and teachers were no better off in 1918 than they had been in 1914.

Indignation over the diminishing purchasing power of salaries at the 1918 Annual General Meeting was tempered by a recognition that solid progress had been made. In his presidential address, G.A. Watson urged delegates to 'congratulate themselves on two distinct achievements': the introduction of registration – 'a definite recognition of the teaching body as a profession' – and the acceptance of the principle of state salaries for teachers.¹⁷

Dissatisfaction about pay towards the end of the war led to the establishment of a Vice-Regal Committee on the Conditions of Service and Remuneration of Teachers in Intermediate Schools, with ASTI representation, whose recommendations on state examinations, pay, pensions, and other matters were reflected in an Education Bill of 1919. If the ASTI was lukewarm about the legislation, Catholic employers were antagonistic towards its promise to increase state regulation. The Bill never became law, but its provisions would be influential in the post-independence period.¹⁸

In the wider society, trade unions were energised by wartime circumstances. Price increases obliged workers to demand wage increases, while reduced unemployment and state regulation enhanced labour's bargaining position. Initially, manual workers moved into action, and their successes recommended the labour movement to cash-strapped white collar workers. Aloof from trade unionism up to then, the INTO affiliated in 1917/18 to the Irish Labour Party and Trades Union Congress (a single body at that point). The ASTI, which had forged close links with the INTO, followed suit in 1919 on a margin of just one vote. Labour/Congress was moving leftwards, and initiatives such as its stance against conscription created a perception that it was 'a body which is frankly bolshevist and Sinn Féin', in the words of an indignant Ulster teacher. There were defections from the INTO to the breakaway Ulster Teachers' Union, but the outcome was worse for the ASTI, which had a higher proportion of Protestant members. The Ulster women's branch defected in 1919, and there were resignations from

the heavily-Protestant Leinster women's branch. With the loss of most female members, the WTA was wound up in 1920 and with it went provision for female representation on the ASTI's leading bodies.¹⁹

Frustration over pay gave rise to action that would have been inconceivable a few years previously. The first ASTI strike took place in Cork on Monday, 3 May 1920, with the threat of a national strike one week later. Most employers conceded, but the Christian Brothers and a number of schools in Limerick did not. Announcing that schools would be picketed, T.J. Burke, the newly appointed General Secretary, advised that the ASTI was 'taking steps to induce parents, and in particular trade unionists to withdraw their children from the schools until a settlement was reached'. By the end of May, concessions from employers brought the strike to an end, though some would claim revenge by dismissing the perceived 'ringleaders' of the strike.²⁰

'Educators of the middle class': 1923-1960

The first ASTI Convention was held in University College Dublin on Easter Tuesday, 3 April 1923, towards the end of the Civil War – a time when educational reforms were being prepared, including a reconfiguration of the examination system, intended to lessen the most egregious of its 'murder machine' features. The first Convention was a modest affair, with about twenty delegates debating eight resolutions, submitted by branches in Dublin, Tuam, Roscrea, and Dundalk. Affected by the defection of Protestant members (and by a wider loss in the territory of newly-established Northern Ireland), the Association was greatly diminished. Delegates were advised that there were 193 full members and 39 associates, many of whom had not paid their dues. The switch from Annual General Meetings to Conventions seems to have been instigated by poor attendances in the previous years. With the loss of female members, there was only one woman delegate to the Convention and no woman at all on the Central Executive Committee for 1923-24. The Association had abruptly become very male and very Catholic. Resolutions to the first Convention were generally unremarkable, except for one from Dundalk which, somewhat improbably, called for a general strike should the Minister not accede to ASTI demands on pay and conditions.²¹

The 1923 Convention set the pattern for next five, which were one-day events on Easter Tuesday in UCD attended by fewer than 20 delegates. A

photograph showing forty-three people at the 1927 Convention however establishes that non-delegates attended.²² The Association struggled to maintain membership, and the numbers for 1927 were even lower than 1923. Proceedings in 1927, which extended into a second day, give a flavour of the period. Invited guest speakers were Prof. F.E. Hackett, who advocated an expansion in the teaching of science; Elenor Butler who spoke on ‘The Geography of History’; George Nicholls Department of Education inspector, on ‘The New Growth of the Language’; and Prof. Michael Tierney, T.D., on the role of the Classics. Then there was Prof. Walter Starkie, who enthused about Mussolini as a ‘creator of a natural consciousness’ in his paper on ‘The Reform of Education in Italy’.²³

A notable item of business at the 1927 Convention was the resolution to disaffiliate from the Irish Labour Party and Trades Union Congress, resulting in a tied vote. When the matter was put to members, there was a majority of eleven votes in favour. An argument for disaffiliation aired at the Dublin branch was that secondary teachers ‘were educators of the middle class, and as such, our connection should be with this class’²⁴ The INTO maintained the connection, even after Labour and Congress separated amicably in 1930. The ASTI would plough in its own lonely furrow during the following four decades until it affiliated with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in 1968.

The 1929 Convention broke fresh ground by meeting in Cork, in the University College. It was back in Cork in 1933, in University College Galway in 1935, in the Municipal Technical Institute in Limerick in 1936, in the De La Salle Training College in Waterford in 1937, and in Cork again in 1940.²⁵ In 1934, there was a notable Special Convention in Dublin, which reviewed progress during the Association’s first twenty-five years, and committed the Association to tackling the question of job security, the founding objective on which least progress had been made.²⁶ Membership was growing (300 full members and 100 associates in 1939) and with it delegate numbers. The 37 delegates in Waterford included 16 women. By the late 1930s also, the Convention was regularly a two-day event. Through the 1940s and most of the 1950s, Dublin was usually the venue, though there were occasional forays, such as to Waterford (1951) and Kilkenny (1953).

Another departure came in 1957, when Convention met in the Warwick Hotel in the Galway seaside resort of Salthill, for the first time outside of

an educational institution. The principal guest speaker was Michael Browne, the famously outspoken Catholic bishop of Galway. In his address, Bishop Browne ranged widely, echoing remarks made by Association President, P.J. Hardiman, in criticising the downgrading of grammar, which he said was ‘bringing the rock n’ roll spirit into education’, in urging that more attention be paid to oral teaching of languages, and in demanding more state investment in education:

*In the Twenty-six Counties, we have not yet seen accepted the principle of providing facilities for secondary education within reach of every boy and girl who is willing and able to avail himself of them. That principle is accepted in the Six Counties and in England, but not here.*²⁷

After the Warwick there was no going back, and the International Hotel in Bray was the venue in 1958. Unusually for the time, the Minister for Education, Jack Lynch, addressed the delegates in Bray. Taking advantage of his presence, Association President, Liam Comerford, raised a matter that was causing alarm in the profession – the INTO claim for pay parity with secondary teachers:

*Before I say anything further I do not wish anyone to construe what I am about to say as an attack on the INTO – far from it... A secondary teacher must spend four or five years in a university at his own expense and then do a year’s probation before being registered and placed on the incremental scale. A national teacher spent two years at a training college during which his personal expenditure was subsidised by the state.*²⁸

For a *Cork Examiner* journalist, the move to the seaside was the occasion of other changes:

*The Association of Secondary Teachers have departed from what seemed to have become for them a fixed practice of holding their annual meetings in University College [Dublin]... The members must have been feeling in the mood for even further changes because for the second time only in many years they elected a lady as their President. She is Miss Nora Kelleher ... a graduate of University College, Cork, where we understand she had no mean reputation as a wielder of the camán on the camogie pitch.*²⁹

The Yeats County Hotel in Sligo was the venue in 1959, and by then the social side of things was receiving more attention, for the programme advised that ‘the remainder of the [Wednesday] afternoon will be devoted to Golf Competitions and other recreational activities’.³⁰

‘The future will be different however’

It is precisely because we know with such certainty what man’s place in the universe is and for what end he is created, that we can make a unique contribution to science study in our secondary schools... One of the most pathetic features of the last two decades had been the dilemma of men of science — materialists, often intellectual giants in their own sphere — in the face of moral problems created by their own discoveries... Scientists trained in our philosophic atmosphere should have no such problems.³¹

John Wilson, presidential address, 1960

The presidential address of John Wilson, classics teacher and future Minister of Education, at the 1960 Convention in Bray shows a consciousness, at the beginning of the Lemass-Whitaker era, that change was coming. In a system substantially ‘arranged to suit the minority of students who wished to proceed to Holy Orders’, in the words of one critic, the OECD *Investment in Education* report established that, while 90 per cent of boys took Latin in the Leaving Cert, there was a dearth of science and business in school curricula in the early 1960s.³² For Wilson, material progress depended ‘to an increasing extent both on an increased knowledge and appreciation of science and on the availability of trained scientists’, and his address sugared the pill by arguing that there was no intrinsic conflict between the religious ethos of schools and economic exigencies.³³

Reaching its fiftieth anniversary in 1959, the Association celebrated the milestone at Convention in Sligo and with a Jubilee dinner in Dublin in late October which was addressed by President de Valera, Taoiseach Lemass, and other leading political and religious figures.³⁴ A recruitment campaign during the year brought membership over a thousand for the first time, a target reached without recourse to a Convention resolution advocating ‘a boycott of secondary teachers who refuse (for no good reason) to join the Association’.³⁵

There were grounds for satisfaction on the anniversary. Secondary teaching was relatively well-paid, secure, and pensionable. Ploughing their own furrow, ASTI negotiators had won concessions, which were not costly for the state for as long as the sector was small and semi-autonomous. Ominously however, the INTO and the Vocational Teachers Association (VTA) were beginning to raise the demand for a common salary scale.³⁶

In an important respect however, the Association had been less successful, for its members had little influence on education policy, either collectively, or individually in their own schools. With 85 per cent of schools operated by Catholic religious, there was little opportunity for promotion. And teachers were not valued in the authoritarian system. Pierce Purcell (President, 1973/4) recalled:

It was most important for the religious order to be able to claim credit for winning the cup, or raising the funds for famine relief. The lay teacher's place was in the background, no matter how much voluntary work he or she may have done... An attempt to organise a school tour to London by myself and a colleague was rejected by the Christian Brother principal because he could find no brother willing to participate in the tour. I remember his words well: 'A Christian Brother presence is essential'.³⁷

The 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising was an occasion for reflection across Irish society and the ASTI was no exception, with the new Association periodical, *The Secondary Teacher*, giving over its April 1966 issue entirely to articles on notable rebel leaders. Senator Garret Fitzgerald contributed a thoughtful piece on 'The Murder Machine' by Pádraig Pearse, the savage critique of education, and the examination system in particular, previously mentioned, which Fitzgerald considered was 'depressingly apt to our present educational situation'. In the same month, in his presidential address to the ASTI Convention, Daniel Buckley took a rather different view. Criticising the 'modern tendency towards the soft approach, and unwillingness to face unpleasant truths', he continued, 'The Leaving Cert examination ought to be a winnowing process which would effectively separate the chaff from the wheat. As it is a lot of the chaff gets in among the wheat'. It was a viewpoint quite at odds with Pearse's.³⁸ Another example of complacency was in the very lukewarm reaction to Donogh O'Malley's announcement of the introduction of free post-primary education later in 1966.

O'Malley's was one of a series of educational reforms in the 1960s, but his announcement came as a surprise to most people – including his cabinet colleagues – and they were greeted with scepticism by many involved in education. ASTI President, Senator Dónal Ó Conalláin, stated that he did not believe that fees were a significant obstacle to anyone wishing to attend secondary school.³⁹ Speaking at the 1967 Convention in Athlone, Minister O'Malley rebuked the ASTI President who had proposed that no student

should be allowed to proceed to Leaving Cert without ‘an adequate performance’ in the Intermediate Certificate.

Mr O’Malley said all modern social and educational thinking would insist that there was no age or stage at which a pupil should be barred from further education... Mr Ó Broiméil’s ideas on this subject are probably governed by the conception of post-primary education which has hitherto obtained in this country. The future will be different however.⁴⁰

Four Conventions and an Assembly

No fewer than four Conventions were held in 1968, the scheduled Easter gathering at Seapoint in Galway, and Special Conventions in Dublin in July, October, and November. The flurry was occasioned by the report of the Ryan Tribunal on Teachers’ Salaries. The latter was the culmination of a decade-long process, during which arbitration mechanisms had narrowed gaps in salaries between secondary teachers on the one hand and primary and vocational teachers on the other, resulting in frustratingly small pay awards to the former. The frustration had boiled over at the 1964 Convention in Limerick, when delegates decided on a boycott of the state examinations. With the INTO refusing to instruct its members to observe the 1964 boycott, some primary teachers took advantage of the opportunity, causing acrimony all round. There were hopes that the Ryan process would heal relationships between the teachers’ unions, but quite the reverse transpired.⁴¹

Donogh O’Malley, who had convened the Ryan Tribunal, did not see its report published, for his short but influential tenure as Minister for Education was ended by his death in March 1968 at the age of 47. Elements of the O’Malley legacy however influenced the report. Free education and free school transport left little in the education kitty, so the pay element of the Ryan Report disappointed secondary teachers in the context of its recommendation of a common salary scale across teaching.

The ASTI reaction was that it amounted to a ‘downgrading of the salary position at present obtaining’.⁴² For younger secondary teachers – a substantial body in a profession that had grown by almost 50 per cent in the previous four years – the ASTI leading bodies had been too accommodating. The most dynamic exponents of this view were in Cork, and it was the branch there that initiated the series of Special Conventions.

Out of the July Convention came a resolution committing the Association to conducting a strike ballot if its concerns were not addressed. A subsequent offer was not sufficient to mollify the indignant members of the ASTI. The Cork branch kept up the pressure, and in a ballot in November 92 per cent voted for strike action.⁴³

During 1968 also, the ASTI began to open up to the wider world in ways it had not done in a generation. By decision of the Easter Convention, reiterated in November, affiliation was sought with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). And the Association was represented at the Assembly of the World Confederation of Organisations of the Teaching Professions, which met in Dublin in July 1968, having affiliated with both the Confederation and the International Federation of Secondary Teachers during the previous year.⁴⁴

‘We weren’t looking for a piecemeal approach’

I joined the ASTI almost immediately [in 1968]. I was a Commerce graduate with a strong interest in labour and industrial relations, so it would have been my immediate reaction to join the teachers’ trade union. I didn’t have to be approached to join... Shortly after I joined there was a major salary campaign which ignited the interest of most members... We weren’t looking for a piecemeal approach; we wanted a significant increase to put teaching on a scale similar to other professions.⁴⁵

Michael Corley, ASTI President, 1998/9

The flurry of activity of 1968 and the prospect of strike action was a great stimulus to recruitment. Having entered the decade with 1,000 members, the Association had almost three times as many at the end. And the expansion of the profession during the 1960s changed the age profile. Some young graduates like Michael Corley were disposed to playing their part in the ASTI, having been politicised, even radicalised, during their time at university. Moreover, it is apparent from the preparations for, and the proceedings of, the Special Conventions of 1968 that there was a tendency among the younger cohort to distrust the veterans forming the leading bodies of the Association.⁴⁶ Negotiations continued, but the concessions gained were insufficient to win wide support, and in a strike ballot in January 1969, only 15 per cent voted to accept the modified Ryan Tribunal proposals.

On Monday 3 February 1969, the strike commenced, an action colluded in by the Catholic managers, who had their own differences with the government. Only one school remained open. In anticipation of a long strike, many of the younger teachers went to find work in England. Some of these were not available to participate in the ballot which accepted a very slightly improved offer – especially attractive to those with long service – by a large margin. Disappointment led to disillusionment among the activist young. Some resigned from the Association, including for a time young Michael Corley who cited a lack of transparency surrounding the negotiation process, and the disposition of the negotiators to compromise prematurely.⁴⁷

If some in the ASTI were angered at the terms of the settlement, the other teacher unions took umbrage at the fact that it breached the Ryan Tribunal's recommendations. Strikes by the INTO and VTA obliged the government to renege on the February agreement in September. There was confusion in the ASTI, which was not resolved by the 1970 Convention in Dundalk. There, Minister Faulkner's appeal to the teachers' unions to resolve their differences provoked a walk-out by fifteen to twenty delegates and a chant of 'Oh, Oh' from others. An ASTI boycott of the 1970 state examinations, lifted in response to a concession by the Minister, and an extended summer vacation to allow for correction of exams, did not resolve the key grievances. At a further Special Convention in October 1970, there was a mood of 'anger – a deep cold anger', according to a report in the *Secondary Teacher*.⁴⁸ In that context, the decision was taken to proceed with an all-out strike on 2 February 1971 if a resolution had not been reached.

Contacts continued between the ASTI, the other teaching unions, and the Department of Education which yielded small concessions. Through all of this, there was a widening of internal divisions. It was not just that the concessions with regards to promotional posts seemed to favour established teachers, but also that many of this group were averse to the very idea of taking strike action. The hardening of positions was reflected in tighter margins in a series of ballots of the membership: 56 per cent for strike in January 1971; 53 per cent in February. With this slender majority, arrangements proceeded for a strike on 16 February, 1971. However, Standing Committee yielded to tremendous pressure to defer the industrial action, with members learning of the postponement on the 9 o'clock news on the eve of the strike.

Two hundred, mostly younger, members making arrangements for picketing on the morrow in the North Star hotel in Dublin were flabbergasted, and they made their way to ASTI headquarters, to demand the resignation of Standing Committee. This was the first of a number of protests which entered ASTI lore as ‘the siege of Hume Street’. Throughout the country, younger teachers stayed away from work for one or more days. With school authorities taking an indulgent view, the disruption had ended by the following week. There was a bitter after-taste, and many of the more militant disengaged for a few years.⁴⁹ Pierce Purcell (President, 1973/4) recalled a perception at that time, which he subsequently discounted, that ‘there was an establishment in the Association linked to the Knights [of Columbanus] ... seen as the old guard, conservative, pro-religious, anti-young teacher, and so on.’⁵⁰

It was a temporary disengagement, and within a few years, members of the cohort that had besieged Hume Street were using the structures of the Association to enhance the terms offered in February 1971, and have their voices heard more generally. Their engagement led to a change in culture as well as in the composition of the Central Executive Committee and Standing Committee. Tommy Francis recalled:

One year on the way to Convention, we were talking about things, and we decided that the friend I was travelling with, Hugh Dorrian, should put himself forward for Standing Committee. When we got out of the car we started canvassing. People were semi-amazed to be canvassed but he topped the poll. Up to then things were done in a quieter way in the ASTI, but we were used to Donegal politics, to canvassing, to talking at chapel gates, so we weren't afraid to ask someone for a vote. Every year after that, we'd do the same.⁵¹

Francis (President 1995/6) would follow Dorrian in successfully canvassing for office in the Association.

‘Back room boys’ stuff, which suited the ‘boys’ mainly’

It was at a time in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when there were great moves in the ICTU to get more women involved in the trade unions and in politics in general... One thing that struck me at the time was that it was all very much back-room boys’ stuff, which suited the ‘boys’ mainly. You’d have people campaigning late into the night at Convention. I’d have felt that I needed to go to bed at one o’clock or thereabouts, but the following day someone

would say, 'Where were you at three o'clock when so-and-so was doing a deal?' It was very difficult but I got onto Steering Committee eventually, and then I stood for Standing Committee.⁵²

Catherine Fitzpatrick, ASTI President 2001/2

If the pace of change of the 1960s was unnerving for some, it did not abate in the 1970s and 1980s. The numbers of pupils and teachers continued to increase, while there was a cataclysmic fall in religious vocations. The arrangements with regard to posts of responsibility in the settlement of the early 1970s set parameters for discussion with the religious employers, which resulted in almost all posts up to the level of vice-principal being held by ASTI members. While structural change proceeded, curricular changes broadened the range of subjects in most schools.

The announcement of the establishment of comprehensive schools in 1963 was followed in 1970 by the announcement of community schools, while curricular changes were blurring the distinction between secondary and vocational schools. Secondary teacher and vocational teacher occupations were evolving into that of post-primary teacher. Many of the community schools were created by mergers between secondary and vocational schools, so it became common for members of the ASTI to work alongside members of the Teachers Union of Ireland (as the VTA was named from 1973). At the national level, this departure was reflected in cooperation between the two unions in negotiations.⁵³

With the ASTI growing rapidly – a trebling of membership in the 1960s, followed by another trebling in the 1970s – efforts were made to streamline its internal structures. It proved difficult to find agreement on specific detail however. The union produced new resources. A periodical, *ASTIR*, first appeared on a pilot basis in 1970, and a *School Stewards' Handbook* in 1977. Recognising that the Association's apparatus had developed in an ad hoc way, a resolution from the Galway branch was adopted by the 1979 Convention in Blarney establishing a sub-committee to investigate the staffing and resourcing of head office. Among the outcomes was the appointment of a full-time education officer in 1981, reflecting a determination to more effectively influence education policy. Further appointments strengthened the apparatus of the union. A significant development was the appointment of Kieran Mulvey to the position of General Secretary in 1983 on the retirement of Máire McDonagh who had overseen the great expansion of the Association since 1957.⁵⁴

Mulvey took over at a difficult time, when retrenchment by government threatened teachers' pay and conditions. Good relations between Mulvey and his opposite numbers in the INTO and TUI however facilitated a united front among teachers, Teachers United, which mounted an impressive demonstration in Croke Park on a crisp December day in 1985. A round of regional strikes, a ban on examination work, and student protests brought the government back to the table and a deal was agreed which was accepted by an overwhelming majority of ASTI members. Cooperation between INTO, TUI, and ASTI continued and was reflected in a Council of Teachers Unions (CTU), which was approved by the 1990 Convention in Ennis. Incoming President, Senator Joe Costello, was pleased at the 'overwhelming and enthusiastic' acceptance of the proposal: 'I think it is extremely important for all our children at all levels of education that we have a strong and united teacher union group'. The CTU worked towards the objective of a creating a merger of the three teachers' unions, but INTO delegates threw a spanner in the works at their 1994 Congress, and the TUI another at their 1995 Congress. The project of teacher unity had to be abandoned.⁵⁵

As the grip of institutional Catholicism weakened, there was still occasional aftershocks. The case of Eileen Flynn was one such. A young teacher in a Gorey convent school, she was dismissed in 1982 for becoming pregnant while unmarried. Unfortunately, she had neglected to become a union member, placing the ASTI in the uncomfortable position of publicly advocating for her, but unable to represent her. The matter loomed large at several Conventions, having caused both 'nervousness and indignation' among the younger cohort in particular. Michael Waddell of Wexford proposed the following resolution at the 1984 Convention which was passed by a large majority: 'That it be ASTI policy that a teacher's private morality and lifestyle should not be grounds for dismissal where they conflict with the views of the school management'. Despite the outcry and the widespread support for her across the trade union movement, Flynn was not reinstated.

Gender discrimination was at the core of Flynn case. As Nell McCafferty put it, 'Male teachers ... don't have babies, they're away on a hack' – and there was a growing recognition at that time of gender discrimination within unions, including the ASTI.⁵⁶ As Catherine Fitzpatrick discovered, the electoral culture of the Association favoured men, and she and others

were determined that the voices of the female majority of ASTI members be heard. ICTU's emphasis on equality prompted the Association to provide training for female CEC members in 1984, and from that an informal feminist network developed. A fully-fledged ASTI Equality Committee was established by decision of the 1988 Convention (which would be superseded by an Equal Opportunities Committee in 2000). Significant improvement in female representation ensued from a decision of a 1993 Special Convention that elections for Standing Committee be held on regional basis rather than at Convention. This had an impact at all levels.⁵⁷ With regard to the presidency, Mary McCarthy in 1979/80 was the first woman to hold the position since Nora Kelleher in 1958/9. There were two female Presidents in the 1980s; two in the 1990s; four in the first decade of the new millennium; and four again in the second.

The new millennium

In the past quarter century or so there has been a speeding up of some processes in the wider society, while a fresh set of challenges have presented themselves. The economic importance of accessible and appropriate education – a policy imperative since the 1960s – is ever more widely emphasised. Social change has raised expectations with regard to the range of supports provided by schools and by teachers: there has necessarily been a focus on inclusion as school populations have become more diverse.⁵⁸ An intensification of social partnership created pressures within the ASTI reminiscent of those previously seen in the 1960s surrounding the introduction of a common salary scale for teachers. Given the Association's democratic traditions, these and other issues of the day have been robustly discussed and debated at Convention. But wherever delegates have gathered, they have faced scrutiny from a media which in recent decades has often been unsympathetic towards trade unionism, and sceptical of ideals of public service.

Circumstances at the turn of the millennium strained relations between the ASTI and the rest of the trade union movement, resulting in another ASTI decision to disaffiliate from the Congress. At issue were differing expectations of social partnership, a process championed by ICTU and the majority of public sector unions within it. This was the period of economic boom dubbed the 'the Celtic Tiger', of which social partnership was considered a major pillar. Partnership had linked pay awards to productivity

and had offered non-pay concessions in exchange for pay restraint. In this context, certain features of the Celtic Tiger era created difficulties for public servants. Costs, including housing costs, were rising at an almost unprecedented rate, at a time when private sector wages were buoyant, due to the tightness of the labour market. With acute demands on their incomes, teachers were under pressure from the consequences of rapid social and cultural change on a daily basis. 'Benchmarking' was the productivity element of the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (2000) which brought matters to a head. Among the memberships of teachers' unions, ASTI members were not alone in being concerned about it.

Within the Association, there was prior dissatisfaction with ICTU's conduct of social partnership negotiations, but it was still a matter of surprise when Standing Committee and the CEC voted to disaffiliate from the national body in January 2000. The disengagement was greatly disappointing to the ASTI's industrial relations professionals, and it set the Association on a course of conflict both with the wider trade union movement and the government. For a time, the internal differences around strategy and political analysis seemed to be personified by relations between President, Bernadine O'Sullivan (1999/2000) and General Secretary, Charlie Lennon. Fractious Conventions, intermittent industrial action, frequent ballots, and unresolved industrial relations issues with the ASTI staff, culminating in the resignation of the General Secretary, Charlie Lennon in 2002, were among the headline-capturing episodes during the following dramatic years. Eventually compromises were reached, and a way found back to ICTU in 2006.⁵⁹

Inevitably the Celtic Tiger bubble imploded. This took place in 2007, sparking a series of developments, including a banking bailout, which culminated in an intervention by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union (EU) in 2010.⁶⁰ With consequences of the crash felt in the form of bankruptcies, job losses and collapsing property prices, much of the public discourse in the aftermath focused on state employees who were represented as a cosseted group, protected from the worst consequences of the crisis. Even after IMF/EU-dictated wage cuts and other impositions, which fell heaviest on new recruits, commentary of this character did not markedly abate.

Criticism notwithstanding, in an era of economic adversity ASTI delegates were welcomed by some of their critics to those towns and cities where

Conventions were held. A headline in the *Connacht Tribune* in 2010 announced, ‘Two teachers events worth €1.5m spin-off’, citing a Galway Chamber of Commerce estimate that the 1,250 delegates attending the ASTI Convention at the Radisson Hotel and the INTO Congress in the Salthill Hotel would spend that amount ‘between bednights, food, drink and incidental daily spend around the city.’⁶¹

Ruairí Quinn, Minister for Education (2011-14), was the bearer of unpalatable tidings around the curriculum and other changes at a series of Conventions, where the welcome he received was muted at best. It was indicative of the mood among activists that Quinn’s successor, Jan O’Sullivan, was not invited to the 2015 Convention. These ministers were seen as representing a cost-cutting government, but reform of the junior cycle curriculum, on foot of the 2011 report of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, was the major cause of the Ministers’ unpopularity. Resistance to the proposals for curriculum change and growing dissatisfaction among ASTI members’ about salaries and other aspects of working conditions was expressed in industrial action including strike days. This industrial action was eventually suspended by a Special Convention of June 2017, in a context of growing internal dissatisfaction with the impact of the FEMPI legislation on ASTI members’ salaries and a mooted pay restorations for younger teachers. A specific concern in relation to the junior cycle curriculum was the downgrading of History as a non-core subject, discussed at several Conventions, which was eventually allayed by a ministerial announcement in 2019.⁶²

With regard to post-crash adjustments to pay and conditions delivered through the Croke Park agreement (2010), Haddington Road (2013), and Lansdowne Road (2015), the response at Conventions was in two phases. Initially, the focus was on restoring the losses experienced by established members of the profession, but by the 2011 Convention in Cork, younger teachers had firmly placed their concerns about precarious work and unequal pay on the agenda.⁶³ In this regard, the ASTI would prove to be more exacting in negotiations than others, which led to delays, and to associated difficulties with recruitment.⁶⁴ Altered conditions in recent years have shifted concern to the matter of attracting people to (and retaining people in) the profession.⁶⁵ For its part, the Covid-19 crisis, which overshadowed the past two Conventions, underlined the versatility and commitment of the current generation of teachers.

The Conventions of 2020 (in July like the ASTI's earliest gatherings) and 2021 were held online, the latest in a number of adaptations over the past hundred years. From the confines of the Council Room in UCD for most of the 1920s, the Association convened in Cork in 1929, and sporadically in other educational institutions outside Dublin during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. When circumstances were ripe, hotel venues were chosen, starting with Galway's Warwick Hotel in 1957. Through changing surroundings, Convention has remained the vital life force of the ASTI, facilitating communication, connection, and common purpose between post-primary teachers throughout Ireland.

Notes

- 1 Author interview with Lily Cronin, Sligo, 11 April 2007.
- 2 See, for example, ASTI, Galway branch minutes, 1968-73
- 3 John Coolahan, *The ASTI and Post-Primary Education in Ireland, 1909-1984*, Dublin: Cumann na Meánmhúinteoraí, 1984; John Cunningham, *Unlikely Radicals: Irish Post-Primary Teachers and the ASTI*, Cork: Cork University Press, 2009; Francis Devine, *Organising History: A Centenary of SIPTU*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2009.
- 4 Joseph O'Connor, '“Old, unhappy, far off things”: A Personal Reminiscence', *The School and College Year Book*, 1956, pp. 15-25.
- 5 'General Meeting of the Association', *Irish Journal of Education*, September 1910.
- 6 Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, 'Irish Secondary Teachers', *Irish Review*, October 1912.
- 7 Cunningham, *Unlikely Radicals*, pp. 36-41.
- 8 'Secondary Teachers', *Freemans Journal*, 10 July 1916.
- 9 'Thomas MacDonagh's last book', *Irish Journal of Education*, September 1916.
- 10 Cunningham, *Unlikely Radicals*, pp. 3-17.
- 11 John Coolahan, *Irish Education: History and Structure*, Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1981; Pádraic Pearse, *Political Writings and Speeches*, Dublin: Phoenix, 1962
- 12 'Secondary Teachers', *Irish Independent*, 4 July 1912.
- 13 Cunningham, *Unlikely Radicals*, pp. 19-24.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19, 24-29; For the development of the INTO, see Niamh Puirseil, *Kindling the Flame: 150 years of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation*, Dublin: Gill Books, 2017
- 15 Cunningham, *Unlikely Radicals*, pp. 33-35.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 35-41.
- 17 'Secondary Teachers', 6 July 1918.
- 18 Cunningham, *Unlikely Radicals*, pp. 41-43.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 44-46
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 47-53.
- 21 Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland, *Programme for First Annual Convention*, Council Room, UCD, 3 April 1923.
- 22 'Irish Secondary Teachers Convention', *Irish Examiner*, 22 April 1927.
- 23 'Secondary Teachers' Congress', *Irish Independent*, 22 April 1927.
- 24 ASTI, Dublin branch minutes, 17 April 1926.
- 25 ASTI Convention programmes, 1929-1940.
- 26 ASTI, *Security of Tenure*, Dublin: ASTI, 1934
- 27 'Oral education getting "too little attention",' *Irish Press*, 25 April 1957.
- 28 'Minister's plan will emphasise oral Irish', *Irish Press*, 10 April 1958.
- 29 'Dublin Letter', *Cork Examiner*, 10 April 1958.
- 30 Programme of 1959 ASTI Convention, Yeats County Hotel, 19-20 April 1959.
- 31 'Secondary Teachers' Congress: Ireland's unique role in science is stressed', *Irish Press*, 21 April 1960.
- 32 Tuam Diocesan Archive: quote from unpublished letter from 'Justitia', an anonymous past student of St Jarlath's College, Tuam, to the editor of the *Connacht Tribune*.
- 33 'Secondary Teachers' Congress', *Irish Press*, 21 April 1960.
- 34 'Secondary Teachers' Jubilee Dinner', 2 November 1959
- 35 Cunningham. *Unlikely Radicals*, pp. 103-4.

- 36 Ibid., pp. 128-9. For VTA/TUI, see John Logan, ed., *Teachers' Union: The TUI and its forerunners, 1899-1994*, Dublin: A. & A. Farmer, 1999.
- 37 Author interview with Pierce Purcell, 19 May 2007.
- 38 'Generous attitude to education primarily economic', *Irish Examiner*, 14 April 1966.
- 39 D. Ó Conalláin, 'Education – free for all', *Secondary Teacher*, September 1966.
- 40 'Minister warns on changes', *Irish Press*, 30 March 1967.
- 41 Coolahan, *The ASTI*, pp. 244-48.
- 42 Ibid., pp. 273-81.
- 43 Cunningham, *Unlikely Radicals*, pp. 133-41
- 44 'WCOPT seeks end to illiteracy', *Irish Times*, 31 July 1968; Coolohan, *The ASTI*, p. 266. The Confederation met in Ireland at the invitation of the INTO.
- 45 Author interview with Michael Corley, 19 May 2007.
- 46 ASTI, Galway branch minutes, 1968-73.
- 47 Cunningham, *Unlikely Radicals*, pp. 144-59.
- 48 'Teachers walk out at conference', *Irish Independent*, 2 April 1970, Cunningham, *Unlikely Radicals*, pp. 155-9.
- 49 Cunningham, *Unlikely Radicals*, pp. 159-69.
- 50 Author interview with Pierce Purcell, 19 May 2007.
- 51 Author interview with Tommy Francis, 11 April 2007.
- 52 Author interview with Catherine Fitzpatrick, 11 April 2007.
- 53 Cunningham, *Unlikely Radicals*, pp. 187-93; David Barry, 'The involvement and impact of a professional interest group', in D.G. Mulcahy and D. O'Sullivan, *Irish Educational Policy: Process and Substance*, Dublin: IPA, 1989.
- 54 Cunningham, *Unlikely Radicals*, pp. 193-203; Coolahan, *The ASTI*, pp. 362-91.
- 55 Ibid., pp. 204-24.
- 56 Ibid., pp. 225-31.
- 57 Ibid., pp. 225-31.
- 58 See Rob Kitchin, Mary Gilmartin, and Allen White, *Migrations: Ireland in a Global World*, Manchester University Press, 2016; Fintan O'Toole, *We don't know ourselves: A Personal History of Ireland since 1958*, London: Head of Zeus, 2021
- 59 This period is treated in detail in Cunningham, *Unlikely Radicals*, pp. 266-300.
- 60 See Terrence McDonough, 'The Irish Crash in Global Context', *World Review of Political Economy*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 442-62.
- 61 'Two teachers events worth €1.5m spin-off', *Connacht Tribune*, 9 April 2010.
- 62 'No plans for further core subjects', *Irish Examiner*, 2 October 2019
- 63 See *ASTIR*, 'Convention 2010: the speeches', May 2010: 'New Teachers speak out' [cover], *ASTIR*, May 1911; 'One in four teachers treated like "yellow packs",' *Irish Independent*, 12 April 2012.
- 64 'Discontent in ASTI grows', *Irish Independent*, 20 April 2017.
- 65 Kieran Christie, 'Teaching heading for recruitment and retention crisis', *ASTIR*, May 2017.



ASTI

Printed, April 2022