

Book Review

Liam Cullinane (2020) *Working in Cork: Everyday Life in Irish Steel, Sunbeam Wolsey and the Ford Marina Plant, 1917–2001.*

Cork: Cork University Press. ISBN 9781782053139.

318 pp. Hardback €39. Kindle \$49.

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Working in Cork by Liam Cullinane explores working lives through a comparative study of three workplaces in the Cork harbour area of Ireland. Through this story of “everyday worlds” Cullinane examines the influence of local politics, gender, class and global economic transformations on each workplace (Burawoy, 1998). Reacting to the predominant approach in Irish labour history, which tends to privilege high politics and the activities of organised labour while neglecting the broader history of the working class, *Working in Cork* centres the experience of workers, employing oral history techniques as well as archival evidence to reconstruct their daily realities.

The workplaces chosen by Cullinane – the Ford Marina plant in Cork Harbour (est. 1917), the Sunbeam Wolsey textile factory in the suburbs of Cork city (est. 1932) and Irish Steel’s only steel mill (est. 1939) in the coastal town of Cobh – each have an iconic status in local collective memory. In the early twentieth century Cork had a limited industrial sector, with employment mainly based in agriculture and commerce. The establishment of these factories contributed to the growth of an industrial working class, with Cork becoming Ireland’s second-largest manufacturing centre. The first three chapters draw on documentary evidence to trace the business history of each factory, thereby placing the workers’ narratives in their broader economic context. The accounts demonstrate the economic and geographic disadvantages that hampered the growth of industry in Ireland. In its early years, the Ford factory was constantly in danger of closure, with its inexperienced workforce unable to keep up with production targets. The Ford Marina plant and Irish Steel depended on raw materials which were unavailable locally. The outbreak of World War 2 brought production at these factories to a standstill as neither company could import coal or ore.

However, all three firms benefitted from the Irish government’s adoption of protectionist economic policies in the 1930s. Ford and Sunbeam Wolsey became the dominant players in their sectors, while Irish Steel enjoyed an effective monopoly as a domestic steel supplier. The state’s abandonment of protectionism ended this period of prosperity. Ireland signed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1967 and then entered the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973. Faced with international competition and a global recession, the workplaces closed one by one: the Ford Marina Plant in 1984 and the Sunbeam Wolsey factory in 1990; Irish Steel was initially sold to Ispat, an Indian multinational, in 1995, but the mill ceased operations in 2001.

Chapters Four to Seven analyse working lives in each of the case studies and describe how workers’ subjective experiences were shaped by the changing business fortunes discussed earlier in the book. Cullinane explores the nature of work in each factory, changes in industrial relations and the social activities that flourished around each workplace. Though supported by documentary

sources, these chapters mainly rely on the rich oral evidence provided by former employees of each company.

Chapter Seven describes the rigid class system structuring life in twentieth-century Ireland and the narrow opportunities available to the majority of working-class people in Cork. In Chapter Eight, Cullinane explores the influence of class, hegemonic gender norms and familial ideology on attitudes to work, the status of different types of worker and involvement in trade unionism.

For much of the twentieth century, historians have privileged nationalism and religion as structuring forces in Irish politics and culture while neglecting the influence of class (Convery, 2013). Opportunities for working-class people in Ireland were scarce during the twentieth century. Further education was prohibitively expensive and clerical and administrative work were the preserve of the middle class. Unemployment was high and the work that was available was insecure and seasonal. Working-class people often relied on emigration as a means of resisting the limited life choices they were faced with in Ireland. However, those that secured well-paid jobs in workplaces such as the three under study had limited structural bargaining power due to the high levels of unemployment among working-class people and the large pool of labour in Cork. Cullinane's findings show that this strategic disadvantage affected workers' behaviour. Faced with the alternative of unemployment, workers accepted dangerous working conditions at Irish Steel because "you'd no option if you had a family, really" (p. 151).

Nevertheless, *Working in Cork* provides evidence of working-class resistance to control and the strong ties of solidarity which existed in each factory. Workers engaged in both wildcat strikes and official industrial action on several occasions in each of the workplaces. In the post-war period, Irish trade unions, like their counterparts in other countries reached their peak in terms of strength and density and the oral-history narrators of *Working in Cork* describe finding a sense of agency through involvement in trade unions. Even those with only a passive involvement in unions underlined the importance of respecting the picket, whether official or unofficial, suggesting this norm was part of the socio-cultural values of the broader working class.

By focusing on the workplace level, Cullinane provides an intricate picture of the implications of stratified class structures on workers' lived experiences. Through the use of oral history methods, Cullinane presents findings that nuance the divisions which existed between middle-class management and clerical workers on one side and working-class general operatives and tradespeople on the other, nuances that would have been obscured by traditional sources. Through testimony from workers at the three factories, we learn that while male workers ascribed status and prestige to work based on pay levels and skill, what was considered a "good job" for women depended on the type of work. Clerical occupations and jobs in retail were accorded a higher status than factory work, even though the latter tended to be better paid, because these were seen as clean, respectable roles, compatible with widely held ideas of femininity. Factory work was seen as masculine and women working on factory floors were viewed as transgressive, even though most working-class women had little choice in the type of work they accepted given the limited employment available in the Irish market.

Although *Working in Cork* aims to provide detail of working lives in particular workplaces, the study also reveals connections between the lives of the participants and global, structural forces. The power of trade unions in each factory is punctured by the transition to free trade and neo-liberalism in the 1970s, and in Sunbeam Wolsey and Irish Steel workers experience this through wage cuts and more aggressive managerial supervision and control. Cullinane demonstrates that Irish workplaces can provide further evidence of the ways in which shifts in power between labour and capital at the global level reshaped workplaces even in so-called peripheral countries. While illustrating the particular norms and experiences which constituted the Irish working class, *Working*

in Cork demonstrates how their working lives fit into the broader system, thereby imprinting the “bigger picture” of the history of global capitalism with new and fascinating detail.

References

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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