



Workers against Institutions

Power Relations and Political economy in the Irish Mushroom Industry

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SUMMARY

This dissertation focuses on the evaluation of the obstacles on the way towards a militant and democratic, grassroots trade unionism. Therefore, it is an ethnography of trade union organising.

At a general level this study deals with the relationship between labour and capital in the Irish mushroom industry in the context of global capitalism and the Irish national institutional framework. This is reflected at a theoretical level in the opposition between the political economies of labour and capital. At a more concrete level, this dissertation centres on workers' resistance to exploitation and the struggle of capital to overcome it. While the first part of the thesis deals with that struggle on mushroom farms, the second part tells about the efforts of organised labour in Ireland to 'clean up' the worst aspects of exploitation in the mushroom industry.

In the second part of the dissertation, a second contradiction arises, that between the interests and dynamics of labour institutions, such as trade unions and workers' based Non-Governmental Organisations, and workers' collective interests. This second contradiction, which I consider a reflection of the main contradiction between capital and labour, motivates the title of this dissertation, 'Workers against Institutions'. This does not imply that I make a case against organised labour; it merely means that workers have also to fight against the influence of the hegemonic political economy of capital within their own organisations, which is reflected in tendencies such as 'reformism', 'partnership trade unionism', and bureaucratic tendencies as opposed to rank-and-file unionism, and 'popular power'.

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In relation to the academic and personal aspects involved in the development of this dissertation, which also constitutes a process of self-development, I owe my gratitude to my thesis supervisors Séamas Ó Síocháin and Chandana Mathur. Laurence Cox, from the Sociology Department at NUIM, read a full draft of the thesis and had an important influence in the second part of this dissertation. He made me think about how to integrate theory and ethnographic description. I conceived the title of this dissertation after a discussion with him in June 2010, during the weekend workshop ‘Learning from each other’s struggles’. Owen Doyle, from UCD, read chapters 2 and 3, and insisted on how important was the context of economic crisis and unemployment in the middle of which the Irish satellite system was created in the 1980s.

My gratitude to Tom Corrigan, who has been a friend to me since I met him early in my fieldwork period, and who has made many and important contributions, without which Part I of this thesis would not look the same. Niamh McCree, a PhD candidate, read one of the chapters and took her time to make some comments about it. I had several very stimulating discussions with Sally Daly, another PhD candidate, on my research and her own research on agricultural workers in North Dublin. I also found very stimulating an evening’s discussion with Dace Dzenovska, a PhD candidate originally from Latvia. Bryan Tyrrell read the last two chapters and made suggestions in matters of style. Evelyn Groark also read the final chapters. I thank her for her support and stimulating conversations.

During my fieldwork time MRCI and SIPTU staff greatly facilitated my research. In Monaghan town, the Branch Organiser opened up to me SIPTU files on Monaghan Mushrooms, up on which chapter 5 is based. The staff of SIPTU Cavan were also very helpful. I frequently visited MRCI headquarters in Dublin and got to know and appreciate its staff and its work. I learned a lot from them and shared many good and bad moments. Some of my conclusions in this dissertation might take them by surprise since I offer a portrayal of some aspects of MRCI mushroom campaign that they might not recognise. I hope that my descriptions and comments are not decontextualized and taken as destructive criticism, or worse, used to attack this NGO for the wrong reasons.

While I have pointed at the excellent work that MRCI carried out on behalf of migrant workers, my criticism has been limited to only one but very important aspect that runs through this dissertation: ‘popular power’, something that does not require only good intentions and cannot just be implemented from the top.

I also owe my special gratitude to the staff of EXPAC and IWU in Monaghan town. I shared many memorable moments with the members of the MWSG. I felt united with them in the same struggle and the same class. I have written this dissertation with them in my mind, and on their side. Because I need to maintain their anonymity, I cannot name them. During my fieldwork time in Monaghan between August 2005 and November 2006 I shared memorable moments and I had the support of, and learnt a lot from my friends Immanuel, Radek, Gregor, Barbara, Beata, Irek, Dana, Svcek, Rudite, Enda, and Bernie. Above all, thanks to my parents for always being there.

The names of my informants have been changed to protect their anonymity. I have not changed the names of the growers and ‘big’ names of the mushroom industry who were never informants. I had a very good relationship with one grower in particular. I was very lucky to meet him. For the most part, and excepting TEAGASC, the industry was completely closed to me. From TEAGASC I must acknowledge Gerry Walsh, Tom Kellegher, and Jim Grant. My big thanks to Mairead Kilpatrick (Applied Plant Science Division, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for Northern Ireland).

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List of Abbreviations

ACOT	The National Advisory and Training Body
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
AGM	Annual General Meeting
AgWA	Agricultural Workers Association
AWB	Agricultural Wages Board
CIC	Citizen Information Centre
CMP	Commercial Mushroom Producers
CNC	The Co-operative of Dutch Mushroom Growers' Association
CSO	Central Statistic Office
DAF	Department of Agriculture and Food
DANI	Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland
DETE	Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment
DWSG	Domestic Workers Support Group
EEC	European Economic Community
ERO	Employment Regulation Order
ETI	Ethical Trade Initiative
EU	European Union
EUREP-GAP	Euro-Retailer Produce Working Group - Good Agricultural Practices
EXPAC	Ex-prisoners' Assistance Committee
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FER	Final Evaluation Report
FLOC	Farm Labor Organizing Committee
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IBEC	Irish Business and Employers Confederation
ICI	Immigrant Council of Ireland
ICTU	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
IDA	The Industry Development Authority
IMGA	Irish Mushroom Growers Association
ISME	Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association
ITWF	International Transport Workers' Federation
IWU	Independent Workers' Union
JLC	Joint Labour Committee
LRC	Labour Relations Commission
MGA	Mushroom Growers' Association
MRCI	Migrant Rights Centre Ireland
MWSG	Mushroom Workers Support Group
NEP	Northern Eastern Producers
NERA	National Employment Rights Authority
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NIB	National Implementation Body

NMW	National Minimum Wage
PESP	Programme for Economic and Social Progress
PO	Producer Organisation
REA	Registered Employment Agreement
RMT	British Rail, Marine and Transport Union
SAFE	South Armagh Farming Enterprises
SEIU	Service Employees International Union
SIPTU	The Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union
SP	Social Partnership
SUI	Seamen's Union of Ireland
TAM	Tyrone and Armagh Marketing Group
TD	Teachta Dála
TEAGASC	The Agriculture and Food Development Authority in Ireland
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TNC	Transnational Corporation
TUC	Trades Union Congress (UK)
UFW	United Farm Workers
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WCs	Worker Centres
WTO	World Trade Organisation
WWII	World War II

1. Introduction

Fragments from a mushroom picker's diary in a farm in Co. Mayo, October 2003-
January 2004:

29/10/03: Today we were working from 7 am up to 9 pm. We were dead!

30/10/03: I would like to join an Irish trade union and start fighting for my rights. Working day for 14 hours, like in Russia before the socialist revolution. I wanted to call home but we finished our job at 21.30 No time for calling!

02/11/03: It seems to me my job can be described as a strict regime prison! I bought this prison myself for big money [she refers to the money she paid for her work permit].

18/11/03: Tomorrow is going to be my day off, but [the boss] asked us to pick up mushrooms. As she is our employer, she is impossible to refuse!

30/11/03: Two days in a row we pick up mushrooms ... We are coming back at 10 o'clock at night. My legs were aching.

14/12/03: On Wednesday, we got our wages. We were given Christmas cards and a small bonus, €30. It was very nice. We wanted to say 'Thank you', but next day this desire disappeared. Next day [the boss] asked us to come into her office.

[Our] very poor translator told us that [the boss] wasn't happy with our job. According to her, we were slow. Next day [the boss] was fighting with the Latvians workers. We asked about a break at 6 o'clock in the evening. [My friend] was crying... was threatened not to get 3rd work permit. Now pickers have 3 breaks instead of 4; we have our meals all together. The employer is our master.

15/12/03: Today something unusual happened. I saw the farm in daylight for the first time! Very unusual fact, they let us go at 4 pm today!

25/12/03: We had very hard days before Christmas! ... To stand at the conveyor belt

for 14 hours, then we had to re-pack the whole palette of mushrooms. Somebody made a mistake about the dates! Nobody said 'thank you for your job'. Our employer considered us to be at his complete disposal for his money!

2/1/04: New Years Eve, good day! We went to bed at 5.30am but we had to go to job by 8am! Nobody consider us as human beings! This week no day off! We were told no day off, you had one day at Christmas!

Kilnaleck, County Cavan, 11th January 2006

17 mushroom pickers (Latvian and Lithuanian women) walked out of their jobs and went to SIPTU's office in Cavan town. There they claimed working between 80-100 hours per week for around €250, no *right* to holidays or days off. An assistant organiser in Cavan said that it was one of the worst cases she had ever come across and that every single piece of labour legislation had been broken (*Irish Independent*, 18 January 06; *Irish Times* 19 January 06).

On February 19th, 8 Lithuanian pickers were dismissed. They were part of a group recruited through an employment agency in Vilnius to replace the previous batch of workers in the same farm. The employer, Eamon Murray, told them that the farm had changed hands (not true) and that the new employer had hired Czech and Slovenian workers. These 8 workers had been given contracts as self-employed agricultural contractors with a normal working week of 50 hours, a seven day working week, and wages of €115 per week (SIPTU 2006a). SIPTU complained about the inability of the state to enforce the law (SIPTU 2006b):

The fact that such practices can continue under scrutiny from the Department of Social and Family Affairs, the Labour Inspectorate and the Revenue Commissioners, is testament to the fact that rogue employers can flaunt the law with impunity and dismiss any worker who complains, without fear of any sanction.

SIPTU had actually called the labour inspectorate in February 2005 after Mr Murray assaulted one of the employees in his office. This worker had denounced the same working conditions that hit the headlines a year later, but the farm had continued operating during all that time, business as usual, even after the media gave them wide coverage. In the following weeks, there were talks in Liberty Hall (SIPTU headquarters in Dublin) about organising migrant issues in general and in the mushroom industry in particular. The main mover was Mike Jennings, Regional Secretary for the Midlands and South East in charge of SIPTU's campaign on exploitation and displacement. A reason to get involved was that unions were negotiating with employers and government representatives a new partnership deal. The union needed hard evidence of lack of enforcement of workers' rights.

At the end of March, SIPTU launched a nationwide campaign aimed at highlighting the *exploitation*¹ of migrant mushroom workers and at organising them. Mike Jennings characterised the mushroom industry as one of the worst sweatshop industries in Ireland, and he added (*Irish Independent*, 25th March 2006):

[Mushroom growers] are applying for the right to bring in workers from Thailand and China. There is already a big debate about displacement and these employers are pre-planning for the next stage of displacement. Irish workers have disappeared from the mushroom industry. This is being done to drive down pay. It's now one of the worst sweatshop industries

Displacement and *race to the bottom*, in the foregoing quote, were added as a natural product of lack of enforcement of workers' rights. The fragments from a diary of a mushroom picker in a farm in County Mayo and the walkout in a farm in County Cavan were separated in time and space, but they represent two different types of events. In the former case we have an account of oppression meant to be private, confidential, and individual. But stories of that kind constituted, as we shall see, shared and collective experiences also on the farm in Cavan. In the latter case, it led to an open collective action by the workers, which captured the attention of the media and SIPTU.

The Kilnaleck case did not constitute an isolated incident. SIPTU had come across other cases of migrant workers' *exploitation* in the mushroom industry, in construction, and the domestic and security industries. The previous year, there had been a strike of Turkish construction workers in Gama Construction Ireland Ltd., which lasted around 3 months and made Irish society receptive to the idea that migrant workers could be generally mistreated and underpaid, and that a *race to the bottom* affecting all workers was taking place in Ireland. At the end of 2005, a dispute at Irish Ferries ended with the replacement of unionised Irish workers with Lithuanian crews on the minimum wage, who in the end were not even covered by Irish labour regulation and were not entitled to the Irish minimum wage. This dispute provoked the largest national demonstrations in the last 30 years in Ireland as the *public* took to the streets of Dublin and other Irish towns to protest against *displacement* and *race to the bottom*. SIPTU then started campaigning against the 'race to the bottom', displacement of Irish workers and *exploitation* of migrants. The union demanded of the government tougher labour regulation to stop all that, and assurances that new and existing regulations would be implemented as a condition to renew the social pact (Social Partnership) with government and employers, which in the opinion of SIPTU officials had been highly

¹ I put this word in italics when its usage does not correspond to its Marxist usage, which is explained later in this chapter.

beneficial for workers since it was first agreed in 1987 (see chapter 5).

In that context, the mushroom industry and migrant workers became the focus of the media and the social partners during the first half of 2006. The walkout of 17 workers in January 2006 probably would have not triggered that kind of reaction if it had occurred a year earlier. Timing was essential. In Kilnaleck the interests of SIPTU, the largest union in Ireland, and the poorest workers in Ireland met. Economic and political forces, structures and agencies must be unravelled to understand a number of questions:

- Why some collective and individual actions take place and why some have far-reaching consequences while others do not?
- Why were there groups of workers deprived of their legal rights and paid below the legal minimum?
- Why did some groups of workers step forward while others did not?
- Were the interests of unions as institutions and the workers they represented alike or different?
- Why did the state allow mistreatment and underpayment?
- Why did the workers in Kilnaleck decide to come out in an action never before seen among this type of workers?
- What chain of events triggered the walkout in Kilnaleck and how successfully were opportunities turned into positive outcomes for particular sections of the working class?

They are questions that do not have an easy answer. The first step is to understand the context in which collective actions take place, themselves the product of previous actions. As soon as we move forward, new questions spring from previous explanations. So, while the text below in this chapter gives some answers to the questions that this short section has generated, it mostly generates further questions. But, nevertheless, before going into the body of the thesis and its substantive issues, we need some contextualisation.

A successful *industry* is established in a context of economic crisis

The mushroom industry had been ‘one of the big success stories of the Irish food industry’, according to industry and state sources (Leonard 1999). Thanks to state funded technological development, ACOT² (now TEAGASC, The Agriculture and Food

² The national advisory and training body (ACOT), a semi-state organisation set up in 1980 to provide training and advisory services for farmers. Its functions were integrated within

Development Authority in Ireland) advice, and grants from the Industrial Development Authority (IDA), the old mushroom industry, pre-1980s and based on a handful of large tray farms, underwent a radical technological change leading to a ‘satellite growing system’ based on small contract family-run farms in the 1980s. The process started in 1979 in Gorey, Wexford, when Pat H., a businessman, invested in a central compost plant to produce compost fertilised with spawn, the soil needed to grow mushrooms. He also built a central packhouse to dispatch mushrooms to the British market. Monaghan Mushrooms Ltd, which is now the largest grower and supplier of mushrooms in Europe, was set up in 1981 in Tyholland, County Monaghan. A *satellite system* consisted in a group of family-run farms buying their main input, compost, from a single compost producer and selling their entire crop to the same company, which also acted as a market agent. These contract farmers had to make an initial investment of £20,000 consisting of a three-house growing unit (three tunnels covered with a polythene structure), a packing shed, and a cold store. Each house had a dimension of 6.7 x 30 metres. Growers got their compost in bags, up to 1,000 units of 22.5 kilos each per house (MacCanna 1984:114-115). A typical profile of a prospective mushroom grower was an underemployed farmer with at least one acre of land not in use and looking to increase family income. The work of the contract grower was supplemented by the work of his wife, children, relatives, and three to six casual pickers, normally housewives in need of extra income. The new system had the advantage of having low production costs.

This technological and structural change took place in a context of economic crisis and growing unemployment in Ireland. Between 1978 and 1983 the unemployment rate in Ireland (all sectors) went up from 8.2 to 14 percent (Source: CSO), reaching a peak of 18 percent in 1985, according to the unemployment register, but other estimates put it above 20 percent (O’Hearn 1998: 50, 96). According to O’Hearn (1998), the decline in employment took place in a context of change from a strategy of industrialisation based on indigenous industry to one dependent on foreign investment starting in the 1950s with the removal of import restrictions and the concession of grants and profits tax relief. But it was after the entry of Ireland in the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 and the introduction of its free trade policies that the earlier shift started to take its toll. Irish firms, unprotected and unable to compete, started to collapse one after another. Within 13 years 44 percent of these types of firms had closed down. Between 1982 and 1993 mass emigration followed with 472,000 leaving the country. Had they

TEAGASC when this new institution was set up in 1988
(<http://www.TEAGASC.ie/aboutus/TEAGASC-past.asp>).

stayed, unemployment would have reached a much higher level (O'Hearn 1998: 33, 39, 42, 51).

The restructuring of the agricultural sector after Ireland joined the EEC also accelerated the long-term decline of employment in agriculture. At the end of 1974 the Irish Department of Agriculture classified most Irish farms (120,000 out of 170,000) as non-commercially viable (those of less than 45 acres and annual incomes of less than £1,800 per labour unit), and established a Farm Modernisation Scheme to buy out that land (Scheper-Hughes 2001: 106-108). Few farmers signed up, but the scheme (which included a retirement pension) was an indication that most Irish farmers were ill-prepared to compete in the European market.

There were, at the same time, attempts to promote the creation of indigenous companies. In a context of agricultural crisis in rural areas, economic depression and rising unemployment in the whole country, a new industry developed in counties where small farms predominated. Monaghan, for instance, became during the 1980s the county with the largest concentration of mushroom farms in the Republic. *The Northern Standard*, Monaghan's weekly newspaper, reported on 6th and 13th of March 1980 meetings of the IDA with representatives of the Chamber of Commerce, trade councils, teachers, industrialists and prospective industrialists in Monaghan town, Castleblaney and other towns in the county. It was part of the strategy of the Co. Monaghan Development Plan to promote the development of small businesses as a way to create jobs.

On the 7th August 1980, *The Northern Standard* announced a plan to open a 'new Mushroom Plant for Monaghan' with IDA grant assistance under the Enterprise Development Programme. The project planned to employ 99 people by 1983 and create jobs for an additional 140 people as a result of sub-contracts with satellite growers. The company was Monaghan Mushrooms, and the idea had developed out of the meetings with the IDA. Behind the project were two local entrepreneurs, Ronnie Wilson, a vocational teacher, and Noel Howlin, an instructor with the County Monaghan Committee of Agriculture.

From that point on, the development of the new industry in the Republic was meteoric. Production went from 6,600 tonnes in 1979 to 37,000 tonnes in 1990, peaking in 2002 at 69,000 tonnes. The number of growers reached a peak of 576 in 1997. In relation to farm gate value, the industry reached its highest point, at current prices, in 2002 with €137.7 millions. By 2000, with €114.8m, mushrooms represented the largest

sector in terms of farm gate value in horticulture (see chart below).³ It employed 4,431 people in 2002 (Bord Bia, no date), a figure that had been more or less stable throughout the 1990s.

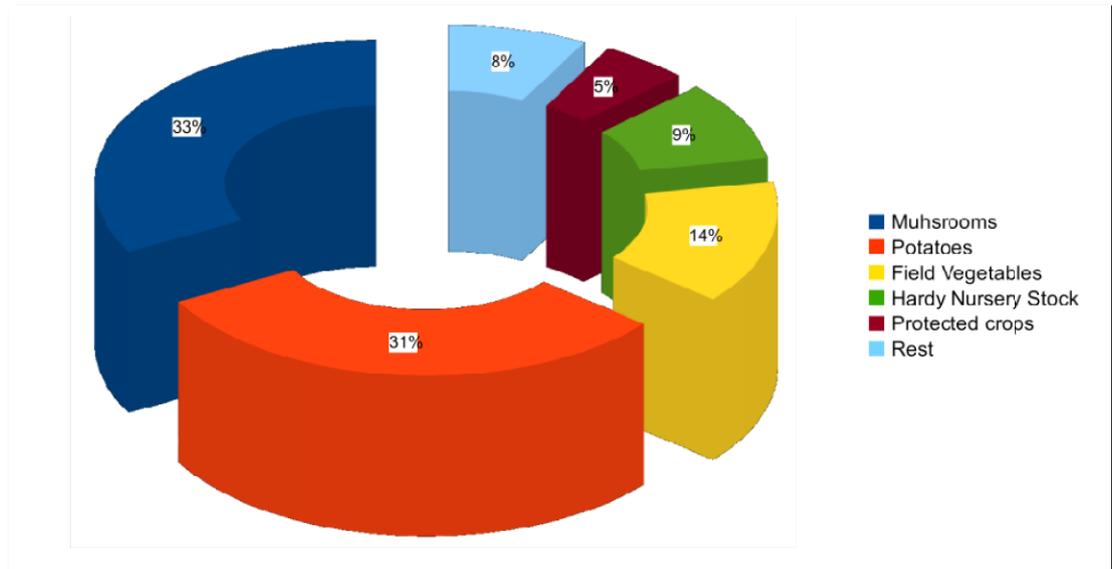


Chart 1: farm gate value in horticulture, 2001

In the early 2000s Teagasc and Growers' Associations still maintained as current the version propagated in the 1980s of a success story based on the creation of employment and means of livelihood for small farmers and farm-workers thanks to a satellite growing system developed with the help of the state. There were reasons for this self-satisfaction. In a period of economic downturn during the 1980s and early 1990s, the mushroom industry had experienced a booming economic cycle, creating livelihoods and jobs.

But an industry economic cycle in the mushroom industry was about to end at the same time that the Irish economy as a whole was going through its biggest economic boom in history.⁴ In the 1990s, with an increasing number of growers, high competition with Dutch mushroom growers for the British market, the collapse of wholesale markets, and competition between supermarket chains, prices started to fall. To keep margins up, growers had to increase yields by adding new mushroom houses. In 1996, the shelf-growing system, the alternative to growing in bags, was introduced for the first time in Ireland (Boyle *et al.* 2002:118). It consisted of houses with two or three rows, each of two or three shelves, and required a higher capital investment. The standard

³ Horticulture included the food and amenity sectors (Bord Glas 2001)

⁴ Dr Owen Doyle (UCD) made this point after reading a draft of chapters one and two, adding that it is a feature of the *natural* cycle of commodities to undergo transformations. My position is that the satellite growing system collapsed, or broke down, under market pressure, giving birth to a new configuration (see chapters 2 and 3).

number of mushroom houses necessary for growers to stay in business increased from three to six. By 2006 around 40 percent of all mushroom farms were shelf farms (Teagasc Mushroom Census Spring 2006). The satellite growing system disappeared as surviving growers bought inputs and sold outputs in an open market, and in only six years the number of growers went down to 85 in 2007 from 465 in 2001.⁵

The industry as such did not collapse or shrink, as the number of farms declined but their sizes increased. The number of pickers per farm increased and the part-time nature of the job changed. For example, in the early 1980s yields averaged between 3,000 to 4,000 kg per crop (MacCanna 1984:113). By 2006 a top mushroom house of three rows, with five shelves each, and filled with 50 tonnes of compost, could yield between 16,000 to 18,000 kg of mushrooms per crop. Crop cycles (turn-over time) also went down from 10 to 6 weeks with the adoption of improved compost. A team of a minimum of 12 full-time pickers had to work at the same time in one house with those characteristics. Depending on the number of houses in a farm, there could be two or three houses being cropped at the same time.

When a professional full-time labour force replaced the work of relatives, neighbours, children, and part-time housewives, reducing the cost of labour became the big issue in the mushroom industry. Harvesting, a manual operation, absorbed 25 percent of farm gate prices. Margins had started to decrease as growers began to experience the *cost-price squeeze*: the cost of inputs (i.e. compost) at one end tends to increase faster than the prices that farmers get for their output at the other end. So, they rushed to reduce costs and increase output and productivity. The problem was that the Irish share of the UK market, around 45,000 tonnes per year, had remained static since the late 1990s because of a slow growth in consumption and competition with Dutch and Polish growers—the former more efficient; the latter with lower labour costs. Therefore, with the expansion of production above the market share, the least efficient farms were offered prices at or below their cost of production and had to give up.⁶

The cost-price squeeze on growers put a considerable strain on mushroom pickers. Since picking for the fresh market cannot be mechanised, the main efforts were directed at increasing picking rates while decreasing piece rates.⁷ Growers complained that the National Minimum Wage (NMW) had become prohibitively expensive. *The Irish*

⁵ In 2009 the number went down to 80 (TMP, February 2010)

⁶ The number of growers went down from a peak of 544 in 1998 to 129 in March 2006 (Teagasc Mushroom Census, Spring 2006); total output, however, remained stable between 62,000-67,000 tonnes per year.

⁷ The wages of mushroom pickers, mostly women, take in a majority of cases the form of piece wages. General operators, mostly men, are paid by the hour (time wages). See chapter 3

Farmers Journal, IFJ (15 April 2006), for example, also objected to it because it was the second highest in Europe, and added,

We need rules that give people a chance of survival. Rules that recognise that the capacity to pay bureaucratically imposed Irish costs is crippling legitimate business that must export to survive.⁸

The mushroom industry was going through a turning point that was going to transform mushroom growing in Ireland. Growers were of the opinion that the minimum wage was too high if they were to remain competitive, but the Irish economy as a whole was still in a boom period and employers in other sectors were of the same opinion. The arrival of migrants to Ireland was linked to both the economic growth that created shortage of labour in some sectors and the upward pressure of wages in a context of nearly full employment.

An Unprecedented economic boom of the Irish economy creates a shortage of labour supply and an upward wages trend

Unseen and sustained rates of economic growth (as GDP) between 1995 and 2000 (see graph below) had changed the Irish economy and society as unemployment fell from over 15 percent (close to 20 percent according to other estimates) to 4 percent during that period, although employment growth had its negative side as it was concentrated in flexible, part-time, and non-secure jobs with increasingly more workers on low wages and fewer rights (O’Hearn 2003: 41-2). O’Hearn (1998: 104) blames in part Irish trade unions for these negative side effects as they accepted, through Social Partnership deals, moderate pay rises in return for more subcontracting, and temporary, flexible, and non-unionised part-time jobs. Government estimations at the beginning of 2001 were that the Irish economy was going to need 200,000 new workers by 2006 between returnees, EU, and non-EU workers (Loyal 2003: 79).

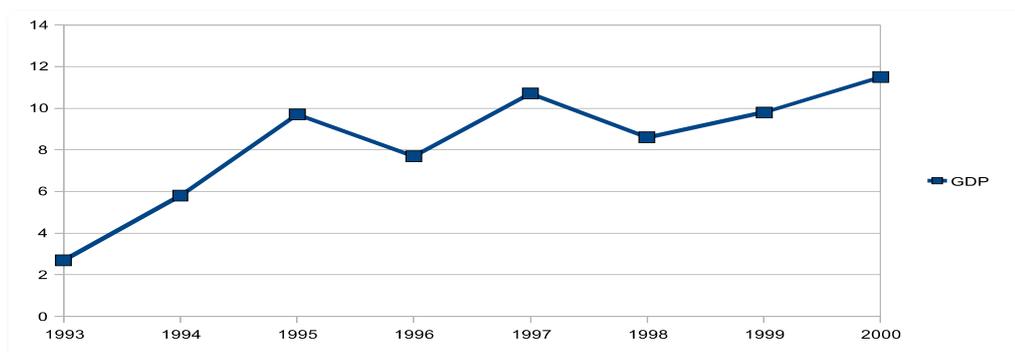


Chart 2: GDP as percentage (Source: O’Hearn 2003: 36).

⁸ In February 2010 the government introduced the inability to pay [the minimum wage] clause.

In the mushroom industry an acute shortage of labour took place in the late 1990s but was solved by bringing Eastern European workers on work permits. This shortage of labour took place because the national labour market offered more attractive and better-paid jobs in other sectors of the economy to Irish workers. In 2002, 70 percent of the workforce in mushroom farming was made up of migrant workers; by 2007 they represented 94 percent (Bord Bia, no date). It turned into the sector in Ireland with the highest concentration of this type of workers. Migrant workers replaced Irish workers but did not displace them, as we will see.

The other consequence of the economic growth and the lowering of unemployment rates consisted in an upward pressure on wages and, therefore, the cost of labour. The discussions in the media between February and March 2005 that followed the recommendation of the Labour Court to increase the National Minimum Wage (NMW) from €7 to €7.65 per hour (IT, 02/02/05), under the terms of the national pay deal agreed in the summer of 2004 (IT, 25/01/05), were quite revealing. There were two different angles.

ICTU in representation of most unions in Ireland, and on behalf of non-unionised workers, demanded the NMW to be increased by 25%, from €7 to €8.75 an hour, to reach the target of two-thirds of average wages in Ireland, which was the goal of the national pay deal. This increase, ICTU argued, ‘would help fuel economic growth and close the gap between rich and poor’, and attract the migrants that Ireland needed to sustain that growth (IT, 25/01/05). The Labour Court only recommended to the Government to increase it by 9%, to €7.65 an hour (IT, 02/02/05). ICTU was putting forward the interest of a majority of workers who worked in low-wage sectors and with no union representation. On the other hand, the minimum wage in the view of SIPTU officials represented a floor for higher earners and an increase in the minimum wage would also automatically increase wages for all.

Employers initiated a media campaign against the intended 9% increase (IT, 25/01/05; 02/02/05; 03/02/05) arguing that it would result in higher prices, would reduce competitiveness, and, therefore, employers would have to cut jobs to reduce costs and maintain competitiveness. The most articulated and extensive argument in favour of the thesis of the employers came from Mr John Dunne, Chief Executive of the Chambers of Commerce (IT, 04/02/05). He argued that, since small and medium enterprises paid wages built on the NMW, an increase in labour cost could only be paid by combining

three possible strategies: a) an increase in sales; b) a rise in prices; c) cutting jobs.⁹ But cutting jobs, ‘a painful experience for all concerned’ he said, was the only option, since the market was very competitive. Mr Dunne said that the problem was that the margins of Irish-based firms were smaller than those based on international capital. Therefore, Irish firms were more sensitive to cost increases, so an increase in the NMW could be ‘the end’ of the national industry. Mr Dunne was also *concerned* about migrants: ‘While we do need these workers, if costs are set too high for business, then although they may come, there will be fewer jobs for these new migrants.’ The idea was that lower wages and standards would result in more jobs. On the other hand, better wages and standards would result in fewer jobs and more unemployment. Lower wages and standards, according to Mr Dunne, were supposed to benefit workers in general; higher wages and standards, to harm workers’ interests. Employers linked their interests, and profits, to the interests and wellbeing of the whole society, or the *national interest*.

The Government, on the other hand, was already taking measures to guarantee that the Irish economy remained competitive on employers’ terms. The accession of the new ten member states to the EU in May 2004 was followed by a restriction of welfare benefits to the citizens of these states living and working in Ireland: they had to live for two years in Ireland before qualifying for them (IT, 27/01/05). These workers, on the other hand, were allowed freedom of movement only in Ireland, UK, and Sweden. The reduction of welfare benefits (reversed after the GAMA and Irish Ferries scandals) guaranteed that they would have to accept low wages and bad working conditions because they could not survive without working. Speaking of Polish migrants, for instance, Mr Chris Dooley (industry correspondent with the *Irish Times*) wrote in (IT 06/04/05), ‘Employers know that there are queues of Polish people lining up for work and believe they can act with impunity.’

A significant increase of the minimum wage, on the other hand, was more likely to affect labour-intensive sectors with a higher concentration of low-paid workers. One reason for this is that the strategy of reducing labour costs by investing in machinery and technology is less feasible than for large and specialised manufacturers in high capital-intensive sectors. Most of jobs created during the peak of the ‘Celtic Tiger’, from 1994 to 2000, were in services rather than in manufacturing, accounting for 70.8

⁹ The strategy that Mr Dunne did not consider would have been to increase productivity by changes in work practices or capital investment, or both. As we will see in chapter 2, Dutch mushroom growers became more competitive than Irish growers in spite of paying wages double those paid on Irish mushroom farms. What is true for one economic sector is true for the whole economy.

percent of all new jobs (CSO). Since the recession in the manufacturing sector began in 2001 there was ‘a much-increased dependence on the lower-productivity service sector’ for economic growth (IT, 19/02/2005). It is no wonder that the uproar against the increase of the NMW came chiefly from institutions that represented the small and medium employers in Ireland, the ISME and the Chambers of Commerce.

Labour market and trade unions in Ireland during the economic boom up to 2005

The arrival of a large number of immigrants to Ireland posed some problems for the labour movement, but the crisis of Irish trade unions cannot be solely attributed to labour migrations. Unions had been losing market power, measured as union density,¹⁰ since the early 1980s. Absolute union membership reached a historical peak in 1980 with 527,200 members, but seven years later the figure had gone down to 457,300, a loss of 70,000 members caused mainly by rising unemployment. In terms of union density, figures also went down, from 61.8 to 56.2 percent between 1980 and 1987 (Roche 1997: 50).

The response of unions was to enter negotiations for a social pact (Social Partnership) with the State and employers, which fundamentally, as we will see in chapter 5, implied that wage increases would be negotiated nationally, moderate, and linked to productivity. These partnership agreements went further than previous *national understandings* and national wage agreements during the 1970s (Roche 1997b). Unions accepted non-strike clauses over wage negotiations and the implementation of ‘social peace’ implied in the agreements. Unions and employers, on the other hand, got direct influence over taxation, creation of employment and social programmes; the government, over wage levels (Roche 1997b: 148).

Around 1994, some 7 years after the first partnership agreement (renewed roughly every three years), the economy entered a long boom period, which some sources have attributed mainly to the centralised wage-increase moderation and the social peace that Social Partnership brought about (O’Kelly 2004; Hastings *et al.* 2007). Others (Allen 2009: 32; Allen 2000: 23-27; O’Hearn 2003: 37-38) have attributed it fundamentally to the creation of a European single market, particularly since the Maastricht treaty of 1992, and the move to Ireland of US corporations, thanks to the incentive of very low corporation taxes (10 percent) in manufacturing and to gain access to this market. Yet,

¹⁰ The number of workers enrolled as members of trade unions as a proportion of all those employees potentially eligible to be members. ([www.encyclo.co.uk/define/union density](http://www.encyclo.co.uk/define/union%20density))

Social Partnership did not stop the progressive widening of the gap in the share between wages and profits in the national economy. The share of wages went down at a higher pace than the EU average [75.9 percent 1971-1980 / 71.2 percent 1981-1990 / 62.3 1991-2000 / 54 percent 2001-2007], and total expenditure in Social Protection, as percentage of GDP, decreased from 19.6percent in 1991 to 16 percent in 2002, nearly eleven points below EU-15 average (Allen 2009: 26-28). Summing up, the ‘Celtic Tiger’ ended up producing increasing class polarisation (Allen 2000: 21; O’Hearn 2003: 52), even if this has not been reflected in higher levels of class struggle and class consciousness. Trade unions bore part of the responsibility for the widening of the gap between classes since they contributed to the *moderation* of wage increases and to ‘social peace’ (see Allen 2003: 66-71).

The other aspect of partnership was that it did not stop unions losing labour-market power, even when the Irish economy had reached nearly full employment by 2000. Between 1990 and 2000 the Irish work force grew by 538,000, mostly in services with 421,000 and secondly in industry with 155,000 (O’Hearn 2003: 42). A tighter labour market should have resulted in higher union density, but that was not the case. Between 1987 and 1995, there was certainly an increase in union members, from 457,300 to 504,450, and another jump between 1995 and 2007 to 551,700 (Allen 2009b: 47). A gain of 94,400 members in 20 years; not much considering that between 1990 and 2004 total employment grew by 772,000 (Allen 2009b: 47; Roche 2003: 42). Most of the new jobs, therefore, were non-unionised. So, union density had fallen to 32 percent in 2007. Compared to 61.8 percent union density in 1980, the decrease had been substantial.

The economic boom and high levels of employment created acute shortages of labour by the end of the 1990s, particularly in the labour-intensive and low-wage sector such as service, catering and agriculture, which could not be filled by EU workers. So, employers started to bring in non-EU workers on work permits (see chart).

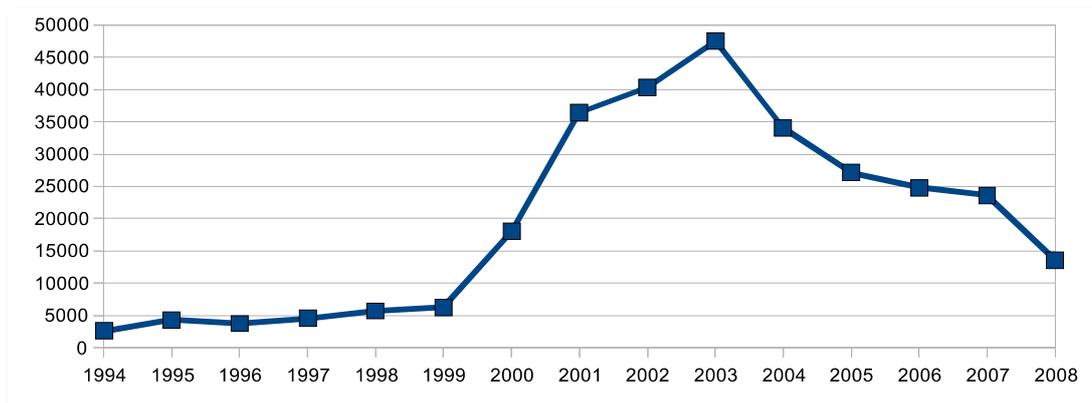


Chart 3: work permits issued (Source: Gonzalez-Perez *et al.* 2009: 155)

The surge in arrivals took place between 2000 and 2003 when 142,314 work permits were issued. The number went down after May 2004 because of the accession of 10 new member states to the EU; these were countries where a majority of work permits had been issued (i.e. Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Czech Republic, Estonia or Slovakia). After May 2004, citizens from these countries did not need work permits to work in Ireland, UK, and Sweden. The total number of former non-EU migrants who arrived after May 2004 can be better appreciated by having a look at the number of Personal Public Service Numbers (PPSNs) issued to EU10 nationals after that date, 186,000 from May 2004 to February 2006 (source ESRI).¹¹ The economic boom meant that net migration figures between 1996 and 2008 turned positive (see chart below). On the other hand, labour migration from accession countries and non-EU other than the US were more likely to be low-paid migrants, and their numbers, higher (see chart).

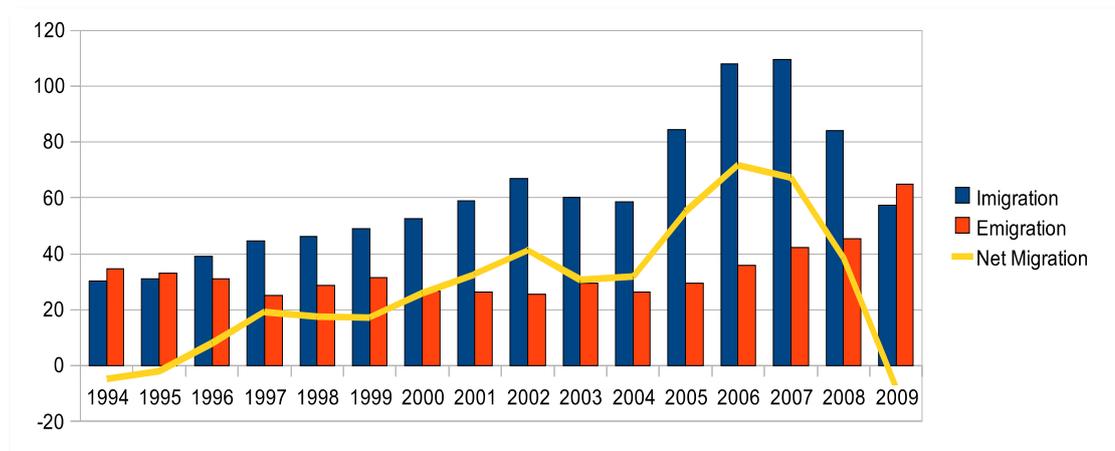


Chart 4: Migration and Emigration figures (Source: CSO)

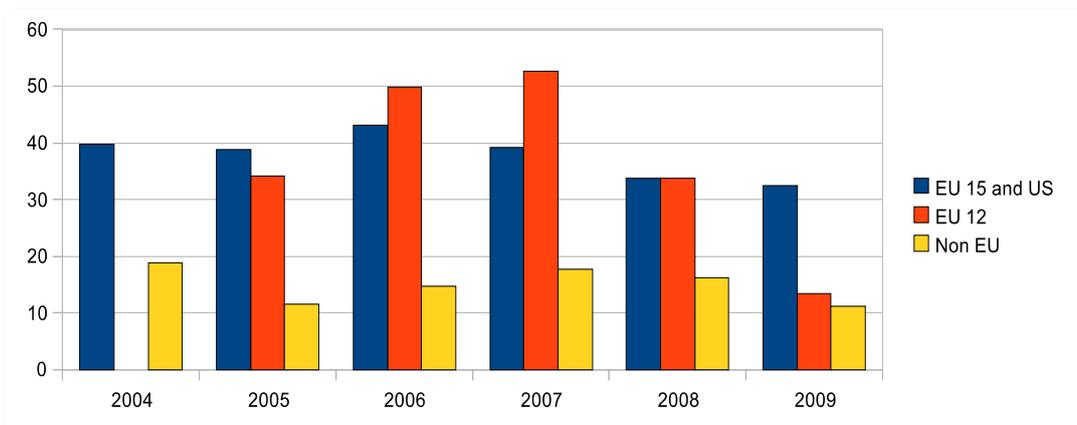


Chart 5: Immigration (Source: CSO). The first column consists of EU citizens before May 2004 (EU15), including Irish. The second column consists of citizens from the new EU 10 member that joined the EU May 2004 plus those from Romania and Bulgaria, who only became EU citizens in January 2007 (EU12). The figure of EU 12 for 2004 is included with Non-EU.

¹¹ http://www.finfacts.ie/irishfinancenews/Irish_2/article_10005998_printer.shtml

We can see that net migration turned positive only from 1996 onwards. The work-permit system solved shortages of labour in some economic sectors, but only the opening of the Irish labour market to Eastern Europeans (EU 10) after May 2004 allowed for higher levels of immigration. Net migration was at its peak between 2005 and 2007, but turned negative in 2009 because of the recession in the Irish economy that started at the end of 2007. As we are going to see in the next section, it was the opening of the labour market to Eastern Europeans (EU 10) and the immediate increase of migration from these countries that made unions take a particular interest in migrant workers, and include that concern in the partnership negotiations of 2006.

Race to the Bottom and displacement

Another face of the *Celtic Tiger* was starting to emerge. A survey of migrant workers and their working conditions in 2003 found that piece rates for fruit-pickers ranged between €1.25 and €2.50 an hour, which was attributed to migrants' lack of knowledge of their rights (*Irish Times*, 19 May 2003). Cases like this could be considered extreme but, as we will see, they are consistent with the logic of accumulation of capital and reduction of costs in the small and less competitive enterprises that opted for bypassing labour legislation. In 2004 The Equality Authority registered 166 cases dealing with discrimination because of race (IT, 28/12/04). Labour inspectors were investigating in December 2004 more than 300 cases of mistreatment of employees, the majority, 202 cases, involving migrant workers in hotel and catering (IT, 30/12/04). Violations of the law included: not paying pre-arranged wages; or paying below minimum wages; excessive working hours; illegal deductions; and non-payment of overtime or holidays. Around a year later, another report made the following comment:

Exploitation is now no longer as simple as failing to pay the minimum wage: it's forcing people to work without overtime, no extra pay for weekends, no holiday pay, dismissals for being sick or getting injured. Trade unions and groups have encountered exploitation of migrant workers in low-skilled jobs in every industry from construction to services to the unregulated domestic work sector (*Irish Times*, 12 November 2005).

2005 was the year when unions, particularly SIPTU being the largest union, started to react to what they characterised as the lowering of working conditions and incomes brought about by employers thanks to the influx of migrant workers; a *race to the bottom* that was starting to affect Irish workers. SIPTU had noticed before 2005 *proven cases* of non-Irish immigrant workers being *exploited*, particularly in the domestic

industry, which the union attributed to an improperly resourced labour inspectorate.¹² The union suspected that the cases encountered only scratched the surface, but it did not claim that there was a ‘race to the bottom’ for all, or that migrants on lower wages and worse working conditions were displacing Irish workers.

GAMA

Then, in February 2005 the GAMA case exploded. Joe Higgins TD announced on the 8th of February in the Dáil (Irish Parliament) that Turkish-based Gama Construction Ireland Limited employed around 2000 workers in Ireland, most *imported* from Turkey, and paid them as little as €1 to €3 per hour for unskilled work, and just over €3 for skilled work.¹³ What made it worse was that the company had secured ‘massive local authority and state contracts’. Joe Higgins made the point that GAMA ‘not only exploit immigrant workers but undermine wages and conditions for all workers’ and ‘underbid other companies who pay full rate’ (Barry 2006: 58).

As the conflict unfolded and GAMA workers went on strike on Monday 4th of March, it turned out that a formal complaint by an Irish construction company to Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment (which claimed to have been undercut by GAMA because the company did not pay the National Minimum Wage) was dismissed in 2002 because allegations against GAMA were found to be ‘without substance’. Mary Harney, then minister for enterprise, said that labour inspectors had investigated GAMA and ‘hadn’t revealed anything’ (*Irish Times*, 14 April 2005). A report sent to Mary Harney in October 2003 further dismissed allegations from the union BATU, and TDs Tommy Broughan, Arthur Morgan, and Conor Lenihan because they did not provide evidence to support their allegations. The report, on the other hand, provided evidence of how the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment (DETE) had facilitated GAMA to *importing* Turkish labour to Ireland (*Irish Times* 15 April 2005):

We originally facilitated this company to bring in labour by using the intra-company transfer facility but, since its suspension, we have facilitated requests by way of work permits. While the company is required to seek to fill positions through FÁS, we operate on the basis that important NDP [National Development Plan] infrastructure projects should not be delayed due to lack of suitable labour and we have been granting permits liberally and quickly to ensure that contracts for these projects are delivered on time.

¹² <http://www.siptu.ie/PressRoom/NewsReleases/2004/Name,2014,en.html>

¹³ The lowest legal wage for an unskilled worker in construction was €12.96 per hour, according to J. Higgins.

More worrying was that the report claimed that GAMA was a unionised company. The company denied the ‘malicious allegations’ made by Joe Higgins and argued that GAMA workers in Ireland were represented by SIPTU, TEEU, UCATT, OPATSI and BATU (*Irish Times* 8 Feb 2005). Joe Higgins said that GAMA had signed up some of its workers as SIPTU members ‘more as a cover’ (*Irish Times* 8 Feb 2005), but according to Eric Fleming, SIPTU’s Dublin construction branch, SIPTU had shop stewards at every GAMA site and regular dealings with the company on industrial relations issues. BATU general secretary admitted that his union had not had difficulties with the company in regards to its own members (*Irish Times* 12 Feb 2005). How is it possible, then, that SIPTU was not able to notice gross underpayment to Turkish workers and working weeks beyond the legal maximum? The report to Mary Harney of 2003 by a DETE senior civil servant contained some of the answers (*Irish Times* 15 April 2005):

I met the relevant labour unions as far back as in 2001, at the invitation of ICTU, and explained the policy approach to them. All agreed that early delivery of the NDP infrastructure programme was the best guarantee for future full employment for their members. I made it quite clear that, for so long as the construction sector remained operating at or close to full capacity, we would be very flexible in meeting the labour needs of infrastructure contracts. To this end, I keep in contact with the relevant unions as I need information as to what is happening on the ground and I do not think that the department should be dependent on views from one, central union source. *It should be said that the unions have proved very accommodating and have not sought to place obstacles in the way of policy, nor have they ever sought any form of veto. Their members are still doing very well in a very buoyant construction sector.* (My italics).

The state had little interest in enforcing labour standards since the priority consisted in guaranteeing the aims of the development plan. But unions also turned a blind eye because, as we will see in chapter 5, it seemed that partnership was delivering benefits to union members, and these were not affected by the use of migrant workers. Unions prioritised economic development on state terms, at least while they got crumbs. This was one of the sides of Social Partnership (new corporativism), which implied coincidence in ideas about economic development by unions, state and employers. Unions did not fear the displacement of Irish workers or a *race to the bottom* back then. This does not mean, however, that SIPTU officials were aware of the gross underpayment of Turkish workers, but it does look they either turned a blind eye to increasing evidence or plainly failed to see it. Chapters 5 and 6 will focus on casework and the model of trade unionism based on Social Partnership accounts for wilful blindness or plain failure. Some BATU members had complained but the 2003 report dismissed their allegations as the product of an inter-union dispute. According to Mick

Barry (2006: 7-8), Socialist Party Local Councillor in Tallaght, the company had agreed in 2000 that the workers sign up to SIPTU. But when this union organised a meeting some years later with the workers, GAMA provided the Turkish interpreter, so the workers did not feel free to talk for fear of being returned to Turkey. Barry (2006: 13) claims that the company kept Turkish workers under constant surveillance to keep them shut off from the outside world, with the result that these workers were afraid to talk to any *outsider*. An initial contact of Turkish workers with the Socialist Party only took place by phone after Mick Barry managed to leaflet in Turkish and English one of the GAMA sites (Balgaddy). It was then that the Socialist Party decided to initiate the investigation that led to Higgins's claims in the Dáil.

The strike, led by a committee made up of workers and Socialist Party members, lasted from the 4th of March to the 25th of May. The Labour Court main recommendation on the 27th of May was that the company pay €8,000 overtime for each year worked to each of the 85 workers that had remained on strike to the end (2006: 49). The rest, up to 300-400 hundred, had abandoned the strike and returned to Turkey under company pressure. SIPTU offered material and moral support to the Turkish workers during the course of the strike and its settlement, a fact recognised by the Socialist Party.

This conflict made top union officials aware of migrant workers' *exploitation*, and how difficult it was to implement labour standards. It also highlighted the 'race to the bottom' that the use of migrant labour in substandard wages and conditions could imply for all workers in Ireland, including union members. During the GAMA dispute there was also a surge in articles published in the media about mistreated and underpaid migrant workers. Mike Jennings, midlands and southeast regional SIPTU secretary, who led the SIPTU campaign the following year to 'clean up' the mushroom industry, said that mushroom farmers have replaced part-time Irish workers with Eastern Europeans 'as a source of cheap labour'. He believed that, after May 2004, the situation had improved for those workers who did not need any more work permits, but he was 'beginning to despair' at the State's failure to address *exploitation* (*Irish Times*, 06/04/2005)

Irish Ferries

The next episode of the *migrants' saga* was the Irish Ferries dispute, which was going to rock SIPTU from top to bottom as it directly affected Irish unionised workers although it did not lead to substantial changes within the union or a union renewal in deeds rather

than in words.¹⁴ This episode unfolded over a period of nearly two years. Irish Ferries was created after the parent company, Irish Continental Group, bought from the Irish government in 1992 the B&I Line shipping company (Barret 2006: 279). It was therefore the product of a privatisation. Around 2004, the company conceived a *secret plan*¹⁵ to reduce costs and increase profits, and become more competitive, by re-flagging the ships in another country and replacing Irish and British staff with Eastern European workers on wages half the Irish minimum wage. The Irish Ferries affair became the major case of *displacement* of Irish workers with *non-nationals* on cheaper wages by an employer playing between different labour markets to by-pass the Irish minimum wage and labour standards agreed with unions; this also called Social Partnership into question. This case, on the other hand, was not unique to Ireland, as there were similar cases within the EU such as the Laval case in Sweden.¹⁶

But the company proceeded slowly and gradually. The first act took place early in 2004 when the company, which operated four vessels, withdrew three boats from services and laid off 450 staff (a ‘lock out’) on the 24th of February after the unions *failed to negotiate* a cost-cutting deal of €3.4m a year by making 52 staff redundant. The sea-going staff consisted of 777, of which 177 officers and 120 ratings were SIPTU members, and 480 ratings, of the Seamen’s Union of Ireland (SUI). According to the company they had been outdone by competitors and operating profits had gone down in 2003 almost 30% to €24.1m from €33.1m in 2002. After a four days’ lockout the company reinstated the staff laid-off and discussions started at the Labour Relations Commission (*Irish Times*, 18/2/04; 21/2/04; 25/2/04; 26/2/04; 28/2/04; 09/3/04). In June 2004 the unions agreed to the cost cutting proposal of the company but at the beginning of November, Irish Ferries management announced that the route between Rosslare and Cherbourg, covered by the MV Normandy, would be outsourced by making 150 workers redundant with an offering of ‘voluntary severance packages’ and hiring ‘low-

¹⁴ That is, it did not lead to a qualitative change within the union. See chapter 5.

¹⁵ The facts presented in the following pages lead me to this conclusion. It should be noticed that the company’s plan became feasible after May 2004, and was probably formulated around that time.

¹⁶ The Latvian company LAVAL, subcontracted by a Swedish company to build a school in the Swedish town of Vaxholm, refused to pay wages agreed through the collective agreement with the Swedish Building Workers’ Union, which provoked strike action by Swedish workers. The firm appealed to the European Court of Justice under the grounds of the Posting of Workers Directive (Article 3.1.C), and article 49 of the EU Treaty, according to which restrictions on freedom to provide services shall be prohibited in respect of nationals of member states who are established in a state of the Community other than that of the recipient of services. The ECJ ruled that the company did not have to pay anything more than the minimum wage (TUAEUC, no date).

cost crews' (agency workers). According to Irish Ferries, 125 of the 150 employed on the ship had agreed to be made redundant. The plan was to re-open the following year with the outsourced crew. SIPTU workers voted for industrial action on the four boats and the company responded by cancelling the service to Cherbourg, and threatened the withdrawal of the remaining services if the strike went ahead – a threat that materialised before the strike started. A spokesperson from the company verbally guaranteed that there would not be any further outsourcing, which was a lie. The position of SIPTU was that outsourcing was motivated by profits alone and that the real plan was to outsource all services, which happened to be confirmed later (*Irish Times* 03/11/04; 26/11/04; 30/11/04; 3/12/04). Paul Smith, SIPTU Martine Ports Division, was of the opinion that, if this outsourcing was not stopped, more and more companies would follow the trend and replace well-paid unionised, pensioned staff with 'yellow pack labour': 'This is a race to the bottom. It benchmarks the cost of Irish seafarers against that of Latvians and Poles and says "you haven't come up to the mark". Well, we won't play that game.'

Jack O'Connor, SIPTU president, had also characterised that trend as a 'race to the bottom', which had already taken place in *Independent Newspapers* (where SIPTU and the workers had been defeated) and in Aerlingus (*Irish Times* 7/12/04; 11/12/04). By September 2005, SIPTU's National Executive Council characterised the *replacement* at Irish Ferries as 'an outrageous example of the acceleration of the "race to the bottom" ... well under way in the Irish economy' (SIPTU, 23/09/2005). This, we have to notice, had been facilitated after May 2004. The government had the power to stop outsourcing under the 1990 Industrial Relations Act when a dispute affected the public interest, according to Labour TD Tommy Broughan, but DETE minister Micheál Martin said that state intervention would be counter-productive (*Irish Times* 8/12/04). For whom? In less than a year SIPTU's prediction proved to be true, and the company's assurances nothing but lies. However, SIPTU's assurances that they would not play the game of outsourcing did not come true either. In the end, as we will see, it was accepted as a *fait accompli*. The union did not have the will to fight till the end or felt unable to stop outsourcing.

SIPTU members went on an all-out strike in December 2004, which lasted 10 days and ended when company management accepted to refer the dispute to the Labour Relations Committee. They only accepted to talk about the wages of the outsourced crews, not outsourcing itself. SUI did not directly support the strike and even agreed and encouraged its members to accept redundancy packages (*Irish Independent*, 8/12/04; 9/12/04; 16/12/04). That is, the first act ended in a defeat for SIPTU. Referring to the Labour Court was just a delaying strategy for the company, which allowed it to

implement its outsourcing plan. The wages for the outsourced crew staff would be reduced to €3.60 an hour for 12-hour shifts. Only ship officers were allowed to remain employed directly by the company. The company was now able to implement a more drastic cost-cutting plan of between €5 and €6m (*Irish Independent* 20/9/05; *Irish Times* 11/12/04).

That was not the end of the story. In September 2005 the company announced a new plan to replace all its 543 crew members, in the other three boats, with Eastern European workers on half the Irish Minimum Wage, and gave only 10 working days to employees to accept a *generous* redundancy package (8 weeks wages per year worked rather than the statutory 2 weeks), which the company would withdraw if strike action went ahead. Workers could choose to stay with Irish Ferries but would have to accept longer shifts, fewer holidays and new working structures. The company plan was to get rid of crews paid about €430 per week and substitute them with new crews paid at €140 per week, cutting labour costs by €15,000 per worker and per year.¹⁷

The Irish Continental Group had reported operating profits of €14.6m in 2004, a drop of €10m in relation to the previous year but mainly due to a €12m restructuring cost on the *MV Normandy* operation. By September 2005 the company had already started to re-register the ships in a non-EU country. SIPTU served a two weeks' strike notice but the SUI (representing 350 crew members) was in favour of accepting the redundancy packages because in the words of its general secretary there was not much choice given that the crews were being asked to do the same work for half the money, and if they went on strike the company would withdraw the redundancy deal (*Irish Independent*, 20/9/05; 21/9/05; 04/12/2005). SIPTU had talks with the British Rail, Marine and Transport (RMT) union to make sure that Irish Ferries vessels could not get a berth in any UK port, as well as in Ireland, but the strike was called off after Irish Ferries, under pressure from the Government and IBEC, accepted the mediation of the Labour Court. The company had refused until then to meet SIPTU (*Irish Independent* 1/10/05; 4/10/05).

Patricia King, SIPTU chief regional officer, still hoped for a resolution of the conflict by appealing to the Labour Court, 'We now look forward to raising all the issues with

¹⁷ It is interesting to mention that, while proposing this savage cost for workers, Mr Rotwell, company boss, had earned €687,000 in 2004 and had a company pension fund valued at €970,000, and was also a shareholder in the company.

them through the Labour Court process' (*Irish Independent* 4/10/2005).¹⁸ The number of workers ready to fight back had also gone down to around 60, while an estimated 480 had taken redundancy packages by December. But the Irish Ferries dispute was starting to concern Irish workers in general and European labour unions because of the feeling that 'displacement' was a real issue that could affect any worker in Ireland and other EU countries. On the 8th December finally workers went on an official strike, although ship officers had, before that, been refusing to sail the three vessels affected (the fourth vessel had already been outsourced the previous March). The position of the state was ambiguous for although ministers and Taoiseach declared their sympathy with the workers they refused to intervene claiming not to be able to do anything about the outsourcing, as it was not illegal. Sources from within DETE mentioned that the redundancy package was good and that foreign workers would be happy too because they would earn more (€3.60/h) than in their home countries (*Irish Independent* 04/12/2005). The bigger winner, however, was the company, which was supposed to boost profits by €20m. We are going to see that this was part of the official discourse on migration into Ireland, which also framed the way in which mistreatment and underpayment in mushroom farms was uncovered and dealt with.

On the Friday 9th of December huge demonstrations in different cities and towns in Ireland showed the concern of Irish workers and citizens with 'displacement' and the 'race to the bottom'. The following week, however, SIPTU announced a deal with the company that ended the dispute. The company accepted to reduce its target cost-cutting figure from €15m to €11.5m (up from an initial target of €3.5m a year earlier) and to maintain the terms and conditions of employment of the 48 workers that wished to stay. Also, the company accepted paying the Irish minimum wage to the outsourced workers. Irish Ferries, in turn, would be allowed to reflag the ships and SIPTU could not engage in any industrial action for a period of three years (*Irish Independent* 15/12/2005). The only concession the company made was to pay the minimum wage. In all other aspects it was a complete victory for the company. SIPTU, however, considered it had been a victory for the union (SIPTU, 14 Dec 2005).

On the 4th April 2007 I attended a meeting in Dublin port between a SIPTU officer, Ken, and a number of Lithuanian crewmembers from one of the boats. He explained that under the agreement between Irish Ferries and SIPTU the Irish law would cover only union members, while non-union members were not entitled to get the Irish

¹⁸ As noted later in this introduction, there is nothing wrong with framing demands within the hegemonic legal system. It cannot be otherwise other than in exceptional times. Legal *injustices* have also a mobilizing force.

minimum wage. For that reason, the company was willing to do anything to stop workers from joining SIPTU and double their wages. The meeting took place in terminal one. The workers, around 12 of them, were on their way from the ship where they worked to the ship where they stayed after their shift was over. Union officials did not have access to the ship, unless they had the permission of the captain, and, according to Ken, they did not have it. Another SIPTU official, Paula, suggested that a union official buy a ticket to Holyhead, but Ken said that it would be difficult to talk to the workers because there were CCTV cameras all over the ship. So group meetings were not possible and talking one by one would take too long, unless they only talked to one elected representative of the workers. Paula and Ken were of the opinion that the ship had become like a prison for the workers.

Another risk that the workers faced was that, since they spent two months working on board and one on holidays in Lithuania, where they had been recruited, the company might not renew their contracts while they were on holidays in Lithuania, if they chose to join the union. But in Ken's opinion the more workers who joined the union, the more difficult it would be to fire them, because it was costly to train new workers. Those attending the meeting had very good English. Ken's central idea was that management would always try to lower working conditions and wages. If Romanians and Bulgarians were cheaper workers, they would change the crew again, and if they could get Filipinos on cheaper wages then they would go for them. The role of the union, according to Ken, was to stop the 'race to the bottom'.

The Irish Ferry worker who made the meeting possible in the terminal was Sean, one of the only three Irish workers still working in the ship, who was running the risk of losing his job, something that happened less than a month after the meeting. Sean had arranged to meet inside the terminal. One woman in authority at the terminal arrived, and said that only people with credentials were allowed there. She looked at me and asked, 'do you have credentials?' I did not answer, and then she said: 'I can't see your credentials. You don't have credentials, so you are not allowed here.' Sean, Ken, this woman, and one of the managers of Irish Ferries started an argument. Ken got angry and decided that we would have the meeting outside. So we all moved to the area where passengers buy their tickets. The woman said it was all right for us to stay there. She and the manager of Irish Ferries stayed for a while, watching us from a distance. The workers had the forms of all those who wanted to join the union, around 30 forms (out of around 130 staff). For Ken that was not enough. Someone asked how many they needed to be strong. 'The more the better', said Ken, because it was more difficult to

replace a large number of workers, and he went through the terms of the contract between SIPTU and the company. The workers were not aware of this contract. Then Ken said that he needed at least two representatives to be in contact with. The plan was to meet with representatives of the company to enforce the contract they had signed with SIPTU. They would have to do the same with the rest of the ships belonging to Irish Ferries. One of the workers said that the company had told them that if they have to pay the Irish minimum wage they would be forced to close down the line. Ken did not take that threat seriously because the attitude of the company had been the same all along, 'they won't do it because another company would take their spot and they would lose that service.' He warned that the company knew now those in touch with the union and that they would be approached and told that if they joined they might not be called again to work. If that happened, Ken said, they had to ask the person who said it and to repeat that in front of someone else. They repeated several times the formula: 'We won't talk alone to them.'

SIPTU was at least trying to stop the 'race to the bottom', but why did the union not fight to stop outsourcing when it had achieved a high level of public support back in December 2005, rather than accepting a deal that the company would not honour and that went against what the union had been defending all along? Perhaps the only way to avoid outsourcing would have been to struggle for the nationalisation of the company, which would have elevated the dispute to a different level. But that was never put on the table. SIPTU's only alternative was to cooperate with cuts in order to maintain the competitiveness of the company. They were willing to accept 75 percent of the cuts proposed, as the Labour Court recommended, to stop the outsourcing of the three remaining crews (SIPTU, 29/09/2005). That strategy of concessions did not stop 'the trend'. By December 2005 most workers had accepted redundancy packages, probably because they did not believe that SIPTU (rather than *themselves*) could stop outsourcing. Even SIPTU admitted that redundancies were not voluntary because the company offered them as *take it or leave it* (SIPTU 19 Sept 2005). What would have happened if the union had shown from the beginning the will to struggle to avoid outsourcing in deed as well as in words? Would workers have changed their minds and joined forces, rather than accepting redundancies? There was a material basis for a successful struggle, because the union had been able to go beyond a workplace or company issue and connect with the concerns of the wider society by turning an industrial dispute into one about fundamental rights. But even in that case, a victory was not guaranteed, and never is.

The unions, SIPTU and SUI, had agreed to cuts in excess of €3.4m in 2004 to secure the future of all routes (SIPTU 24 Nov 04), but SIPTU had opposed outsourcing up front. Then SIPTU accepted the outsourcing on one of the boats as a minor evil. In the end, it accepted outsourcing on all the services. The referrals to the Labour Court had only served to delay the ‘inevitable’. But delays only weakened the unions because it demobilised and demoralised members, making further concessions inevitable. The state could have intervened but it chose not to. Sources from within just confirmed that in spite of some show of *faux* public sympathy there was state support to outsourcing. The Chamber of Commerce of Ireland even criticised the SIPTU strike as ‘totally irresponsible’, jeopardising Irish competitiveness (*Irish Times*, 4/12/2004). SIPTU bitterly complained that the National Implementation Body (NIB) had failed to make Irish Ferries adhere to Social Partnership agreements. Jack O’Connor described the dispute as a test of the viability of Social Partnership: ‘The Government must move now to arrest the trend in the direction of the law of the jungle which threatens to wreck a great deal of what has been achieved in this country in the last 20 years (SIPTU, 23/09/2005).’ He went further saying that Partnership was ‘incapable of protecting workers against displacement... There is no point in the trade union movement participating in national agreements if they allow this type of situation to arise’ (SIPTU, 28/09/2005).¹⁹ A Labour Court recommendation to Irish Ferries to ‘honour’ the Regulation Employment Agreement (REA) between SIPTU and Irish Ferries did not have any effect on the company (SIPTU, 14 Nov 2005). From the point of view of employers, outsourcing was an excellent option to increase profits and the state could not but back them up, although not publicly. Even most of the cost of making 543 staff redundant, between €6 to €7m, was paid by the state (SIPTU 27/09/2005)

SIPTU, however, managed to mobilise a broad sector of Irish society by exposing the threat of ‘race to the bottom’ as a real possibility for any worker in Ireland. But the union did not follow through on that synergy which had been generated to elevate the struggle to a new plane. SIPTU had also contacted unions affiliated to the International Transport Workers Federation (ITWF) during the first strike in December 2004 to develop a coordinated strategy to oppose ‘social dumping’ on Irish seas because it could also affect British and French workers (SIPTU 13/12/2004). The French unions

¹⁹ He later said that partnership had been good for workers (Hastings *et al.* 2007). Yet, when employers and state walked out of Social Partnership in 2008, SIPTU still kept clinging to Social Partnership, and to this day, December 2010, they cannot come to terms with the fact that Partnership is over. Union leaders still frame their demands within the framework of Social Partnership and try to force employers and state with threats of strikes and mobilisation to return to it. So far, however, deeds have not followed words.

CGT/CFDT offered to cooperate with the blockade of French ports during the December 2005 strike (SIPTU, 29/09/2005). The point in common with other EU unions was the rejection of the EU 'Services Directive' that would allow employers to import workers and pay the *going rate* in the member state where these workers came from. Jack O'Connor warned, 'People must mobilise. Irish Ferries is a harbinger of the workplace of the future. The same blind market forces that are driving down pay and conditions there are coming closer to everyone's workplace (SIPTU, 01/11/2005).' But what was SIPTU willing to sacrifice to put an end to that *trend*? What was the alternative? Just new regulation? How could that come about other than by mobilisation?

A march to the Dáil gathered around 8,000 people and almost 20 TDs (Labour Party, Sinn Féin, and Sociality Party) at the beginning of November 2005. In a speech in front of the Dáil, Jack O'Connor said that displacement was already happening in construction, cleaning and the security industry. The French co-ordinator of the ITWF said that Irish Ferries was a European problem. ICTU General Secretary, David Begg, said that the business community was 'succumbing to greed', and the government had contributed to the problem by opposing an EU Ferries Directive in 2001 (SIPTU, 03/11/2005). The marches of the 9th December 2005 (around 100,000 only in Dublin) saw the largest amount of people taking part in a national day of protest since 1979.

In the end, SIPTU used that support mainly as a way to put pressure on Partnership negotiations to pass more favourable labour legislation, and to implement existing labour standards and partnership agreements. It is not clear that was achieved either, and in any case the current economic crisis had swept away any improvements achieved at the time. Before the December 2005 strike SIPTU called the government to 'enact legislation which would ensure ferry workers... have the same protection as all shore-based employees' (SIPTU 18 /10/2005). After the settlement in Dec 2005 SIPTU claimed to have received that concession (SIPTU, 14 Dec 2005):

The Union has been successful in ensuring that the threshold of decency has been defended and that vulnerable migrant maritime workers have the protection of Irish law ... The settlement terms will provide a framework for the protection of workers in the company and for the viable operation of the ferries business into the future. One of our key objectives was the payment of the Irish minimum wage and this has now been achieved, he said. SIPTU has secured substantial increases in the rates of pay originally proposed by management, which will bring wages up to and above the Irish national minimum wage. The protection of the terms and conditions of employment of Irish Ferries staff who wish to remain working for Irish Ferries has been secured.

That was much less than what the REA had previously guaranteed to Irish Ferries

workers. Initially the company seemed to give that concession about the Irish minimum wage for outsourced workers, and certainly the massive mobilisation of the 9th of December had been the most important contributing factor, but less than two years later they got their way. Still, even that concession was a defeat for the union and the workers. The task was still to fight against displacement of ‘shore-based’ employees. With that aim in mind SIPTU delegates voted ‘by an overwhelming majority’ to start talks for a new national partnership, with the confidence, according to Jack O’Connor, that they could ‘call on the combined strength of over 600,000 workers if the talks process failed to deliver’ (SIPTU, 31 Jan 2006). It was around that time when SIPTU focussed its attention on the Irish mushroom industry and in organising migrant workers.

Filling the gap left by unions

SIPTU, the largest union in Ireland, showed little interest in organising low paid and low skilled workers in sectors such as services, or hotel and catering, particularly in small workplaces before May 2004. There had been some talks about organising since Jack O’Connor became SIPTU president at the end of the 1990s, partly as a result of an international turn in the labour movement and partly the result of pressure from below (see chapters 5 and 6), but by and large there had not been any progress.

In April 2005 SIPTU organised the talk ‘Rights in the Workplace for Irish and Immigrant alike’ in Liberty Hall. The main speakers were Jack O’Connor, SIPTU President; Mike Jennings, SIPTU regional secretary; and Pat Rabbitte TD, Labour Party leader. Suzanne, a Slovakian woman and a domestic worker, also spoke at the meeting. The stereotypical phrase ‘the economy needs migrants’ was repeated a good few times; it was difficult to avoid framing workers’ interests in the terms of the hegemonic political economy of capital, to put it as if workers must serve the economy rather than the other way around. Another phrase repeated from time to time was, ‘migrant workers can make a strong contribution to Irish society’. In general, however, SIPTU speakers gave radical speeches in which the interests of capitalists and workers were antagonistic.

Jack O’Connor intervened first. He started by talking about the inadequacies of Irish labour regulation and labour rights in relation to other *more socially advanced* countries in the EU, and highlighted the contradiction that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) was supposed to promote enterprises and employers interests at the same time that it was responsible for workers’ rights. He admitted, ‘Most of us

have accepted the omnipotence of the market economy.’ It was not clear whether he implied a challenge to that hegemony, as he just dropped the thought and moved on. He seemed to say ‘I do not agree it with it, but what can we do about it?’ In relation to solidarity with migrant workers, he stressed that it was not based on altruism but on the idea that ‘by supporting migrant workers we support all other workers in Ireland’. He ended by saying that SIPTU and Irish society would not tolerate wages below the NMW and hours above the maximum legal working week. Mike Jennings spoke after him. He started by praising the work of Anton McCabe, who got the award for person of the year in Co. Meath in 2004. Jennings then referred to the GAMA affair and how SIPTU had tried to talk to the workers with the help of an interpreter, before the scandal was brought to daylight. He also referred to how all workers said that everything was fine, although he did not say that the union had accepted an interpreter offered by the company and that SIPTU did not uncover the exploitation of Turkish GAMA workers:

It was like talking to slaves in a plantation and these saying, with a gaze of fear to the white house, that the master was good and they were happy with the conditions ... but it is not true that exploitation in GAMA took place because it is a foreign company and those things don’t happen in Ireland. The same people who have been exploiting Irish workers are now exploiting migrant workers. In most of cases, the exploiter is an Irish employer.

Then he went on to tell how exploitation was taking place in rural areas, how a Ukrainian woman [from a mushroom farm] was suing her employer for paying her below NMW, working many more hours than she should and also for being physically assaulted. He referred to a story that McCabe told him about in incident that took place in a pub:

A group of dairy farmers were drinking and one had to leave early, ‘why are you leaving so early?’ said one. ‘Tomorrow I have to milk the cows at 6 in the morning’, said the other. ‘You should get a migrant worker. I have a very good one that gets up early in the morning to do the job for me’, he said... Another farmer said that his *migrant* worked very hard, did loads of overtime and didn’t want to stop.

Jennings ended his intervention with an appeal: ‘We must win them [the migrant workers] over!’ Yet, he never said how that could come about. A debate followed afterwards. In the opinion of a SIPTU official from a local branch in Tallaght, Dublin, if workers did not go to them they could not know about their exploitation (which perhaps explains why SIPTU did not notice the exploitation of GAMA workers). No one argued that the union should also try and approach the workers. Jennings commented that 10,000 migrant workers had joined SIPTU since May 2004, and quoted James Connolly by saying that the capitalists of his own country were his enemies but that the workers

of any country were his friends.

Pat Rabbitte quoted Larkin: ‘an injury to one is a concern for all,’ and then said that Emmet Stagg, Labour Party TD, was campaigning for the elderly and forgotten Irish migrant workers living in misery in England. But most of his intervention focussed on asking for the vote to the Labour Party to pass legislation in favour of workers, migrants and native alike, and he defended a pact with Fine Gael (right-wing party) to be able to pass that legislation. A man from the floor shouted, ‘shame!’ and mentioned Joe Higgins. Another one accused the Labour Party and SIPTU of [literally] *exploiting* workers, which made Rabbitte go into a rage. A migrant worker said that blacks and whites were exploited in the same way and that there was also legal exploitation. An old trade unionist said that employers were using migrant labour to deregulate the labour market and get rid of legal rights that took many years to win. That radical and antagonistic language to denounce exploitation of migrant workers, however, did not match very well with the Labour Party aim of going into coalition with a right-wing party or with Social Partnership. On the other hand, it was a different matter to turn words into actions. That ambiguity and ambivalence does not necessarily imply dishonesty, although it tends to be the case more often than not. What matters beyond those types of judgements is the contradictions within the labour movement to which ambivalence and ambiguity point. This is a topic that will be explored further in this chapter and in the second part of this dissertation.

It looked as if SIPTU was taking interest, although in a contradictory way, in migrant workers. At the same time, and because of the unions’ contradiction between words and deeds, there were already organisations oriented to these sectors of workers, trying to fill the void that unions had not started to fill. The arrival of migrant workers in increasing numbers, particularly those on work permits since 1999 and 2000, to fill vacancies chiefly in unskilled and low-pay jobs that had become non-acceptable for national workers (see chapter 4) gave rise to organisations such as the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) and Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI), apart from numerous local support groups all over Ireland. The ICI was set up in 2002 with the task of collecting information on immigration trends, promoting the rights of immigrants, and addressing their needs because migrant workers were the most vulnerable to *exploitation* (ICI 2003: vii). The ICI was a Non-Government Organisation (NGO) that provided information, support, advocacy and strategic litigation.²⁰ It offered services that unions and the state were not providing to migrant workers but did not try

²⁰ <http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/services.php>

community work, organising, or making these workers active participants in the process of their own empowerment.

MRCI also started as a service provider. Five Columban missionaries, who had worked in the Philippines, set it up in 2001 after returning to Ireland, due to the lack of information and lack of welcome that Filipino migrants had encountered in Ireland. But MRCI was set up to *welcome* all types of migrants into Ireland. The difference with the ICI was that MRCI quickly expanded its scope to policy making and community work. It was its Community Work Programme (see chapter 7) that led to the active involvement of migrant workers, organising and mobilising, particularly after the creation of the Domestic Workers Support Group in 2004. MRCI also criticised the traditional ways in which unions recruited and organised workers, particularly for dealing mainly with workplace issues (MRCI 2004). Yet, MRCI managed to involve SIPTU in trying to organise female migrant domestic workers in order to bring to the attention of the union those workers outside its remit. MRCI also tried to address structural inequalities in Ireland. In 2004, the NGO came into contact with migrant mushroom workers looking for help, a contact that led to the creation of a Mushroom Workers Support Group (MWSG) in 2006, renamed Agricultural Workers Association (AgWA) in 2007.

These developments did not take place in vacuum. The workers support groups set up by MRCI were inspired by the experiences of the Worker Centres (WCs) in the US and community work in Ireland.²¹ MRCI tried to address the needs of migrant workers, but particularly of those on work permits, the most vulnerable of all. MRCI also claimed to have created migrant-led groups. NGOs, however, are generally non-membership organisations, ruled by non-elected board of directors and funded by grants and donations. Chapters 7 and 8 tell the story of the MWSG and the role that migrant workers play in it in order to assess the claim as to whether it was a migrant-led group or not.

Substantive issues

This general introduction highlights the creation of a new section within the Irish working class in the last decade: non-unionised migrant workers on low wages in low-skilled, labour intensive occupations. The Irish labour market also attracted migrants to

²¹ This influence came through the staff that MRCI started to hire, which displaced the founders of the group (working on voluntary basis) in day-to-day work, as we will see in chapter 6. Unless the term ‘workers centres’ appears in quotes I used throughout the British spelling.

high-skilled occupations, like doctors or engineers, which accounted for one quarter of job offers for migrant workers on work permits up to May 2004 (*Irish Times*, 14/09/2004). But these types of immigrants are not the subjects of this dissertation. I also place this dissertation within the body of literature that considers that last period of capitalist development, namely neoliberalism (flexible accumulation, lean production or post-Fordism in terms of dynamics of accumulation), which has increased class inequalities and class polarisation.²²

The new section of the Irish working class was made up mainly of Eastern European workers, particularly after May 2004, who came to Ireland due to shortages of labour in the labour market caused by the strong economic growth of the Irish economy between 1994-5 and 2007. They came to Ireland because *the economy needed them*. That was how government, associations of employers, and even trade unions and migrant associations presented the debate in the media. They all agreed that the national economy needed these migrant workers to fill job vacancies, three quarters of which were low skilled and low paid. Migrant workers, they argued, were also needed to maintain the competitiveness of the Irish economy, and the rates of economic growth of the second half of the 1990s, because of shortages of (cheap) labour in the Irish labour market (*Irish Times*, 20/11/2004). A report by the ICI (2003) even argued that migrant workers were necessary to do the dirty, dangerous, arduous and ill-paid jobs that needed to be done in any society. Employers, on their part, generally perceived migrants as cheap labour (González-Pérez *et al.* 2009). While that is a fact, and it could be argued that ICI was trying to put forward the case that migrant workers should be welcome, the ICI report did not question why there have to be ill-paid jobs (understood as those on the bare minimum wage). Therefore, the ICI seemed to give consent to the hegemonic political economy of capital; SIPTU also seemed to consent by linking wages to productivity. ICTU (see below) believed that higher wages would increase consumption and stimulate the economy, but as we have seen in the case of Irish Ferries, SIPTU accepted (or felt unable to fight against) wage cuts when the competitive position of the company was *compromised*, according to management. We will see in this dissertation, however, how that ideology cannot be completely hegemonic as it implies a counter hegemonic-ideology, an expression of a political economy of labour, which is manifested in the contradictory practice of trade unionism. A mechanical application of the concept of ‘false consciousness’ to union bureaucrats’ and workers’ responses can be

²² In Ireland some analyses after the collapse of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ argue that point (see Allen 2009; Kirby 2010. Before the economic crash that had been the overall assessment in other works, O’Hearn 2003; 1998; Allen 2003; 2000)

misleading, as resignation or giving in to employers' demands, or framing unions' and workers' demands in employers' terms does not necessarily imply consent to the political economy of capital.²³

The differences between employers and unions were not about the nature of labour exploitation itself; that is, about the nature of capitalism as a particular form in which surplus, or unpaid labour, is 'extorted from the immediate producer, the worker' (Marx 1976: 325). Marx distinguished between necessary labour-time, or the time the worker spends on his or her own reproduction, and surplus labour-time, or the time in which the worker creates (surplus) value for the capitalist. *Exploitation* in Marx's use can be legal, based on legislation, as in Irish Ferries, or illegal, as in the case of GAMA Turkish workers. It is interesting to point out that GAMA workers were *exploited* because they could be paid around €3 or €4 per hour, while outsourced Irish Ferries workers on the same wages would not be. The debate over what constituted exploitation was then about labour standards and the value of labour. Either way *exploitation* in Marx's usage consists in unpaid labour; otherwise profits would not be possible. The chief difference between a political economy of capital and a political economy of labour then would be that, while the former upholds that capital is the origin of wealth and profits do not come from unpaid labour, the latter argues that labour is the origin of all economic values. Therefore, capitalism would be based on a fundamental injustice, the appropriation of value produced by others, as any previous modes of production had done before capitalism, although in different ways. Unions generally quarrel about the share that workers are going to have in relation to profits and about labour standards (i.e. job control, length of the working day, etc.). What unions generally do in normal times is bargaining over wages, as Gramsci wrote (in Kelly 1988: 55):

... objectively, the trade union is nothing other than a commercial company, of a purely capitalistic type, which aims to secure, in the interests of the proletariat, the maximum price for the commodity labour, and to establish a monopoly over this commodity in the national and international fields. The trade union is distinguished from capitalist mercantilism only subjectively ...

That is, bargaining does not question capitalism but reproduces it. We will see, however, that within this function of trade unionism implicitly lies the political economy of

²³ Union leaders such as Jack O'Connor or Mike Jennings were quite capable, as we have seen, of challenging in meetings, in words, the political economy of capital, the hegemonic ideology. A left-wing communist interpretation would maintain that union bureaucrats are crudely dishonest and treasonous as they speak one language to workers, to let steam out and justify their posts, and another language to employers, the latter being their true ideas. Generalizing, this is a mechanical analysis that has little to do with the dialectical method that left-wing communist leaders claim to follow (see Lenin 1968).

labour because, as Gramsci said, trade unions also aim at establishing a monopoly over the commodity 'labour'. Harvey (2010:157-8) also argues that while a shortening of the working day and an increase in the value of labour power can help to stabilise capitalism and economic growth, as unions tend to argue, beyond a certain point it might threaten accumulation and therefore turn revolutionary.

The idea that there is 'dirty, dangerous, arduous and ill-paid work which needs to be done in any society' reflects the scenario of the hegemonic political economy of capital. It follows that wages cannot be increased above productivity; otherwise companies would have to close down or move to areas of the world where labour is cheaper.²⁴ ICTU made the point in 2005 during the debate on the increase of NMW that a higher NMW 'would help fuel the economic growth and close the gap between rich and poor' (*IT*, 25/01/05), and attract the migrants that Ireland needs. It is a kind of bargaining that is clearly on the side of waged workers, but nonetheless formulated within the frame of the political economy of capital.

The logic behind that argument is that an increase in wages would stimulate consumption, and, therefore, market expansion. Capital expands by increasing production, that is, by expanding existing consumption and by discovering new needs (Lebowitz 2003: 11), but workers' wages should also go up to absorb that increase of production, and expand the market for personal consumption goods.²⁵ Workers, however, do not necessarily need an increase in their wages to raise their living standards. According to Marx (1976: 659),

The value of labour-power is determined by the value of a certain quantity of means of subsistence. It is the value and not the mass of these means of subsistence that varies with the productivity of labour. It is however possible that owing to an increase in the productivity of labour both the worker and the capitalist may simultaneously be able to appropriate a greater quantity of means of subsistence, without any change in the price of labour-power or in surplus-value.

Those who support the claim that capitalism can still improve the living conditions of the majority, and present a more human face, could use this argument to simultaneously put forward workers' rights and employers' interests. A social partnership can be achieved on those terms, and in theory should last forever if that was the case. The need

²⁴ The doctrine of the US Government, and its Department of Agriculture since the 1970s, actually, is that labour-intensive crops such as fruit and vegetables should move to tropical countries where the weather is more favourable and labour is abundant and cheap. So, these countries should specialise in the production of cheap food for the more developed world. See Collins (1995: 221). This doctrine could be applied to any labour-intensive industry.

²⁵ Other markets are for luxury goods, the personal consumption of capitalists and the rich, and for means of production.

of capital for valorisation and the need of workers for self-development must meet somehow for the forces of production to develop (Lebowitz 2003; Narotzky 1997: 163-4).²⁶ We can then start to understand how *consent* or, perhaps, unwilling acceptance of this hegemonic scenario is generated. The present economic crisis, however, calls that belief into question.

Workers (and their organisations, which reinforce that view) tend to perceive capital as the necessary mediator between them and the articles of consumption and services they need to survive and for their own self-development (Lebowitz 2003: 12). To undermine this *fiction*, Marx tried to demystify that role of capital as mediator by explaining that labour is the sole generator of value, and that capitalism is based on the appropriation of surplus value, the product of unpaid labour. To that end, he made the crucial distinction between *labour* and *labour-power*. Workers are paid for their capacity to work (labour-power) but not for the actual work that they perform. It is in this way that capitalists can conceal exploitation (i.e. unpaid labour). But the fact is that nearly 150 years after the publication of the first edition of *Capital, Volume 1* (1867), consent, at least in appearance, to capitalism and to the market economy shows that theoretical awareness, although essential, is not enough to counteract the ideological (theoretical) hegemony of capital. The labour movement has even gone backwards in relation to previous decades.

The terms *hegemony* and *consent* have to be understood in this dissertation in the context of Antonio Gramsci's usage of them. *Hegemony* in that sense is not just about *ideology*, but, in Crehan's words (2002: 204), about 'the power to determine the structuring rules within which struggles are to be fought out'. This conceptualisation of *hegemony* is also similar to Eric Wolf's concept of *structural power* (1999: 5): 'The power manifest in relationships that not only operates within settings and domains but also organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves.' Michael Burawoy (1979) makes use of *hegemony* in a similar way but in the context of what he calls 'games' to which the players give full consent by the mere acceptance of their rules. The hegemony of the political economy of capital then would be chiefly based on the fact that all players play according to its rules, including trade unions. Taken like that, hegemony is either internalised by all participants, particularly labour leaders and workers, or just not

²⁶ The problem, and main contradiction in capitalism, is that capital is always struggling to realise, in the sphere of circulation, the value added in the sphere of production. So, capital needs low wages to add more value, but high wages to realise that value. Crises of overproduction are the consequence of this contradiction (Lebowitz 2003: 12)

openly challenged because opponents see no other option.²⁷ Labour legislation, intended in the last instance to protect private property and guarantee *free* market exchanges (the bases of capitalist accumulation), is the frame within which workers legitimise their disputes with capitalists in normal times. We can interpret in this light the declarations of Mr Robert Berney (IT, 20/11/05), head of ISME, who considered that all migrant workers had to be treated ‘with the dignity and respect that they deserve, and afforded the same rights and opportunities available to Irish employees’. If Mr Berney had tried to defend the opposite, even with all the power of the state behind him, his argument would not have been legitimate. So government and employers are also constrained to a large extent by the rules that are an expression of their power and interests.²⁸ But labour standards, and with them what is considered *exploitation*, vary over time. Employers and government in Ireland have been able at present to impose wage cuts and more flexible working time in both the private and the public sector with trade unions’ consent. In 2006 unions struggled to preserve labour standards, to guarantee their implementation, and to stop the ‘race to the bottom’ that they argued an open labour market would bring about.

According to Marx (Lebowitz 2003: 82-3), capital manifests its inner-logic – accumulation by self-valorisation of capital – through the competition of many individual capitals, although this competition sometimes is harmful for the interest of capital in general and capitalists as a class. So, the state sometimes has to intervene to limit competition. That is how Marx (1976: 375-77) explains the introduction of the 10 hours bill in Britain in the 1830s: the extension of the working day to its physical limits put under risk the very reproduction of the labour force necessary for capital accumulation. It was not a matter of humanitarian concerns, although middle-class humanitarians made the case for the limitation of the working week on those terms and had some influence in the final outcome. Marx also deals with the Chartist movement and its influence, although in *Capital* the agency of the working class is mostly implicit in the constant revolutionising of the means of production and in technological change aimed at cutting labour cost (including deskilling). From the point of view of capital, the most important reason to introduce limits to the working week and working day was that the reproduction of labour in the specific conditions of the first half of the 1800s in

²⁷ Following Scott’s analysis (1990), the key question is whether there is a backstage rejection of hegemonic ideas and rituals of consent. Only in that way can we discern whether there is true consent.

²⁸ They are not only an expression of their power, as not all agency emanates from them, rather they are the outcome of class struggle and reflect real differentials of power.

Britain was becoming more expensive, as the commodity labour was not as generalised and not as mobile globally as it is nowadays. An excessive extension of the working day ‘produces the premature exhaustion and death of this labour-power itself’. Therefore, its replacement had to be speeded up with the result that the value of labour increased (1976: 376-77). On the other hand, lack of regulation meant that ‘underselling masters’ competed unfairly by adulterating products like bread and through the use of unpaid labour by making their employees work longer for the same wages as competitors (1976: 361). We will see in chapter 6 that the implementation of labour standards in the mushroom industry was possible thanks to a *partnership* between SIPTU and employers, which also included a downgrading of previous standards.²⁹

On the other hand, if capital expresses its inner logic through competition, competition among workers can only benefit capital; it allows capitalists to capture the fruits of cooperation in production; it is, therefore, the expression of competition among many capitals (Lebowitz 2003: 84, 86, 157). In a scenario of a working class hierarchically divided in segments by race, gender, skill, or nationality, workers enter into competition with each other and push wages down. Employers, for example, can put pressure on trade unions to keep wages low because of the threats of offshoring or outsourcing. By using migrant workers willing to accept lower wages than native workers, capitalists can also push wages down. Imbalances between supply and demand cause, therefore, fluctuations in the price of labour. Marx and Engels (in Lebowitz 2003, p. 159) saw this type of competition between Irish and English workers in the nineteenth century:

Every industrial and commercial centre in England now possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life.

The segmentation of the working class makes the development of working-class consciousness and working-class united action difficult. A political economy of wage-labour, therefore, cannot be based on competition but on the combination of all segments of the working class at a global scale. Capital, on the other hand, facilitates

²⁹ Karl Polanyi, therefore, was not particularly original when he said that a self-regulating market ‘could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society’ (in Munck 2002: 2). According to Munck (2002: 2), Polanyi spoke also about a double movement: an ‘ever wider extension of free-market principles generated a counter-movement of social regulation to protect society’. So a move toward deregulation sooner or later must provoke a social reaction and a move towards regulation, but then that also would imply that the opposite movement would take place at a later stage. It is interesting, but it looks like the fluctuation of prices according to supply and demand, and in that way is a theory of equilibrium.

that process by bringing workers together in workplaces and by constant deskilling. Trade unions are the vehicles that articulate workers' combination. The tendency of unions to establish a monopoly over the commodity 'labour-power' is one of the material bases of the political economy of labour. The obstacles are many, and this dissertation deals with those encountered by workers in the mushroom industry. An intense struggle for equal working conditions and wages for all workers in Ireland according to previously agreed standards started during the Irish Ferries dispute, and constituted a step along the way to combination.³⁰ But SIPTU was not consistent in its approach. This dissertation looks to traditional organisations of the working class (i.e. unions) as institutions, which although set up to represent and advance the interest of the workers can develop bureaucratic structures that may also turn into obstacles for the advance of workers' interests as a whole. This dissertation will focus mainly on SIPTU's branch in Monaghan Mushrooms Ltd., and on SIPTU's campaign to 'clean up' the mushroom industry between 2006 and 2007, to illustrate how unions can themselves become impediments to workers' interests.

Power and powerlessness

We have not seen workers doing much in the account given in the pages above. They do appear to be simple pawns in a game that others are playing, a game that does not look to be theirs. I started this introduction with the walkout in Kilnaleck, but after that we have encountered the face of the union official more often than the face of the worker. This does not mean that workers were powerless, as this dissertation will show. We will see workers doing things, making trade-offs with employers, labour institutions, and NGOs, pretending to consent, rebelling when they get the chance. The diary of a mushroom picker represents just a snapshot of *what went on in pickers' minds*, as an Irish picker put it to me when she was trying to guess what I was doing picking mushrooms and asking questions. The group of 17 pickers walking out of their jobs, asking for help in the nearest SIPTU office, were later awarded a substantial amount of money by the Labour Court, which did not cover all the earnings they were entitled to since they started their jobs (see chapter 4). We have seen SIPTU officials acting on behalf of workers at Irish Ferries but also representing the interest of labour in Ireland

³⁰ A common question at this point is whether capitalism can guarantee socially acceptable standards of life for those working in the 'low-productivity' sector of the economy. A struggle in that direction can push capitalism beyond its limits. The political economy of labour carries with it the seeds of the challenge to capitalism. But it has to negate itself, as Lebowitz argues (2003), as it would have to go beyond wage-labour.

as they interpreted it. We did not see Irish Ferries' workers agency though. In the case of GAMA, the focus has been on roles of the state, ideas about economic development, and unions in recent Irish history. It is now time to place this within a more theoretical framework.

Eric Wolf (2001: 384) dealt with four different modes of power – these are useful to understand power relations within the mushroom industry, SIPTU and MRCI-MWSG. The first two modes refer to the capacity of individuals to exert power and their ability to impose their will in interpersonal relations. In a group meeting, a skilled speaker can impose his or her ideas over others by means of persuasion. But this does not tell us about, as Wolf points out, 'the nature of the arena in which the interaction goes forward'. It is, in other words, not possible to know who plays with advantage and why, what actions are precluded, what is realistic and what is not. It tells us about agency but nothing about structure. That is, we cannot yet make sense of agency.

For this dissertation the third and fourth modes of power are the most relevant. The third mode is 'tactical' or 'organisational' power, the 'power that controls the settings in which people may exhibit their potentialities and interact with others'. Some actors or agents are allocated more power in the settings or environments in which they operate. In the same way that we can think of the authority of an employer in his or her company over the employees, we can also think about the power of a trade union official over members, etc., although both types of power are not equivalent and do not come from the same source. They are qualitatively different in that sense. Clearly, questions of democracy in the running of institutions are important here. *Tactical power* is the power that shapes organisations: 'It sets up relationships among people through allocation and control of resources and rewards (2001: 391).' But where does it come from? How can we make sense of it?

The fourth mode is 'structural power', which 'organises and orchestrates the settings themselves'. It is the power that establishes *the rules of the game*. Wolf mentions the power of capital to harness and allocate labour power, and the power that structures the political economy. This is the power that capital showed in the mushroom industry to mobilise labour in the way it did (2001: 385): 'Structural power shapes the social field of action in such a way as to render some kinds of behaviour possible, while making others less possible or impossible... [it touches on] what goes on in the real world, that constrains, inhibits, or promotes what people do, or cannot do, within the scenarios we study.' Both tactical and structural powers are the realm of political economy, but they are qualitatively different. The ultimate aim is to 'move to a political-economic model

of the entire ensemble... to attempt explanation, not merely description, descriptive integration, or interpretation' (2001: 385, 390). That should be in Wolf's view the task of anthropology.

Structural power in Wolf's usage affects capitalists and workers, capital and labour institutions. We will see in chapters 2 to 4 that growers' decisions and actions were constrained within a framework over which they had no power. We can say the same thing about individual capitalists and large companies in the mushroom industry. The *laws of competition* are the product of the interaction of individuals, but they are also placed above them as a structural force against which they are powerless. It is in that way that we are talking about capitalists as roles to which individual capitalists must live up to in order to survive. The tendency towards monopoly capitalism can be seen as a way to tame and control market forces, but beyond a certain point it cannot tame the forces on which capitalism is based without bringing about its own destruction.

Structural power as a process in capitalist societies, which means the entire globe, could also be defined as the unfolding of the law of value, which is peculiar to capitalism as it did not govern economic behaviour in previous modes of production (see Mandel 1976: 15). The 'law of value' (or how value is produced) constitutes the foundation upon which Marx built his critique of the political economy of capital. According to Mandel (1976: 41-2) the 'law of value' fulfils a triple function. It *governs* the exchange relations between commodities, and capital and labour; it determines the relative proportions of total social labour devoted to the output of different groups of commodities; and it rules economic growth by determining average rates of profits and directing investment flows.

The 'law of value' would then constitute, paraphrasing Marx (1968: 181), 'the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure'. As David Harvey (2010: 198-199) argues, Marx's statement should not be seen in a deterministic or causal way. The law of value would constitute an imperative that 'cannot be overcome without overthrowing capitalism', which for instance makes peculiar to capitalism the struggle over the length of the working day but does not determine the outcome of that struggle, as can be seen in Marx's *Capital, Volume I*, chapter 10 ('the working day'). In chapter 3, on the other hand, we will see how Marx's 'deep-value theory' (Harvey's term) can account for the rise of a domestic industry in the Irish mushroom industry in the 1980s, which seemed to reverse the tendency towards large-scale industry.

If we want to understand what went on in the mushroom industry between 2006 and 2007 we must talk about the dynamics of accumulation: the dynamic structure of the

mushroom industry in the last decades in the context of the accumulation of capital, globally and nationally. The dynamics of an ‘institution’ such as the mushroom industry, ‘institutions’ within ‘institutions’ such as individual farms, marketing groups, or compost firms must be placed within that framework. We are talking also about the agency of ‘institutions’. The same applies to ‘institutions’ such as SIPTU or MRCI. ‘Institutions’ are considered here as sets of social relations, or *patterns* of social interaction that are consistent and stable over a period of time, although at another level institutions are changing and dynamic.³¹

To understand how power acts we have to see it in practice, in the interaction between social groups and individuals with power differentials and different interests. The kind and degree of ‘powerlessness’ amongst the migrant mushroom workers in Ireland is an important issue in this dissertation, which pursues explanation before interpretation but does not renounce the latter. James C. Scott (1985; 1990) has studied the power of the weak, chiefly in his book dealing with South-Asian peasants, *The Weapons of the Weak* (1985), and in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990). What is interesting is that he focuses on how the poor contested the power of the rich and how they did it within the same *normative frame*, the hegemonic framework within which both rich and poor operated in Sedaka, the fictional name of the location of his ethnography. Scott considers neither the frame itself, structural power, nor leadership, which is an important topic to understand in-group agency. But he offers some interesting insights.

He argues that the most subordinated classes throughout history ‘have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organised, political activity... such activity was dangerous, if not suicidal’ (1985: xv). That does not mean that class struggle did not exist, but it had to be pursued in a non-open way. Scott particularly referred to the peasantry when he wrote those lines, but it can be applied to the new working classes created in Ireland during the boom years. As we will see in chapter 4 mushroom pickers did not believe that they could afford the *luxury* of an open struggle with growers, and yet the walkout in Kilnaleck showed that it could happen. Class struggle on mushroom farms, nevertheless, was normally waged in a non-open way, in what Scott calls every-day forms of resistance. The weapons listed were ‘foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on ... [which] typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority’ (1985: xvi).

This can be applied to local mushroom pickers before migrant workers replaced them, but migrant workers were even weaker as they were complete outsiders. Unlike local

³¹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-institutions/>

pickers and growers, they were not part of the same community. Shared values, on the other hand, existed outside the local communities as manifested in struggles over rights, nationally and globally. SIPTU and MRCI were fundamental in establishing a connection with labour standards to which workers could appeal during 2006 and 2007. Growers, particularly the most efficient, made their cases within the same normative framework, the political economy of capital, which is why those growers and SIPTU could co-operate to clean up the industry (see in chapter 6).

But migrant workers' powerlessness had another dimension, as they were not acquainted with Irish unions' traditions. Even if they could appeal to workers' solidarity, labour standards, and the rights-based approach of Irish unions, they were outside the remit of unions, which also made them weak within union structures. It was because of that powerlessness that MRCI started its own mushroom campaign in 2006, not only to address migrant workers' concerns vis-à-vis employers and the state, but also vis-à-vis trade unions. Their powerlessness was never absolute, but their options were much reduced. For them it was more difficult to get the message out of their very reduced circles. They got, however, an end to the worst types of exploitation, mainly because of the reforms from the top. Isolated, they could not have achieved that. From MRCI they got back-wages, social welfare, English classes, weekends away, etc. In relation to employers, even in the worst moments, they saw underpayment and mistreatment as trade offs. After 2004, many became free to sell their labour-power to different employers; although their chances to get other jobs were reduced to those pickers who were younger and had good English, that is, a minority. Nevertheless growers got angry about it and tried to substitute Eastern Europeans free to move between jobs with Thai and Chinese workers on work permits, in a form of bonded labour (see chapter 4).

Scott wrote with regard to peasants in an economy in transition to capitalism, so his insights should be considered in that context. He says for example that, in the long run, the acts of resistance that avoided open confrontation were the most effective (1985: xvi). Through history there were not material conditions for the emancipation of the peasantry, but the same cannot be said of wagedworkers under capitalism. Even if they are employed in agriculture, the possibility of their emancipation lies in the labour movement as a whole, of which they are only a section. Scott also makes a virtue of necessity by saying that the powerless were not interested in changing the system but in working it to the minimum disadvantage (1985: xv), although later (Scott 1990) he modified that position. There are, however, many good points in his work. He, for instance, says that (1985: 34) 'The nature of resistance is greatly influenced by the

existing forms of labor control and by belief about the probability and severity of retaliation,' and if piece rates prevail, 'slowdowns cannot be chosen, but defective production, purloining of materials, etc.'

Robin Cohen (1980; In Silver 2003: 185) in a study about African workers included among acts of resistance sickness, accidents, a counter culture of drug use, and belief in supernatural solutions. They were reactions to working and living conditions that went beyond what workers could physically and mentally tolerate. In Silver's opinion (2003: 186): 'This roundaboutness and muting of open protest is a result of the weakness of the subordinate groups and the ability of the dominant groups to impose severe sanctions on those who do not obey.' Silver, on other hand, mentions the widespread drunkenness, absenteeism, and shoddy workmanship in the former Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s as cases of labour unrest, which would constitute the genesis of Perestroika, a reform from above (2003: 187).³² Therefore, the fact that workers do not display open signs of resistance cannot be taken as a sign of consent. James Scott points in that direction (1985: 324-5) when he says:

No matter how conscious members of a subordinate class may be of having gotten a raw deal, the daily pressure of making a living and the risks of open defiance are usually enough to skew the ethnographic record systematically in the direction of compliance, if not acceptance, of the inevitable. Here again, however, resignation to what seems inevitable is not the same as according it legitimacy, although it may serve just as efficiently to produce daily compliance... To prove the case for ideological support -for hegemony- one would have to supply independent evidence that the values of the subordinate class are in fact largely in accord with those of the dominant elite.

Immigrants came to Ireland because they were unemployed or underemployed in their countries of origin, and therefore came to meet *their own needs*. It was not all about the needs of capital. The 'trade off' that migrants make when they accept substandard working conditions does not mean consent, as we will see. Therefore, an open conflict can start suddenly and unexpectedly, like the walkout in Kilnaleck in January 2006. If there had been consent for *exploitation*, the walkout would never have taken place.

Hyman (1975: 187) notices higher rates of accidents, absence, and turnover among low-skilled and low-paid workers, while higher-skilled groups tend to manifest their grievances in open, collective, and organised conflict such as strikes, overtime bans, and go-slows. For Hyman (1975: 189), 'Unorganised conflict is not normally part of a deliberate strategy to remedy the source of grievance; indeed it may well derive from a

³² This constitutes an interesting alternative explanation to the fall of the Soviet Union. The economic inefficiency that has been attributed to the Soviet Union would not be an inherent feature of the system but the product of class struggle.

generalised sense of dissatisfaction rather than consciousness of a specific grievance, and so maybe not be conceived as industrial conflict at all.’ Hidden, unorganised *acts of resistance* and *industrial conflicts* may not be the same thing, but it is difficult not to consider the spontaneous walkout in Kilnaleck as industrial conflict, a form of class struggle, unless industrial conflict is defined in a very narrow way, as Hyman does. But still Hyman takes for granted what constitutes ‘consciousness of a specific grievance’. Scott (1990: 194-95), for instance, mentions that Marx considered the theft of wood in forests by peasants in Germany in the 1800s as a form of class struggle (it could qualify as industrial conflict if it took place in a workplace). The ruling class had deprived peasants of access to natural resources that used to be free. Peasants did not challenge the ban by open rebellion but by taking what used to belong to them. As it had become illegal and an open challenge was not seen as an option, it had to be done in the cover of night, or, in any case, anonymously. Theft was class struggle. Scott (1990: 183) argues:

For a social science attuned to the relatively open politics of liberal democracies and to loud, headline-grabbing protests, demonstrations, and rebellions, the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups is, like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum. That it should be invisible, as we have seen, is in large part by design – a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power.

Scott (1990: 198) studies mainly the disguised aspects and *infrapolitics* of resistance at three levels: everyday resistance to material appropriation of surplus, the symbolic and ritual aspects of resistance, and the subculture of resistance (ideology). Resistance, according to Scott, has normally been the object of academic studies when it develops into open conflicts. Scott’s point is that we cannot make sense of the form taken by (and causes of) open conflicts if we do not know anything about the hidden and covered ongoing everyday resistance, about its ‘hidden transcript’. Rick Fantasia (1988: 7) gives a classical example of the limitations of most surveys on workers’ consciousness. A study about workers in a car plant in Luton, England, found that class-consciousness was non-existent, workers were happy with their wages, and had no important grievances. However, a week after the results of the survey were published, when workers also knew about the profits made by the company, thousands of workers stopped working and tried to storm the company’s office. The problem, according to Fantasia (1988: 6, 8), is when consciousness is considered as fixed and static rather than dynamic and the product of struggle.

As I have argued, Scott does not deal with structural power, although it is somehow assumed and even mentioned as the appropriation of surplus (the material aspect of domination); it just falls outside the scope of his work. Chapters 2 to 4 deal with

structural and tactical power in the mushroom industry and the resistance of workers, which we can grasp by looking at the constant revolutionising of the means of production and the organisation of production. Silver (2003: 19), for instance, interprets Marx's *Capital, Volume 1*, 'as a history of the dialectic between workers' resistance to exploitation at the point of production and the efforts of capital to overcome that resistance...' Throughout chapters 2 to 4 we will see that the labour question was the key issue in the different structural transformations undergone by the mushroom industry. In chapter 5, we will see that it was also the most important issue for Monaghan Mushrooms Ltd, the largest company in the mushroom industry in Ireland and in Europe, to the point that the company waged a merciless war, sometimes open and sometimes hidden, against its workers for over a decade until the union branch was destroyed, and working conditions and income brought to the lowest level allowed by labour legislation in Ireland.

The first part of this dissertation tries also to provide an explanation of why jobs in the mushroom industry were low-paid and low-skilled, below the minimum standards that labour regulation allowed, and why mushroom workers were one of the most vulnerable sectors of the Irish working class. The first step in that direction will consist in an analysis of capital and labour relations that will include the labour process and the labour market within a framework that can be called *commodity chain analysis*. The Irish mushroom commodity chain was neither a separate economic, nor political entity, but there were structural issues peculiar to the mushroom industry that determined a particular framework for capital-labour relations in this sector. Chapters 2 to 4, at a broader level, deal with the political economy of capital in the mushroom industry, paying attention to the agency of employers and capitalists. There was not homogeneity among these agents. If we speak of classes, we had growers, some of whom were capitalists but others who were not, but market agents, manufacturers and industrialists, creditors, and retailers. The network was international and interlinked with other commodity chains. The state as a political agent played an important role in the configuration of this commodity chain by giving grants, technical advice, and funding research. Economics and politics cannot be separated.

The agency of labour is dealt with in the second part of the dissertation. Here we also need an understanding of structural and tactical power. In the first instance, unions operated within the hegemonic framework of the political economy of capital, which in Ireland led to a social partnership between labour and capital (chapter 5). The model of trade unionism that SIPTU followed was heavily influenced by around 20 years of

partnership deals and could be defined as *business* and *service unionism*, although I prefer to characterise it as *partnership unionism* to highlight its particularism. To reverse the trends of loss of market power and *race to the bottom*, which were shared with unions in the US and the UK, SIPTU tried to apply an ‘organising’ model of trade unionism in the mushroom industry campaign during 2006 and 2007. Contradictions surfaced in this pilot campaign between the interests and dynamics of the union as an institution and its members, particularly the new workers that SIPTU was trying to recruit and organise. MRCI, for its part, tried a more proper organising model (which will be explained in chapters 6 and 7) with scarce resources and limited capacity trying to create a worker centre modelled in the US experience (see chapters 7 and 8). MRCI tried to address both the problems of migrant workers versus their employer, but also versus the unions. MRCI, however, as an ‘institution’ ruled by a non-elected board of directors and funded by donors, had also its own interests. Contradictions emerged between mushroom workers, members of MWSG-AgWA, and the priorities and habits of MRCI.

The final aspect, analysed chiefly in chapter 8, is leadership. Scott deals with leadership only in passing and in general to dismiss it with sarcastic references to the Leninist concept of the vanguard of the proletariat, usually in footnotes. For example, he mentions that the idea of consent from below is particularly ‘comforting’ for Leninists, since a working class developing in a spontaneous way the ideology that could lead to its own emancipation would make problematic the role of the Leninist party (Scott 1990: 86 fn). In his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott tends to be more constructive, but *leaders* for him tend to be those who propagate ideas that already match peasants’ or workers’ experiences of oppression, making them aware that they are more generalised than they could have imagined. The places to propagate and discuss such ideas (popular subversive sub-culture and shared stories of oppression and fantasies of revenge) were in the pub, in the tavern, at the market place, etc. His discussion on the Diggers and the Levellers during the English Civil War illustrates his idea of leadership. In relation to Winstanley, the ideological spokesman of the Diggers, he says (1990: 226), ‘He merely tapped the popular energy implicit in a set of beliefs and practices hitherto denied full expression.’ So for Scott leadership is largely unproblematic. Sandro (2001: 213-14) reveals the false dichotomy in which Scott is trapped,

If the spontaneous working-class movement is equated with the economic base and social-democratic consciousness with the superstructure, then Lenin’s thesis amounts

to a voluntarist reversal of the Marxist primacy of the base: revolution is no longer grounded in a materialist analysis of class relations and becomes instead the expression of the will of the conscious revolutionary intellectuals. These categories provide little conceptual space in which to grasp the phenomena of leadership: revolution is accomplished either by the working class or by the vanguard party; either the working class spontaneously generates a consciousness of its revolutionary vocation or the self-professed vanguard of revolutionary intellectuals substitutes itself for this spontaneous process.

That dichotomy is the antithesis of dialectical thinking, and Scott just chooses the first term of the dichotomy, which is why leadership is not an issue for him. His rebels do not need formal organisations or leaders in the everyday struggles in which they are engaged, although they are part of a coordinated struggle based on networks articulated by a ‘hidden transcript’, a popular subculture, and a shared experience of material appropriation of surplus by the elites. When the ‘hidden transcript’ becomes public because the elites show weakness, signalled by making concessions, then ‘practical failure’ to comply with the practices and rituals of domination (everyday resistance) can turn into mass ‘declared refusal’ to comply, which might lead to insurgency, riots, and open rebellion if the *break in the wall* is wide enough. The role of leadership is not considered in the case of open conflict either.

That account has its merits and points to aspects not previously considered, as has been argued above, but the role of leadership can and should be integrated with it. The problem with Scott is not that he does not deal with leadership but that he brushes it off with a few sarcastic comments. There are reasons why leadership must be taken into account. Alan Johnson (2001), for example, considers the role of leadership relevant in relation to two aspects: the unevenness in the consciousness of the emancipatory subject and the need for generalship to defeat an organised adversary. Ganz (2000) explains the success of the United Farm Workers organising agriculture workers in California, where other unions with more resources had failed, by the role played by leadership in creating effective strategies, which Ganz puts in terms of ‘strategic capacity’, and adds (2001: 1011):

Environmental changes may generate opportunities for social movements to emerge, but the outcomes and legacies of such movements have far more to do with strategies actors devise to turn these opportunities to their purposes – thus reshaping their environment.

The role of leadership becomes particularly salient in chapters 6 and 8, where the outcomes of SIPTU and MRCI campaigns are described and analysed.

Workers against institutions

I have chosen for this dissertation the title ‘workers against institutions’ because I think that it reflects the constant struggle between the two political economies (labour and capital) within the mushroom industry as well as within the institutions of the working class. The word ‘against’ can be taken in different ways: at *war*, in *opposition*, or just as *contrast*. On the other hand, it is not the same to be *against* an employer as to be *against* a trade union official or a NGO social worker. But as institutions, unions tend to develop interests that depart from those of the workers that they represent, or to represent the interests of some groups of workers rather than the interests of the whole working class. That dialectical relationship exists always at different levels between the bureaucracies of workers’ organisations (as not all unions are bureaucratic), even those democratically elected, and the rank-and-file, at least in the context of the hegemonic political economy of capital.

David Mosse (2006) introduces us to a controversy in which anthropologists can get involved when undertaking ethnographies of *institutions*. A draft of his book about a development project in western India triggered a long controversy with his informants, international experts and project managers, on the grounds that the book would ‘seriously damage the professional reputation of individuals and institutions, and would harm work among poor tribals in India’ (2006: 935). Subsequently, those affected by the criticism contained in the draft tried to stop its publication unless the author carried out a substantial rewriting of the ‘negative’ aspects. This controversy highlights some of the problems that ‘insider ethnographies’ of institutions can present, particularly when the ‘reputation’ (public face) of institutions and individuals working for them is involved. Mosse argues that the success of a development project is based on its ability to continue recruiting support. Development interventions, on the other hand, are driven by the exigencies of organisations (2006: 939-940). This constitutes an aspect of the relationship between the interest of institutions and the interest of the people who are receiving benefits through the interventions of these institutions.

This dissertation can provoke adverse and defensive reactions from union officials and community workers that have tried to recruit and organise migrant mushroom workers. I do not expect that reaction from workers. Siding with the workers can also mean having to face workers’ organisations as institutions that may not advance the interests of the working class as a whole, particularly the weaker segments, or do not do it in a way that help workers’ self-emancipation, which is the intention of this work. A paper about SIPTU’s campaign in the mushroom industry between 2006 and 2007 that I

presented at the International Labour Process Conference in Dublin in March 2008 (Arqueros-Fernández 2009) caused very negative reactions on the part of some top union officials, although others took it in a constructive way. Some saw it as a breach of trust on my part (as I had been seen as a friend of the union) and as an attack on the union that could only benefit employers. Kate Bronfenbrenner (2008: 215) indicated that US unions, even if they generally are not running comprehensive organising campaigns, in spite the increasing number of studies on strategies that work, were at least paying independent researchers to assess critically what unions do, to help them do it better. An independent critical voice, which attempts to help the weakest section of the working class on the way to their emancipation, should not harm the institutions that represent workers, at least not the institutions that aspire to be truly representative of workers' interests in a non-sectional way.

In the cases studied in this dissertation, mushroom workers did not elect any of those who became their representatives. These workers had felt powerless in relation to their employers, and normally could only assent, accept and consent. Trade unions also looked distant to them. MRCI achieved important results for the workers (for example in terms of back wages, etc.), but on behalf of these workers and chiefly from the point of view of MRCI, as we will see in chapter 8. Members of the MSWG-AgWA did not even try to challenge MRCI leadership because of their awareness that MRCI had the resources and they had none. However, I do not view the opposition between workers and workers' institutions at the same level as the opposition with employers. MRCI tried its best, had the best intentions, and did a very good job in general. Saying that, a critique must be made, not to negate some of the very good work that has been done but to make a contribution to the body of knowledge that already exists on union renewal, and to help the struggles of the powerless. After all, *the road to hell is paved with good intentions*.

Methodology

The findings of a study are greatly affected by the way in which it is conducted. A study based on interviews is likely to miss essential information that can only be captured by research carried out following the method of participant observation. In other words, there are insights that do not depend on the good analytical abilities and intelligence of the researcher. The reason is that what a person says in an interview and what he or she does can be contradictory. Interviews reflect partial, ossified opinions, frozen in time. The point of view, theoretical background, and goals and interests of the researcher

must also be taken into account. Methods, on the other hand, are neither neutral (ideology free) nor independent from viewpoints.

Brendan MacPartlin (2008: 99) makes the claim that SIPTU had organised 400 workers (out of 900) in the mushroom industry (we can guess, as he does not say it, that is by the end of 2007) and expected to have 600 organised in the near future. As he does not mention his source, we could assume that maybe he had first-hand knowledge, but that does not seem to be the case; his research did not include fieldwork. In the reference list, he includes Noel Dowling, SIPTU National Organiser (interviewed on 9 November 2007), among the people he interviewed. We, again, can guess that Dowling gave MacPartlin those figures. A further fact is that the four people interviewed for his article, 'The Organising Union', were all top union officials. MacPartlin probably means 'recruitment' when he talks about 'organising', but as this dissertation shows in chapter 6 there were not even workers recruited at the end of 2007. He is clear about his method when he says at the beginning of the article that this is based on 'interviewing some key actors and from primary documents' (2008: 83), but he is not as explicit about his point of view, or ideology. His (ideological) approach, however, can be deduced from his method. He argues in the article the point of view of top trade union officials, which is understandable since he only interviewed them. The 'organising' model that SIPTU was trying to adopt comes from unions in the US and UK, which in turn, as we will see in chapter 6, has been implemented from the top and has produced some good results, but again depending on the point of view we take to evaluate them. But MacPartlin treats the issues of method and ideology in an unproblematic way. He is not alone in that.

A recent work on 'organising' migrant workers in Ireland (Gonzalez-Perez *et al.* 2009) follows MacPartlin's method. The authors held interviews with key policy-makers, top union officers, and migrant workers. In their opinion, work towards the article involved an ethnographic approach (participant observation) because one of the authors was employed over a period of six months in the 'Diversity at Work Network Project', funded by the European Social Fund and the European Union Equal Initiative. But again the opinions of top trade union officials about the obstacles to organise migrant workers are the only ones represented. The same can be said about another article about unions and migrant workers in Ireland by Torben Kring (2006).³³

At the level of theory, I draw on more critical authors for an alternative approach.

³³ Lopez (2005) found out, through participant observation, that bad attitudes towards unions from workers were in part unions' fault.

Most of them were activists themselves: Moody (1997, 2007), Clawson (2003), Lopez (2004), Tait (2005), Cohen (2006), and Yates (2009) just to mention recent critical analyses. What they have in common is that they all deal exclusively with the US labour movement (with the exception of Moody, 1997; for the UK and Ireland see Gall 2009), and that they draw their inspiration from the struggles of poor workers: union renewal strategies based on methods and ideas applied by the weakest segments of workers and their organisations to fight for what higher-paid workers in traditional unions took for granted during the ‘golden era’ (post World War II).

Action Research

The methodology followed in this dissertation, as I have said, is not neutral; it corresponds to the approach that I take at the level of ideas. It is broadly called ‘action research’, and more particularly ‘emancipatory action research’. It could also be considered under the broad term ‘public anthropology’.

It was the US anthropologist Sol Tax who first publicly used the methodology of ‘action anthropology’ in 1951 in his fieldwork among Native Americans. He said (Tax 1975), ‘We do not conceive of ourselves as simply observing what would happen ‘naturally’; we are willing to make things happen’; The action anthropologist, he also said, ‘wants to help a group of people to solve a problem, and he wants to learn something in the process’. He differentiated action anthropology from applied anthropology by saying that the action anthropologist can have no master, meaning management, government, administrator, or organisation: ‘Community research is thus justifiable only to the degree that the results are imminently useful to the community and easily outweighs the disturbance to it.’ Tax, on the other hand, tried to impose restrictions to action research since for him it did not consist in applying knowledge to a practical social problem; it was not social work (1975: 516). This conclusion came after considering that the researcher is in a position of power and undue influence, therefore restricting the freedom of the people he or she observes, which can lead to empirically wrong studies (ibid.). The psychologist Kurt Lewin, the first to use the term ‘action research’ in 1946, however, considered that ‘action research’ was problem solving oriented (in Lopes 2005). Tax, however, had a point: the people studied must be allowed to make their own decisions from their own point of view. In that way the researcher can help them to do it. Later we will see (chapter 8) that a union organiser should play the same role in relation to workers. But this also means that the roles of the action anthropologist and the activist might be incompatible in Tax’s view. The answer to this

dilemma consists in asking who are the people to whom the anthropologist answers. Tax clearly said that the action anthropologist does not serve the government or other institutions with vested interests, but he does not say either that he must answer to the people he is studying. Tax only mentioned in passing that the action anthropologist works as a member of the academic community. That is then the community to which he has to answer.

Ana Lopes' (2005), in her PhD thesis on sex workers, uses as her methodology 'emancipatory action research', which allows her to go further than Tax: 'The action aim is to enable and empower people to take strategic and effective action to improve their lives and liberate themselves from oppression.' It goes beyond other types of 'action research' because the researcher is close to going native, and turning into a fully-fledged activist answering only to the community he or she also researches. Between the academic community and the community where the research is carried out, which master does one serve? In the light of the present discussion, the contradiction here is not between the activist and the researcher, but between the activist and the academic, understood as a member, primarily, of an academic community. That contradiction is reflected in the final result: the written dissertation. The audience is academia. Negotiations take place, a compromise is reached, and concessions are made. The result will be a hybrid.

Sandy Smith-Nonini (2009) conducted research about migrant workers and union struggles. The subjects were migrant agricultural workers and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) organisers in North Carolina. She called her approach 'critical ethnography', which aims at addressing 'processes of injustice'. It is critical because the researcher is aligned with 'a specific political position' in order to expose the effects of domination and offer alternatives (2009: 115). So the anthropologist takes the side of the powerless. She also struggled with the contradiction between her role as workers' advocate and as an academic. Her collaboration with FLOC made her the object of criticism when she submitted a research proposal to the Sage Foundation in 2007. On the other hand, she did not publish any analysis on internal union affairs while the union was in the middle of an organising campaign, but also refused to give editorial control to the union on the book that she intended to publish on that organising campaign (2009: 125). She considered it more valuable for the workers and the unions to produce a book according to her own criteria. But who was the intended audience? She did not say.

Fieldwork

When I started to think about the initial goals of my research, I put forward a plan consisting of (1) tracing how the modern mushroom industry had developed in Ireland (South), particularly in Monaghan, the county with the highest number of mushroom farms; (2) what political communities, classes, it had created; (3) the connection between the relatively local development of a particular industry and larger political, economic and institutional processes. The general purpose of the research project was to situate political behaviour and ideas, of the different classes that made up the mushroom industry, in relation to local and global economic processes. At a more general level it implied a study of the relation between structure and agency in a particular agricultural sector. At a more concrete level my concern was to understand and explain the increasing class polarisation between farmers and agricultural and retail capital, on the one hand, and farmers and agricultural labourers, on the other. In my BA thesis in 2003 I had studied the social exclusion of migrant agricultural labourers, mostly from Morocco, in the Spanish horticultural industry of Almería after the racist riots of February 2000. In Ireland, the mushroom industry, with a labour force made up mainly of migrant Eastern European workers, presented some parallels. The human drama in both cases was the return, in appearance, of nineteenth-century forms of exploitation to 21st century Europe.

I began with some interviews of government officials and technical advisors from Bord Bia, Teagasc, and Commercial Mushroom Producers (CMP). Thanks to these interviews I was invited to participate in the spring of 2005 in the farm walks of the TEAGASC-CMP Farm Monitor programme set up by the Mushroom Task Force (Department of Agriculture and Food 2004). A grower taking part in the Farm Monitor Programme agreed to take me for some work experience between August and November 2005. That work experience consisted in picking mushrooms, helping out in the office, copying and organising crop record charts, and hanging around, which allowed me to meet some growers who visited the farm and some of the workers; although the language barrier (I was not a fluent Russian speaker) proved to be a permanent handicap during my fieldwork.

I also visited and talked to some SIPTU officials in Liberty Hall, who put me in touch with union officials in Cavan and Monaghan. I offered to do voluntary work as an intern with SIPTU but they did not take me on. At that time SIPTU officials had no knowledge about the mushroom industry, although some mushroom workers had already asked for help in some local branches and, from time to time, some mushroom pickers called in to

make enquiries about their rights and entitlements. SIPTU had a branch in the central packhouse of Monaghan Mushrooms in Tyholland, Co. Monaghan, and in the company's compost yards, but they were regarded as undifferentiated workplaces. These branches were not even taken into account during SIPTU's mushroom industry campaign in 2006-2007. I also offered several times to work as an intern in MRCI when I learned that they were in touch with a group of mushroom pickers from County Mayo, but the offer was not accepted. Later, in January 2006, I joined the Mushroom Workers Support Group (MWSG).

In Monaghan town, where I lived between August 2005 and November 2006, I joined a migrant support group organised by the local churches, but dealing only with asylum seekers. So I gave that up after a couple of months. I also worked as a volunteer for a couple of months in the autumn-winter of 2005 in the Citizen Information Centre in Monaghan town, but very few migrant workers visited it. Much more productive was my participation in the MWSG between January 2006 and September 2007; I got to know the work of MRCI and the workers who joined.

After the first few months of fieldwork in 2005 the focus of my research turned towards what I came to understand as the two major structural changes that the mushroom industry had undergone between the 1970s and the 2000s, particularly with an eye to the role of food and labour standards. But at the beginning of 2006 the underpayment and mistreatment of migrant workers in mushroom farms came to the attention of the mass media. These events refocused the priority of my research, leading to the study of SIPTU and MRCI organising campaigns in the mushroom industry and issues of leadership and intragroup politics.

From the beginning I had in mind to gain political understanding of organisational, technological, and structural transformations. As William Roseberry argues (1983: 119), social and economic changes are political because they are contradictory, non-mechanical and non-predetermined, so we have to pay attention to agency. A political economic understanding, on the other hand, pays attention to unequal distributions of power and consists ultimately in a class-based analysis of social, economic, and political processes. A purely political understanding would be one-sided.

Power and Suspicion³⁴

During the course of fieldwork I interviewed workers and workers' representatives,

³⁴ This subtitle and the content of this section are inspired by a session organized at the 11th EASA Biennial Conference (2010) by Virtudes Téllez-Delgado and José Mapril, 'What are you really doing here? Suspicion and the politics of ethnography.'

growers and government officials, but the interviews were mainly a means to getting in touch with workers and growers in a more informal and regular way. Fieldwork going back and forth between different social classes, however, proved to be a difficult task. The first contacts were with government officials, technical experts, and growers. The industry was not under the scrutiny of the media, unions, and migrant groups at the time, but growers were not complying, as we are going to see, with the Employment Regulation Order (Agricultural Workers Joint Labour Committee). The most glaring breach was failing to pay the Minimum Wage for Agricultural Workers. A top government official that I interviewed at the beginning of my research denied that workers were paid below the minimum wage. He also complained that many growers were getting lower incomes than their workers: they were the ones who were exploited, he said. A Garda immigration officer in Monaghan also denied underpayment. He claimed to know growers personally and was sure that workers made at least €10 per hour. But during the first month of my fieldwork growers and experts also admitted that ‘sometimes’ workers did not get the minimum wage because they were too slow or because growers could not afford to pay it. At that time I took part in a conversation between a mushroom technical advisor and a grower after which the advisor explained, at my request, that they could not put in writing the hours worked beside wages because that would constitute evidence that the minimum wage was not paid. Suspicion on the part of growers and technical advisors about my work and my intentions were, therefore, the norm. I tried surveys on the phone and face-to-face interviews but except in a few cases there was a wall that separated them from me and restricted my access to inside information. I will illustrate it with a single case.

An advisor working for TEAGASC used to ask me with a glint in his eyes, almost any time we met, what I was after. My usual reply, to him and to others, was that I was doing research on the social and economic history of the mushroom industry in Ireland, particularly the structural transformation that gave birth to the satellite system, etc. When he learnt that I was an anthropologist, he started wondering what anthropology was about. One day he asked me again and, listening to what I had to say, he said that he had learnt that anthropologists studied African tribes, took pictures, and made films of natives, and back in their universities had a laugh at them with their colleagues showing those pictures and films. ‘Is that what you want to do with us? Show us in your university and have a laugh at us?’ I explained that it was not my purpose to do that, but he had a point. His suspicion, I guessed, was that I was going to show the inside, guts, and secrets of the industry in public. Most growers plainly said that they were not

interested in talking to me; others were too busy. Another advisor thought that most growers would not talk to me because they did not know me; my foreign accent, he agreed, did not help.

My relation with growers also raised suspicions among workers at the beginning of my research, although they were easier to overcome. A mushroom picker on the farm where I was carrying out fieldwork said to other workers that I was going around asking questions about wages and working conditions. I had interviewed her before I started working on the farm, and later she became unsure about the purpose of my enquiries. Plainly, she feared that I could tell the employer. Another worker, who had been talking to me quite freely, asked me, alarmed, about the purpose of my 'work' when she heard the gossip about me. I said that I was doing research and asking questions, but for College, not for the grower, and that I was on the side of the workers and would not reveal anything to him. A third worker was more difficult to convince about my real intentions. I had met her several times in a pub to talk about her work. The third time we met she looked worried, and I asked, 'are you ok?' She replied, 'I'm not ok. My sister has told me that I shouldn't tell you anything because we all might get into trouble.' I could not convince her that I would not get them into trouble, so I decided to tell her something about me that if she told the grower it would get me into trouble too. I was trying to be in an equal relation with her, so I confessed that I had put up around the town the posters she had already seen calling mushroom workers for a meeting in Monaghan town, which MRCI was organising. This confession re-established trust between the two of us. A friend of hers, wondering about the purpose of my research, and what anthropology could be about, said, 'you are trying to know what is going on in the picker's mind.' All this made me aware of the unequal relation between the *researcher* and the *researched*, and the vulnerability of the latter. The question was the use I wanted to make of the data that I was collecting, what class interests, to say it plainly, I wanted to advance. The suspicion would never go away, but some, like the mushroom growers, had more to hide, or more to lose. In situations of economic and political oppression the oppressed are normally more willing to talk than the oppressors, unless they are afraid of the consequences. Fear in that case is the reason to keep the mouth shut to the enquiries of outsiders. In the end, it came to how I was categorised, whether as 'us' or as 'them'.

After my focus shifted to the organising campaigns of SIPTU and MRCI, my enquiries also shifted from the relation between growers and workers (labour and capital in a more general way) to the relation between workers and their representatives.

I noticed reluctance on the part of the most forthcoming members of the MWSG to join SIPTU. They believed that the union had to show first that it was worth joining, that it could really help workers solve their problems. They already had doubts about SIPTU. In one case, the story went that some mushroom workers had gone to a county branch to ask for help and local officers had told them that they could not do anything for them. It looked like, on the other hand, that MRCI and the workers were on the same side. But contradictions started to appear and workers were not willing to bring them to light at the meetings. I did not know what they *really* thought about MRCI. In the initial meetings I had argued that it would be very positive to join SIPTU and some had asked me whether I was from SIPTU. They also saw me as close to MRCI. It was not until the end of my fieldwork that I gained enough trust to know that some of them did not identify themselves with MRCI, and that there were critics of its work. This is analysed in chapter 8. Unequal relations, although at a different level than that between employers and workers, could be identified in the relation between workers and their institutions. They affected the way fieldwork could be carried out and they constituted as well some of the issues that this dissertation studies.

Part I: The Political Economy of Capital

The revolutionising of agriculture is setting in train a remorseless chase. Its participants are whipped on and on until they collapse exhausted – aside from a small number of especially aggressive and thrusting types who manage to clamber over the bodies of the fallen and join the ranks of the chief whippers, the big capitalists.

Karl Kautsky, *The Agrarian Question*, 1899

2. The Irish Mushroom Industry in transition

This chapter deals with the origins, development over time, and fall of the mushroom satellite growing system in the Republic of Ireland, chiefly from 1980 to 2006. This system represented a temporary and transitional structure between the large mechanised tray farm before the 1980s and the return of large-scale horticultural production to the mushroom sector in the 2000s. In the 1990s prices fell with the increasing number of growers in Ireland, the competition with Dutch mushroom growers for the British market, the collapse of wholesale markets and competition between supermarket chains. To keep margins up, growers had to increase yields by adding new mushroom houses. In 1996, the shelf-growing system, the alternative to bags, was introduced for the first time in Ireland (Boyle *et al.* 2002:118). It consisted of houses with two or three rows of two or three shelves each, and required a higher capital investment. The standard number of mushroom houses per farm increased from three to six. At the same time that the largest mushroom group in Ireland, Monaghan Mushrooms, went into production, the satellite growing system broke down, with the remaining growers buying inputs and selling output in an open market. These structural transformations are the topic of this chapter.

Mushroom growing before the 1980s: the failure of the large tray farm

There is hardly any written information about mushroom growing in Ireland before the 1980s. We are told that the first commercial mushroom farm in the Republic of Ireland was built in Shanagarry, Co. Cork, in 1935 (Department of Agriculture and Food, DAF,

1969). In 1956 national annual output amounted to 500 metric tons, hardly the production of an average farm 50 years later. By 1965 annual output had only increased to 1,700 tons, but 7 large tray farms making their own compost produced 80 percent of mushrooms while another 22 small tray farms produced the rest (South).³⁵ 66 percent of the total production of the Irish Republic went to Britain (DAF 1969; Hinton 1982). In 1979 production had risen to 6,600 tonnes (4,762 exported to Britain) and 5 large tray farms, three of them under the same management, produced 80 percent of the total output (*The Mushroom People*, TMP, December 1985: 4-5).³⁶ As it is the case today, the Irish mushroom industry was export-oriented. The concentration of production in a small number of large farms allowed them 'to fix' the price of mushrooms in the home market (Ryan 1986: 56), but they marketed their produce individually in the British market. According to Liam Staunton (1991: 9), the disadvantages of old large wooden tray farms included:

High capital investment, difficulty in achieving a sufficient quantity of high quality produce, management problems because of their large size and high labour costs. In addition the concept of individual marketing made it difficult to penetrate the upper end of the market where quality and continuity of supply are a necessity.

According to Hinton (1982: 16) labour represented 35.8 percent of all production cost in a mechanised tray farm. A sample British tray farm with an output of 825 tonnes of mushrooms per year in 1981 employed 12 full-time men and 45 part-time regular female pickers averaging 30 hours a week. There were labour inputs such as growing, maintenance, and administration that could be greatly reduced through mechanisation and computerisation. They represented 15 percent of all costs of production in our sample farm. But picking and packing were a highly labour intensive activity that represented 20.4 percent of all production cost. To this day, harvesting for the fresh market has not been mechanised.³⁷ The sample farm also produced 150 tonnes of compost per week.³⁸

³⁵ Those seven farms were large according to standards at that time. The average yield of one of those large farms was only 194.3 tonnes per year. The average for a small farm was 15.4 tonnes. The evolution of the average production per year of farms between 1997 and 2009 is given later in this chapter.

³⁶ Cathal McCanna (TMP, April 1990: 13) said that there were only 10 tray farms and 14 bag growers in Ireland at that time.

³⁷ In the 1970s, the Dutch mushroom industry introduced mechanical harvesting. They were able to harvest up to 1,000 kg of mushrooms per hour (*TMJ*, August 1978: 250). But the quality of mushrooms harvested in that way was not suitable for the fresh market; they could only go to processing. In the 1980s and 1990s mechanical harvesters were developed for the fresh market but growers never adopted them beyond experimental levels.

³⁸ Hinton said that 150 tonnes of compost were 'laid down' each week, we can assume he was talking about a two zone tray farm in which compost was laid down in the growing rooms after

The tray farm and the labour question in Britain

Because of the lack of information about the crisis of the mushroom industry in Ireland in the 1970s, I will base this section chiefly on the impact that the crisis of the 1970s had in the British mushroom industry. Large mushroom farms were of the same type in both countries and aimed at the same market. Irish farmers were also members of the (British) Mushroom Growers Association (MGA). This crisis called into question the tray farm, not because of the quality of its produce or its productivity but because of the cost of labour³⁹, in a labour intensive industry, on top of high capital investments needed to operate these farms in an efficient way. As we have seen in the quote above, management was also seen as a troublesome cost that was later hidden as unpaid labour in the Irish satellite system.

The galloping rate of inflation in 1975 threatened the livelihoods of millions of workers across Britain, who, represented by their trade unions, started to put pressure on the government and the employers to get wage increases in order to balance up with increasing living costs. Mushroom growers had two main reasons to be worried about immediate increases in labour costs. On the one hand, wages in the mushroom industry were lower than in other economic sectors (*TMJ*, May 1975: 190), so they feared an equalisation of wages with other sectors. On the other hand, the government was due to introduce the Equal Pay Act 1970 on the first of January 1976 (*TMJ*, April 1975: 149).⁴⁰ That meant that the wages of women could not be lower than the wages of men. Mushroom pickers and packers were women to a large extent.

The lobbying capacity of the MGA was then set in motion to oppose the Act arguing that the industry was facing its most traumatic two years.⁴¹ In spite of ‘excessive wage settlements in other sections of the industry’, according to the *TMJ*, the Agricultural Wages Board (AWB) ruled ‘after prolonged opposition’ that equal pay would not apply to workers employed for thirty hours or less per working week. The wage level for part-time workers was fixed at 87.5 percent of the hourly rate of those employed for more than thirty hours (*TMJ*, Sept 1975: 301). The new rate for a full-time worker had been

being pasteurised and spawn run. But he could be also referring to phase1 compost laid down for pasteurisation. Actually, in the 1970s in Britain, it was more common to account for compost productivity in pounds per tonne of phase1 compost. Compost shrinks up to 30 percent during pasteurisation and spawn-running. That is why, among other factors, productivity (pounds per tonne) is much higher for phase3 compost – less matter produces higher yields.

³⁹ Throughout this chapter I use the term ‘labour’, which corresponds to the Marxist term ‘labour-power’.

⁴⁰ The introduction of the National Minimum Wage in Ireland (South) caused a similar uproar among Irish mushroom growers about the cost of labour.

⁴¹ This is a periodic claim in Ireland as well as in Britain.

increased by £6 per week to £36.50, but overtime rates remained at the same level. While the AWB fixed the hourly rate of full-time workers at 91.5p per hour, the hourly rate for those employed 30 or less hours per week was only 80p/h. Furthermore, the AWB also ruled that the lower rate of 80p/h would also apply to full time workers not regularly employed. A picker employed regularly by two different employers (i.e. shifted continuously between two or more farms) would be also considered a casual one.

At the end of January (*TMJ*, April 1976), Middlebrook Mushrooms (later acquired by Monaghan Mushrooms) announced that its entire 208-strong female labour force in its farm in Cromer, Norfolk, had become part-time on a 30-hour week. The company declared that the Equal Pay act had motivated their decision, and that to keep production at the same level they had to hire 45 extra workers, including school leavers. They were introducing a more flexible workforce in order to increase profits.

The ruling of the AWB reinforced a tendency that was already there. It pushed the process of putting the harvesting workforce in a more precarious situation. Aylesbury Mushrooms, for example, was a model tray farm in 1975. It held the farm-walk for the MGA conference that year. The farm employed 50 female pickers and packers, 14 full-time and 36 part-time. The sample farm we have seen above in 1981, six years later, had a fully part-time female labour force. According to the Manpower Committee of the MGA, 70 percent of all the labour employed on mushrooms in 1976 worked 30 hours or less (*TMJ*, December 1976: 425).

New regulation, however, had been introduced in the mushroom industry including the Sex Discrimination Act, the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act, the Health and Safety at Work Act, and the Employment Protection Act. This set of regulations was to some extent the product of the pressure from the trade union movement, particularly with the Labour Party in office, in a context of substandard labour conditions and wages in British agriculture, and in the mushroom industry in comparison to other sectors of the economy. Upward wages pressure and regulation worried mushroom growers, small and big alike. But it was particularly in the large farms with a large workforce where any wage increase was seen as a huge loss of money and as an unwarranted interference from a left-wing government. Growers counter-attacked and obtained concessions in terms of lower wages for part-time workers. As a result they turned their full-time pickers into part-time workers. From the point of view of workers, what was given with one hand was taken with the other.

In that context, a new production system (an alternative to the large tray farm) was

developed to offer a more attractive field for capital investment in agriculture, a system both efficient (lower costs) in quality requirements and management of labour. That development took place in Ireland rather than in Britain thanks to state research and aid, and the existence of a large and underemployed class of small farmers. That new system allowed the Irish mushroom industry to greatly increase its share in the British mushroom market at the expense of the British industry. Ever since, the British industry has been steadily losing its share of the British mushroom market.

Large tray farms in Ireland followed the model of the large mechanised British two-zone tray farms (compost, phase I, was prepared in a compost yard and then moved to the growing rooms).⁴² The rest were small tray farms on the one-zone system, pasteurising and spawn-running the compost in the growing rooms. That meant weeks of waiting or idle time for the grower and the equipment until mushrooms eventually pinned and were ready for harvesting. Most farms prepared their compost with horse manure, but some growers used a mixture of pig and fowl manure, and just two were using synthetic compost (DAF 1969: 14). To better understand the way in which tray farms operated, we must understand how compost, the main input in mushroom farming, used to be prepared. This will allow us also to understand how and why the satellite system was created in Ireland. The implications are interesting because in Ireland the large tray farm was substituted with small family farms growing on bags. In Britain that shift did not take place and production started to fall from the 1980s onwards.

Composting

Composting shows the way in which non-farm capital has appropriated nearly all inputs in mushroom farming, or at least those that could be appropriated in a profitable way, and has also influenced changes in social relations in the mushroom industry. The first mushroom growers in Europe, in seventeenth century France, used to make their own compost. The process of making compost in fact did not change until after World War II. Growers inoculated horse manure compost, rich in straw, with mushroom mycelium from previous crops. But horse manure had to undergo first a period of fermentation, or composting, before it was suitable for inoculation with mycelium (*The Mushroom Journal*, TMJ, March 1979, p. 82). Composting is a biological process because of the thermophilic micro-organisms acting on it, not because straw and manure are organic

⁴² So, two-zone farms needed the use of machinery to move large trays from one zone to the other.

matter (which they are). Compost is also the soil of mushroom farming, but unlike the soil in tilling, it is prepared, used, and discharged in each different crop. A mushroom farm does not depend on the fertility of the land on which it stands: mushroom houses are built on concrete. Good composting for commercial purposes, therefore, ‘depends mainly on the technical equipment available ... [and] the construction and the technical installations of a peak-heating room’ (Vedder 1978: 214, 219).

Composting has become over time a capital-intensive activity. We can measure improvements in terms of compost productivity, kilograms or pounds of mushrooms per tonne of compost. The old process of composting consisted in manually wetting horse manure and stacking it loosely in a pile, where it fermented between 5 and 7 days. After the first week, the composter had to pull the pile apart. He had to wet it, shake it, mix it, and stack it again. The most important thing was to turn the outer parts to the interior of the pile. That was the only way to keep the compost fermenting uniformly because composting is an aerobic process. Once the grower decided that the compost was ready for spawning (inoculation with mushroom mycelium) mushroom beds were made outdoors, covered in a shed or in caves with the compost, spawned, and covered with a thin layer of, for example, marl. At present peat from bogs is more common. The last operation is known as casing. In early nineteenth century France, yields of 50 to 70 kg of mushrooms per tonne of compost, grown in caves, were considered good (Vedder 1978: 181, 184). Nowadays an average modern Irish farm (on phase III compost) achieves 700 lbs/tonne (318.18 kg/tonne).

Louis F. Lambert, a professional researcher with a scientific background and state funding developed in the 1930s in the US the modern way to make compost. In order to get all the layers of compost to ferment at the ideal temperature of 50-55°C, after the initial heating in the pile (phase I), compost had to be transferred to a special room for ‘pasteurisation’ or ‘peak-heating’ under controlled conditions (phase II) (Vedder 1978: 184-5). Yields improved in this way. During the twentieth century synthetic compost (also called straw compost), based on fresh straw and chicken manure, was also developed as an alternative to manure compost, and at present most commercial growers use it in the US and Europe.

Phase I for synthetic compost, however, takes longer, demands more skill and is more costly –independently of the cost of the raw materials – because the straw has to be softened. The pre-treatment of fresh straw also demands more labour and more skills than the sole fermentation of horse manure. Therefore synthetic compost must be prepared on a larger scale to be as cost efficient as horse manure compost (Vedder 1978:

204). The mechanisation of the process in Europe took place first in Holland, where the composting centre of the Co-operative Dutch Mushroom Growers' Association (CNC) developed a straw-processing machine for loosening up round bales of straw at a speed of 150 bales per hour in the 1980s. A fore-loader then pushed the straw into a liquid manure bath. Thus with the pre-treatment of the straw completed, another fore-loader took the straw to a trailer provided with a moving bottom chain that later emptied the straw into the manure (van As and van Dullemen 1988: 309-311).⁴³

Mechanisation of phase I did not end there. The piles of compost had to be stacked, turned and stacked again once every few days. This happened in the part of the composting yard covered with a simple roof to protect the piles against sunlight, dehydration, rain, snow and strong wind (Vedder 1978: 187). The CNC had in the 1980s a turning machine (the compost turner) with a capacity to turn and stack compost at 200 tonnes per hour. This machine could travel at a speed of 2 metres per minute through the pile. At the end of phase I, a fore-loader took the compost into the loading machine, with a capacity of 275 tonnes per hour, to transfer the compost to the lorries, ready to go into the pasteurisation tunnel for phase II (van As and van Dullemen (1988: 315).

While the way to carry out phase I compost did not differ in any growing system, phase II greatly did. The method used in tray farms consisted in taking the compost to the growing room to peak heat it there (the one-zone system) in wooden trays, which could also be done in shelves. According to MacCanna (1984: 43), this system was the most common until the 1950s. The compost was consequently spawned and cased in the same trays. A later development, after the 1950s, consisted in the introduction of peak-heating rooms (the two-zone system). Compost could achieve better quality and higher yields because the better insulation (using supplementary heating as little as possible and thus saving energy) and the better technical equipment of specialised peak heat rooms rendered a more homogeneous compost. Since the time taken by each crop in the growing rooms was shortened, the number of crops could be increased, including output.

All these technical improvements put at a severe disadvantage the one-zone way of carrying out phase II in tray farms throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and with it the smaller farms, which could not justify the capital investment needed to build special peak-heating rooms. This was particularly the case because at that time there was not a proper market for compost. Later we will see that small mushroom farms became efficient in Ireland in the 1980s when a market for phase II compost was created,

⁴³ In Holland horse manure continued to be used in large proportions till the 1990s,

although with monopolistic features. Until the late 1970s, there were just a handful of large tray farms making their own compost, and some of them would sell it (phase I) to smaller farms.

The creation of a market for compost in Holland took place nearly 20 years earlier than in Ireland, and was the product of co-operative efforts of Dutch growers, who created a co-operative to make compost in 1963, allowing in that way the expansion of a Dutch industry based on small growers. Up to that time most Dutch growers had prepared their own compost, obtaining great variability in compost quality (Gerrits 1988: 42). The creation of a market for compost in Ireland and in Holland actually helped to reverse in these countries the tendency in commercial agriculture, including mushroom growing, towards bigger farms. But as we will see later, this was going to be just a short-lived counter-tendency.

The next breakthrough was the commercial development of bulk pasteurisation in the 1970s in Italy and the Netherlands. Pasteurisation of compost in bulk, in specially designed tunnels, opened the way for the creation of a market for compost phase II, and later phase III. According to Vedder (1978: 224-5) bulk pasteurisation (and spawn-running in bulk to prepare phase III compost, or spawn run-compost) was a more rational method of peak-heating and mycelium growth than the peak-heating and mycelium growth in trays or shelves. He pointed out that the difference between air and compost temperature would not diverge more than 3°C in a well-equipped tunnel for peak-heating in bulk, while in traditional peak-heating tray rooms it could diverge up to 15°C. Another point was that filling, emptying and spawning could be mechanised with less capital costs. It required only front-loaders and conveyor belts as opposed to the more costly mechanised filling line used in the tray system. According to Tschierpe (*TMJ*, 1977: 410) the investment in machinery in a bulk composting operation processing 100 tons of phase I per week would be £41,000, while in a tray farm it would be between £82,000 and £102,000. Finally, the beds in the growing rooms could be filled at their optimum capacity (i.e. 90-100 kg per m²), because during Phase II and Phase III compost shrinks – by 25 % during pasteurisation and 8% during spawn-run (Vedder 1978: 253).

But the real advantage of composting in bulk was the market for compost that it allowed to create, allowing the renaissance of the small farm. Phase II compost could be bagged, used to make blocks, or to fill trays and shelves. Two weeks after mushroom houses had been filled with phase II compost (the spawn-running period), casing took place, and two weeks later mushrooms started to pin. In the case of phase III, compost

was already spawn-run and ready for casing. So, growing rooms were left idle for only two weeks. In some large farms in France, compost beds are stored in special rooms for those last two weeks and then taken to picking parlours. They call it phase IV. The development of bulk composting and the creation of a phase II compost market took place first in Holland in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Van As and Van Dullemen (1988: 309), 'the small scale on which the average Dutch grower operated meant that, making his own compost was a big, unprofitable chore.' Gerard Derks (*TMJ*, 1984: 65) set out the rule for capital investment: 'when the saving of labour equals the cost of depreciation and interest, then the unit is too small to justify the investment.'

The process of concentration and centralisation has reached its peak, however, in the production of mushroom spawn. In the US, spawn companies, which are vertically integrated international corporations, own compost operations and large farms. The next section deals with that topic, fundamental in understanding the structural transformations that the mushroom industry underwent in Ireland.

The Irish spawn market and its international connections

Since the days of Matruchot, Ferguson, Lambert, and Sinden the quasi family-based small spawn laboratories have developed into a few multinational corporations that control most of the world spawn market for commercial growing. Ireland's only spawn plant, Sylvan Ireland, is located in Navan town and was set up in 1987 as International Spawn Ltd. It produced its first batch of spawn in March 1988 with Joe Mulligan, a grower from Mullahoran, Co. Cavan, as the first to harvest mushrooms with spawn produced by this company in May 1989 and inoculated in a compost yard of Monaghan Mushrooms (O'Rourke 1990: 4). Until then, Irish compost producers had been importing all mushroom spawn from European suppliers.

Mel O'Rourke, one of the founders of this plant, and its general manager until recently, saw the market opportunity around 1985. He believed, after doing some market research, that the Irish mushroom industry was expanding, but he also found out that to develop a functional mushroom strain could take years, a lot of scientific knowledge and expertise, and, ultimately, a lot of money. 'Developing a new strain could be compared to breeding a Derby winner', he wrote (O'Rourke 1990: 4). Therefore, he contacted L.F. Lambert Spawn Co., located in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. He had had negotiations as well with Campbell Soups, another U.S. spawn manufacturer. After testing several Lambert strains in Kinsealy Horticultural Research Institute in Dublin, O'Rourke chose the strain that he considered the most

adequate for the Irish market, and signed an agreement with L.F. Lambert to access their expertise and get the license to use their mushroom strains.

Still, O'Rourke needed a high capital investment to build the plant, acquire the necessary equipment and expertise to make spawn. He sent a microbiologist from Cork, Frank Cogan, to Kennet Square to get some training in how to manipulate Lambert inoculum. Cogan became the first Technical Director of the company. O'Rourke also made an application for the initial capital investment to the Industrial Development Agency (IDA) (O'Rourke 1989: 32). The agreement was that the inoculum would be sent to Navan from Lambert laboratories in the US. Staff in Navan then had to regenerate and grow this inoculum onto a nutrient base before they transferred it onto millet grains, which acted as mycelium carriers and nutritional sources. The grains had been previously boiled, cooled and mixed with gypsum to increase PH levels and prevent the grains adhering to each other. Then the mixture had to be put into glass bottles, sealed and sterilised. Vedder (1978: 229) considers that the bottles had to be sterilised at about 120°C for over an hour. Inside the bottles the mycelium was left to colonise the grains at 23°C. The bottles had to be turned to facilitate colonisation and checked for infections at regular intervals. On completion of that process, which according to Vedder (1978: 229) lasted 2-3 weeks, the bottles went into a cold room (2°C). There, the spawn was packed into plastic bags, and remained until it was distributed to compost producers.

Mel O'Rourke set up the spawn plant in Navan as International Spawn Ltd, but Sylvan Inc, the principal competitor of Lambert Spawn in the USA, acquired it in 1998 and modernised it in 1999.⁴⁴ The company then changed its name to Sylvan Ireland, and became a subsidiary of Sylvan Inc as a part of its European division. I visited the plant in Navan in May 2005 and took the guided tour. We started in the 'dirty' room, from where chalk, rye grains, and hot water were pumped up to a 300 cubic feet, V-shaped blender in a different room. I noticed that the room was spotlessly clean and tidy, and inquired why they called it 'dirty'. My two guides smiled, and I thought that most visitors asked, with surprise, the same question:

We call it the 'dirty' room because it really is if you compare it to the rooms we are going to show you in a few minutes. As we move from one compartment to another, hygienic conditions increase to ensure that no fungus or bacteria interfere with the mycelium.

In the next room, the mixture was heated and sterilised at 120°C for a couple of hours in

⁴⁴ www.sylvaninc.com

the blender. The guides said that when the mixture had cooled down, the staff plugged into the blender a little tank with the inoculum. For the next twenty-four hours the blender rotated, mixing the inoculum with the mixture of chalk and grains. In the next stage of the production cycle, staff had to connect a drop-tube to the blender and transfer the spawn to the 'clean room'. According to my guides, the blender produced in one cycle of 24 hours a batch of spawn capable of filling 72 mushroom houses. Since they also said that the blender had a capacity to produce 360 nine-litre boxes of spawn, and each box could fertilise 4 tonnes of spawn, I later thought that Sylvan reckoned that the average mushroom house in Ireland had a capacity for 20 tonnes of compost. But I also made more calculations. If the blender worked at full capacity, it could produce spawn to fertilise around 525,600 tonnes of compost per year. That was a lot considering that growers from the Republic of Ireland had consumed only 274,548 tonnes of compost in 2004 (TEAGASC mushroom census). Sylvan, according to my guides, had a 70 percent share of the Irish market for spawn in 2004. Taking into consideration that the total staff in the plant amounted to only 18 workers, the productivity per worker was really high compared to production of compost, or, at the lower end, compared to harvesting. Spawn manufacturing was a very high capital-intensive activity.

After the blender, the main innovation that Sylvan had introduced in the plant in Navan, we went down to see the 'clean' room through thick glass. This was a sterilised compartment in which only personnel in sterile clothing was allowed, including shoe and sleeve covers, gloves, and head and face protection. There they filled nine-litre bags with the spawn. The bags were later stored at 24-25°C to allow the mycelium to colonise the grains. After two weeks, the grains acquired a white colour and looked puffed, and were moved to a cold room where they could remain up to 6 months at 2-3°C, until they were delivered to compost producers. At that low temperature, the mycelium stopped growing. The last part of visit was to the laboratory for quality controls, where other staff performed tests on the spawn.

When International Mushroom Ltd was set up, it had to compete with representatives from other spawn producers in Ireland such as Darmycol UK (a division of Darlington Mushroom Laboratories Limited), Hauser England, and Le Lion. A couple of years later, the number of competitors increased with the entry into the Irish market for spawn by representatives of Italspawn, Euro-Semy Spawn, Le Champion, and Sylvan. In September 1998, a publicity report in *The Mushroom People* (p. 7) said that Sylvan and International Spawn had joined forces by establishing an alliance. The main reasons

given were ‘an ever increasing demand for improved quality mushrooms’, the ‘ability to maintain a competitive edge’, and ‘to avoid duplication of research effort and to combine the resources of the two organisations’. The ‘alliance’ was in fact an acquisition that had taken place in May 1998 and according to which the new company ‘Sylvan Ireland’ became a subsidiary wholly owned by Sylvan Inc.⁴⁵ This acquisition increased the range of mushroom strains, as well as the level of technical advice that the plant in Navan offered to growers. Before the acquisition, Sylvan had three technical advisors in Ireland for mushroom growers using Sylvan spawn. They joined the combined team of both companies. Sylvan also modernised the plant in Navan between 1999 and 2000 with an investment of \$3 million, and introduced the blender technology described above.⁴⁶

The absorption of International Spawn Ltd by Sylvan was part of a process of centralisation in the world spawn market. Sylvan, a US corporation had entered the European market in 1991 by selling its spawn in Ireland and in Holland. After acquiring two major spawn producers in Europe, Hauser and Somycel, Sylvan set up a product distribution centre in Co. Armagh to distribute spawn in Ireland (TMP, June 1993). It would have been difficult for International Spawn to survive on its own, let alone to keep its market share. Competition had definitely become tighter and only transnational corporations (TNCs) could put into circulation the volume of capital needed to compete in the world spawn market. In 2004, Sylvan Inc. claimed to be the world’s larger producer of mushroom spawn with a share of between 55 and 60 percent of the world spawn market.⁴⁷

Concentration and centralisation in spawn production, as we can see, had gone quite far. US spawn makers actually produce compost and own large farms, and Sylvan started as a farming enterprise. Its modest origins can be traced back to 1937 with the establishment of Butler County Mushroom, Inc. in West Winfield, Pennsylvania, an underground enterprise in a limestone mine. In 1966, the company acquired a larger limestone mine in Worthington, Pennsylvania. Old mines were ideal for growing mushrooms. With this expansion Butler became the largest producer of fresh mushrooms in the US.⁴⁸ Strong competition in the 1970s in the North American mushroom market led the company to expand production but also to diversify its commercial activities. In 1981, Butler acquired an above-ground large farm in Northern

⁴⁵ www.secinfo.com

⁴⁶ www.sylvaninc.com

⁴⁷ www.post-gazette.com/pg/0419/3444174.stm

⁴⁸ www.answers.com/topic/sylvan-inc

Florida, Quince Corporation. In the same year, the company patented its spawn production and built a modern spawn plant near Kittanning, Pennsylvania, re-organised in 1984 as an independent subsidiary, Sylvan Spawn Laboratory. By the end of the 1980s, Sylvan Spawn Laboratory had become the second largest producer of spawn in the US. The growing division was not doing that well. The farm in West Winfield was closed down and the company's name, Butler, changed to Moonlight Mushroom, Inc. The underground farm in Worthington was yielding annually over 22,000 tonnes of mushrooms at the end of the 1980s and employed 1,000 workers (The Republic of Ireland produced only 22,000 tonnes in 1988). Quince Corporation was producing over 8,000 tonnes per year. The two farms produced over 9 percent of all mushrooms in the US. But while Quince modernised its production system and increased its production by 25 percent, Moonlight remained static. A labour dispute ended with the closing down of Moonlight Mushrooms in 1993. The firm wanted a wage cut for pickers of 50 cents per hour, and to limit the company's contribution for their health care. The workers and their union, The United Steelworkers, rejected the proposal and the company just closed the farm. By then the whole group had been reorganised as Sylvan Foods. The new company decided to concentrate its resources on their more profitable farm group in Florida and on their booming spawn division. In 1994, Sylvan Food sold the assets of Moonlight Mushrooms to Snyder Associated Companies Inc, which the new owners reopened as a non-union farm.

The expansion of the spawn division took place chiefly in the 1990s with the construction or acquisition of two spawn production plants in North America, five in Europe, one in Australia, and one in South Africa. In Europe alone, Sylvan started its expansion with the acquisition of Somycel S.A in 1991 (France), the largest spawn company in Europe at the time, and Darlington Mushroom Laboratories Ltd (England), of which Darmycel was a division, at a cost of \$18 million. In 1992, Sylvan acquired for \$3.8 million the Swiss-based company Hauser Champignonkulturen AG. Hauser had also production in England (Hauser UK).⁴⁹ By 1994, spawn production had become the chief commercial activity of Sylvan and the company changed its name to Sylvan, Inc. because, in the words of its Chairman, Dennis C. Zensen, 'our research and production activities now focus on spawn and other technological oriented fungal products.' While mushroom net sales were about \$65 million in 1990, they went down to \$29.3 million in 1996, and accounted for \$29.5 million in 2003.⁵⁰ On the other hand, while spawn net

⁴⁹ www.answers.com/topic/sylvan-inc

⁵⁰ www.answers.com/topic/sylvan-inc; www.secinfo.com

sales were worth \$5 million in 1990, they went up to \$49.8 million in 1996, and to \$66.8 million in 2003. With a high level of investment in updating the production system, Quince farms yielded new records in productivity, crop yields, and product quality in 1995, but the company could not improve the profitability of the previous year. The leading force within the company was the spawn division.

At present, research, improvement of strains, and production of inoculum, is a separate division in Sylvan. It takes place in two inoculum production and research centres, one in Kittanning, Pennsylvania, and the other one in Langeais, France. These two inoculum production centres supply Sylvan's ten spawn production plants in the world. The company invested in Research and Development alone \$1.5 million in 2003, and \$2.0 million in 2002.⁵¹ This high level of investment has allowed Sylvan 'to maintain the genetic stability of its mushrooms strains to withstand bacterial, fungal, and viral contamination that can wipe out a grower's crop'.⁵² However, competition with other companies in the spawn market is very tight and spawn sales went down in 2002 and again in 2003, so the company started looking for a buyer. In June 2004 Snyder Associated Companies Inc (based in Pennsylvania) finalised a deal with Sylvan's shareholders for \$63 million in cash and assumed \$32 million in debt to acquire the Sylvan group. According to Mark Snyder, Snyder executive and family spokesman, 'Sylvan needed to make a change. Wall Street makes certain demands, and expectations are quarter to quarter.... Sylvan doesn't fit the mould of a Wall Street company today.' Don Smith, Sylvan's chief financial executive added, 'you can't grow quickly when you own that much worldwide [55-60 percent]'.⁵³

In Europe the main competitors of the new company are Euromycel (France), which is part of Amycel Inc (a division of Monterrey Mushrooms, US and also Sylvan's main competitor in North America), Italspawn (Italy), and Le Lion (France). The market is quite concentrated in North America, with seven companies in the US and three in Canada producing the entire mushroom spawn that growers use in North America. In Europe the companies already mentioned control the European market, but there are a number of smaller spawn producers.⁵⁴

The satellite growing system

The Irish mushroom industry before the 1980s was dominated by a handful of large tray

⁵¹ www.secinfo.com

⁵² www.answers.com/topic/sylvan-inc

⁵³ www.post-gazette.com/pg/04193/344174.stm

⁵⁴ www.post-gazette.com/pg/04193/344174.stm

farms making their own compost, growing mushrooms and marketing them. In the 1980s, a new and peculiar structure arose in which growing became separated from composting and marketing. While composting and marketing became larger operations overall, growing turned into a small-scale family business. In 1986 the last three large tray farms in Ireland (South) closed down. It was the Drummin Group set up in 1958 and made up of Midland Growers, Midland Drummin Growers, and C.J.M. Growers, which produced 80 tonnes of mushrooms per week (or 4,160 tonnes per year) and employed 350 workers (IT 28/1/1985). With IR £1m liabilities (IR £300,000 owed to Allied Irish Banks and Ulster Bank), Ulster Bank put it under receivership to sell it. ITGWU represented the workers and had accepted previously 10 percent staff reduction and a pay increase freeze. Custom Compost (the compost division of Walsh mushrooms) and Greenhills Nursery acquired the group in mid 1986 with the idea of dividing it up and leasing small units to up to 170 tenant growers. The plan was also to employ over 40 workers in a central complex. In November 1986 these companies announced an IR £845,000 investment with funding from IDA (IT 7/5/86 p. 14; 10/6/86 p14)(IT 7/5/86 p. 14; 10/6/86 p14; 20/11/1986 p16). In a Dáil debate (14-15 May 1986)⁵⁵, Minister of State for Agriculture, Mr Hegarty said, ‘their problems emanated from the radical technological advances in mushroom production.’ He was referring to the satellite growing system based on investment costs ‘spread over a big number of investors’ and low labour costs. A year earlier, H. Byrne TD had asked the government for IR £50,000 to buy a new machine to guarantee the survival of Top Quality Products, a large tray farm set up in 1974 with a weekly production of 45 tonnes of mushrooms per week (2,340 tonnes a year) and 147 direct jobs.⁵⁶ The farm also had 24 satellite growers. *Fóir Teoranta*, a semi-state agency, had placed it in receivership. Minister for Industry, Trade and Employment, John Bruton said, ‘One must be able to produce the product at a price which is significantly less than the selling price. The problem in the case of Top Quality Products was that production costs were simply too high prior to the appointment of the receiver.’ In spite of a growing market for mushrooms in Britain, the largest tray farms in Ireland had to close down because they could not produce at a cost below market prices and had ended up assailed by creditors.

The successful production system based on small mushroom farms, which could compete with large mechanized tray farms, had become possible thanks to the commoditization of phase II compost (already spawned and distributed to farmers in

⁵⁵ <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/D/0366/D.0366.198605140061.html>

⁵⁶ <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/D/0358/D.0358.198505070092.html>

bags), a low capital investment growing system, and lower labour costs. As we will see, lower labour costs were due to the externalisation of labour costs and the use of unpaid labour. A context of high unemployment rates and high proportion of small and unproductive farms was the best to set up a contract growing as an attractive option for non-farming capital. Sources from within the mushroom industry (in the Republic) were proud to indicate in 1985 that, with an unemployment rate of 17 percent, the mushroom satellite growing system had created 2,000 jobs (TMP December 1985). Michael Neary (1991: 27), An Bord Glas, estimated that by 1990 the mushroom industry had created 1,000 full-time and 3,100 part-time jobs. Ronnie Wilson, the founder of Monaghan Mushrooms who made a fortune out of the satellite growing system, also praised the contract system and their participants as,

Independent business people ... small farmers who, with their wives and families, look upon mushroom growing as a profitable business which provides year-round work and a valuable source of additional income... In addition, the growing process also provides important spin-off employment and income for local people who act as pickers and who, were it not for the mushroom industry, might be unemployed or be forced to emigrate (TMP, Sept 1988: 4).

Herbie Sullivan, general manager of South Armagh Farming Enterprises Ltd. (SAFE), in a meeting for potential contract growers considered mushroom farming, 'Well-suited to a situation where a son has recently come home to farm', and who after a training period could add to the farm 'another very profitable, non-land-based enterprise on farming cramped for expansion' (TMP, Feb 1988: 1-2). SAFE offered intensive training courses and low-interest loans to build the three polythene units needed to start growing mushrooms.

The new concept of the satellite growing system was also grounded on developments that took place in the border counties, in Kinsealy Research Centre in Co. Dublin, and in the British market for fresh mushrooms. I will proceed in that order and then go into the advantages of contract growing based on the bag system in relation to growing in large tray farms.

Developments in the border Counties

The first steps in the development of the satellite growing system in Ireland took place in Northern Ireland. According to DAF (1969: 13, 22), some 'commercial compost stations', which in fact were mushroom farms, started to sell compost (phase I) to small growers at the end of the 1960s. That is how some 250 small tray farms were built in Northern Ireland at the end of the 1960s. The origins of the satellite growing system could be traced back to early 1956 to a grower and later composter called Malachy

Kernan (TMP, August 1986). His story shows the context and conditions in which the satellite system was created. He was a dairy farmer from Co Armagh who decided to take a job running a mushroom house in Armagh city to bring home some extra cash. In 1958, Malachy Kernan got his own farm, three-custom-designed houses at Battleford Road, in Benburb, near Dungannon. At that time, probably there were not any commercial compost producers in the whole of the British Isles and Kernan, like others, made his own compost, but in Northern Ireland some large farms sold compost to small growers who had taken on mushroom farming as an extra cash activity. Kernan's spawn supplier was Somycel, which later became Darmycel. Malachy also became the Somycel agent for Northern Ireland. The farm started supplying the local mushroom market in Northern Ireland, but in the 1960s it started to dispatch mushrooms to the Glasgow market through a Scottish agent. The mushrooms went by train to Belfast and by steamer to Glasgow.

Kernan expanded his production of compost and began to supply new local growers with compost (phase I). By 1966 there were more than two-dozen mushroom growers in the area (South Armagh). As the compost operation expanded, it moved to 270 Battleford Road (Benburb) in 1970. Kernan's growing division also expanded with mushroom houses in Cookstown, Co. Tyrone; Darkley, Armagh City; and Benburb, Co Armagh. A canning operation of mushrooms was added in Benburb.

Reen, a mushroom farm in Middletown (Co. Armagh), also prepared its own compost. In the late 1960s, Reen started to sell compost to other growers, and in the 1980s the company closed down its growing section. Reen Compost Ltd. was still in business in 2010, selling phase II to the remaining bag-and-block mushroom growers in Ireland. Monaghan Mushrooms Ltd. bought Kernans in 1991, and soon after that the compost yard closed down.

Across the border, in County Monaghan, there were also a number of small mushroom tray farms. These farms bought compost from a large tray farm in the area in the late 1960s (DAF 1969: 13). Some other farms were set up in the 1970s in Co Monaghan following the same model. That was the case of Frank McKenna (IJF, 10 March 1979). In 1975, he was in the quarry business but had a bad accident. While recovering in hospital, Frank started thinking on making a new livelihood, and decided to use part of his 15 acres of land in Glaslough, Co. Monaghan, to start a mushroom farm. He first contacted his local horticultural instructor, Noel Howlin (who later set up the satellite group, Monaghan Mushrooms, with Ronnie Wilson), to prepare a plan for a brand new mushroom farm, and applied for a grant. His was a small tray farm

consisting of 2 Nissen-hut type mushroom houses with a capacity for 20 tonnes of compost in each one, not the type that was being developed at Kinsealy Research Centre in Co Dublin. He bought phase I compost and peak-heated it in the growing rooms. In 1979 the price of one tonne of compost, phase I, was IR £20. He marketed his mushrooms through the Tyrone and Armagh Marketing Group (TAM). There were no contract growers at that time.

The development of a network of small growers around the border was based on the existence of larger farms from which they could get compost. The larger farms were the forerunner of the custom compost companies that created a market for compost (phase II) in the 1980s, but we cannot speak yet of a proper commercial compost market. Or, in other words, it was in its early stages. On the other hand, this network, already established in the 1970s, brought forward the questions of group transport and marketing.

In the early 1970s, Malachy Kernan's sons, Martin and Patrick, set up a transport division to take to the market place the produce of Northern Irish growers. They had in mind a full-fledged market operation, but that did not happen until 1980. It was also in the early 1980s that Kernan's turned its network of buyers of compost into a satellite growers' group following the examples of Walsh Mushrooms in Wexford (1979) and Monaghan Mushrooms (1981). In the early 1970s, Kernan Mushrooms sold compost to nearby growers, collected their mushrooms, and took them to the market place. But they did not organise a full-scale central marketing operation linking up the supply of compost with the marketing of mushrooms. A satellite-growing group led by Kernan did not arise till the 1980s. The TAM, already mentioned, was set up in March 1975 by a group of 28 growers in Northern Ireland to market their own produce (*TMJ*, August 1975: 276). The idea of a centralised marketing structure was attractive for a majority of growers, but when it came to make it work in practice, it did not take off. It remained the choice of a minority. In the long run, private companies rather than cooperatives of growers set up successful marketing groups.

Looking back, it seems it took a long time for the Kernan group to establish a satellite growing group, and certainly when they did so, they just followed the lead of others in the Republic. Why did they not constitute the first satellite-growing group in Ireland? There are several reasons. As I have said, the low capital investment, which later constituted the basis for the satellite growing system, was still being developed in research institutions. Another reason was the economic crisis that affected the mushroom industry in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, which by 1974 had eliminated

two-thirds of all the existing growers from the late 1960s (Hinton 1982: 11). That crisis probably put off the question of a fully-fledged Kernan's marketing group for a while, but it also affected mainly the small timber-tray farms, which could not compete with the large ones (see below). Only when small growers adopted the bag production system could they compete successfully with large tray farms. From another point of view, it was probably the crisis of the 1970s and the large tray farm that accelerated the social and technological transformation of the mushroom industry. On the other hand, the British fresh mushroom market only started to expand again at the end of the 1970s. Besides, the satellite growing system was supported and promoted by the State only in the Republic of Ireland.

The role of the state

The intervention of the Irish state, through the TEAGASC research centre at Kinsealy (Co. Dublin), played a fundamental role in the origin and development of the modern Irish mushroom industry with a research investment of €5.5m, at 1999 prices, between 1969 and 1995 (Boyle *et al.* 2002: 132). According to MacCanna (1991: 4-5), the satellite growing system was made possible in Ireland by bringing together the insulated polythene structures developed in the UK in the 1960s, the plastic bags developed first in Denmark in the 1950s, and the system of central compost preparation to supply small farms used in Italy and the Netherlands since the 1950s. These three factors did not come together of their own accord or by the initiative of the private sector. The satellite growing system was formulated at Kinsealy, particularly thanks to research conducted at that centre under the leadership of Cathal Mac Canna and Jim Flanagan, 'the founding fathers of the modern Irish mushroom industry' (Staunton (1991: 9). At Kinsealy, technical staff developed low-cost technology for growing mushrooms (bag system) and preparing phase II compost in order to make a satellite system commercially viable.⁵⁷

In 1977 TEAGASC drew up plans to centralize the production of compost and build around it a network of satellite growers 'who would supply mushrooms to a single processing and marketing unit' (Boyle *et al.* 2002: 121, 133). The state would help the process but would not control it. Business initiative was left to the private sector. The Industrial Development Authority (IDA) funded mushroom groups, and growers got grants from the Department of Agriculture and Food. The idea was *sold* as a state initiative based on small private enterprises to create livelihoods for small

⁵⁷ The tunnel system for the production of compost (bulk pasteurization) was a very low-cost one and unique in the world compared to the production of phase II in concrete buildings with highly-insulated and vapour-sealed walls (MacCanna, 1984)

underemployed or unemployed farmers:

The use of such a low capital cost system was attractive in that it would allow people with little capital to develop a small mushroom enterprise. From this was born the concept of specialist central compost facilities supplying spawned compost [phase II] to many small 'satellite' growing units. To make it successful the central compost company would also have to arrange the central marketing of the mushrooms (Staunton 1991: 9).

The British market

The development of the satellite system was also possible because across the Irish Sea there was a large and expanding market for mushrooms. The British mushroom market experienced an extraordinary growth between the 1960s and the 1980s. The British mushroom industry reflected this market growth (at that time imports were not significant) by expanding at an annual rate of between 10-15 percent between 1960 and 1970. It doubled between 1958-59 and 1968, when annual output went from 12,121 to 24,788 tonnes, and doubled again between 1969 and 1971, the years of fastest growth, when output reached 48,200 tonnes in the UK. The growth continued then at a slower pace. In 1975, output reached 55,800 tonnes in the UK, and fell until 1977, when it only came to 51,000 tonnes. They were years of crisis of overproduction and reduction of production. But after 1977, the industry recovered again, and by 1979 output hit 58,200 tonnes. The forecast at the beginning of the 1980s was that the British market for mushrooms was going to expand by 20 percent between 1980 and 1990 (Hinton, 1982: 22). According to Mernagh (1987: 24-6), IDA, the UK market grew at a rate of 12 percent per year in the 1980s.

Between 1971 and 1979 Irish exports to Britain had grown from 1.6 thousand to 4.9 thousand annual tonnes of mushrooms, representing 3.2 percent of the British mushroom market in 1971 and 7.8 percent in 1979. It had peaked at 5,800 tonnes in 1977 (10.2 percent share) but decreased when the British industry recovered from its crisis of the mid 1970s (Hinton 1982: 19). The prospect of strong market growth in the 1980s meant that the Irish mushroom industry could expand if it was able to compete successfully in the British market. The decrease in exports after 1977 seemed to indicate that Irish tray farms were lagging behind British farm. The satellite system put the Irish industry ahead.

Advantages of the satellite system based on bags

MacCanna (1991: 6) summarized the advantages of the satellite growing system in the Republic of Ireland in three points:

- Growers concentrate on growing, harvesting and quality. It is more flexible to market demand such as day-to-day changes in relation to grades and packaging.
- Compost firms provide better compost and service. They also concentrate on one aspect, and competition among the more than 10 compost firms in Ireland keep prices down [growers disputed it from time to time].
- Centralized marketing: ‘a few companies market on behalf of up to 75% of growers... Supplies of Irish mushrooms to some UK multiples exceed 50% of their total usage.’

According to that account the satellite system could manage to produce a higher quality product and be more efficient in each and every of the different operations within the mushroom chain. That was an idealised, *emic* picture of contract growing that concealed other issues. Experts also spoke of the reduction in labour costs or even the solution of ‘the labour question’, a problem in large tray farms, as the main achievement of the satellite system. The crisis that swept the mushroom industry in Britain and Ireland in the mid 1970s called into question the high capital cost and high labour-intensive (with a large workforce) British tray farm, but mainly the small tray farm. High inflation increased production costs, including labour, and slowed down demand. The crisis affected first the least mechanised and least efficient small tray farms, pushing scores of growers out, although some large farms also had to reduce production and some others closed down. That crisis can help us to understand why contract farming based on the bag system became an attractive alternative.

After the proliferation of mushroom growers in the late 1960s in Northern Ireland – up to 250 – their number went down to 219 in 1972 and to 128 in 1977-78 (Hilton 1982: 9). Total output went down from 5,461 to 3,260 tonnes also between 1972 and 1978. The crisis in Britain mainly affected the smaller growers in the Northern Ireland because most of the mushrooms were exported to Britain, 76 percent in 1972 and 80 percent in 1978. Those with a bed area of less than 10,000 sq. ft. represented 85 percent of all growers in 1972 (187 out of 219) but only 75 percent in 1978 (97 out of 128). Those with a bed area of over 10,000 sq. ft. represented 15 percent in 1972 (32) but 25 percent in 1978 (31). That is, the number of growers with over 10,000 sq. ft. remained stable while those with less than 10,000 sq. ft. were halved.

According to Hinton (1982: 9-10), mushroom growers in Northern Ireland at the end of the 1970s were small and part-timers. For up to 25 percent of them, growing mushrooms represented only around 20 percent of their incomes, and only 25 percent of

all mushroom growers were specialist growers. There was therefore a tradition of mushroom farming as a domestic industry in order to get extra incomes:

In Northern Ireland other farming activity might displace mushrooms during the summer months, when prices are generally lower and mushroom production is more difficult to manage because of summer temperatures, and when demands by other crops are greater. Only a quarter of the mushroom enterprises are specialised, but these enterprises account for half of the production. Mushroom holdings associated with farm enterprises account for rather more than a third of mushroom production. A quarter of the enterprises are on mixed horticultural holdings with a little over one fifth of the production. Income from mushroom growing is a third of the total income, but most of the specialist growers depend entirely on mushrooms. Mushrooms come first place in order of importance on horticultural enterprises where it is important to maximise income on a small piece of land (Hinton 1982: 9-10).

Small growers, having mushroom growing as a secondary occupation, could exit the industry in times of crisis and wait for better prices. However, going back to growing at a later stage, when prices were higher, was becoming more difficult for low-capital-investment, poorly-insulated-mushroom-houses because increases in productivity were making it more difficult for small enterprises to continue growing. The development of the bag growing system solved that problem, at least temporarily, allowing for the revival of the small farm.⁵⁸

The new bag production system for small growers was more efficient and had lower capital costs than the old system based on cranked roofed houses that small growers had been using in the border counties in the 1970s. But the creation of a market for phase II compost also allowed for higher outputs as the crop cycle was reduced. A report from the Economic and Statistic Division of the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland (DANI) (TMP Nov 1990: 5) found that,

⁵⁸ On the laws of centralisation of capitals, or of the attraction of capital by capital, Marx said, 'The battle of competition is fought by cheapening of commodities. The cheapness of commodities demands, caeteris paribus, on the productiveness of labour, and this again on the scale of production. Therefore, the larger capitals beat the smaller. It will further be remembered that, with the development of the capitalist mode of production, there is an increase in the minimum amount of individual capital necessary to carry on a business under its normal conditions. The smaller capitals, therefore, crowd into spheres of production which Modern Industry has only sporadically or incompletely got hold of. Here competition rages in direct proportion to the number, and in inverse proportion to the magnitudes, of the antagonistic capitals. It always ends in the ruin of many small capitalists, whose capitals partly pass into the hands of their conquerors, partly vanish.' (*Capital* 1; ch 25; sec 2; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch25.htm#S2>)

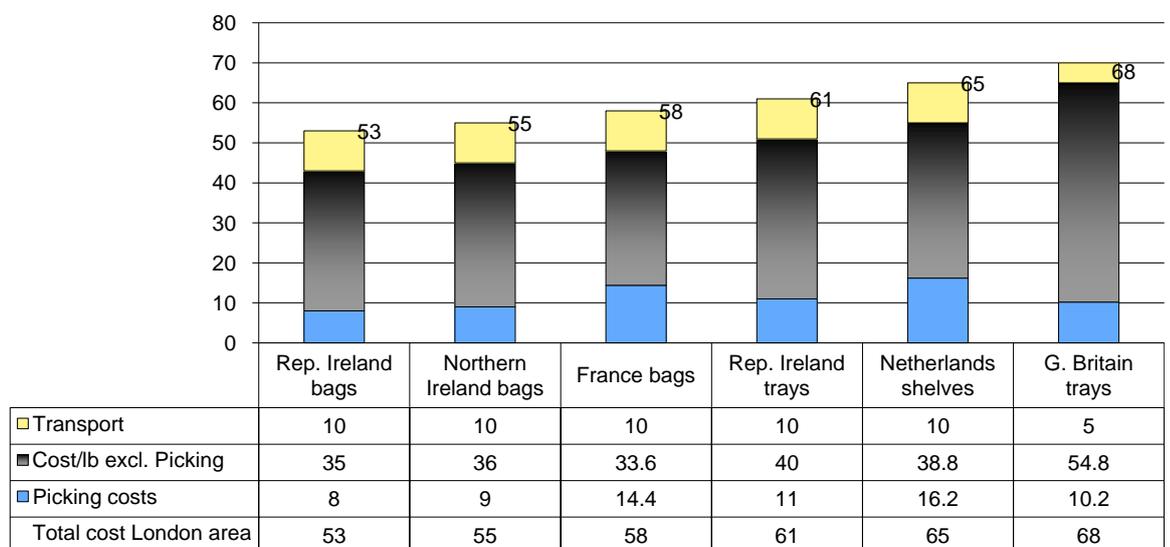
The mushroom industry seemed at first to invert that tendency, but only temporary. The tendency towards concentration continued operating and manifested itself fully in the 2000s. On the other hand, capital was highly centralised in compost production and distribution, while in relation to farming there was a return of the domestic industry. I look into this question in chapter 3.

Crops grown in bags in insulated plastic houses were superior to those using cranked roofed houses in terms of yield and energy requirements. Yields produced in plastic houses were 8% higher and the energy required was 40% less. Variable production costs per kg were 9p (10%) lower. After allowance for differences in full-time labour costs and depreciation of buildings and machinery, the net margin was 36p per kg greater than from traditional houses.

According to Jones (1985) the competitive advantages of bag growing, in relation to large tray farms consisted in minimal investment; savings of 33.3 percent in labour; 50 percent saving in casing material; savings of 33.3 percent in heating costs because of higher density of compost in bags, no peak-heating or cooking out at the end of the crop was required; and better product quality. Yields, pounds of mushrooms per tonne of compost, on the other hand were equivalent in the tray and bag systems. According to Ryan (1985), however, average yields had improved from 325 to 500 lbs/t (450 according to Jones 1985, who considered that figure to be the lowest yield to make a farm profitable) between 1980 and 1985. The maximum yields achieved were 600 lbs/t. That variability did not depend only on the compost but also on crop management and picking strategies.

Small satellite farms based on the bag growing system were therefore more competitive than both large tray mechanised farms and small tray farms. The following table shows the lower production costs of the bag growing system in relation to other systems in 1985 (MacCanna 1985).

Chart 6: Production costs pence per pound in London area (Irish pounds)



In relation to the labour question, Tom Quigley, AIB Agricultural Advisor (2001: 45-49), made the point in an all-Ireland mushroom conference that,

Labour was not a problem with family and local casual labour usually available in ample numbers to ensure the success of the production programme. Many of the new

mushroom farming households had some other income, e.g. dairying, cattle, sheep or off-farm income... The enterprise provided opportunities to keep more people on the farms and provided a lot of local employment... in a period of relatively high unemployment and redundancies.

To a great extent the competitive advantage of the bag system lay in lower labour costs. Wages were lower in Ireland than in Britain, but satellite farms made use of non-unionised labour and, more particularly, unpaid labour, as they were based on family labour, including the wife of the grower, the children, relatives and neighbours. The bag growing system had lower costs in general, and required a minimal capital investment. A farmer could start a mushroom farm of three houses with an investment of IR £30,000. In 1990 the initial capital investment had increased to IR £45,000 for a three-house unit.⁵⁹ After all costs were deducted, including the 'grower's wage' at IR £8,000 annually, also called 'family living expenses', the cash surplus depended on yields and prices, given that the quality of the produce was optimum (Sullivan&Smith 1991).

Jim M., from Co. Clare, had emigrated to America as a young man and was back in Ireland in the 1970s, settling in Co. Cavan. He got a job in Dublin as a carpenter and had to commute, leaving early in the morning when his children were still in bed and returning home after they had gone to bed in the evening. One day he heard from a friend that it was possible to make money growing mushrooms. He had a 3-acre farm, more than enough to start growing. In 1981, he got a £7,000 grant from ACOT and built two mushroom tunnels. The total investment came to £20,000. In the 1990s he operated 6 tunnels. Before starting, Jim and his wife, Pamela, went to another farm to work for two weeks picking mushrooms. He started as a satellite grower of Monaghan Mushrooms.

John L. started as a satellite grower of Monaghan Mushrooms with a three-house unit in 1988 in Co. Monaghan after inheriting his father's dairy farm. The farm income was not enough for him and his family, so he decided to have a go at mushrooms as a satellite part-time grower. In the mid 1980s, he said, a good number of people were going into mushrooms in the Monaghan area, and they were making money. It was either mushrooms or poultry.

Luke K. was the son of a publican from Clones, Co. Monaghan, with no background in farming. He went to college in England between 1961 and 1964, where he studied textiles. Back in Clones he set up a textile factory, but his business came to an end in 1979 because he could not compete with more capital-intensive textile factories

⁵⁹ Through the Farm Improvement Programme the prospective grower could get £10,000

elsewhere. His brother told him at that time that Noel Howlin and Ronnie Wilson were working on a project that ‘was getting bigger and bigger the more they worked on it’, and that the IDA was willing to fund it. They wanted to set up a central compost yard and a marketing business and help growers to build 3-house mushroom farms, sell them the compost, market their mushrooms and offer technical advice. Banks were ready to support the initiative.’ For Luke, people went into mushrooms because they had no other choice: ‘Irish people were poor, few had cars, many had to migrate.’ Given Luke’s background, Ronnie Wilson proposed work to him helping new growers to erect the mushroom houses, and facilitate them with chemicals, etc. But he did not get on well with Ronnie Wilson and quit after a year. The founder of Monaghan Mushrooms is known for his obsession with small details, his hands-on approach, and stubbornness when it comes to business. ‘Everyone falls out with him sooner or later’, Luke said. After leaving the company, Luke set up his own three-house mushroom farm in Clones and decided to get into marketing after turning his old factory into a packhouse. He gathered a group of 17 other growers in 1982, like him outside the satellite system, and sold the produce in wholesale markets in Britain. They got the compost from independent compost firms in Northern Ireland.

The mushroom groups

Growers did not just flock to mushroom groups. If they had a choice they marketed outside the satellite groups. Growing groups such as Monaghan Mushrooms or Kernan (across the border) actively looked for potential growers in the 1980s and used to organize meetings to show potential growers the substantial returns they could expect (see below). One of the key operations of a mushroom group was marketing. In a talk for potential growers, Patrick Kernan, from the Kernan group (TMP, Dec 1984: 12), told growers, ‘only large growers can successfully transport and market their produce. Smaller growers cannot compete individually in the market without the cohesion and strength of group marketing to secure a better price...’ There were, nevertheless, ‘a lot of small mushroom farms’ supplied by four or five custom-compost makers and marketing their produce individually, mainly through transport-cum-marketing services. This was in the North. Yet, MacCanna (1991: 6) pointed out that in the South 25 percent of growers did not market their mushrooms through the few large mushroom groups.

The first mushroom group was established in Wexford in 1980, and consisted in a central composting station supplying compost to eight growers on the bag system (three tunnels each of 33x7m). In 1980, a former geography and history teacher, Ronnie

Wilson, created Monaghan Mushrooms Ltd to produce compost, to process mushrooms, and market them. Monaghan Mushrooms supplied contract growers with all packaging and compost (84.80 pounds per tonne in 1987) (Bannon 1987: 22). The company had 44 contract growers in 1981, all supplying the processed market. By 1987 they reached 107 growers, but only 26 were growing for processing.⁶⁰ The average number of tunnels per grower in the group in 1981 was 2.75 (44x121) but 3.7 in 1987 (107x396). According to Bannon (1987: 20), standard farm size to guarantee the regular supply demanded by Monaghan Mushrooms had increased from 3 to 5 tunnels per farm within the same period. In 1987, there were 40 standard growers (4-6 tunnels) and 65 below standard.

The mushroom industry was presented as based on family farms, but mushroom groups around which capital was increasingly concentrated and centralised from the 1980s to the 2000s dominated it. In 1985 five compost firms in the South supplied compost to satellite growers in the centres of Wexford-Carlow-Wicklow and Monaghan-Cavan-Louth, and 80 percent of satellite growers belonged to 3 marketing groups, which also supplied compost. The rest supplied the home market or exported through marketing companies (TMP, Dec 1985: 4-6). State agencies such as ACOT even advised against developments outside established groups. They argued that only through large mushroom groups (economies of scale) could growers get good and stable contracts with large retailers in Britain. The wholesale markets were the option for small growers and medium growers, who preferred to remain independent and sell on their own or through agents, but during the 1980s retailers started to replace wholesale markets, and by the early 1990s most wholesale markets had disappeared.

Contract growers, on the other hand, tended to be organised in associations such as the Irish Mushrooms Growers Association (IMGA), which also included mushroom groups, or in more local associations. Monaghan Mushrooms' satellite growers, for instance, had their own association and appointed committees to negotiate about compost quality, prices, and charges (TMP, Dec 1985: 4-6).

Problems with the contract satellite growing system

From time to time growers complained publicly that returns and incomes were not as good as mushroom groups had promised. Mushroom groups and compost makers, on the other hand, used to claim that growers were not careful enough and did not pay attention to details as they were advised. Yields of 440 lbs/t were considered very good

⁶⁰ In 1985 Ronnie Wilson claimed to have 113 satellite growers and a coming increase of 43 new growers (TMP, Feb 1985: 15. According to Boyle *et al.*, Monaghan Mushrooms started with an initial network of 70 growers (2002: 122)

in 1990, as in 1980, but below that, farms could incur losses. There used to be divergences between mushroom groups and growers about estimates. Jimmy Harper, a grower from Sligo, for example, disputed the figures that an expert from Monaghan Mushrooms had given to prospective growers for a 3-house unit (TMP, July 1986). According to him, growers were not that well off and mushroom growing was not an easy way to make money as mushroom groups liked to put it. Prices had remained static while costs had increased. So the margins for a 3-house unit had gone down. According to him, prices could not go below 56 p/lb to break even with average yields of 400 lbs/t, while the expert believed that it was possible to break even with prices of 47 p/lb. The difference lay in the calculation of costs. A. Bannon, ACOT advisor who later worked for Monaghan Mushrooms, based on a survey of 48 satellite growers in Monaghan, found that growers needed yields of 330lbs/t to break even in 1985. Half of the growers surveyed got average yields between 413 and 441 lbs/t, and 8 less than 340 lbs/t. Only two growers according to Bannon did not break even (TMP, Dec 1986: 12). Those making capital repayments, however, had to be on yields of around 400 lbs/t to break even.

According to Quigley (2001: 45-49) most of the success of the mushroom industry in Ireland had to be credited to the main mushroom exporting companies that co-ordinated production and marketing. Within the industry, however, there were voices warning that the satellite system based on small contract growers had limitations. Staunton (1987: 29), for example, predicted that growing units would have to increase their size because of 'decreasing profit margins per kilo' and 'make best use of improvements in technology'. The first and most articulated critique came from Colm MacCartan (TMP, June 1985: 4), an independent entrepreneur who had designed his own model of a mushroom house. Colm sold equipment and provided advice, but was not part of any mushroom group. In his view, the Dutch industry showed how backward the Irish growing system was and demanded 'to invest in a stable, profitable future where technological advances and efficient growing methods are undoubtedly the means of survival'. He was right in the end, for the Dutch shelf farm displaced the bag system in Ireland in the 2000s. He predicted that it was not a good idea to invest in the bag growing system 'which may phase out or change radically' even if it represented a low-cost investment as,

It is labour intensive, bags are an inefficient use of space within a growing shed, they cause numerous moisture and aerating problems, not to mention the problems of heat retention in transport and heat build up during cropping.

Of more interest, as we will see, was that bag farms could not expand beyond the small family farm and that for that reason they could not compete with Dutch shelf farms. Part of Colm MacCartan's critique was of a political nature, as it dealt with differences of power between growers and mushroom groups. In his opinion, growers were completely dependent on compost manufacturers and had little control over compost quality since there was little unity among them. Dutch growers instead had been able to create their own compost co-operatives. In relation to marketing, Colm MacCartan said that those (a majority) who depended on 'a larger central marketing system with its own transport are at the mercy of an irreproachable master!' For him those who marketed their own mushrooms were safe once the consumer [or rather the client] maintained his demand. He went on, 'So at both extremities of a developing industry we have unsatisfactory conditions, yet growers are in the majority. Surely they should be in better control of their industry?' He was probably suggesting that growers should create co-operatives to make compost and market their own produce, but as we have seen above, and will see later, attempts to market either individually or collectively ended in failure.

Jim M. tried to leave Monaghan Mushrooms several times. Once he went to Manchester Central Market with another grower to try and distribute their own produce directly. But they did not succeed. Marketing groups were giving similar prices to growers and were safer. So he in the end never left his satellite group. Luke K. was a different kettle of fish, and in the early 1980s there was a more open market before retailers took over. 'Marketing was very simple back then,' he said, 'you just had to arrive, literally, to the market with your own mushrooms and see who would get them. The seller got 10 percent commission and after paying for transport cost the rest was yours.' Soon he was marketing mushrooms for 17 other growers and also buying compost for them. But he added that in the 1980s supermarkets were increasing their control over the market and the time was up for wholesale markets. In the 1990s, at the peak of the supermarket wars, prices *hit the floor* and wholesalers started to close down. A small group such as Luke's Grathvern Group was neither big enough, nor flexible enough to guarantee a large and steady supply, nor able to stand the shocks of the market. His group started to lose units and disappeared eventually. He then joined Hughes' Marketing Group.

The crisis of the satellite system took a more definitive form in the mid 1990s. It was the old farming question: the squeeze that growers suffered at the hand of both input suppliers and retailers. According to a grower, Moshe Margalit (TMP, Nov 1995: 10),

three mushroom groups (Monaghan, Walsh and Carbury Mushrooms)⁶¹ had established a monopoly over the market for compost, so they could fix prices [above value].⁶² So Margalit proposed an open market for compost. He did not explain, though, how that could come about. On the other hand, mushroom groups, Margalit added, also fixed prices paid to growers, another monopoly situation. Further, there was a 300% difference between the price received by the grower and the price paid by the consumer in the supermarket. So, ‘somebody is making a very nice profit along the way,’ he said.

Mushroom groups argued that they were acting under the pressure of market forces and that if they did not offer competitive prices they would lose their market share. Satellite growers, therefore, had little option, ‘take it or leave it’. Jim M. was a member of Northern Eastern Producers (NEP), an association made up of contract growers with Monaghan Mushrooms, and a member of its committee from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. He remembered long negotiations with Ronnie Wilson over reductions of prices to growers over the years. Other differences were over the quality and price of compost. If compost was too wet it would weigh more and cost more, and ‘growers didn’t want to pay for water’.

The change in the value of the Irish pound in relation to the sterling did not help (IR £1 = 0.86p stg in 1989 / £1 stg = Ir1.02 in 1995). While costs increased (48.30p/lb in 1989 to 54.11p/lb in 1995) returns remained static (60.13p/lb in 1989 and 60.88p in 1995). So, yields had to be in the region of 480/500 lb/t in 1995 for farms to be viable compared to 420 lb/t in 1989. That situation was putting growers under increasing strain, as Moshe Margalit said (TMP, Nov 1995: 10):

Over the years, the companies have encouraged the growers to be more efficient in order to maintain a profit to the grower and to the company and, at the same time, maintain a constant supply of mushrooms to the company (and obviously a constant supply of compost to the grower). And so the growers have become more efficient by expanding their growing units from three to five, by investing in new technology ... and by managing their growing techniques in order to maximize their output. Growers thus reached the outer limits of efficiency [at least with the bag system].

Squeeze, crisis, and structural transformations

In the publications within the mushroom industry there had been voices raising the

⁶¹ Monaghan Mushrooms and Carbury merged in July 2003. John Keon, managing director of Donegal Creameries group, part of the consortium behind the merger, said, ‘a loss in the group’s mushrooms operations [Carbury] last year, due to combined effects of multiple pricing, the strengthening of the Euro and problems with compost quality, had made the merger with Carbury Mushrooms and rival Monaghan Mushrooms imperative.’ (TMP, July 04: 15).

⁶² That monopoly perhaps was not that solid, or perhaps some compost firms tried to break it from time to time. A price war between compost firms in the North, unknown sources argued, took place at the beginning of 2000, with some supplying below cost (TMP, Feb 2000)

alarm bells from time to time, but it was not till 2003 that the crisis of the mushroom industry became acute, according to these sources. Its main features were not new: falling market prices and rising costs (fundamentally labour costs). According to TEAGASC the cost of a pound of mushrooms for a grower, including labour and repayments on capital, went up to between 73 and 78 cents. Prices, however, had gone down to around 90 cents from €1 because of price wars between British supermarkets, and, on top of that, the strength of the Euro against the Sterling had further reduced margins to around two to seven cents per pound of mushrooms. According to Gerry Walsh (TEAGASC), growers producing about 350,000 pounds a year (159 tonnes) would be making only €16,000 (IFJ, 7/6/2003): ‘a poor return for a hard way of life and long hours’, he said.

Gerry Walsh was talking about average growers. So, a group of them had to be doing better, but others were giving up. A couple of growers, Evelyn and Pat English, had entered the industry in 1999, when Tipperary Mushrooms (of which Monaghan Mushrooms was the main shareholder) was set up with 34 satellite growers. The financial projections were of €76,000 for a five-house unit annually, but prices fell, mushrooms used to be downgraded (at a lower price), and yields were lower than expected. The Englishes blamed the quality of Monaghan Mushrooms’ compost and its grading system (IFJ, 7/6/03):

Dealing with Monaghan Mushrooms turned out to be a nightmare... They were selling mushrooms for top dollar to Sainsbury’s and Tesco in England and giving us whatever they deemed a fair price.

They tried to sell mushrooms locally to survive, but Monaghan Mushrooms warned them not to until Tipperary Co-op decided that it was OK to sell in the home market. The Englishes closed down in May 2001 and went back to their former jobs. By 2003 another eight growers in Tipperary had quit. Sources within the industry blamed the Englishes for their own failure, since they had not been farmers previously, were not used to the hard farming life, did not work enough hours, and did not pay enough attention to detail. The growers that I interviewed, interestingly, did not show any sympathy towards the Englishes. It looked that even growers considered them outsiders and troublemakers. The Englishes had gone to the papers and to a national mushroom conference to stage a protest, but their behaviour and arguments did not appeal to other growers, even when many were also leaving the industry. The Irish Mushroom Growers Association (IMGA) predicted that half of mushroom growers could go out of business in a matter of months. The IMGA president, Michael Slattery, said that growers would

be ‘the only group that will suffer’.⁶³ He blamed rising costs but mainly the cut in prices by supermarkets and market agents (IFJ, 18/10/03):

Recently, a contract between Northern growers and a UK supermarket chain was up for renewal. It was won at a cost below the cost of production. It’s unlikely that the marketeers will lose a cent and it’s easy to get market share if someone else, in this case the grower, has to pick up the tab.

But Slattery also stated, as one of the causes of the crisis, that growers were not able to reduce costs, because Irish mushroom farms were falling behind competitors, chief among them the Dutch (IFJ, 18/10/03). The Dutch shelf system on phase III compost was producing yields of 700 lbs/ton compared to 600 lbs/t (phase III) and 520 lbs/t (phase II) in Irish farms. Also, around 40 percent of Irish farms did not have cooling systems and 50 percent did not have humidification, which made possible higher yields. The Dutch system allowed Dutch growers to reduce costs 15 cents in relation to Irish growers.⁶⁴ ‘We want to learn about the latest technical advances, and that expertise does not exist here. In my opinion TEAGASC has only just realised that the industry has moved ahead of their expertise. They, and as a result the growers, have a lot of catching up to do.’ So, Slattery considered essential in order to survive to switch to Phase III and the Dutch system, which implied investments per farm of around €150,000 for five-house units, for which there were state grants to cover 30 percent of the investment.

By 2006 the crisis had worsened and Jim Gollogley, chairman of Commercial Mushroom Producers (CMP), warned that the number of mushroom farms in the South had fallen to around 100 (the last TEAGASC census had registered 129 in March 2006) and, ‘a further third of these remaining members are being paid a price either equal or below the cost of production.’ (IFJ, 2 December 2006). The industry was in a ‘terminal decline’ and could disappear ‘in as little as six months’. Gollogley supplied data from TEAGASC and the research agency TNS showing that average costs of production were €0.77/lb and that growers were only getting a margin of €0.02/lb. The rest, the difference between the current average price growers got (€0.79/lb) and the average price consumers paid for mushrooms in supermarkets (€1.66/lb) went to service cost, €0.25/lb; marketing groups, €0.18/lb; and supermarkets, €0.44/lb. According to the figures, supermarkets took the largest share, making profits that for the CMP chairman were ‘obscene’.

⁶³ Mr. Slattery forgot to mention the workers, or perhaps he did not consider them as one of the groups of the mushroom industry. They only were ‘labour’, an input.

⁶⁴ Even when wages in Holland were double those in Ireland according to industry sources.

As the crisis worsened, growers became more aware that they were at the lower end of the mushroom chain and that competition among supermarkets was based on lowering the prices paid to growers. Supermarkets dropped prices and passed the cost to market agents, who in turn passed the burden to growers, and these to workers. In 2003, three mushroom groups dominated the Irish mushroom industry: Walsh Mushrooms, Monaghan Mushrooms, and Carbury Mushrooms. The latter two merged in 2005. These companies supplied growers with compost and marketed the mushrooms. According to Michael Slattery (IFJ, 7/6/03), after supermarkets paid marketing and compost companies the latter took their 'cut' to cover costs and profits, deducted the price of the compost, and the grower got whatever was left over.

I will deal now in more detail with the two forces that mainly affected growers during the crisis: the power of supermarkets and technological changes driven by competition among growers and retailers.

Squeeze theory: (1) distribution

There have been a number of books and articles in the last decade describing the rise of British supermarkets and their increasing control of the groceries market. They tend to confirm supermarkets' abusive practices with suppliers and a strong tendency towards concentration and centralisation in retailing (Woad 2005; Bevan 2005; Fine *et al.* 1996). Four retailers control most of the grocery market in the UK. Tesco, The largest one, is head and shoulders above the rest, Asda, Sainsbury, and Morrison. At a world level Tesco comes only third after the American Wal-Mart and the French Carrefour. This situation gives them a buying power to impose suppliers' prices and conditions of supply (Bevan 2005). Let us have a look at both aspects, starting with retailers' relationship with suppliers.

Asda, for example, decided to cut back its three milk suppliers to one in 2004. There was an excess of supply in the milk market and Asda offered a contract for a lower price but a bigger volume to only one supplier. Arla won the contract and turned into Asda's only milk supplier, but lost its contract with Sainsbury, which also reduced the number of milk suppliers, from three to two. Asda dropped Robert Wiseman Dairies, which subsequently won contracts with Sainsbury and Tesco. Dairy Crest, the other supplier that Asda dropped, was not able to secure a contract with anyone else (Bevan 2005). We can surmise that it also represented a big loss for the dairy farmers supplying Dairy Crest. As a consequence suppliers tended to increase their size, volume and reliability to secure contracts. This allowed them to offer lower prices. Wal-Mart, for instance, got a

contract in 2003 with Del-Monte, the third largest producer of bananas in the world, which operated from Costa Rica and Cameroon. Asda (owned by Wal-Mart) drastically cut the price of bananas and caused losses of £30m to the rest of supermarkets in the UK. Subsequently BBC radio reported that Caribbean producers, who were less efficient but the traditional suppliers of the UK market, would go out of business because they could not offer prices as low as those of Del-Monte (Bevan 2005). Smaller suppliers, then, have the hardest time. Because they are so small and fragmented, they do not have leverage, and retailers can easily bully them into selling at any price. John Nott, former Tory minister and chairman of Hillsdown Holding, a food supplier, said about its customers Sainsbury, Tesco, Safeway, Asda and Marks & Spencer (Bevan 2005: 165-166):

Together they represent a complex monopoly, using their overwhelming buying power to squeeze their suppliers, most of them in the farming industry... At its most ruthless stood Sainsbury. On several occasions I visited its headquarters to see the Purchasing Director. The atmosphere... was poisonous; apparently miserable staff and an arrogance towards suppliers, consistent with the bullying approach of a third-rate corporal in a bad regiment.

The purchasing director was Tom Vyner, famous for being ruthless and quick to threaten to de-list products or reduce their shelf space if suppliers did not lower their prices. To have an even tighter control over suppliers, Sainsbury went as far as introducing the PICO (Price in, Cost out) 'open-book' system in 2002. So suppliers had to open their accounts to Sainsbury buyers, who would tell them how to eliminate cost to reduce their prices. Other retailers are no better. After Wal-Mart acquired Asda in 1999, Tesco counterattacked by slashing prices. So they started to renegotiate prices with suppliers. One of them said (Bevan 2005: 167),

If you are small supplier, you slog all the way to Cheshunt [Tesco's headquarters] to see a buyer... They routinely keep you waiting in that horrible reception area for an hour to two hours and when they eventually appear they ask what you are doing there, or say that the meeting is not in their diary. Sometimes they just tell you they have no time to see you. Then they grudgingly agree to give you five minutes so you are at a complete psychological disadvantage when the negotiation begins. They do it so you will be glad to come away with an order for any quantity at any price.

Concerns over these monopoly practices moved the office of fair-trading in the UK to introduce a code of practice in 2002 to prevent retailers' abuses. A survey by Friends of the Earth, however, claimed that the code had made no difference. Out of 161 farmers, one third said that they were being paid the same or less than the cost of production. 17 percent had been asked to pay rebate on a price previously agreed. More than a quarter of those surveyed had been asked to alter the transport or packaging without

compensation; 16% were required to meet the costs of unsold produce. But in general farmers did not complain because of fear according to the National Farmers Union. One of the farmers surveyed, for example, suffered a price cut and later was de-listed for complaining (TMP, March 2003: 16).

Not all suppliers are squeezed in the same way. Supermarkets tend to negotiate the best possible deals with suppliers to keep their shelves always full of their own label products, which tend to be cheaper, and branded products, which tend to offer higher quality at a higher cost. Therefore, retailers tend to form partnerships with some suppliers. In general, supermarkets prefer to deal with a few large suppliers. That generally excludes direct deals with small suppliers and producers. Some suppliers in the UK are known for having made huge fortunes. Gulam Noon, proprietor of Noon Products and Sainsbury's supplier of chilled Indian food, for example, was listed in the Sunday Time Rich List in 2004 with a personal fortune of more than £50m. Noon Products also supplied to Morrison and Waitrose, but the partnership with Sainsbury represents 60 percent of Noon's business (Bevan 2005).

Chain supermarkets in Britain have come to control over 80 percent of the total grocery spend in the chief market of Irish mushroom producers. Concentration and centralisation in retailing (*consolidation* in official economics) have also taken place among mushroom groups such as Monaghan and Walsh Mushrooms.⁶⁵ ASDA, taken over by Wal-Mart in 1999, had only one mushroom supplier; Sainsbury, two. Prices on the other hand, were lower in 2003 than in 1988 (Woad 2005: 18-20). As a consequence of competition between retailers, general prices went down 9.4 percent between 1989 and 1998. A factor that accelerated this tendency was the arrival, in the early 1990s, of continental discounters such as Aldi, Lidl and Netto. In Germany and France, for example, prices are still between 12 and 16 percent lower than in the UK. The big supermarket chains were forced to lower prices down to block the growth of the continental discounters (Bevan 2005: 122).

The price wars between some of the major supermarkets peaked after September 1996, affecting the price of mushrooms. The price of loose medium mushrooms fell from £1.59/lb sterling to 99p/lb in ASDA and TESCO. Sales of loose mushrooms increase 10% and pre-pack sales went down (Des Finnamore 1999: 68-71): 'As part of their rigid, set in stone, pricing policy the profitability of mushrooms disappeared almost overnight. Most people accepted that the previous pricing policy had been

⁶⁵ In the top 1000 companies in Ireland in May 2004 in Irish Times, Monaghan Mushrooms was 243 (335 in 2008), Walsh 412 (581 in 2008), and Carbury 669.

detrimental to growth in the industry and was unnecessarily high. Now the industry got a sudden burst of growth. This was quickly exploited by both British and Irish growers and by imports from the Netherlands.' Prices stabilised at 1.15/lb in 1999.

To cut prices down, supermarkets can reduce their own margins to increase sales, but they prefer to cut down the prices paid to suppliers according to their buying power, which allows them to get volume discounts. David Webster, Safeway chairman, said in 2003 that Tesco, for example, because of sheer size, could buy 5 percent cheaper than Safeway, while Wal-Mart could buy 10 percent cheaper. That was the reason why the board of directors of Safeway started to negotiate an absorption in 2002 (Bevan 2005: 192).

Before supermarkets and mushroom groups, therefore, Irish mushroom growers lay powerless. But most of them could only distribute their products through them. They had no other way to reach the market. They were not, however, completely fragmented as they grouped around producer organisations (POs): 13 of them in 2003. It was the role of the IMGA to bring them together to give growers more bargaining power with the marketing (and compost) companies. A step further was to deal directly with supermarkets, but it was just a good idea till 2003 (IFJ, 7/6/03). Between 2003 and 2006 there were some changes in growers' associationism. The IMGA voluntarily dissolved as well as the Northern Eastern Producers (NEP), another growers' association, to give way to Commercial Mushroom Producers (CMP), a Producers Organisation (PO) that aspired to group all mushroom growers in Ireland, North and South, and deal directly with supermarkets. In 2006 CMP claimed to represent 90 percent of Irish growers after absorbing a number of smaller POs. This organisation offered services to members such as packaging, insurance, pest control, pickers' training and specialists' advice on aspects such as growing and farm investment (TMP, April 2006). Advisers helped growers to apply for investment grants. Growers also obtained EU subsidies through their POs, their only way to do to it. CMP, as a PO, nominally owned the mushrooms of its members and had a list with the market agents with which members were allowed to have dealings. CMP's most ambitious project consisted in an attempt to market mushrooms on behalf of its members. Jim Gollogley announced in 2006 that CMP had been awarded an investment grant valued at €474,429 under the *Capital Investment Scheme for the Marketing and Processing of Certain Agricultural Products* to build a pack-house near Monaghan town (TMP, April 2006). That was an essential step to get into marketing. Gollogley also announced that CMP was about to get an order with a

large British retailer. In the end, Monaghan Mushrooms got the order by undercutting CMP and the marketing project came to nothing.

Paradoxically, the shift from wholesale markets to large retailers had been encouraged as the way to go in the 1980s to a more rational marketing of mushrooms, but the disappearance of spot markets created a monster that was devouring its former enthusiastic followers. The head of the Irish Mushroom Growers' Association (IMGGA), considered in the mid 1980s that the only way for Irish growers to thrive in the long term due to the constant increase in the cost of inputs (30 percent between 1982 to 1986) and the stagnation of mushroom prices was to focus on supplying supermarket multiples (Ryan 1986: 58). To access the British market through wholesale markets and large British producers could not guarantee, in his opinion, 'a stable and economically viable industry' (1986: 56). The wholesale markets were losing market share to multiple supermarkets at that time because, according to Ryan (1986: 57), wholesale markets supplied mainly small shops, and these were in decline.⁶⁶

As a strategy, growers had used wholesale markets to dump mushrooms that did not achieve the required quality, bringing prices down in that way (Snell 1990). So, 'the dumping of the surpluses which suppliers [had] over and above the requirements of the multiples' had caused price fluctuations in an already saturated and declining market (Ryan 1986: 59). These fluctuations took place because wholesale markets worked on commission and were only concerned with selling cheap, accepting any produce from any producers at the cheapest price, bringing prices down. On the other hand, small producers acting individually could not guarantee a steady and high supply to multiples, so individually they only could access the wholesale markets (Ryan 1986: 58-59):

It seems inevitable that with this stagnation of price and the unwillingness of smaller growers to amalgamate into large supply units, that the Irish mushroom [sic] must continue to fight the Irish mushroom [sic] on the home and export market to the detriment of all. In the north of England and Scotland, Irish producers North and South are competing for the same customers. Instead of presenting a united front involving share distribution and common pricing, they are competing, not on the basis of quality and service, but in price cutting.

Growers' individualised marketing had worked in the first five years of the mushroom industry against growers' interest (Ryan 1985: 31): 'Attempts to bring order into

⁶⁶ Some growers, however, had warned about the lower prices that farmers could get through marketing groups and targeting only supermarkets. Ciarán C., a large grower from Carlow, for example said that the key of his success was to distribute fundamentally in the domestic market, avoiding, therefore, marketing groups and supermarket chains. He presided over his own marketing group, and his own farm was one of the largest and most efficient in Ireland, so together with his produce and the produce of Dewfresh he was able to get contracts in the domestic market.

handling of produce has usually resulted in rubbish being unloaded through the group while Class 1 produce was marketed separately by the grower, until of course a glut made him run for shelter within the group.’ Monaghan Mushrooms entered the fresh wholesale market in 1984 after it started to supply the processing market in 1981, but the company did not find the experience satisfactory according to one of its executives (Bannon 1987: 18):

The fluctuating market prices, combined with currency variation, were not conducive to the fixed priced system operated for the grower network. Continuing with outlets that were predicted to diminish in their capacity, coupled with a price system governed by supply and demand rather than quality, did not augur well for the future, so Monaghan Mushrooms commenced supplying the multiple chain outlets in February 1986.

The shift to multiples stores was fast. By 1989, 60 percent of Irish mushrooms went to them (O’Toole 1989: 35). In 2002 (Neary 2003: 55), supermarket outlets accounted for 80% of all mushrooms sold in the UK; 60% in the four biggest supermarkets (Tesco, Sainsbury, Asda and Safeway). Growers could only follow the lead of retailers, if they wanted to reach consumers.

Squeeze theory: (2) reducing costs and structural change

The production of mushrooms in Ireland shows a steady increase from 1979 (6,600 tonnes) until 2002, when mushroom output (South) peaked at 69,000 tonnes. A reduction of output followed afterwards and total output went to 62,000 tonnes in 2005 and 55,000 tonnes in 2008 (see table 1). In 2008 production had come to mid 1990s levels but had stabilised there. Output had actually increased by 2,000 tonnes between 2007 and 2008. Paul Mooney (IFJ, 18 November 2006) wrote, ‘since mid 2006 the supply situation across the EU and in the UK has reversed as capacity shrunk... after a decade of declining prices and margins, the mushroom sector is showing tentative signs of recovery.’ Ronnie Wilson also said in the same article that prices would increase again. In terms of total output, therefore, the Irish mushroom industry as such did not seem to be in crisis at all. But if you look at the evolution of compost consumption, another picture emerges (table 2). The size of a mushroom farm measured by square metres or the number of mushroom houses cannot give an idea of its size. A house growing one layer of blocks or bags can be filled with 17 or 18 tonnes of compost. But a house with Dutch shelves can be filled with 50 tonnes or even 75. So compost consumption can give us a better picture, particularly of the structural change that has taken place.

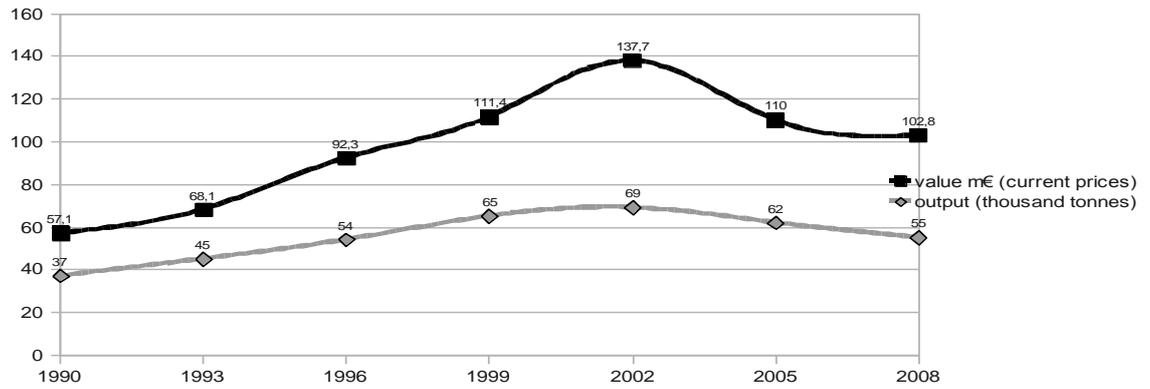


Chart 7: Total value of mushroom output in m€ and in thousands of tonnes (Source: CSO)

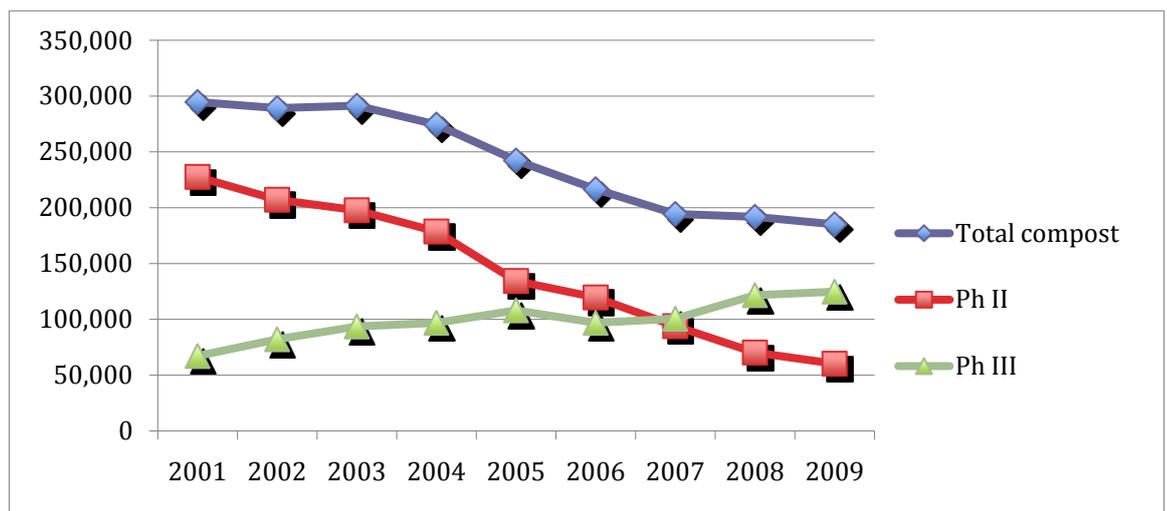


Chart 8: Total consumption of compost in tonnes (Source: TEAGASC)

While the consumption of compost phase II decreased sharply, consumption of compost phase III kept increasing during the crisis. That shows that farms on phase II were disappearing and that farms on phase III, particularly those with Dutch shelves, were increasing and expanding. Farms on phase III are also more productive; the same amount of compost Phase III can produce higher yields than Phase II. So even if total annual output has remained at similar levels since 1996 compost consumption has sharply decreased. On the other hand, as the number of growers decreased, average farm size increased. A process of concentration of production took place as some farms expanded and other closed down. The following tables show how the crisis of the first half of 2000s was just the crisis of the small farm and the ‘domestic industry’, which is what has disappeared.

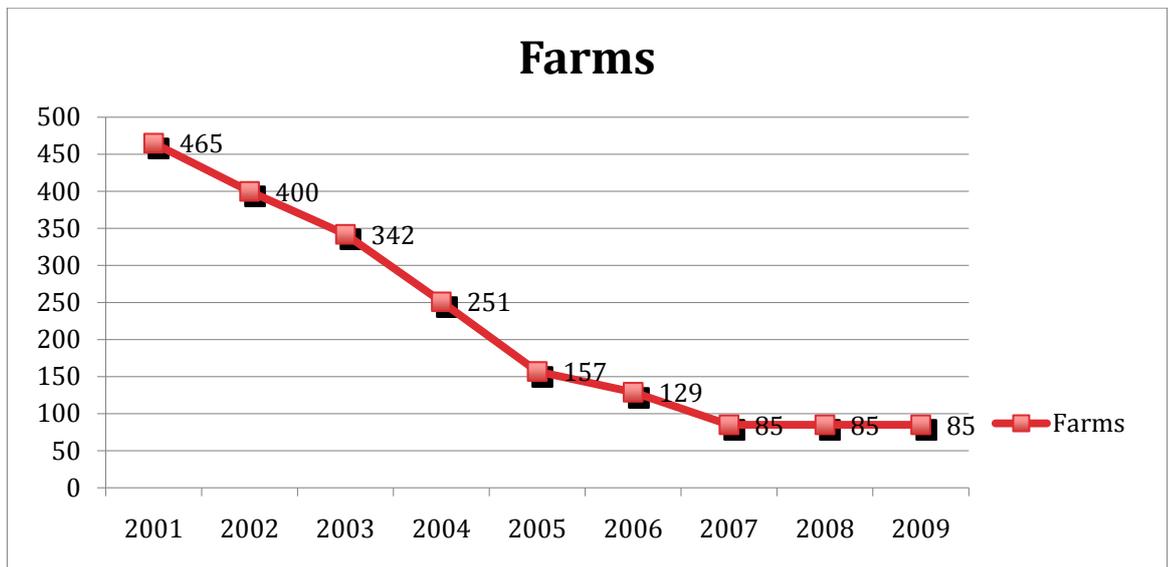


Chart 9: Decrease in number of growers and farms (Source: TEAGASC)

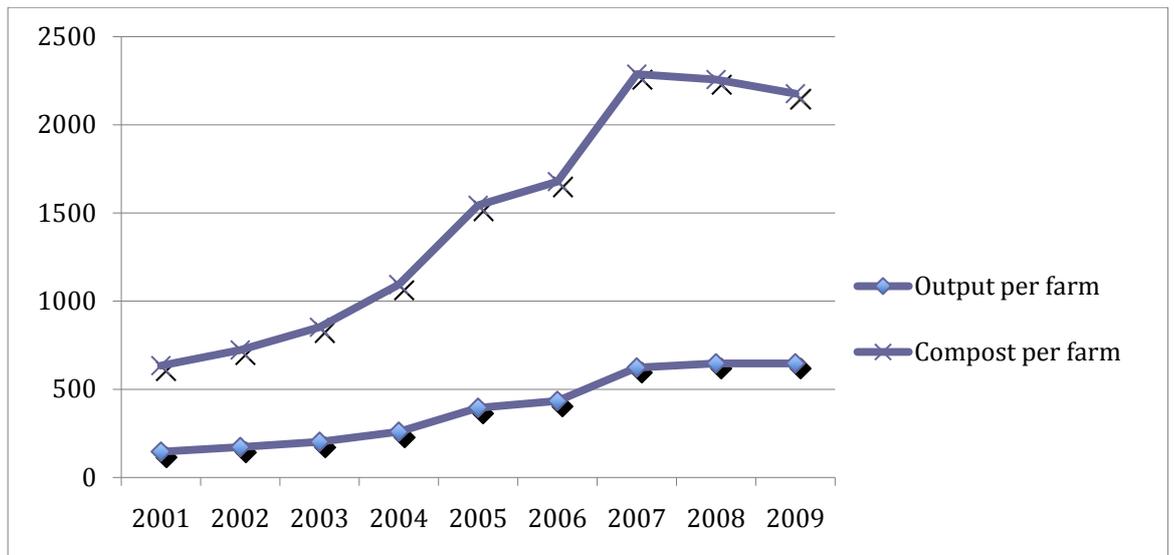


Chart 10: Farm size: output in mushrooms and compost consumption, all in tonnes (own elaboration)

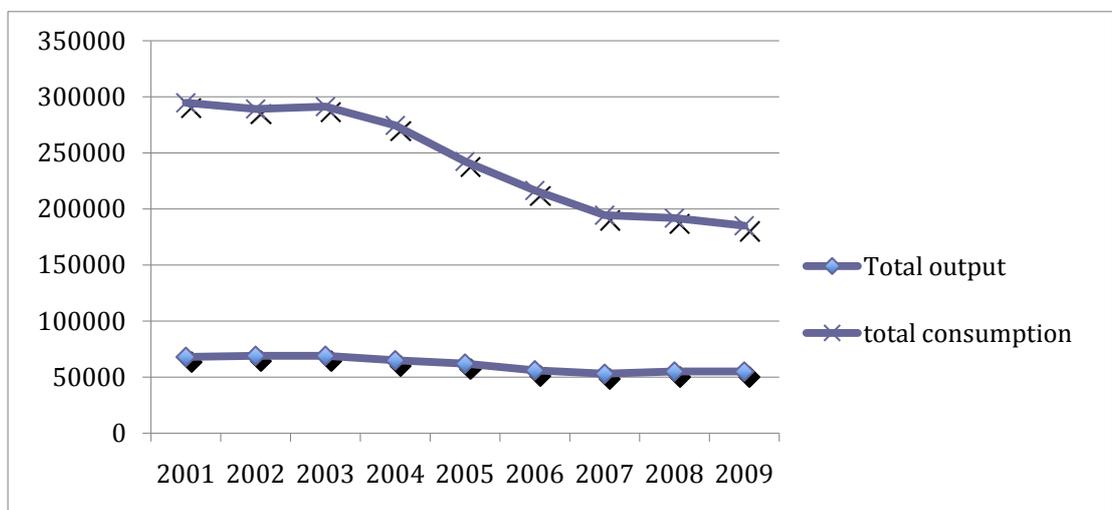


Chart 11: Total output of mushrooms and total compost consumption

The transformation of the mushroom industry sped up between 2002 and 2004 as prices per pound of mushrooms fell from 95 to 82 cents (MN, 24, winter 2004). The number of farms using the Dutch shelf system increased from 20 to 44 between 2001 and 2006, representing 4.3% of all farms in 2001 and 34.1% in 2006. But in terms of output the role of Dutch farms was more important. We can guess that most compost phase III was consumed in shelf farms (there was also some production of blocks phase III, and some shelf farms were still using blocks phase II). With Phase III compost, growers could achieve average yields of 620 lbs/tonne (281.82 kg) against 525 lbs/tonne (238.64 kg) with phase II. In 2005 phase III accounted for 30,449 tonnes of mushrooms against 31,986 on phase II, roughly 50 percent. In 2007, 58 percent of mushrooms grew on phase III compost (IFJ. 26/7/08). Average prices paid to grower in 2005 were 80 cents per pound of mushrooms, but they increased to 85 cents in 2008 (IFJ, 26/7/2008). The tendency in the future will be for Dutch farms to expand further and take hold of the other 50 percent of output, displacing the bag and block growing systems and any commercial growing based on phase II compost.

Lower prices and a static market share forced growers to expand or give up. Experts within the industry both warned growers against expansion and advised expansion in order to survive. Des Finnamore (1999: 22), director of Carbury, for example, said that, 'if in a static market people expand then this will cause inevitable casualties,' to immediately add that in the 'current' situation expansion was the only way forward: 'New growers will only become established at the expense of departing older growers for the further closure of plants in the UK.' The hope was that Irish farms would take the place of British farms, but other competitors such as Dutch and Polish growers were increasing their share of the British market too. As a consequence, a race to reduce costs based on expanding production produced high casualties among Irish growers. The Irish Department of Agriculture intervened by creating a Mushroom Task Force in 2003, which delivered its report in May 2004. The task force was made up of growers, compost firms, marketeers, and state agencies, but did not include trade unions. It concluded that, since prices were static or falling, variable costs had to be reduced by 20% (1) with a reduction of the price of compost phase III by 15 percent and phase II by 8 percent; (2) by getting yields around 700 lbs/t with phase III and 600 lbs/ton with phase II; (3) by reducing picking costs from 20 to 15 cents/lb. TEAGASC and CMP decided also to organise a number of monitor farms to apply the recommendations and show the results to other growers (MN, 23, no date; MN, 24, Winter 2004).

A reduction in the price of compost (phase III) would incentivise growers to switch to the mechanised Dutch shelf system. The price of phase III in Ireland was higher than in Holland, and quality lower (MN, 23, no date). Only Monaghan Mushrooms (after the absorption of Carbury Mushrooms) and Walsh Mushrooms in Wexford produced phase III in Ireland. The compost division of Walsh Mushrooms, Custom Compost, had



Dutch shelf farm with five levels of shelves
(County Monaghan)

mushroom commercial growing. Some CMP growers started to import compost from Belgium in 2007 but that practice did not spread, as the cost of transport did not compensate.

Growers tended to distrust compost firms, as well as marketeers, since they saw them as taking the biggest share and none of the risks, as we have already seen. That was the consequence of market monopoly practices which caused frictions from time to time between growers and mushroom groups. Most of the time, the complaints did not take the form of collective action. The circulation of the report among CMP members (most growers were members of this PO) caused strains between CMP and Monaghan Mushrooms. Interestingly, Monaghan Mushrooms through its growing division was a member of CMP, and therefore able to collect EU subsidies, which could only be channelled through POs. On one occasion the conflict between this company and growers exploded openly and in a collective way. In 1996, for example, *The Mushroom People* (June 1996) reported on a boycott of Monaghan Mushrooms and its subsidiaries

expanded in 1999 its production of phase III from 300 to 600 weekly tonnes after an investment of IR £6m (MN 3, winter 98/99). But they were not willing at the time to further expansion of production of phase III as new environmental regulation increased the cost of expanding. Monaghan Mushrooms compost was, on the other hand, of worse quality than Walsh's. A report circulated among CMP members, written by a Dutch expert in 2006, indicated that there could be a variation of up to 100 lbs/t in yields between the two compost firms.

Growers recommended Walsh compost as one of the keys to successful

from a group of satellite growers led by 'a Monaghan Growers Executive'. The alleged reason was that Monaghan Mushrooms was selling compost to outsiders at a cheaper price and with better credit facilities.



This picture shows a two-level of blocks (phase II) in a small mushroom farm of 4 tunnels. The first on the right is Jarlath Coleman, Junior Minister of Agriculture; the second, Jim Golligley, chairman of CMP (2005), during a CMP-Teagasc farm walk.

The second and third recommendations of the Mushroom Task Force were more within the grasp of growers. I deal with the effects of the third recommendation, reduction of piece rates from 20 to 15 cents/lb, in the next two chapters. Here I

will only say that the reduction of piece rates did not

necessarily imply a reduction of wages since it could be achieved through an increase in the productivity of labour that could bring about lower piece rates, but the same or higher weekly wages, at least in theory. Experts thought that the shelf system and new picking strategies would increase picking rates and bring about lower piece rates. The problem was that growers applied a reduction in piece rates regardless of increases in picking rates by taking advantage of the substitution of Irish pickers with Eastern Europeans on work permits, and regardless of Minimum Wage regulations.

From the point of view taken in this chapter, the most important recommendation of the Mushroom Task Force was changing to the new growing system. The Department of Agriculture introduced in 2000 a new capital investment scheme for growers who participated in the Bord Glas Quality Assurance Scheme (MN, 10, winter 2000). These grants covered around 30 percent of the investment and replaced other types of grant schemes. TEAGASC's response was to carry out, in cooperation with CMP, studies of costs and potential gains for farmers who switched to shelves. In Holland, shelves were installed in a square room; in Ireland, adapted to existing tunnels with capacity for 2 or 3 rows of shelves three levels high, although new and bigger tunnels were built to

accommodate up to 4 rows 5 or 6 levels high. In Carlow, Ciarán C. had one of the most modern Dutch farms in Ireland in 2006 and planned to introduce in 2008 a Dutch square construction with six levels of shelves. After finishing his Leaving Cert in 1990, he leased a mushroom farm averaging a yield of 3,000 lbs per week. A year later, he got his own farm and became a satellite grower with Walsh Mushrooms until 2000, when he decided to set up his own marketing company to distribute in the domestic market, and later a PO, Dewfresh Mushroom,

It was easier to make money at that time. Too many people had entered the industry, and that couldn't last.

That move eliminated the array of different punnets that British supermarkets demanded from growers. Punnets of different sizes slowed pickers down, reduced picking rates, and increased packaging costs. To avoid the large British supermarkets he focussed on the wholesale Irish market for loose mushrooms in five and six pound boxes. That was in his opinion the key to his success. In 2006 the Irish market had a size of around 300,000 lbs a week and there was no competition with Dutch and Polish growers. But competition in the Irish market also made necessary capital investment to increase the productivity of labour: 'The Irish market is extremely competitive, with prices steadily falling, so the only hope is to supply large volumes,' he said. His advantage consisted in being a large grower with a Dutch-style farm, so he was ahead of the other growers competing for the Irish market.

In 2006, Ciarán C. had two farms producing 55,000 lbs/week and had plans to enlarge 13 tunnels to achieve a capacity for 60 tonnes of compost in each one to reach 84,000 lbs/w. This upgrading would include battery-powered picking trolleys and a filling-casing-ruffling system all at once (Dutch), which allowed 3 operators to complete the whole operation in only 4 hours with a substantial saving in labour time (see below). The new mushroom houses were ready to open in November 2008, bringing the workforce to 85 employees from a previous 63, and production to 80,000 lbs a week. A second expansion was due to take place in 2009 to increase production to 108,000lbs per week, meaning an annual output of 2,552 tonnes. In July 2008 it was 1,536 tonnes (IFJ 26/7/2008).

TEAGASC rightly predicted that, while the number of growers would decrease dramatically, total production would not fall. So, average farm size would increase and 'owners of units will become progressively less involved with day-to day growing tasks and more oriented towards managing the activities of staff and contractors.' (Grant 2001: 5). That is, Irish growers would turn into capitalist farmers. The old satellite

system based on small contract farms was a capitalist system but the contract grower was also a worker, even when he employed staff. He was not a capitalist. We will see in the next chapter that he could also be exploited. After the crisis of the 2000s, surviving growers turned capitalists as they fully made their money out of the surplus labour of others.

In 1996, Eugene Kiernan, a grower from Cavan, introduced in the Republic of Ireland the shelf growing system. He reported an increase in picking rates from 40 to 60 lbs/h, which is hard to believe since 60 lbs/h was not a normal rate even ten years later (see next chapter). TEAGASC experts attributed it to the use of hybrid strains (with better yields) and improved picking strategies such as picking larger mushrooms (Staunton *et al.* 1999). A larger cropping surface, nevertheless, allowed for higher yields, and the use of bulk phase III compost increased the number of crops per tunnel and per year from 5 to 7.5 (Staunton *et al.* 1999: 11-13), which allowed for a more intense use of capital investments and a further expansion of production. This grower converted his 21-house mushroom unit to a three-tier shelf system because the shelf system was,

highly mechanisable with possible reduced labour inputs... [which] maybe be a penalty in terms of quality and cost of production. [However] The increasing cost and scarcity of labour for manual work has prompted the Irish industry to consider less labour intensive production systems (Staunton *et al.* 1999: 39).

That scarcity of labour was also a consequence of the low wages that mushroom growers paid to workers. Actually, the Dutch industry offered higher wages and was more competitive. The main problem with the bag system was that it was the most labour intensive of jobs other than harvesting, did not allow high picking rates, and was not viable beyond the family farm. Within those limits it had been effective, as it required a low capital investment (Staunton *et al.* 1999: 39). Peter Leonards (1999: 5), TEAGASC, explained that,

The ability of the Irish Industry to meet these high standards [of UK multiples, who dominated the UK fresh mushroom market] has in large measure been responsible for the growth and development of the industry. As Irish units of production are generally small scale and family run picking, standards are in general very good. This has given the industry an edge with the ability to respond to the consumers ever changing demands with regards to quality standards and product range.

The bag system, however, turned uncompetitive towards the end of the 1990s as growers had to expand production in order to compensate for lower prices and reduce labour cost by mechanising. The bag system could not accomplish those goals. By substituting bags with blocks labour time could not be reduced significantly either. The

following table gives an idea of expenditure of labour time per crop in a mushroom tunnel in three different systems for filling, casing, and emptying compost (based on Grant 2001: 35). Male general operators generally performed those jobs, which were better paid than picking.

<u>Man Hours</u>	<i>Bag</i>	<i>Block,</i> <i>staging</i>	<i>Shelving, 3</i> <i>levels</i>
Filling and stacking	14	8	10
Cutting plastic	0	2	0
Casing	14	16	10
Emptying	15	15	5
Washing tunnels	5	5	5
TOTAL HOURS	48	46	30

Table: expenditure of labour time per crop in a mushroom tunnel in three different systems

The change to the shelf system also allowed an increase of cropping surface per tunnel. Growing surface in a standard tunnel (7X33 metres) filled with bags was about 120m² (800 bags), or 180m² (1200 bags) in a wide tunnel (8.8X33 metres). In a farm with the shelf system growing surface was 216m² in a standard tunnel (two rows of shelves with three levels) and 324m² in a wide tunnel (three rows of shelves) (Staunton *et al.* 1999). In 2001 the cost per tunnel of changing to shelves was estimated at £10,000 (standard) and £13,000 (wide), plus £72,000 per farm for filling, casing, ruffling, watering and emptying equipment (Grant 2001: 34). The high cost of the equipment meant that only large farms could afford it unless small growers could contract filling, casing and emptying. But that service was not available.

The shelf system offered also the possibility to mechanise harvesting. That was the case in Holland, but only for growers oriented to the processing market. The harvesting machine could not cut mushrooms properly for the fresh market and a number of picking robots developed so far still cause bruising and are not efficient enough. Some growers in Ireland tried some picking aid machines with uneven results. New picking strategies are being applied instead. In recent times labour time has been further cut in Irish farms on the shelf system for jobs other than picking. Watering has been reduced from 30 to 3 minutes in farms that have substituted the watering tree, manned by an

operator, with a system installed on the shelves that allows watering a mushroom house by just pressing a button in a control panel. A new filling-casing-ruffling machine developed in Holland also allows for a reduction of labour in those operations, which can be performed in 3-4 hours by two operators. With the normal equipment 3 operators are needed for filling, 4 for casing, and 2 for ruffling, with a total of 27 to 32 hours for a 50 tonnes tunnel. But the cost of the new machine makes it an option only for very large farms, unless a number of growers came together and shared it. Ciarán C. had that machinery in 2006, and a group of growers in Monaghan were thinking of getting together and using it collectively. CMP also thought about acquiring one and contracting it to a group of 7 or 8 nearby growers. However, Dutch-style farms were dispersed and few in Ireland, unlike in Holland. That made a contracting service more difficult and less viable than in Holland. The cost of this new machinery was €120,000 in 2006.

The Fall of the Contract System

The 2000s signalled a qualitative change in the industry that Liam Staunton (Staunton *et al.* 1999: 29-30), one of the TEAGASC experts, described as ‘[moving] production into a factory-style operation’, implying a change in the role of the grower, from a self-employee to a manager. But it was more than that. Capitalist growers came to dominate the industry. These growers bought compost in an open market and distributed their mushrooms through different mushroom agents or by themselves. A couple of cases taken from fieldwork will illustrate this change better.

Joe, a grower from Monaghan, started in 1994 as a satellite grower for Monaghan Mushrooms with a 4 mushroom house unit, the minimum required at that time to start as a satellite grower.⁶⁷ Previously he had been repairing cars in a small garage. Joe bought the material to build the farm from the mother company, got the compost from it and sold through it. He used to get periodic visits from company consultants, who he thought visited him to make sure he was not selling to other marketing groups. In 1996 he added one more tunnel to the farm, and upgraded to a three-tier block system in 2002. That was the year in which he left Monaghan Mushrooms for Hughes Mushrooms because the latter offered a couple of cents more per pound of mushrooms. A couple of years later he switched again to Monaghan Mushrooms; they started to offer better prices, but he also sold one third of his mushrooms to Unimush, a marketing group from Armagh. In 2004 Joe added a new tunnel and upgraded to the shelf system on phase III

⁶⁷ Mushroom Groups demanded growers to start with a minimum of 3 mushroom houses in the 1980s. When the last satellite group was established in 1999 in Tipperary, that demand had risen to 5 houses.

compost in bulk (3:4:3)⁶⁸ on a six weeks cycle, which meant a weekly filling of 24-26 tonnes of compost (one truck). Between 2002 and 2004, Joe got phase II blocks from Mourne Compost (in Newry). After the change to phase III, he got it from Walsh Mushrooms (Gorey, Wexford). For him, this group had more consistent quality compost.

The farm was yielding 18,000-20,000 pounds per week (425-473 tonnes per year) with the new system and had 2 general operators and 12 pickers.⁶⁹ Before he used to be directly involved in physical labour apart from running the farm, but since the last expansion he did not labour any more. His new role now consisted in supervising the work of his workers and managing the farm. The reason to keep expanding production lay in reducing production costs per pound of mushrooms and to achieve a minimum weekly output to maintain a minimum margin. Without the upgrading to shelves Joe thinks he would not have remained in business. 'If you don't improve, you can go back,' he said, 'the shelf system compensates the investment. I'm doing much better with it.' His goal was to get more efficient and then expand production again by increasing the size of their mushroom houses to a filling of 50 tonnes (2 trucks) and maybe add more tunnels. By doubling the capacity per tunnel he would also double output. He used to regularly visit the farms of Paul H. and Patrick Reilly, in his opinion the most efficient growers on the Dutch system in Cavan and Monaghan. The location of his farm, on the other hand, was only 20 minutes from Monaghan Mushrooms and 30 from Hughes and Unimush.

Smaller growers are not in satellite groups anymore either. A part-time grower from North Monaghan, John started as a satellite grower of Monaghan Mushrooms with a three-house unit in 1988. In 2006 John had four tunnels and was growing flats. Each tunnel could hold 840 bags and 220 blocks on a second level on top of the bags. His output came to around an average of 6000 pounds per week (141 tonnes per year). However, his work with mushrooms was irregular as he was growing on phase II, which meant that each crop lasted 8 weeks. To be a full-time mushroom grower with a regular pattern of work he would have needed 8 tunnels. A grower like Joe had a regular pattern of work, with only 6 tunnels as he was doing phase III on a 6 weeks cycle. John hired only three pickers per crop and paid a contractor to fill, case and empty the mushroom houses. He carried out the rest of the growing tasks and took the trays with mushrooms

⁶⁸ Three rows; the one in the middle with 4 shelves and the two in the sides with two.

⁶⁹ At average prices of 80 cents per pound in 2006, that meant annual net sales of €748,000 to €832,000. An increase, as it took place in 2008, of only 4 cents per pounds would elevate net sales by €41,200 without any increase in cost.

to the fridge carrying them by hand. He used a wheeled bucket for casing. In 2006, John bought the compost from Monaghan Mushrooms and sold to Unimush, the only market agent that would take his flats in the area. 'For small growers it is very difficult to survive. Marketeers don't like sending trucks, with the costs that it represents, to take small loads. They prefer working with big growers who can ensure a continuity of supply,' he said. He was not a satellite grower any more because Monaghan Mushrooms would not buy his flat mushrooms, and because the company had abandoned that system. To understand that, we must turn now to the reasons why this company got into production.

In 2005 Monaghan Mushrooms was producing 70 percent of the mushrooms it sold. This was not a fixed figure. In an open market the company could lose one order or gain a new one; demand might increase or decrease. So, the company would accordingly increase or decrease the percentage of its own mushrooms sold to supermarkets at the expense of small growers, who were therefore used as a cushion in an open market. According to a source from TEAGASC, Monaghan Mushrooms had made a mistake going into production in the 1990s. Compost was cheaper for the company, as it produced it, and could make better use of machinery, but overhead costs such as management were very expensive, because, 'you wouldn't get a manager working 12 to 14 hours a day.' So small farms were more cost efficient as the manager-owner also paid more attention to detail. This source also thought that Walsh Mushrooms was doing better. The company had abandoned the satellite system too, but did not get into production. Walsh sold compost and bought mushrooms to meet supermarkets' orders, but as it was not into production it could play with the market in a way that Monaghan Mushrooms could not. Walsh Mushrooms bought only one-third of the mushrooms in Ireland, and the rest wherever they were cheap.

Both companies therefore had abandoned the satellite system but had gone different ways. Going into production in the context of general concentration and centralisation of capital in production in the mushroom industry (also in the rest of Europe) made perhaps more sense in the longer term. A Monaghan Mushrooms farm manager explained that the company was looking at the efficiency of the whole system. That is, by centralising production they did not look exactly at making more money in production but along the whole chain. For example, they produced compost and used the production yard at its maximum capacity. The number of trucks and the collection points were also reduced, so they were more efficient in that way as well. On the other hand, other exporters might exploit the market and buy cheaper, but they might have

years in which they could not buy as much as they had to deliver to retailers, or the quality of what they bought might fluctuate. So, Monaghan Mushrooms preferred a tighter control of supply, which was better to get orders from supermarkets always looking for a steady supply and reliable suppliers. Small farms were not more cost efficient if they achieved a higher efficiency by hiding labour costs. Their efficiency, therefore, was fictitious as it was based on unpaid labour.

Monaghan Mushrooms expanded its satellite network reaching over 200 contract growers in the first half of the 1990s (*Food Ireland*, Sept 1996). In 1984 the group invested half a million punts, but its largest investment plan was announced in 1988, £2m as a part of a £11m investment plan (IT 6/9/88). But none of those plans included getting into production. That happened in the 1990s as the company entered a process of centralisation by absorbing competitors that were involved in production. In 1991 the company absorbed Foxfield Mushroom (in Cavan), including 35 satellite growers, a compost yard, and 10 owned growing sites (IT 21/6/91). The next competitor, Kernans, was bought out in 1992. Kernan produced compost and had a network of satellite growers, but also owned a mushroom village in the North. One of the first villages, Connaught Mushrooms Claremorris (later incorporated to Monaghan Mushrooms after a merger with Carbury Mushrooms), was set up in Co. Mayo by Carbury Mushrooms and North Connaught Farmers in 1989. It had 60 mushroom houses to be let to 20 tenant growers. The mushroom village was a hybrid between the large and the small farm according to Staunton (1989):

Compared with the older decentralised ‘satellite’ system there are obvious economies of transport of compost and mushrooms. In addition there are benefits from central cooling, grading and packing and perhaps improved labour efficiency for harvesting.

Kernan inaugurated its Mushroom Village in June 1990 (TMP, July 1990). Pat O’Kane, Managing director, said that the reason to build it was to ensure ‘a consistent supply of top quality produce to meet our marketing needs and a training facility to improve the quality from our existing contract growers’. That is, the mushroom village concept was an intermediate step towards full ownership; the control of production was tighter than in the satellite system. Mushroom villages fell one by one and ended up owned and run by mushroom companies.

A major step in the centralisation of capital was the acquisition in 1994 of Middlebrook Mushrooms, one of the largest supplier of mushrooms in the UK market with 1000 staff and the largest mushroom farm in Britain (IT, 7/10/1994 p. A2). A major merger took place in 2004, between Monaghan Mushrooms and Carbury Mushrooms,

which had suffered €1.7m losses in 2003. Together they employed 1500 staff and owned 6 locations in Britain and 7 in Ireland, with sales of 40,000 tonnes of mushrooms per year, the largest mushroom business in Europe (IFJ, 12/06/2004). Carbury had also a compost site (phase III). Monaghan Mushrooms had also declared losses (€4,7m in the 16 months to Dec 2003) and announced after the merger a staff reduction and the closing of some sites. Monaghan Mushrooms was the main shareholder after the merger (IT 3/6/04). In 2004, Monaghan Mushrooms took over Atlantic Mushrooms in County Mayo, owned by Anthony Blowick. It consisted of 53 growing tunnels in two sites. In 2006 the company owned 5 pack houses, 7 growing sites and 3 compost yards in Britain and Ireland (source: internal document):

Monaghan Mushrooms Limited – Pack House Division	Drimbawn Mushroom Limited – Growing and Harvesting Division	Kabeyun Limited – Compost Division
Tyholland, Co. Monaghan	Belmullet, Co. Mayo	Castleblaney, Co. Monaghan
Knockanrawley Industrial Estate, Tipperary Town, Co. Tipperary	Belcarra Village, Castlebar, Co. Mayo	Carbury, Co. Kildare
Drem, North Berwick, East Lothian.	Claremorris, Co. Mayo	Kilnaleck, Co. Cavan
Mill Lane, Brayton, Selby, North Yorkshire	Carbury, Co. Kildare	
	Drem, North Berwick, East Lothian	
	Stock Lane, Langford, Somerset	
	Gravel Hill Lane, Whitley, Gooley, East Yorkshire	

Ireland's second largest mushroom company, Walsh Mushrooms, did not go into production and sourced most of its mushrooms abroad. Some growers such as Ciarán C. and his group, Dewfresh Mushrooms, focussed on the domestic market. The satellite system had disappeared as growers bought compost in an open market and shifted between market agents. Some, large enough, started marketing on their own. Ciarán C. was not the only one. Paul H. in Monaghan, worked with three market agents: Hughes Mushrooms, Monaghan Mushrooms and Unimush. In 2006 he also negotiated a contract to supply Lidl directly. At the same time he was involved in a process of expansion. He had 7 houses (with a capacity of 50 tonnes each) in 2005 and a weekly output of 50,000 lbs. In 2006, Paul put the foundation of 3 large mushroom houses with a capacity for 75 tonnes, and had a plan to build two more. He also rented a nearby farm with 16

mushroom houses in 2007.

I carried out a survey of 12 farms around Monaghan town in May 2006 from a 2003 list of farms. Most of the farmers I contacted over the phone (30) declined to take part in the survey, and only one of the 12 who answered the questions over the phone accepted to be interviewed in person. 10 of them had started as satellite growers with Monaghan Mushrooms, but only one was still with this firm in 2006. 7 had closed down between 2003 and 2005. Out of the ten satellite farms, 6 had become independent. Only 3 of the former satellite farms (one still was with Monaghan Mushrooms) remained in business.

Monaghan Mushrooms turned into a producer, the largest in Ireland, and only used a network of growers to fulfil orders when necessary, but the aim was to produce all that was marketed. Walsh Mushrooms turned to the international market and played with different prices. Most of the small growers were closing down and the few surviving had grown much larger and did not need the close supervision that small growers needed. Ronnie Wilson said in 2006 that small farms were going to disappear but that they still needed some of them to meet orders from supermarkets. Between December 2007 and October 2009, 21 mushroom farms signed Employment Registered Agreements with SIPTU, normalising labour relations.⁷⁰ That event, which is related in chapter 6, was the product of negotiations with SIPTU and marked the end of a whole period in the mushroom industry. In order to understand all this we must take a closer look at how capital subsumed labour in the satellite growing system during the 1980s. A close look at food quality standards will allow us to understand labour-capital relations. They are some of the topics explored in the next chapter.

⁷⁰ <http://www.labourcourt.ie/labour/labour.nsf/LookupPageLink/HomeRatesOfPay>

3. Control, Exploitation and Standards

The satellite system implied a return to relations of production of the supposedly bygone age of early capitalism, a re-enactment of the 1800s domestic industry, or so it seemed. Did it mean that the tendency towards concentration and centralisation put forward by Marx in *Capital* was wrong? At the turn of the 20th century Karl Kautsky produced the most influential work by a classic Marxist on capitalism and agriculture. According to him (1988: 183-5), the domestic industry constituted,

merely a transitional stage on the way to large-scale industry, which could be carried out in the smallest enterprises, with the most primitive means, without any or scarcely any outlay of capital ... all the burdens which account for the bulk of capitalist risk are borne by the exploited domestic workers.

Did the setting up of the satellite system indicate a step back in the way to large-scale farming, was it a temporal regression, a countertendency, or a new tendency within capitalism? Why did the domestic industry return in the 1980s? The shift to the satellite growing system had the labour question at its root. *An Foras Talúntais Annual Report* of 1986 (TMP, Dec 1986) observed that ‘the concept of small growing units operating as a cottage craft industry obviates many of the problems associated with labour-management in large conventional production units’. The term ‘cottage craft industry’ was rarely used. Formally it was contract farming; more popularly known as ‘satellite growing system’ probably in order to give it an air of novelty and modernity. At another level of analysis (see chapter 4) farms turned into rural sweatshops (the other face of the domestic industry) where all the horrors of domestic industry workers’ self-exploitation

to compete in the market were also passed onto wage workers. When a domestic industry is placed in the context of a competitive capitalist market it loses all its bucolic connotations. Similarly, slavery in ancient Greece and Rome turned from soft to horrendous when it was a means to make money at a large scale and separated from the master household, or when slave-labour was used in industries inserted in the world market in the American continent (Marx 1976: 345; Kautsky 2006: 43). Kautsky (1988: 297) noticed the effects that the transition to capitalism in agriculture had on the German peasantry. Irish mushroom growers in the last two decades would have seen themselves in Kautsky's words if they had known them:

The revolutionising of agriculture is setting in train a remorseless chase. Its participants are whipped on an on until they collapse exhausted – aside from a small number of especially aggressive and thrusting types who manage to clamber over the bodies of the fallen and join the ranks of the chief whippers, the big capitalists.

The speed of the transformation of the Irish mushroom industry was astonishing. The satellite system only lasted two decades. From the point of view of TEAGASC (Boyle *et al* 2002: 118-119), the history of the Irish Mushroom industry (South) can be divided into three stages. During the 1960s and 1970s most of mushroom production was concentrated on big farms growing mushrooms on trays. That model collapsed at the end of the 1970s and was substituted by the commercial production of mushrooms in bags and tunnels in the 1980s (in small satellite farms). In 1996, the shelf-growing (Dutch) system, the alternative to bags, was introduced for the first time. Yet, the shift to the shelf system, 'a technological one' also meant a change in social relations of production: 'this also corresponds to the beginning of a period of consolidation in the mushroom industry. Expansion slowed and there was concentration of production in larger units, while the total number of growers started to decrease.' (Boyle *et al.* 2002: 118). The mushroom industry was heading again towards a larger scale model.

There is a tendency to explain structural changes as technological changes based on economic efficiency, without any social content. For Sullivan (1986: 48), production and distribution are *neutral* processes, which require good management practices. This work looks at those technological changes from the point of view of changing social relations reflected in the way in which labour is subsumed and mobilised under capital. Contract farming in the mushroom industry constituted in that sense a particular form of control of labour. Firms providing compost and marketing mushrooms exerted a strict control over contract growers. Yet, marketing groups were subordinated to retail capital,

which led the sector by sheer buying power and by means of food quality standards.⁷¹

The wide range of regulations that retail and marketing capital impose on farmers can be seen as a way to break some of the limits imposed by the formal subjection of labour to retail capital and other off-farm capital. Retailers normally offer a contract to a number of distributors and producers, who in turn can contract out the growing of farm products or the manufacture of commodities to smaller producers. Quality standards were the means in the mushroom industry to implement changes in the work process, demanded by retailers during the 1980s and 1990s, in order to obtain a commodity with the required characteristics. All this took place in the context of market competition, which constituted the driving force. In this way retail capital achieved a high degree of control without moving into production. The fact that contract growing families during the 1980s and part of the 1990s were partly self-employed workers and partly employers of part-time workers brought to bear on them self-imposed degrees of exploitation that later would be transferred to migrant workers. The third phase of the mushroom industry, according to Boyle *et al.* (2002), is considered here as a transitional period to a larger-scale model in mushroom farming in which most of the remaining growers became capitalist farmers and the satellite system disappeared

While in the 1980s mushroom farms were mostly run as family units with occasional ‘help’ from neighbouring housewives, at the turn of the 2000s there was a transition to permanent full-time staff. To make that transition possible, the mushroom industry had to guarantee a steady supply of cheap labour. The Irish economic boom in the second half of the 1990s exhausted local labour supply. Growers then sourced their workers in Eastern European countries where labour was cheap and plentiful, but I deal with that issue in chapter 4.

1) A Modern Domestic industry: a Marxist view

The ‘domestic industry’, the production at home or in small workshops of products paid by the piece for a market agent or a manufacturer, was a typical institution of early capitalism. For Marx, the term encapsulated the split between manufacture and

⁷¹ In relation to the role of technology, Marx said that it ‘discloses man’s mode of dealing with Nature, the process of production by which he sustains his life, and thereby also lays bare the mode of formation of his social relations, and of the mental conceptions that flow from them.’ (Marx 1967: 352fn). Therefore, there would be a direct relation between technology and social relations. Harvey (2010: 218-19) also points out, commenting on Marx’s concept of technology, that machines ‘internalize certain social relations, mental conceptions and ways of producing and living’, and that ‘technologies not only serve to discipline the laborer within the labor process but also help to create a labor supply which will depress wages and worker aspirations.’

agriculture, and the creation of a home market for capital, which took place as peasants were transformed into wage labourers and forced to go to the market to sell their labour power. The creation of a labour market was the most basic condition for capitalism (Marx 1967: chapters 32 and 33). Domestic industries for Marx were part of a transitional structure prior to large-scale industry, in which domestic industry supplemented manufacture (Marx 1967: 700):

[T]he manufacturing period, properly so called, does not succeed in carrying out this transformation radically and completely. It will be remembered that manufacture, properly so called, conquers but partially the domain of national production, and always rests on the handicrafts of the town and the domestic industry of the rural districts as its ultimate basis. If it destroys these in one form, in particular branches, at certain points, it calls them up again elsewhere, because it needs them for the preparation of raw material up to a certain point. It produces, therefore, a new class of small villagers who, while following the cultivation of the soil as an accessory calling, find their chief occupation in industrial labour, the products of which they sell to the manufacturers directly, or through the medium of merchants.

The ‘domestic industry’ was based on the existence of an underemployed class of peasants. It can be seen then as an intermediate form ‘in which surplus-labour is not extorted by direct compulsion from the producer, nor the producer himself yet formally subjected to capital’ (1967: 478). Marx makes the point that this form of subjection to capital is reproduced ‘here and there ... in the background of Modern Industry’ (1967: 478). From the point of view of exploitation, Marx also characterised domestic industries as ‘dens of misery in which capitalistic exploitation obtains free play for the wildest excesses’ (1967: 460), which is highlighted by the predominant use of child and female labour,

more than in manufacture or the factory system; because of the substitution of muscular power for machines (the opposite of the factory system); because workers are disseminated and therefore can offer less resistance; because of the ‘parasites’ between the workman and the employer; and because the domestic industry has to compete with the factory system in the same branch of production (1967: 434-5).

It looks clear that for Marx the domestic industry was a system of exploitation based on cheap labour and was more labour intensive. Competition between the factory system and the domestic industry could only be sustained if domestic workers compensated for a lack of machinery, and a more complex organisation of work and division of labour, by extending the working day (in relation to competitors), by working harder, and by getting paid below value. While the factory system was capital intensive, relying more on the extraction of relative surplus value (the cost of goods that define the standard of living is reduced by organisational and technological change), the domestic industry

could only rely on the extraction of absolute surplus value (longer and more intense working hours). Therefore, the domestic industry, which could only prosper in the shadow of manufacture and large-scale industry, was a transitional and unstable structure in permanent crisis.

Lenin (2003: 446) defined domestic industry under capitalism as ‘the processing at home, for payment by the piece, of raw materials obtained from an entrepreneur’, and considered it to be an industry that can be found at all stages of the development of capitalism in industry, although he associated it mainly with manufacture. There is no contradiction in Marx and Lenin as they both looked first of all at processes, tendencies, and countertendencies. The question is whether the main tendency in capitalism is towards large-scale capital-intensive industry, but neither Marx nor Lenin ruled out its reappearance. As Harvey admits (2010: 225), Marx did not ‘explicitly’ say that the factory system would eliminate the domestic industry or even that it would prevail. Harvey (2010: 225-226) prefers to read Marx in a ‘different way’,

Capitalists, I would argue, like to preserve a choice of labour system. If they can’t make sufficient profit by the factory system, they want the option to go back to a domestic system. If they can’t make it that way, they’ll go off to a kind of quasi-manufacturing system. That is, instead of taking the conditions Marx describes ... as temporary and transitional, I prefer to read them as permanent features (options) of a capitalist mode of production in which competition between different labour systems becomes a weapon to be used by capital against labour in the struggle to procure surplus-value.

However, that ‘permanent feature’ would not invalidate a tendency towards large-scale industry, nor the hegemony of large-scale industry. The permanence or revival of domestic industry must be, therefore, put in its historical context. In late capitalism, as David Harvey shows (1990), domestic industry and the sweatshop have come back to the most developed capitalist economies. The history of the mushroom industry and the change from large tray farms to a contract system based on family farms is related to changes in global capitalism, which Harvey characterises as a change from Fordism to Flexible Accumulation. The previous *configuration* –which bound big labour, capital, and big government– ended up undermining capital accumulation, leading to high inflation in a context of corporate decline in productivity and profitability after 1966 (Harvey 1990; Moody 2007). ‘Rigidities’ were overcome by breaking up working class power (1990: 142).⁷² The new regime of accumulation imported to the ‘old centres’ practices from ‘new areas’ such as the *sweatshop*, rolled back union power, and introduced where they could sub-contracting and temporary work (1990: 147-152). This

⁷² See also chapters 5 and 7.

new configuration opened up opportunities for small businesses and the domestic industry. This did not mean that corporation power diminished; it actually increased through mergers and corporate diversification. What happened is that small businesses were agglomerated through the dominance of powerful financial or marketing organisations (1990: 158). We have seen how in the Irish mushroom industry there was a rapid process of concentration and centralisation in the production of inputs, marketing and retailing in spite, or thanks to, the initial fragmentation at farming level.

The fundamental question that the crisis of the 1970s put forward to capital was how to deal with the tendency to overproduction (1990: 181). The most interesting way, according to Harvey, in which capital solves, at least temporarily, that tendency is temporal and spatial displacements. They consist (a) in accelerating turnover time or absorbing excess capital and labour supply by investments that are returned in the long term (i.e. Infrastructures), although if turnover time cannot be constantly accelerated it merely consists in a short-term solution;⁷³ (b) Spatial displacement (spatial fix), which is a short-term solution as capitalism is implanted in the whole planet; (c) the combination of both strategies (1990: 184). Silver (2003: 76) coined the term ‘product fix’: capital moving to new industries and product lines. In the 1970s, temporal displacement (investing thinking of future uses such as infrastructures, but also shorter turnover time) led to high debt and inflation, reducing the real value of previous investments. Shorter turnover time led to the destruction of the value of fixed capital assets. Competition between different areas increased leading to an over-accumulation crisis (1990: 185). The new regime of accumulation, which elsewhere Harvey described as neoliberalism (2005), was also based on a combination of the two basic strategies of ‘absolute surplus value’ and ‘relative surplus value’. So at both ends, unskilled and skilled (core workers) labour powers developed (1990: 186). It was the combination of both strategies that allowed for the ‘revival of domestic, familial, and paternalistic labour systems’ such as the sweatshop (1990: 187).⁷⁴ Other changes brought about were subcontracting, temporary and self-employment. For David Harvey, this is nothing ‘essentially new in the push towards flexibility’, geographical mobility, relocation, deindustrialisation, etc.; it is related to the tendency in capitalism towards the ‘devaluation of labour power’ (1990: 192).

The revival of the sweatshop and the domestic industry can be also explained in the context of Marx’s law of the tendency of profits to fall. It is in fact a countervailing

⁷³ Silver (2003: 66) speaks of the ‘technological fix’, process innovation, and ‘lean production’.

⁷⁴ The combination of both strategies, as well the practices of subcontracting, temporary work, etc., most importantly was applied in core industries (Moody 1997; Mathur 1998).

tendency: capital saving innovations can bring in some cases increases in productivity and profits. The fall in the rate of profits, provoked by the constant increase in the ‘organic composition of capital’,⁷⁵ can be temporarily reversed by the opening of new lines of production in which the use of living labour is predominant, rather than dead labour (i.e. Machines, tools, etc.) as Harman explains (1999: 21):

If scientific knowledge is progressing and being applied as new technologies, then some of these technologies may employ less machinery and raw materials per worker than old technologies. To give a relatively recent example, the production of newspapers using phototypesetting and lithopresses is less capital-intensive than the old method using linotype machines and letterpresses.

But that is not the end of the argument. It shows only that at any one time there will be some new technologies that are capital-saving. The important point, however, is: what will be the average result of new technologies? Will they save capital or increase it?

What Chris Harman means is that once that innovation has been applied, further investment will be capital intensive generally. The end result is that the average result in the long term will still be the increase of the value composition of capital. So the branches should not impede us from seeing the forest. We will see how that is the case in the mushroom industry. In relation to the tray farms, the satellite growing system applied capital-saving technologies. We also have seen that phase II bulk composting in tunnels was also a capital-saving technology. Afterwards, however, capital-intensive investments reassumed in both farming and composting operations.

Miriam Wells (1996) in her work about the strawberry industry in California deals with the resurgence of sharecropping, which she does not consider ‘a reversion to a less ‘advanced’ form of production’ (1996: 278). Rather, it was a response to a shift in class power in the labour market after the mid 1960s, and a way to cope with production risks and uncertainties (1996: 284). We have seen that the labour question was also the main reason behind the shift to a satellite growing system in the mushroom industry in Ireland. Wells also questions the idea that the development of capitalist systems is uniform and unilinear, common in scholarship on work according to her, and in that I agree with her. But she goes further. She brings a quote from *Capital, volume III*, in which Marx says about ‘sharecropping’, according to Wells (1999: 4):

It is a mere tradition carried over from an obsolete mode of production and managing to prolong its existence as a survival. Its contradiction to the capitalist mode of production is shown by its disappearance of itself from private contracts, and its

⁷⁵ ‘The ratio of the value of the materials and fixed costs (constant capital) embodied in production of a commodity to the value of the labour-power (variable capital) used in making it.’ (<http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/o/r.htm>)

being forcibly shaken off as an anachronism, wherever legislation was able to intervene as in the case of church tithes in England.⁷⁶

The problem is that Marx never said that about ‘sharecropping’, as Wells argues. He was talking about *rent in kind*, and contrasting it with *rent in work* and *rent in money*.⁷⁷ There is, however, much that is valuable in Wells’s study on the strawberry industry. Certainly the mushroom satellite system was more efficient than the previous one, in spite of being based on domestic industry at farm level. However, if we stop there we would get a wrong picture. Domestic industry was contingent and episodic; small farms on the bag system have already disappeared, but more important was the process of centralization and concentration in the production of inputs, in marketing and retailing, which increased its speed under the satellite system. Marx, on the other hand, provides us with ideas to understand how a domestic industry might have come back.

It constitutes a common argument in rural sociology that agriculture is labour intensive because mechanisation is either not possible or too costly. The reason is that we are dealing with a ‘natural production process’. Goodman *et al.* (1987) attribute the resistance of farming to industrial production to that fact, disregarding social relations of production since ‘no industrial alternative to the biological transformation of solar energy into food has been found’ (1987:13). That is why, in their opinion, large-scale industry tends to appropriate the production of farm inputs but not farming. Their argument is very appealing in relation to off-farm processes of appropriation and substitution in agriculture. They, for example, recognize the value of Kautsky’s account (at the end of the 1800s) of why the family dairy farmer was able to remain in business thanks to the ability of capital to determine conditions of supply without going into production (1987: 147-8). The problem for them is that Kautsky did not explain why it was not better and cheaper to produce milk in an industrial way. Yet, corporations also

⁷⁶ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch47.htm>

⁷⁷ The quote actually starts like this: ‘As regards rent in kind, it should be noted now that, in the first place...’, and the quote above follows. There is also a tendency in ‘scholarship of work’, just to follow Wells, to uncritically and stereotypically to prove Marx wrong by taking quotes out of context. But in this case, Marx is even actually misquoted. Perhaps Marx did not anticipate the political circumstances that could make subcontracting and personalized work relations of renewed advantage to capitalist producers in the late 1990s, although Harvey’s reading of Marx allows accounting for that phenomenon. Marx, Wells goes on, does not provide guidelines for making sense of contemporary changes (1999: chapter 9). She also argues that according to Marx ‘sharecropping’ would be incompatible with efficient capitalist production ‘because it hampers the mobility of labor, fosters technological stagnation, and requires a repressive political system to hold it in place.’ (1999: 300). David Harvey (2006; 2010) has produced extensive work on changes in contemporary capitalism based on Marx’s writings, and also criticized some weaknesses in Marx’ analyses, but never in such a simplistic (and wrong) way.

engage in large-scale farming as in the case of the lettuce industry in California (Thomas 1985; Friedland *et al.* 1981) or the US mushroom industry, where large spawn and compost-making companies own large farms (see chapter 2). Moreover, Goodman *et al.* do not consider how and why labour is mobilised and devaluated in different contexts, and how those processes determine the mechanisation of farming and capital investments.⁷⁸

In the case of the mushroom industry solar energy is not a factor in growing mushrooms but there is a period of time, around two weeks when using compost phase III (longer for phase II), in which the growers must leave mushrooms to follow their biological course. So there is a dependence on nature which proper of agriculture (but not of industry). Mushroom growing, on the other hand, does not depend on weather or soil fertility as in other agricultural crops since mushrooms grow on a soil (compost) that is replaced for each crop. And, the way in which landed property interferes with the accumulation process is in mushroom growing also more similar to industry than to agriculture.⁷⁹ A more important factor for capital to find it difficult to enter mushroom farming is that harvesting for the fresh market, the most labour intensive activity, cannot yet be mechanised. Further factors are low margins in mushroom growing, which would make capital migrate to other sectors. Nevertheless, Monaghan Mushrooms Ltd. constitutes an economy of scale that has emerged in the last two decades in the mushroom industry, integrating compost-making, mushroom growing, and marketing.

Small farms still account for a large part of agricultural output in industrialised countries. Corporate farm output accounted for 6 percent of the total in the US in 1980, up from 4.8 percent in 1960 (Heffernan *et al.* 1995: 35). On the other hand, farms of over 1,000 acres went from 23.1 percent of total area in 1920 (1 percent of all farms) to 49.2 percent in 1959 (3.7 percent of all farms) (Mandel 1968: 292). Farm size went up from 142 to 434 acres between 1900 and 2000, at the same time that the number of farms went down from 6.7 to 2.2 million. The percentage of population employed in agriculture went down even more dramatically from 42 to 1.6 percent (Douglas 2002). Small farms, on the other hand, have been ‘integrated into a system of exploitative capitalist relations’ (Davis 1980: 135). That integration is based on the ability of non-farming capital to control small farmers, which can take the shape of subcontracting. In

⁷⁸ According to Ben Fine (Fine *et al.* 1996: 54) Goodman *et al.* correctly identify the heterogeneity of food systems and the significance of their organic content but incorrectly explain the one by the other.

⁷⁹ According to Marx, land rent would be an impediment to accumulation in extensive agriculture (see Fine *et al.* 1996: 45)

that case, the farmer can turn into a piece-worker who sells a product rather than his labour-power (Davis 1980: 140). As we will see, what the farmer sells is actually his labour-power, because exploitative relations are concealed under that particular social relation (i.e. piece work). For Davis, the agricultural equivalent of industrial piece-wages is found in contract farming (1980: 141).

For Marx, industrial domestic work could take different forms including workshops where workers were hired and the workman became an employer of labour-power. What mattered for him was the particular ways in which labour was subjected to capital and the stage of development of capitalism at a particular moment. A study in Mexico City (Littlefield, Alice and Larry Reynolds 1990) found that subcontracting and industrial homework in Mexico City, apart from being related, were structured in a variety of hierarchical organisational forms. Multinational firms subcontracted to local firms, which in turned subcontracted to small sweatshops, which then put out part of the work to women working at home. Contract farming also presents different levels, from a relation with capitalist firms just based on the sale of agricultural products to the inclusion of the supply of all inputs by the contracting firm. Farmers can even become proletarians, 'piece-workers with their own tools for the job who only supply his land and his labour' (Singh 2005: 3, 6, 9). On the other hand, contract growers can either rely on wage labour or on family unpaid labour, full or part-time, casual or permanent, etc. In general, corporations prefer to deal with large and efficient farmers in order to guarantee volume and quality, but small farmers can be the choice if they are low cost producers (Singh 2005: 6). Part of the reasons for agribusiness to go for contract farming, rather than entering production, lie in the flexibility of supply to cope with market uncertainty and avoiding the burden of labour relations, ownership, overhead and management costs, which are not different in other sectors where subcontracting is practised. Corporations can also access, in that way, unpaid labour or use a more docile and flexible labour force, or both (2005: 4, 9). In the mushroom industry we have seen how the size of suppliers tended to increase during the 1990s and 2000s. Monaghan Mushrooms represents the peak of that process. The market power of contractors, versus the fragmentation of contract farmers, allows to some extent the former to determine prices, even below their value, although the level of cooperation between growers, their size, or their being able to market independently will alternatively constrain or enhance the power of agribusiness to determine prices (Singh 2005; Davis 1980: 143). Certainly, contractors can play with different prices in the international market, and what is a price below value for a grower in Ireland would be a price above value for a grower in China,

if both were paid the same, which is not the case. It is doubtful, however, that contractors can just determine prices at will with complete disregard for Marx's law of value.

Concentration and centralisation of capital are two tendencies that Marx described in *Capital, VI* (1967: 585-589). Agriculture is not immune to them, as we have seen. But there are ~~counter~~-countervailing forces. If at the same time there was not a drive towards decentralisation the logical end would be one single corporation in the world with the consequent elimination of competition and the collapse of capitalist production, as competition would be eliminated and value could not be determined. Therefore, corporations engage in practices such as subcontracting and internalise competition by creating different companies in order to counteract the effect of monopoly tendencies (Harvey 2006: 139-146). In the mushroom industry, the split between composting, marketing, and growing with the creation of satellite system implied a vertical disintegration. It consisted in 'outsourcing' the most labour-intensive part of the mushroom chain by handing it to contract growers. But the contract system allowed for a higher level of concentration and centralisation in the industry as a whole. A vertical integration in practice, not formally, was recreated (as we are going to see in this chapter) by establishing sophisticated mechanisms of control in farms by retailers and by mushroom groups. On the other hand, the development of Monaghan Mushrooms, from the 1990s on, led to a process of formal vertical integration of composting, growing and marketing.⁸⁰

According to Singh (2005: 2) contract farming is 'a halfway house between independent farm production and corporate/captive farming', which may or may not lead to large-scale farming. The process in which capital takes hold of production develops first of all in the production of agricultural inputs. In the case of the Irish mushroom industry, retail capital leads the sector but it is not involved in the production of inputs. Marketing and the production of inputs (spawn and compost) are also leading forces but secondary to retail, as we are going to see in the section on standards. The two largest marketing groups are also compost makers. The fact that small enterprises have re-emerged in the mushroom industry does not mean, however, that the tendencies towards concentration and centralisation have been reversed. What matters is who has the power; who is leading the sector. Clearly corporations are the leading force. Millions of small companies in the world do not and cannot lead and do not have market power

⁸⁰ Monaghan Mushrooms is an example of vertical integration, as Pleroma Ltd owns a number of firms along the supply line of the mushroom commodity chain.

as fewer than a thousand corporations do.

In the unmaking and remaking of the mushroom industry in Ireland new relations of production were created, new technologies applied: a revolution in the means of production took place with the creation of a domestic industry and a new class of contract growers. But competition was also reinforced and the tendencies towards concentration and centralisation were not reversed but rather resumed with renovated strength. In the next two sections we are going to see the effect that competition had on growers in the last three decades, how the surviving contract part-time farmer turned into a full fledged capitalist farmer at the same time that the satellite system broke down.⁸¹

The first satellite growers

Beginnings were hard. Prospective growers had no experience in growing mushrooms. A visit to a farm or talking to a neighbour or someone from town who was *into* mushrooms were the most normal introduction to the business. A man, for example, wanted to start growing mushrooms and went to a farm to get some training from another grower, who was a woman. He could see that a day's work would start at 5am, and that she was up some days at 4:30am, and finish at midnight. 'Once you're in mushrooms you work to their time,' the woman said (TMP, December 1990: 6). Later, growers used exactly the same discourse to demand the extra sacrifice of migrant workers. The fact that it was a woman who told the hard facts to a man makes it more telling.

I met Jim in March 2005. After 24 years in the mushroom business he was leaving. In 1981, he started growing in bags with a three-house unit. He and his wife, Pamela, had previously spent two weeks picking in a neighbouring farm. There were no courses

⁸¹ This dissertation does not deal with the extensive literature that there is in anthropology on peasant economies and peasant societies. The focus of this section is on domestic industry from a Marxist point of view (I deal with the sweatshop in the next chapter). Part of the literature on peasant economies is related to the *transition debate* (i.e. to capitalism), how capitalist relations of production take hold of agriculture and peasant economies, and how these new relations have an effect on the anthropological subjects (see Aston and Philpin 1987; Roseberry 1983; 1989; Wolf 1981). However, I consider that the main topic, 'workers against institutions', does not require such exhaustive treatment.

On the other hand, the majority of mushroom workers were women, but this dissertation does not deal either with gender and how it is used, for example, to cheapen the cost of labour, increase the control of growers over workers, and minimise labour conflicts (Collins 1995). This thesis acknowledges the fragmentation of the working class along gender, ethnic and citizenship lines, but it narrows down its scope to class in order to reduce the number of variables.

at the time. Weekly production was at around 4,000 pounds per week. His working day lasted from 6:30 am to 8 or 11pm. On one occasion, before migrant workers arrived, Jim and Pamela started picking at 10am on Sunday morning. Local pickers were not due to arrive till the following morning. They did not stop picking till 8am the following day, when the pickers arrived. In 24 years, Jim could not remember taking breaks or holidays from work. His son, married and with two children, worked off-farm and did not want to take over his dad's mushroom operation: his wife would not tolerate it. In 2005 the farm consisted of five tunnels growing brown mushrooms in blocks. Since yields per tonne for brown mushrooms were around 450 pounds, compared to around 600 for white mushrooms, the need for wage-labour (i.e. harvesting) was reduced. The compensation was that brown mushrooms were paid better.

David, a grower from Northern Ireland said that the most important quality in a grower was commitment. A grower had to be able to work 7 days a week. A grower from North County Monaghan had a 7-house farm with three tiers of blocks doing two flushes of flats, which required less labour input than cups. In order to speed up turnover time, he used to store the blocks for two weeks in a special tunnel and only filled the tunnels when the compost was ready for casing, which is called phase II_{1/2}. He also had a dairy farm with 100 cows. Apart from his father, who had helped him until the old man became ill, the workforce consisted of five to six pickers. This grower, according to the workers, would get up at 5am and would work non-stop until 11 at night. His wife never helped him; she looked after the children and 'had a nice social life'. But he did not. During the day he would have, for a break, tea and a sandwich, very quickly, and then storm back to work after banging the chair against the table. One day he had a wedding to go to. He worked in his suit and 'wellies' until it was time to go and was back in time to continue working.

One of his workers remembered how another day he was giving her a lift home and made a comment on the case of a young guy who had committed suicide. 'Women have it easier because they talk about their problems, but men don't,' he said. 'This guy maybe had problems and wasn't telling. His wife had a great social life; it was him who never went out. Maybe he never stopped working because he didn't wanna stop and think,' she said. This story reveals another side of the myth of the hard working grower, and the sometimes bucolic connotations attributed to the domestic industry.

An old grower, Luke, was about to retire in 2006. He placed contract mushroom growing in the context of poverty in rural Ireland in the 1980s.

Once, a man came over to my house with his son. The son wanted to start a

mushroom farm, as a part-time job, with the father's savings, and the old man wanted me to give some advice to his son.

'Look,' I said, 'I'm not going to get between a father and his son, but you want me to tell you *go ahead*, put the money into mushrooms. I'll tell you right now, you're mad. You and your wife have nice jobs, and are used to having weekends and bank holidays off. Go back to your wife and forget about mushrooms.'

D'you see Francisco? You have to put mushrooms in context. We were very poor. You must know what that means; in Spain you were poor as well. We were migrating, and were given a chance. That's why we did it.

For Luke, only poverty could compel people to get into mushrooms. He was not originally a farmer, nor did he come from a farming background. Yet he could admire the hard work, spirit of sacrifice, and attention to detail that made some growers successful and 'deserve every buck they got'.

It is essential to pay attention to small details. You must be always supervising picking, filling, humidity... I was never a good grower. At one stage I was doing around 400lbs/ton and had to pass the growing management to my wife. She managed to achieve 600lbs/ton [phase II in bags]... It was of course important to get better compost. We were getting it from Marley, who didn't pay attention to detail either. That's why they had to close down... My neighbour was a very good grower. Him and his wife started with a two-mushroom unit, and only got one part-time picker. He would himself pick. Because he was on his own he took two days for casing. Then he started to add houses until he got 7. People think he's a very unpleasant man, but I admire him for his hard work and dedication. Before closing down, because it was very difficult to get pickers, he had made £1.5million. And, fair play to him because he deserves every buck he got.

Growers and technical advisors I talked to agreed that knowledge in traditional farming was not of any help when it came to mushrooms. However, those entering the industry in order to make a living with a 9-to-5-attitude were soon in difficulties because they did not have the mental attitude to be a mushroom grower. That is why those coming from farming were fitter to be growers. The mental attitude consisted in a sacrifice of 24 hours around the clock if needed, mixing professional and private life, family wage with profits, paid and unpaid labour. As we have seen in chapter 2, that level of self-exploitation is what made viable the small farm and the satellite system, as it was based on unpaid labour. It kept, however, that feature when contract growers turned into capitalist growers.

The small master and the capitalist grower

The mushroom industry went through a qualitative change during the 2000s when the average grower turned into a full-fledged capitalist farmer. A series of quantitative changes took place during the 1980s and 1990s that made this transformation possible,

as has been described in chapter 2, where I have explained that the mushroom industry was a capitalist sector, including farming, but contract growers were not capitalist farmers. What is a capitalist grower? Gorayshi (1986: 149) says, ‘the employment of large number of workers is essential for capitalist production’. Drawing on Marx, he even establishes as five the minimum number of workers required for a capitalist labour process in a farm, and then goes on to construct an exacting typology according to proportions between family and hired labour.

For Davis (1980: 137), instead, family farming becomes a capitalist labour process when it is integrated ‘within a system of exploitative capitalist relations’. This is the case of contract farming, the ‘agricultural equivalent of industrial piece-wages’ (1980: 141). Narotzky (1997: 217) makes a similar point. Self-employed contract farmers would not be separated from the means of production but from what Narotzky calls the means of reproduction of their livelihood. So, contract farmers would not be able to reproduce their way of life without entering into specific relations of production with capital. Narotzky cites the case of small family farming enterprises in Les Garriges (Catalonia), but, according to her, although the organisation of production falls outside their control, ‘the labour process remains largely under the management and control of the farmers’ (1997:196). More interesting to my point is her description of subcontracting practices in the garment industry in Les Garriges (1997: 197):

Upstream firms ... produce designs, set up quality requirements, productivity minimums through time measurements realised in-firm with the latest technological equipment, set up piecework prices, acquire and cut up material with the latest computerised technology. Downstream packaging and marketing strategies are designed and realised by the firm ... Workers have greater control over the labour process, however, and the individual responsibility they directly assume in such things as quality and time schedules, still points at a certain ‘independence’ from direct managerial control.⁸²

It is clear that contract family farming is a capitalist work process. What is not that clear where we can drop the line between a capitalist and a non-capitalist farmer, which is where Gorayshi is useful, but still his analysis is mechanistic. For Marx (1967: 292),

⁸² Narotzky also makes the point that contractual self-employed workers do not sell their labour power as a commodity, only the product of their work at piece rates. That means for her that their incomes depend on fluctuations in the product market rather than in the labour market (1997: 197). This point needs to be clarified. For Marx (1976: 692), ‘The piece-wage is nothing but a converted form of the time-wage, just as the time-wage is a converted form of the value or price of labour-power.’ By paying for the final product to the piece worker in a, say, ‘putting out’ system, the capitalist is only paying for his labour-power. So, the rates the capitalist pays for a finished commodity are established in the labour market. (See *Capital*, Volume 1, chapter 21, for more on this point). Fluctuations in prices, certainly will affect farmers prices and therefore incomes, but the value of their work remains the same. Their ‘wages’ are not affected as piece wage workers, but as ‘employers’ the margins would vary.

A certain stage of capitalist production necessitates that the capitalist be able to devote the whole of the time during which he functions as a capitalist, i.e., as personified capital, to the appropriation and therefore control of the labour of others, and to the selling of the products of this labour. The guilds of the middle ages therefore tried to prevent by force the transformation of the master of a trade into a capitalist, by limiting the number of labourers that could be employed by one master within a very small maximum.

According to ‘special technical conditions’ in a particular sphere of production, and the stage of development of capitalist production, a minimum sum of capital will turn its possessor into a capitalist. The purpose of capitalist production, as Marx explains in *Capital*, is to increase wealth, not to reproduce the life of the capitalist and his means of subsistence. The buyer of labour-power, he adds, ‘of course he can, like his labourer, take to work himself, participate directly in the process of production, but he is then only a hybrid between capitalist and labourer, a ‘small master’.’ (1967: 292)

Mushroom growers in the early 1980s started as contract farmers with three-house mushroom units, and used family labour and ‘help’ from neighbouring housewives and even children when they were not in school to harvest the crops. According to Fogarty (1986: 25), farms of that type required three regular pickers and four or five casual part-time pickers. The grower and his wife would normally be included in that figure. However, as we will see below, two people could manage on their own in a three-tunnel farm, although there would be moments in which they would be overwhelmed by the amount of mushrooms to pick. In those moments they needed ‘help’. As I have indicated already, mushroom farming was not typically the only occupation of the family. A crop at that time (a growing cycle) had a length of 9 to 10 weeks, but harvesting only took place during 4 weeks (for four flushes, later three flushes became more normal). With compost phase III, the cycle was reduced to two weeks (TEAGASC 1994).

In the 2000s, as farms expanded and Eastern European full-time workers arrived in Ireland, growers who expanded and updated their growing systems turned into small capitalists. During my fieldwork, 2005-2006, two types of growers coexisted in the Irish mushroom industry: one represented the past; the other, the future. John had four tunnels apart from a dairy farm with 40 cows. He put all the labour needed into the dairy farm and most of the labour other than harvesting into the mushroom farm. He used a contractor for filling and emptying the mushroom houses. If he took a couple of weeks holidays, the mushroom operation would not be affected as he could leave the tunnels idle, but he would need a neighbouring dairy farmer to cover for him his dairy operation. Two bachelor brothers, not far from his farm, had three mushroom tunnels

and a dairy farm, but did not hire any labour at all. Across the border, in County Tyrone, Cormac had four tunnels and four to six full-time pickers. He was quite involved in the work of his farm and a mushroom consultant from TEAGASC described him as a grower-manager because of his involvement in productive work. John was growing flats, with a longer cycle and less labour intensive. Cormac grew cups, which were more labour intensive. The number of tunnels is not what defines the size of a farm, as we have seen. So, a three mushroom-house farm with tunnels with capacity for 12 tonnes of compost and doing 5 crops per year and per house will result in much lower yields and labour time than a three mushroom house farm with tunnels with capacity for 50 tonnes of compost (phase III) doing 7.5 crops per year and per house. In one case we would have an output of 108,000 lbs of mushrooms per year and in the other 675,000 lbs (given an equal productivity of 600 lbs per tonne of compost).

Luke had a 12-tunnel farm (of the type of Cormac). His wife supervised all picking and growing. Luke took care of paper work and marketing. He employed two general operators and a team of around 12 pickers. Joe had started with 4 tunnels in 1994 growing on only one layer of bags. At that time he was quite involved in all the aspects of work on-farm, including picking. In 2006, he had 6 tunnels growing on shelves (3:4:3)⁸³, filling each tunnel with 24 to 25 tonnes of compost, and yielding every week between 18,000 and 20,000 pounds of mushrooms. He employed two men, general operators, and 12 pickers, and did not get involved in 'physical work' any more, just supervising, paperwork and communications with compost and marketing companies. David K., from Derry, had been a dairy farmer before he started growing mushrooms in 1990 with 3 tunnels. In 1993 he added one more and employed 5-6 part-time pickers. In 2005 he had 9 tunnels with capacity for 30 tonnes each (blocks three levels and a nine-week cycle). He ran the farm with his brother, 3 general operators, and 8 pickers, all full-time. David and Luke were capitalist growers but were neither expanding nor upgrading. In fact they both were retired by 2007. Cormac and John were not capitalist growers and were not interested in expanding. Their goal was to make 'good wages'.⁸⁴ Joe had upgraded and expanded. He was a small capitalist grower of the new type planning to increase the number of tunnels because he wanted to get more efficient and

⁸³ Whenever this expression appears in the text, it means the rows of shelves per tunnels and the number of shelves per row. In this case there were three rows of shelves, and the central row had four levels of shelves.

⁸⁴ They could stay in business because they did not have any capital repayment to make, but also because there were still marketing groups willing to do business with them. Only Unimush, however, was willing to send a truck to John's small farm. Monaghan Mushrooms did not bother to send a truck to collect a very small amount of mushrooms.

also bigger. In his opinion, if a grower did not go that way he would fall behind. It was not any more a matter of getting 'good wages' or getting 'extra incomes'. In practice demarcation lines were diffuse. What matters, however, is the tendency.

The group of capitalist growers were those who had upgraded to the shelf system and compost phase III, and had expanded production. They had in 2005 an output of between 20,000 and 50,000 lbs per week each. They were capitalist farmers, manager-owners, who fully lived on the surplus value appropriated from their workers, and always looked at how to increase productivity and expand production. Paul had a 7-tunnel farm near Monaghan town in 2007. As the tunnels had a capacity for 50 tonnes of compost it was the equivalent of 14 houses of the type that Cormac had. But Paul was also on phase III and most of the time did only two flushes of mushrooms in order to increase turnover time and outcome. So, he was much bigger than it looked. Originally, when Paul bought the farm in 1999 there were 8 tunnels with a capacity for 15 tonnes of compost each and a team of 6 to 7 pickers. In 2005 there were around 35 pickers on paper, but in a normal picking day there used to be two picking teams totalling 24 or 25 pickers plus 3 or 4 general operators, a manager-supervisor, and an office worker. He was the only grower in County Monaghan who had the *luxury* of having an office worker, with the exception of Monaghan Mushrooms. A Latvian woman who lived on-farm supervised all aspects of growing and harvesting. The office worker, former employee in Monaghan Mushrooms, managed all paperwork and accountancy. That type of organisation was a novelty in Monaghan. Grower-managers used to do the paperwork late in the evening or their wives would take care of that job. Paul supervised the work of the supervisors and took full control of marketing, but he sometimes would do some physical labour if needed, mostly a symbolic act to stimulate workers' productivity (that was more obvious with those paid by the hour). Later, he built 5 new large mushroom houses each with a capacity for 75 tonnes of compost, and leased a nearby farm with 18 houses and shelf system. In 2006 he got a contract to supply ALDI, packing the orders on farm.

Paul rarely went into the tunnels, which were Aija's domain, the picking manager. He had previously worked as fresh division manager in the packhouse of Monaghan Mushrooms in Tyholland. He was not considered the best grower within the industry, but in the opinion of TEAGASC and CMP experts he was the most successful because he was 'the best businessman'. Joseph, Paul's office worker, said about it:

This is the best overall farm in Ireland even if it is not the best in any single factor such as production or marketing. One of the reasons is that Paul has me here. You

could go to any farm and wouldn't find an office with a full-time administrator like me. If something goes wrong and it is my fault Paul wouldn't have any problem pointing angrily at me, or if I'm not efficient I'll be fired without further questions. But if the farm is not going well and Paul has to reduce costs I also will be the first luxury to go. When the family is involved, these issues are not that easy to handle.

In his opinion, many companies in the mushroom industry (including compost makers) were in crisis because of bad management. He added,

Information and efficiency cost money, and Paul decided to spend money in handling properly paperwork and statistical information about crops and quality standards. In most of farms most of the work that I do is never done.

I remembered that Ciarán, with a rented 8-house farm on an 8-week cycle, had the information about crops handwritten in a diary in an office with no computer and few papers. Joseph had everything carefully recorded in crop records charts, which were placed in an archive. The relevant information was also entered in a computer. He spoke of the three types of growers he had seen: the one that winds down, the one who stays the same, and the one that develops. At another time he spoke of two approaches to management: (1) a hands-on approach when the grower works alongside his workers. He gave the example of another grower who had an 8-house farm of the same type as Paul but with less compost capacity. He worked alongside with his workers, for example filling tunnels with compost. It was a normal thing to see him around with the blue overall that he equally demanded of his general operators. He had the reputation of having the most hygienic farm in Ireland and being the best grower. (2) There was also a hands-off approach. Paul, Joseph said, did not work alongside his workers. He would not interfere with Joseph's or Aija's jobs once the different tasks that Paul gave to them were done. 'By delegating to people who can perform each task well, he can focus on the overall performance of the farm,' Joseph said.

Con G., an agricultural advisor, considered Paul H. a very cunning and aggressive businessman (who also had a business degree) who managed to sell to four different market agents. Paul H. was placed in the same league with men like Ronnie Wilson, who for growers and advisors embodied the qualities required to succeed in business. During my fieldwork period on his farm I always saw him running up and down, back and forth, as if his only job was running around, showing up unexpectedly, to give a sense of urgency to all workers and a feeling that he was constantly on top of them. Gabriel, a manager in a construction company in Monaghan at the time, explained to me that Paul probably increased productivity at work by acting in that way. I particularly noticed it with the general operators, who were on time-wages, while pickers were paid

piece-wages and only supervised by Aija. An incident that took place on the 27th October 2005 will illustrate Paul's type of management.

Paul had four general operators but sometimes only 3 would work at the same time so one could get time off. The four of them, males in their twenties, 2 from Latvia and 2 from Lithuania, could work anything between 8 to 16 hours. Sometimes they worked 24 hours in a row. They hardly stopped to have a cigarette unless there was a moment of calm after pickers had left and would take no more than 15 minutes for the meal breaks. Paul praised them as real hard workers. On the morning of the 27th I saw one of them, Intars, in the pack house sticking labels with the grower's number on punnets and I stopped to talk to him. He was going to have Saturday off. I suggested to go and play pool, and asked for his mobile number. He left in a rush exactly as Paul showed up, who asked whether I was up to something strange that week. That was half a joke. Although he had accepted to have me on the farm, he was not sure what my research was about.⁸⁵ A couple of minutes later Intars came back, and continued working. He did not speak in front of Paul. I felt awkward as I noticed that Paul was not in a good mood and I left. Joseph was in the office and I got to talk to him about how wages, i.e. cents per pounds, were calculated. Normally he used to work and talk with his back turned to me. He turned around, facing me, and said that he was going to give me a straight answer. He started saying that different growers paid differently (something I knew). Then he said, 'you have the NMW, and the Joint Labour Committee for Agriculture. Then you have to take into account what market agents pay and that growers have different margins, and pay what they can afford.' At that interesting moment, however, Paul came in and Joseph let his last word die in his mouth as he turned back to his work.

When I was leaving the farm, Intars approached me in the car park and gave me his mobile phone number. I phoned him later and arranged to play pool in a pub called Shamrock. While we played, Intars said that Paul had been very nervous lately, shouting at people,

Some weeks ago Paul asked me why I was smiling. He had his face red and told me that he didn't like people smiling. So I didn't smile any more. Two days ago he asked me why I was so serious. I don't know what to do... He has told many times in the last few weeks that I am lazy and slow. One day he might arrive to the farm and he will say that he doesn't need me anymore. The other day, when I gave you my phone number, he told me that he was very close to sack me. He always asks why I am doing this or the other thing. But I just do what he tells me to do.

He then went on about the moment when he was going to give me his mobile phone

⁸⁵ His was a monitor farm, so it was common to have farm walks and visitors wanting to know how the farm was run.

number and Paul suddenly showed up,

I went to the canteen for the phone, but when I came back Paul was in the packing room and decided to wait and give it to you later. I can't relax with Paul; he's always around. I don't know why his mood is like that.

At another time, Intars told me that he tolerated the work-regime in Paul's farm because he was trying to make as much money as he could in a period of time as short as possible. He did not think anyone could work in the way he was working for a long period of time, not having a life and ruining your health. His plan was to buy a house in Latvia by the beach and start his own business there. Three years later he was still working for Paul. I had heard on the farm, from pickers, that Paul did not sleep more than five hours, and I noticed that he was normally the last to leave the farm. Then he was building new tunnels. One of the workers had heard him saying that he was 'going nuts'. It was true that he was always under stress and wanted to make people work at the limit of their possibilities, or beyond. I also noticed that another general operator was unwilling to talk to me when he was working.

Paul, as I have said, did not interfere with the work of the pickers, which was Aijas's business. But sometimes he subjected them to similar management pressure tactics, particularly if Aija was not effective enough in that regard. On 22 November 2005, I picked mushrooms from 7am to 7pm. When I left, there was still picking going on, but I asked Aija to allow me to leave. As I was there doing 'work practice' they did not expect from me the same as from the rest of the staff. One of the Lithuanian pickers had told me during the day that she needed a day off but did not know whether to ask Paul directly because Aija was not willing to give her the day off. The following morning I learnt that there had been picking until 11pm. At my first tea break at 12, two pickers were commenting in the canteen that Paul had gone mad the previous night in tunnel 3 (with the other crew). Five girls had requested from him to have the following day off, bypassing Aija, and Paul started shouting who else wanted to have it off, that all of them could go if they wanted. No one dared to ask for a day off, everybody went silent. After Paul left, one of the pickers said that maybe Paul had slept the night before with the dog. A week before the incident Paul's wife had had a baby. The pickers did not know why he had gone mad, when at other times he was so nice to them. Bess, who worked on the farm a couple of days as a 'helper' because it was very busy at the end of November 2005, remembers,

I went out for a smoke and saw Paul screaming at one of the guys. I could see his face, how red and angry it was. Then he saw me and his face turned into a smile. If he didn't know what he was doing he wouldn't change his face so easily. Growers

are very nice when they want to get something but become very angry if you demand or ask for something. Paul knew what he was doing.

Leaving aside the personality of some growers and their bullying tactics, which in the foregoing case still must be understood as a part of a management strategy in the context of the changes taking place in the Irish mushroom industry, this is a description of an owner-manager, a capitalist farmer. Paul represented that type and also the future of the industry. Ciarán C. had gone a step further and had set up a marketing group and a producers' organisation. He was completely removed from day-to-day work on the farm. So he had a farm manager. In the growing division of Monaghan Mushrooms ownership and management were disassociated. Managers hired by the company ran each of the large farms of the company in Ireland and Britain. Ronnie Wilson, its founder, had the majority of shares in the company through Pleroma Ltd. Monaghan Mushrooms represented the most advanced case of the tendency towards concentration and centralisation in the mushroom industry.

Changes in technology brought changes in management practices and the labour process. Perhaps Paul was that tough because it was his personality, but the rest of the growers, according to their capacity, had to follow the same path or fall behind. Those who tried to be 'nice' could not survive. Fogarty (1986: 25) explained in an all-Ireland Mushroom Conference, in 1986, that lack of growers' training in 'personnel management/motivation' and the fact 'that Irish people are too *nice* and do not like telling other people what to do or not to do' were stopping growers from achieving their potential for quality to the fullest. It was market pressure that moved growers to adopt new technologies, organisations of work, and management styles, which as we will see in chapter 4 led to tyrannical work regimes, particularly in farms that could not achieve more efficiency through investment and new growing and managerial skills. Several Irish mushroom pickers who had worked in the 1980s and 1990s said that being 'nice' was a trade-off for very low wages. We will see in chapter 4 that it was a tradition that corresponded to different social relations.⁸⁶ We can look now at the change in the labour process implied in the technological and organisational change that the transition to the capitalist farmer implied.

A changing labour process

While some growers like Paul H. and Ciarán C. were doing well implementing

⁸⁶ In current industrial relations, which are based on different social relations, unions would speak about the 'good employer', but as we will see in chapter 5, this was a concept based on the Social Partnership ideology.

management styles in tune with new technologies and social relations of production, others were coping badly with the transition. Robert C. started with a brand-new 5 tunnel-farm in Co. Tipperary, where Tipperary Co-op and Monaghan Mushrooms had just set up Tipperary Mushrooms as a joint venture and grants were available for prospective growers. By 2003 the group had 30 satellite growers but prices went down and a crisis hit the mushroom industry. Most growers in Tipperary were still repaying their initial investments and some had expanded and upgraded to the shelf system.

In 2005 Robert C. was expanding to 13 tunnels by adding 8 new, large tunnels. The farm used the Dutch shelving system. Robert's farm produced about 50,000 lbs per week. But he was in trouble after a €1.1m investment and needed a yield in excess of 675 lbs/tonne at an average price of 80.5 cent/lb to break even. With phase III compost and shelves that was feasible, but Robert's yields had gone down to 500 lbs/tonne. That meant €16,000 per month in farm gate value (€0.80 was the average farm gate value per pound in 2005).

I had visited Robert's farm in May that year following Paddy B., a harvesting consultant. The visit started with a survey of picking practices. We went into several tunnels to spot bad picking habits. Some workers picked alternately from the two lower shelves rather than going through one at a time, and using a trolley that was appropriate only for the lowest shelf; some picked backward and forward rather than going always forward without looking back; some stretched their arms too much, which slowed them down. Paddy observed a picking trolleys' jam in a corridor. Outside the tunnels, he observed a picker leaving the tunnel, running on the way to the toilet. 'That's the kind of worker I like,' he said. Soon after that another picker came out of the same tunnel on the way to the toilet. She was overweight and walked slowly. 'Look at that!' He thought that growers in Ireland lacked guidance, and CMP and TEAGASC could not offer it because they did not have good professionals.

Bad habits, according to Paddy, meant lower picking rates. Part of the problem was that there was no pickers' supervision. The man in charge was Victor. His job had been to collect the boxes left by pickers and take them to the packing area and the fridge, and general maintenance work, filling, emptying, casing, etc. Robert and his wife used to supervise picking but as the farm expanded they gave that job to him too. But Victor was not doing it. So Paddy after talking to Robert took Victor to the canteen and had a long conversation to see 'what went on in his mind', as he put it. Problems ran deep. Paddy had noticed in the packing area a problem with the quality of mushrooms: bruising, nail marks, dirt, and wrong sizes. Robert suggested that Victor revised them in

the packing area and improved the presentation. Paddy disagreed strongly and retorted that the trays had to be returned to the tunnels because they did not meet the minimum quality and presentation, and pickers had to be told so. That meant that they would not get their wages. Paddy also advised Robert to fire one of the pickers immediately, a male who was very slow, 'a hopeless case'. Robert was perhaps a 'nice' grower. Two Irish pickers who had worked for him thought that he was the nicest grower they ever met, and not as mean as others. After I told them about his financial troubles they said that maybe it was because he was too 'nice'. Paddy probably thought the same. To be successful a grower had to be tough and merciless.

The farm office was directly above the packing area. We went upstairs and Paddy gave a full verbal report of his survey to Robert and his wife while we had tea, coffee and chocolate cakes topped with cream. He recommended that those pickers who were not able to achieve a minimum of 35/40 lbs per hour had to be warned and eventually fired if they could not improve.⁸⁷ This is how I recorded that conversation in my fieldwork diary:

Paddy, chewing his cake, says that pickers keep doing the job improperly and no one is correcting them: 'there are too many in the same corridors, going at different speeds; they pick from different beds at a time and go back and forth, as if they were picking flowers; the layout in the picking trolleys is wrong; and there aren't enough wheeled picking trolleys; there should be two in each corridor. I've seen them standing on the seat [of their trolley] to reach the upper shelves; now, that's dangerous and slows down picking rates. A constant supervision is needed, and those who can't achieve a minimum of 35 to 40 pounds [per hour] have to be warned; and if they don't get it, you should wear your red jacket, because you're the boss.' A mobile phone rings and Robert picks up a big hammer, aiming at the phone. He draws a smile and we all laugh, except Paddy. It is his mobile.

With a list in the hand, Robert commented on the performance of each picker, and particularly their picking rates. He talked about pickers' high turnover rate. There was a core of 8 or 9 workers who, according to them, were making €9 to €10 per hour, but the rest, over 20, were making below minimum wage. To get better picking rates, Paddy said, it was important to plan ahead: if casing is a bit uneven there will be mushrooms of different sizes and less thinning out. But it was important to train and constantly supervise new pickers until they got good. After that, 'you have to show them the red card, and I think they take too many breaks. That must end,' Paddy said, 'they have to be brought under control.' I was all ears. I had never seen how bosses watch workers

⁸⁷ Given that the average piece rate on mushroom farms was 15c/lbs, even pickers doing 40 lbs/h would only get €6, lower than the NMW for agricultural workers in May 2005, when it went from €7.35/h to €7.50/h. (<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie>)

and talk about their work. In the list they had their wages, but not the hours they had worked. Since that fact was fundamental to calculate the picking rates, I asked why they were not there. Paddy, lowering his voice, said that they could not show that information because they were having problems with the minimum wage. In the near future, he said, they will have to lay off those pickers who are not making it.

Different growers used different ways to train pickers. In small farms the owner could pick alongside with new pickers, but more commonly they would put the new picker with a more experienced worker for a while. David K. would give the experienced picker extra money for the supervision. He thought a new picker needed one month training before achieving expected rates. When I started picking in Paul's farm I did not get any training. The supervisor told me what to do for about 5 minutes and after that would only check from time to time. I learnt how to pick by asking and observing other pickers. In many farms, particularly after May 2004, new pickers used to be friends or relatives of mushroom pickers. Growers used those networks as unofficial employment agencies. It became a habit for the picker who brought in a new worker to train her, having her under her supervision until she learnt how to pick properly. Monaghan Mushrooms had a more structured training plan for new pickers and did not use informal recruiting networks. Doloreta, from Poland, got a job through an employment agency on the site of the former Kernans Mushroom Village in Co. Armagh in November 2003, a 30 house-farm back then. She started with some other pickers on the same day. The training of the group lasted for one week. They worked 40 hours and were paid by the hour. After the week of training they were expected to get 40 lbs/h. The picking system was very different in relation to how it was done in Poland, Doloreta explained. There 'when the mushrooms grow you cut all of them. Here you have to keep preparing the bed for the following day, apart from picking.'

Each picking crew had a team leader, a picker whose function was, on top of picking, to tell the rest of the crew where to pick every morning. Unlike in most other farms in Ireland, picker crews in this farm exchanged picking areas every day. For Doloreta that was not good because, 'if a careless picker had picked on that area before you, you wouldn't get a good pick, and if you picked very well, someone else would take advantage of your good work.' Above the team leader there was an Irish (picking) manager who regularly checked the pickers' work. A male general operator collected the pallets at the entry door where pickers left their crates. This worker also took note of the picking of each worker as each crate had the pickers' identification number. In Paul's farm pickers used to take note of their picking and pass the note to the supervisor at the

end of the working day. If some of them lied and put down more crates, Paul would know because of the difference between the weight of all the mushrooms when they entered the fridge and the weight collected from the pickers' notes. If the difference was in favour of the workers he would deduct the average from each worker.

Market pressures, described in the previous chapter, compelled growers to expand production by upgrading the growing system (a technological change) and reorganising the work process. Marx described both aspects as the production of relative surplus value within the process of formal subjection of labour to capital.⁸⁸ The process was uneven, as harvesting could not be mechanised and remained a labour-intensive aspect of mushroom farming, which constituted an obstacle for the development of large-scale mushroom farming. But that obstacle was a relative one. Monaghan Mushrooms was able to engage in large-scale farming. Picking rates could be increased by working harder and by introducing new picking strategies, but also by using better compost, shelves, and picking trolleys.

In the last three decades there have been, from time to time, talks about picking-aiding machines and picking robots. Picking rates and the price of labour have always been at the centre of that discussion. In the beginnings of the industry, Monaghan Mushrooms reported very low picking rates in mushroom farms, an average of 15 lbs/h and sometimes rates as low of 9lbs/h. The goal at the time was to achieve over 25 lbs/h (*Northern Standard*, 6 August 1981). Yet, in 1986 a mushroom advisor (Fogarty 1986: 26-7) argued in a National Mushroom Conference that the average picking rate to achieve was 40 lbs/h, with a range from 15 to 75 lbs/h according to the size of the mushrooms picked and how tight they were on the bed. He estimated the picking cost at 6 pence per pound including PRSI and advised growers to consider various schemes operated through National Manpower to reduce 'the cost of taking staff'. At the same time that picking rates had to be boosted, the shift from wholesalers to supermarkets brought tougher quality demands on growers. Fogarty warned that,

Because most pickers are paid per chip their only concern is to pick as many chips as possible, as quickly as possible. The grower wants every chip picked as carefully as possible; therefore, to avoid a constant conflict situation it is important to establish a minimum acceptable standard. Pickers should not be paid for mushrooms below that minimum acceptable standard.

His recommendation was that growers picked alongside new employees for the first few

⁸⁸ The sheer extension of the working day, the intensification of work without reorganisation of the labour process or introduction of machinery, which Marx described as production of absolute surplus value will be analysed in the next chapter, as it was that kind of exploitation that caused social alarm.

weeks to correct mistakes and show ‘that mushrooms can be picked quickly and well without any bruising.’ The incentive, the carrot and the stick, was the piece wage system. As we can see in the quote above, pickers needed high picking rates to make money, but growers could choose not to pay for mushrooms below standards. Sullivan (1986: 44) in the same conference defined good picking as a combination of pickers’ motivation and good ‘supervision, training and general organisation of the routine in the growing house.’ He did not say how pickers’ motivation was going to be achieved. Fogarty at least mentioned the piece-wages system but also ‘to build a good working relationship’ between the grower and the staff by picking together during the training period. But Sullivan considered that it was better for a grower to have a smaller and skilled team of pickers rather than a large number of casual pickers.

By now it has become clear that only large farms using large-scale industry management style and higher capital investments can achieve high picking rates (efficiency). Connaught Mushrooms (Claremorris, Co. Mayo) had started in 1989 as a mushroom village with 60 tunnels rented to 12 growers, which produced 60,000 pounds of mushrooms on phase II compost in bags. Monaghan Mushrooms took over the farm in 2004 and upgraded to shelves on phase III compost, increasing output to 240,000 pounds per week in 2009 and picking rates to around 60 lbs/h. Picking rates and yields were actually related. We can see this by having a look at the evolution of yields (lbs/t.) and picking rates (lbs/h per picker) between the third quarter of 2005 and the first quarter of 2009 (Feely 2009).

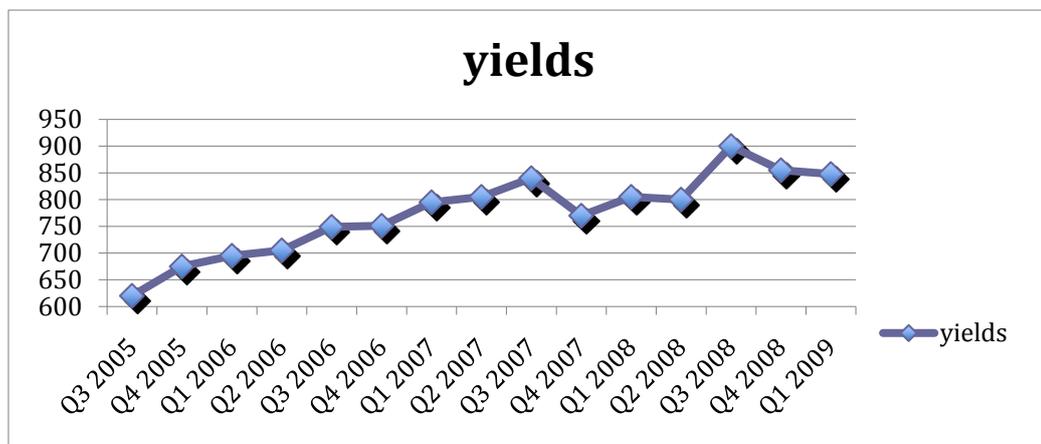


Chart 12: yields (lbs/t) between the third quarter of 2005 and the first quarter of 2009

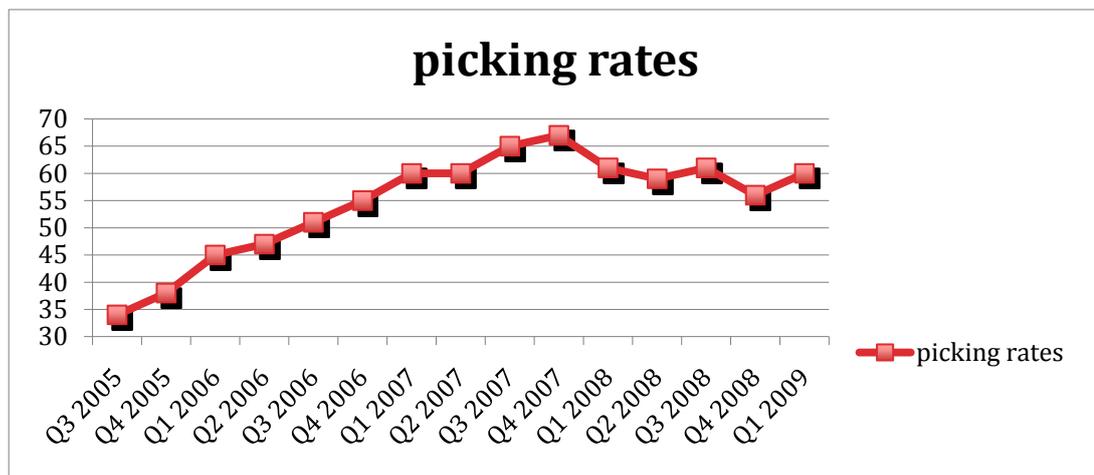


Chart 13: average picking rates (lbs/h) per picker between the third quarter of 2005 and the first quarter of 2009

The quality of the compost, growing management, and growing technology are essential to achieve high yields, but these also depend on picking. The introduction of a new picking strategy, graze picking, and strict training and pickers' supervision at the end of 2006 also accounted for high yields. During 2007 and 2008, picking rates oscillated around 60lbs/h, but both high picking rates and high yields (lbs/t) were related to each other.

Socially necessary labour time

By 2005 desirable average picking rates had gone up to 50 pounds and over per hour and per picker. Ronnie Wilson even spoke at the 2004 annual conference of the Mushroom Growers Association in Britain of the need and feasibility of achieving picking rates of 60 lbs/h (*Mushroom Business*, December 2004: 8-9). Joseph, the office worker in Paul H.'s farm, considered that pickers had to achieve 45 lbs/h and over. They knew the progress a picker should be making after 7 and after 14 days, and what her potential was. A farm in Carrick-on-Shannon, run by the Hogan brothers, even included in written in the contracts that workers had to make rates of 55 lbs/h.⁸⁹

A pertinent question here is why there was that urgent need to increase picking rates when from the point of view of the grower there was no economic loss if picking rates were low. It would be different with a time wages system.⁹⁰ Sullivan (1986: 44), for example, said that the grower and the picker must accept responsibility for any

⁸⁹ The legal basis for that demand is doubtful. And there was nothing in the ERO (JLC) for agricultural workers that compelled them to achieve a certain rate to get the minimum wage. The source for that info was Alan Turner, a researcher from RTÉ radio investigating SIPTU claims of underpayment and health and safety issues on that farm. So it is also doubtful as the basis to fire a worker for not achieving a certain rate.

⁹⁰ A time wages system generally works better in a capital-intensive system of formal subjection of labour to capital as the machine can dictate the speed of work.

deficiency in picking performance but ‘not anyone can become a good picker at a rate which will give a reasonable monetary return for the hours spent.’ In Joseph’s opinion if a picker could not make the expected rates she had to be fired because ‘she is not making money and the farm is not making money either.’

But picking rates did not really bother growers, apart from as a matter of efficiency both in quantity and quality, until the introduction of the National Minimum Wage in 2000. The *Mushroom Newsletter*, edited by TEAGASC (Issue 5, Summer 1999), reported that, according to proposals, as of 1st of January 2000 the minimum wage was going to be set at £4.40 punds (€5.35) per hour for over 18 experienced workers. According to records kept by five growers in one area, rates of £3.75 to £4.50 per hour had been achieved on picking days of 5 to 6 hours per day. Averages piece wages were at that time, according to the *Mushroom Newsletter*, 12p/lb. Therefore, average picking rates were according to these records 31.25 lbs/h to 37.5 lbs/h. It is difficult to know whether those records were representative of the whole industry. Probably they were taken from the most efficient farms. Growers and experts tended to keep figures confidential, perhaps afraid of being found out. But now pickers had to achieve around 37 lbs/h so growers could comply with the NMW that had been extended to all workers in Ireland. The *Mushroom Newsletter* of Winter 2000 added that labour cost increased further if PRSI, sick pay and holiday pay were included. It was not a common practice to include such costs, as we will see in the next chapter. In the context of the Irish economic boom and increasing inflation the NMW kept increasing and with it the NMW for agricultural workers, which was a bit higher. The *Mushroom Newsletter* of summer 2001 announced the increase of the minimum remuneration for agriculture workers from April 2001 to £4.85/h (€6.16/h). By January 2004 the NMW had reached €7/h, and €7.80/h by 23rd August 2005.⁹¹ The tendency of the minimum wage to increase must be understood in the context of a tight labour market during the Irish economic boom. Agricultural workers had been covered by a minimum wage since 1977, but since 2000 it was linked to the NMW for all workers in Ireland and reflected variations in the economy as a whole.⁹² The commodity cycle of the mushroom

⁹¹ From 14th July 2009, last update, the NMW for agricultural workers is €9.33/h, but for mushroom workers covered by Registered Employment Agreements, see chapter 4, the NMW is €9.70/h from April 2009, and €9.33/h for productivity related pay (<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2008/01/articles/ie0801049i.htm>).

⁹² The first Employment Regulation Order (Agricultural Workers Joint Labour Committee) was established in 1977, introducing a minimum wage for agricultural workers (<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie>). However, mushroom pickers, considered part-time occasional workers, were not included until the 1990s.

industry, however, as we have seen in chapters 1 and 2, did not coincide with the general economic cycle.

At the same time that the NMW for agricultural workers increased, the average piece-wage went down. The Report of the Mushroom Task Force (DAF 2004) recommended reducing labour cost for pickers by 25 percent from 20 c/lbs to 15 c/lbs among other proposals, in order to reduce labour cost in the context of the crisis within the mushroom industry. The report did not say how that was going to be accomplished. Growers took advantage of the substitution of Irish workers with Eastern Europeans to apply a reduction in piece rates, as we will see in chapter 3. That had already happened by 2004 before the report was published.

The need to increase picking rates was based on the NMW. From August 2005, average labour costs of 15c/lb meant picking rates of 50 lbs/h and over.⁹³ An increase in the minimum wage had worried English mushroom growers in 1976 when it was established at 91.5p/h for fulltime pickers (80p/h part time). The editor of the *Mushroom*



Journal (Jan 1976: 10) wrote that at a picking rate of 25 lbs/h workers (full-time) would have to be paid 3.66p/lb, but that those doing rates below 25 lbs/h would have to be paid as well the minimum wage. So if a picker [part time] performed at 10 lbs/h he or she would have to be paid a piece rate of 8p/lbs, that is, the equivalent to the hourly rate. His final comment was,

Although this was not disclosed at the meeting [of MGA growers of East Anglia] it is known that, on one farm, the picking rate has been set and agreed at 35 lb. per hour. It seems that no provision, other than sacking, has been made for the slowest pickers

unable to achieve the standard rate.

English growers, like the Irish later, chose to increase picking rates rather than piece wages. The problem is that so far, at least for the fresh market, harvesting cannot be

⁹³ Growers and state agencies in agriculture were never clear whether labour cost included PRSI, etc. In the Mushroom Task Force report the recommendation was for lower picking cost to 15c/lb. We should surmise that all labour cost would be included there. So, pickers would take home a smaller amount. Ciarán C. said he paid pickers 15c/lb, but the cost for him was 20c/lb. Many growers, as we will see in the next chapter, did not pay PRSI and holidays.

mechanised.⁹⁴ So, in order to increase picking rates and decrease piece rates, without having to decrease wages, they have introduced new picking and growing methods and increased the intensity of work. To understand better the process described in the foregoing paragraphs we have to briefly go back to Marx (1967: chapter 21).

Piece wages and time wages are just two converted forms of the value of labour-power, which apply to both piece and time wages. In piecework, value is also measured by the working time expended in the different pieces produced during the day. We have seen above that piece wages tend to converge with their equivalent in time wages in the form of the minimum wage established by negotiation between government, unions and employers' bodies. As the value of a commodity is based on the socially necessary labour time contained in it, picking rates will tend to be equalised through competition in a farm and in the whole mushroom industry whether wages are paid by the piece or by time. Unlike in time wages, however, the piece rate system provokes wage differences between workers according to their speed and skill, a fact that does not alter the relation between wage labour and capital because (Marx 1967: 520):

First, the individual differences balance one another in the workshop as a whole, which thus supplies in a given working-time the average product, and the total wages paid will be the average wages of that particular branch of industry. Second, the proportion between wages and surplus-value remains unaltered, since the mass of surplus labour supplied by each particular labourer corresponds with the wage received by him.

What Marx said applies fully to harvesting in the mushroom industry and the modern piece-rate system, but there are also differences between Marx's times and the current stage of development of capitalism. The minimum wage in Ireland and in England is

⁹⁴ Some picking aiding machines have been developed since the 1980s, makers claiming that a picker using those machines and according to tests carried out in a couple of Irish farm could achieve picking rates of 100 lbs/h and over. But none of these devices have been successful commercially or adopted in Ireland. In the last few years there has been talks about a picking robot that can be left on its own. Recently it was announced in *The Mushroom People* that researchers at the University of Warwick in England were developing a robot that could pick at a speed half of humans, but could be left to work around the clock. The robot uses a camera to spot and select mushrooms of certain sizes more accurately than humans and picks them by a suction cup that is attached to a robotic arm. See picture in the previous page (www.themushroompeople.com/showArticle.asp?id=1649).

In the future one of these devices could be successful with the implication that harvesting would be mechanised and work on mushroom farms would be more like in high tech factories. Farming still is a risky activity in relation to industry because yields still vary according to compost and spawn quality, environmental conditions, and, above all, the risk of diseases.

In relation to harvesting for the processed market, in Holland harvesting has been mechanised, a device with blades cut the whole bed of mushrooms with the shelf system. In that case, mushrooms are grown in a more even way, so they all grow at the same time, and a different variety of mushrooms is also used. But that system is not suitable for the fresh market because of the damage it causes to mushrooms.

now considered a basic workers' right. English growers were very worried that somewhere between 25 lbs/h to 35lbs/h was the socially necessary labour time in 1976, but they still would have to pay the same amount of money to pickers doing 10 lbs/h because new English legislation ruled that wages could not go below a minimum of 91.5 p/h for fulltime agricultural workers.

In the absence of legislation very low picking rates harm profits since they tend to increase piece rates, which is why growers instinctively are interested in boosting picking rates by getting rid of slow pickers, by improving training, supervision, picking methods, and the intensity of work. Boosting piece rates, on the other hand, provokes a fall in the price of labour.⁹⁵ Marx (1967:522) explains it like this,

With the changing productiveness of labour the same quantum of product represents a varying working-time. Therefore, piece-wage also varies, for it is the money expression of a determined working-time. In our example above, 24 pieces were produced in 12 hours, whilst the value of the product of the 12 hours was 6s., the daily value of the labour-power 3s., the price of the labour-hour 3d., and the wage for one piece 1½d. In one piece half-an-hour's labour was absorbed. If the same working-day now supplies, in consequence of the doubled productiveness of labour, 48 pieces instead of 24, and all other circumstances remain unchanged, then the piece-wage falls from 1½d. to ¾d., as every piece now only represents ¼, instead of ½ of a working-hour. 24 by 1½d. = 3s., and in like manner 48 by ¾d. = 3s. In other words, piece-wage is lowered in the same proportion as the number of the pieces produced in the same time rises, and, therefore, as the working time spent on the same piece falls.

At the end of August 2005, when the NMW for agricultural workers in Ireland increased to €7.80/h for experienced workers over 18 workers, average picking rates were below 50 lbs/h. The most successful farm, part of the monitor farm programme, reported average rates of 38 lbs/h. Ciarán C., another modern and successful grower was reporting around 50 lbs/h, but he did not say whether it was average of a whole year, the best month, etc. Piece rates given by growers must be taken with a grain of salt. Ciarán could have spoken about his best monthly average, while Paul was giving a figure for the summer, lower than for the winter. If growers were just struggling to achieve 45 lbs/h, those with the most upgraded growing system and picking strategies, what average picking rates were achieved in less efficient farms? If we take 45 lbs/h as the necessary picking rate in 2005, then piece rates should have been 17.3 cents per pound picked, not including PRSI and other employers' contributions.

The lowering of the piece rate can provoke a reaction on the part of the worker, but a tyrannical work regime, as we will see in the next chapter, was used to impose working

⁹⁵ This has been proven in empirical studies of 'scientific management' (Braverman 1998: 74)

conditions and wages that were likely to be challenged. Growers used the arrival of migrant workers to increase the intensity of labour and reduce the price of labour. The NMW constituted, however, an obstacle for the reduction of piece rates, and the very low level of wages in the mushroom industry in relation to the rest of the economy could only be sustained by bringing in migrant workers on work permits (see next chapter). With time-wages, the wage form conceals the same process because the level of wages remains the same although the value of labour falls with the increasing productivity of labour, and is the reason why time wages are widely used in capital-intensive industries. Piecework was the general rule in early capitalism because capital back then could ‘only increase the efficacy of the working day by intensifying labour’ (1967: 522). The reason also was that (1967: 518),

The quality of the labour is here controlled by the work itself, which must be of average perfection if the piece-price is to be paid in full. Piece-wages become, from this point of view, the most fruitful source of reductions of wages and capitalistic cheating.

They furnish to the capitalist an exact measure for the intensity of labour. Only the working-time which is embodied in a quantum of commodities determined beforehand, and experimentally fixed, counts as socially necessary working-time, and is paid as such.

Braverman (1998: 43) argues that piece wages are used in modern times, and in cases of real subjection of labour to capital, ‘to enlist the worker as a willing accomplice in his or her own exploitation ... piece rates are combined with the systematic and detailed control on the part of management over the process of work, a control which is sometimes exercised more stringently than where times rates are employed.’

How to increase picking rates

In the 1980s and 1990s, picking was typically a part-time activity. Sarah, from Co. Monaghan, started picking for a man with three mushroom houses in 1990. He was looking around for women in need of some cash to take home, and Sarah thought it was handy. There were six part-time pickers on that farm. The farm closed down three years later and Sarah moved on to a new farm, which Paul C. bought in 1999. When she started, there was not any formal training, ‘the grower would tell you how to pick the mushrooms, and you put all sizes in only one basket without worrying about whether the cups were up or down. All the fuss about putting the cups up, not mixing sizes, using so many punnets, happens only now,’ she said. Bess started picking mushrooms in 1988 in a five-tunnel farm in Smithborough, Co. Monaghan, with four other pickers and

the grower. They picked only 6 pounders [boxes] and pickers took them to the fridge, a task that pickers did not have to do in other farms. That, necessarily, lowered picking rates and wages. Later they also used 3 pounders. Hygiene, Bess remembers, was very poor,

The picking trolleys were old, dirty and rusty. We would send mushrooms that today are only good for value packs as grade 'A', placing them with the cap up or down, clean or dirty. That looked natural to me at the time. There was no presentation years ago. We used to smoke in the mushroom houses and have our tea breaks there because there was no canteen... The grower didn't mind how many tea breaks we took because he paid piece rates, 6 pence per pound.

When Bess started, there was not any formal training for pickers, and no instructions about ergonomics to improve picking rates and avoid back pain. The picking method consisted in going only once through the mushroom bed to pick all sizes. When in the 1990s a wide variety of punnets was introduced for the mushrooms sent to supermarkets, different sizes used to go in different boxes. Picking routines changed further in the 2000s when a new picking strategy, 'graze picking', was introduced in Ireland.

Graze picking was first applied in Holland, the most developed and efficient mushroom industry in Europe. Henk Van Gerwen, a regular Dutch consultant visiting Ireland, was the first to talk about 'graze picking' in Ireland (TMP, Nov 2002: 2). In one of the farm walks I attended, in May 2005, Paddy, the Irish expert on 'graze picking', explained this strategy to growers. Mushroom beds were to be picked several times a day and pickers had to go for mushrooms of the same size, as big as possible. The larger the mushrooms picked, the larger the yields, picking rates, wages for the picker and profit for the grower, Paddy used to say. Big mushrooms are heavier. If on top of that pickers leave a stem long enough in each mushroom they increased weight by 10 percent. The biggest cups that Irish growers could sell to British supermarkets were 60 mm diameter. Supermarkets, however, ordered small boxes of, for example, 250 grams in which the maximum size allowed was between 35 and 45 millimetres. Baby buttons were just part of the process of thinning out. Henk Van Gerwen, who took part in the farm walk, said that Dutch growers had advocated bigger mushrooms by arguing that they were tastier, and had left the growing of baby buttons, much less profitable, to Polish growers.

Before picking there were growing aspects to which growers had to pay attention. If pinning was too heavy or even, and most mushrooms of the same size, picking rates and yields would be reduced. So growers had to prepare the mushroom beds for uneven and

not too heavy pinning. On the first day of picking, the strategy was not picking but thinning out. Therefore the only mushrooms picked would be baby buttons. On the second day [mushrooms double their size in 24 hours] pickers started by picking the largest size required by the market agent, and on the second picking they could go for the next size down. Working in this way, Paddy had noticed differences of 30% in picking rates. I asked several growers that brought Paddy to their farms, but no one claimed any significant change in picker rates. Joe was the only one who said that the reason was maybe that he did not follow Paddy's method properly.

Next he addressed the problem of getting pickers to change the way they worked by convincing them that they would get higher picking rates, and, therefore, more money. The main problem, as he put it, was that pickers should not pick what they liked; they had to do one job at a time, as instructed. A mushroom advisor added that graze picking was also the only way for pickers to get the NMW. Paddy made the point that there were problems in communicating with pickers because they spoke other languages than English, and that sometimes, 'they don't want to listen, but they can understand figures.' So, he suggested that growers write on a blackboard in the tunnel the size to pick and the job to do at any one time. 'When workers see that with the new technique they get bigger mushrooms, more weight, and more money, they do it,' he said.

The concept was not new. An experiment at Kinsealy research centre in 1985 in which mushrooms were picked from bags at different stages of development showed that at $\frac{3}{4}$ inches yields per tonne were 441 lbs, and 513 lbs at $1\frac{1}{4}$ to 2 inches, although only 509 lbs at over 2 inches (TMP, Dec 1985: 14). Paul H. showed samples on a farm walk on his farm in May 2005 of picking rates of 55 lbs/h after picking 58 percent of mushrooms of 40 mm and over, and 37 lbs/h after picking only 33 percent of mushrooms of that size.

Graze picking went a few steps further in developing a picking strategy to maximise yields and picking rates, which implied a tighter control of the work process by management. In the process of subjection of labour to capital, reduction of skill, separation of conception and execution, control not just over the general setting of tasks but 'the dictation to the worker of the precise manner in which work is to be performed ... [becomes] an absolute necessity for adequate management' (Braverman 1998: 62). Braverman also showed that, although 'scientific management' was chiefly applied when time-wages were the norm, it was actually first introduced with piece work and it boosted piece rates, which in turn determined pay rates (1998: 68).

In the Irish mushroom industry, the introduction of the NMW accelerated the

introduction of changes in the labour process, such as 'graze picking', to increase productivity. The top rates pursued by growers were equivalent to bottom wages but, were not entirely determined by the NMW as they were also based on productivity achieved in Dutch farms with the same growing system, and on competition with Polish growers in the British market. In Northern Ireland, where the NMW was lower than in the South, Monaghan Mushrooms had in 2003 a bonus system on its farm in Armagh for picking rates over 40 lbs/h. Doloreta (see above) never got it, although she considered herself a good worker, but there was a Ukrainian woman who used to get the bonus nearly every week. According to Doloreta,

She worked very fast. I thought she was like a robot. She only took short breaks, not more than 10 minutes. She was obsessed with getting more money.

According to Ciarán C., his pickers were averaging 50 lbs/h because they applied graze picking, used mechanical picking trolleys and also because they did not do overtime, so were less tired and more focussed. On the other hand, 90 percent of mushrooms were picked in bulk in 6 pounders for the Irish market, a marketing achievement on Ciarán's part.

As we will see in the next chapter less efficient growers also demanded top picking rates that were impossible to achieve, and forced pickers to work very long days, and paid wages well below the NMW. They attempted to achieve the same results as more efficient farms without investing and without improving growing, picking, and management methods. The result was the development of tyrannical work regimes. As mushroom farms were union free, and most growers were antiunion, there was no collective bargaining for negotiating picking and piece rates. When MRCI and SIPTU started their campaigns in the mushroom industry in 2006, there was not any debate on picking rates, but on the implementation of the NMW.

The labour-intensive character of harvesting constituted an obstacle for the development of large-scale industry method in mushroom farming and for capital investment, but it was not an absolute obstacle as we have seen. In that context, piece wages remained the best incentive to increase pickers' productivity. Growers were under pressure from supermarkets and marketing groups to implement changes in the labour process and get a product of the required characteristic, produced in the required conditions. The next section deals with the ideas and practices with which retail and marketing capital managed to control the labour process without entering production.

II) Quality standards and control

We can think about food quality standards as both a system of governance of food chains⁹⁶ and as a device for the subjection of labour under capital and the introduction of large-scale production methods in agriculture. This section considers whether quality standards became the way in which capital controlled the labour process on mushroom farms without managing them directly. Some of the most relevant social science literature on agriculture, agrifood, and labour process do not deal with the role of quality in the transformation of the labour process and the organisation of production (Burawoy 1979; Buttel and Newby 1980; Thompson 1989; McMichael 1995; Goodman and Watts 1997; Lewontin 1998; Braverman 1998; Buttel 2001; Ortiz 2002; Busch and Bain 2004).⁹⁷ Among the references to the link between *quality* and labour process, there is, for example, one in passing in Goodman and Watts (1997: 20). They say,

Retailers are key in ... grading, merchandising and logistics ... in their deployment of information technologies, the cool chain, just-in-time management, contracting arrangements ... which not only reshape the entire filière in, say, fresh products, but also transform the labour process at the farm level. New forms of product specification, grading, quality, and so ... demand of the farmer an entirely new labour process – what Wolf and Buttel (1996) call ‘precision farming’.

Quality is here only one of the ‘forms of product specification’ that have an effect on the labour process. Goodman and Watts (1997: 28) use the term ‘precision farming’ to define ‘the larger process by which science and information technologies are harnessed through private means (processors, retailers, consulting and service companies) to ensure ... quality demands.’ In other words, retailers, through quality demands, would unleash an array of regulations, technologies and management techniques to ensure that farmers, and their employees, work in an exacting and systematic way as possible, as workers on a factory line. The question is how far has that process gone, whether that wide range of regulations that agricultural capital imposes on farmers has become an effective way to break the limits that the type of subjection of labour to capital, represented by contract farming, sets to the introduction of changes in the work process according to large scale industry methods.

⁹⁶ Busch and Bain (2004: 321) say that, ‘today it is the private sector, and retailers in particular, together with private standards that are at the center of the transformation of the global agrifood system.’

⁹⁷ Goodman and Watts (1997) and Marsden (1997) have some references in passing. Boyd and Watts (1997) dedicate a page and a half to the issue of quality in the US poultry industry. They draw on works published in French. Busch and Bain (2004) focus their article on private standards and private regulation, including food quality standards, at a macro level, but only in relation to retailers and consumers. They make no reference to the labour process. Closer to the mark is an article by Martinez and Davis (2002), two agricultural economists.

According to Davis (1980: 144), the essence of contract farming is to allow agricultural capital to control and transform the work process. For him, contract farming allows a high degree of control (1980: 142-3) since it guarantees (1) the scheduling of production according to the needs of food processors and the market; (2) the mechanisation and organisation of on-farm labour; and (3) the application of new techniques, chemicals, and new hybrids to improve product quality and yields. Contract farming is also useful to capital because it contributes to increase the intensity of labour along the lines explained above,

the family farmer will force himself and the members of his family to do what the capitalist contractor cannot force his own time-wage employees to do: he will work harder and longer with little increase in pay to increase productivity and to cheapen the unit cost of this product.

There are, however, some obstacles to these transformations. For Braverman (1998: 42-44), subcontracting and ‘putting out’ systems predominated in the initial phase of capitalism, when capital did not have an effective control over the labour process, and were a transitional form, ‘incompatible with the overall development of capitalist production’ (1998: 43). He further says (1998: 44),

The subcontracting and ‘putting’ out systems were plagued by problems of irregularity of production, loss of materials in transit and through embezzlement, slowness of manufacture, lack of uniformity and uncertainty of the quality of the product. But most of all they were limited by their inability to change the processes of production.

According to David Harvey (see above), however, a return to *putting out systems* would make sense in the context of *flexible accumulation*. It could not be, however, the same type of subcontracting that operated in the 1800s because it is taking place in a different context. The question can be put as to how a satisfactory control of the labour process in subcontracting systems can be achieved and when and why this way to organise production might be more or less interesting for capital than ownership and direct management. The improvement of the instruments and techniques of control of the labour process in subcontracting systems can be part of the reason why this system is back, apart from the externalisation of labour costs, which is the main issue. Ultimately, the question is how capital can increase the rate of surplus value.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Davis (1980) assumes that agricultural capital can exert a high degree of control over the farm work process in contracting farming. Marsden (1997: 176), for example, describes how an exporting company, in a fruit and horticultural district in the São Francisco Valley (Brasil), gave up dealing with small producers because they could not guarantee the *time-quality standards* the consumer market demanded. In the fresh produce commodity chain, timing is an important quality requirement. Mushrooms, for instance, have a shelf life of four days at ambient

Standards as a new trend

Busch and Bain (2004) consider that there have been two important changes in the agrifood system since the 1980s; on the one hand, a shift from quantity to quality; on the other hand, a shift from public to private regulation. They attribute these changes to the expansion of retailers, displacing food processors, and to demographic and lifestyle shifts. They point to the role of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in the rise of supermarket chains. In particular, the trade regime introduced by the WTO permitted – indeed, encouraged – large supermarket chains to become truly global in scope. Those retailers already operating across national borders began to seek out new markets more aggressively. The WTO was created in 1995 to eliminate obstacles to free trade such as tariffs and quotas. Soon the WTO started enforcing international standards to eliminate nontariff obstacles to free trade such as national regulations about the use of pesticides, labelling, etc. (2004: 325-7). But only a small number of standards have their origin in the WTO. This institution mostly legitimises standards originated in private institutions such as large supermarket chains, which third-party institutions certify (Busch and Bain 2004).⁹⁹

The ultimate enforcer of standards, however, is neither the national states, nor the WTO nor third party institutions; it is the market (Bush and Bain 2004). If that is the case we might look into competition as the force behind food standards. Busch and Bain do not dispute that. They point at the oligopolistic tendencies of large retailers through the imposition of private standards on producers. The power of retailers is based, primarily, on their size. While the five biggest supermarket chains concentrated 69.5 percent of all retail sales in the U.K. in 1994, five years later that figure had gone up to 79.8 percent. In this way, the biggest retailers have been displacing spot markets, and, with them, market prices and exporters (Marsden 1997: 174; Bush and Bain 2004: 331; Martinez and Davis 2002). The proportion of food grown and sold under contract is, accordingly, increasing. In the USA (Martinez and Davis 2002), for example, over 95 percent of poultry was produced under contract in 1998, nearly 60 percent of fruit, and

temperature. That is why retailers demand a well-coordinated cool chain, between 2 and 4 degrees, from the moment mushrooms are picked to the shelf in the supermarket. Still, a few days can make the difference between premium, second, and reject quality.

⁹⁹ There is a wide range of standards covering all aspects of food production and processing. Bush and Bain (2004: 334) mention ‘food safety (e.g., Codex standards. Codex Alimentarius 2008), food quality (retailer or processor standards), Good Agricultural Practices, Good Manufacturing Practices, and/or Good Handling Processes (e.g., ISO 9000 series standards. International Organization for Standardization 2002), labor practices (e.g., SA 8000, Social Accountability International 2002), and/or environmental standards (e.g., ISO 14000, International Organization for Standardization 2002).’

over 40 percent of vegetables.

Retailers such as Marks and Spencer complained in the mid 1980s that the decentralised satellite Irish system was having difficulties in enforcing quality controls and shipping mushrooms on time. So, the Irish Export Board (C oras Tr acht ala) suggested the implementation of a ‘quality assurance scheme’ to secure the share of Irish producers in the British retail market (Anderson 1986). The proceedings of the National Mushroom Conferences at the time (1985; 1986; 1987) contain numerous warnings of that kind (i.e. Ryan 1986; Bannon 1987; Mernagh 1987; etc.). Mushroom groups in the satellite system were particularly concerned with getting contracts with large retailers, and in order to get them satellite growers had to produce mushrooms as specified by retailers. The implementation of standards became essential from the mid 1980s on, as market agents moved away from wholesale markets and towards large supermarket chains, which were gaining market share over wholesale markets (Ryan 1986).

In Ireland, particularly in the second half of the 1980s, State institutions such as the Irish Export Board (Bord Glas later and Bord Bia now) and Acot (TEAGASC now), plus exporters such as Monaghan Mushrooms managed to *educate* growers on the need to implement retailers’ standards. In the 1990s, the Irish Food Board (Bord Bia) introduced the Bord Bia Quality Programme for horticultural producers (Bord Bia 2009).

Busch and Bain (2004: 329-331) make a further point. Since large supermarkets have shifted to non-price competition based on quality, variety and convenience, they rely on creation of demand and contracting of supply directly with producers, bypassing wholesale markets and brokers. So prices offered to contract farmers are removed from the prices offered in public markets, where they are publicly available; that is, the only prices publicly available are at retail level. Therefore, for Busch and Bain (2004: 331) ‘the market structure of the agrifood sector is becoming overwhelmingly oligopsonistic, no longer conforming even approximately to the neoclassical model’ of supply and demand.

They do not develop that point further, and do not consider, either, Marx’s theory of value, according to which the value of labour power determines the value of commodities. Weeks (1981) made the point that the law of value applies, and therefore competition, while there is market for labour, as we have seen. The backward integration taking place in the fruit and vegetable commodity chain from retailers to farmers, however, allows retailers to plan production as if they had really gone into

production, squeezing workers harder than if they had to hire them directly, as unions are done away with. The displacement of spot markets, in other words, makes it easier for retailers to effectively control the labour process in contract farming.

Before going into the type of quality standards imposed on mushroom growers, it is interesting to have a brief look at the role of biotechnology (large-scale industry) in determining a framework within which the imposition of standards and a particular work process is facilitated.

Biotechnology and labour process

Lewontin (1998) and Boyd and Watts (1997) argue that new hybrids leave farmers little room to control the labour process in their farms; they force them to follow a pre-designed plan of crop management. This is the case in mushroom farming, which marks already a departure from previous subcontracting systems in agriculture.

Mushroom spawn was the first off-farm input in mushroom farming, and therefore the first to be appropriated by industry and produced in an industrial way. At the beginning of mushroom farming in Europe and for a long time (17th, 18th and 19th centuries) growers inoculated horse manure with mycelium from old, spent horse manure on which mushrooms had been previously grown (van Griensven 1988: 13). Viral and fungal diseases carried over from one crop to the next. Growers fought these diseases back by constantly shifting the growing areas. Another problem was that the spores of malformed or poor-quality mushrooms could not be separated off to improve the varieties of cultivated mushrooms. Therefore, these spores also carried over to the next crop. Quality standards were not required at that time.

In 1894, the French Constantin and Matruchot were able to achieve a controlled germination of spores from mushroom tissue and spores. This mycelium, known as 'pure culture', was then inoculated in sterilised horse manure, which acted as carrier and nutrient base. Subsequently, this substance was bottled and left to settle until the mycelium spread and colonised the sterilised horse manure. Later, growers bought this substance, in theory free of disease. The final product (planting material) sold to growers was mushroom spawn. The process in which growers (or compost manufacturers) planted the spawn in compost and left it to colonise this compost was called spawning. Laboratory operators could achieve a superior spawn quality by selecting spores from the best-quality mushrooms (Vedder 1978: 21, 228-231, 240). In 1932, James W. Sinden, then head of the Pennsylvania State University's mushroom research programme, patented grain spawn (van Griensven 1988: 15). The carriers of

mycelium were, in this case, grains. According to Vedder (1978: 231), by the 1970s grain spawn had completely displaced manure spawn in most countries, and spawn companies world-wide were producing over 50 strains of mushrooms developed in research laboratories, mainly of the *Agaricus bisporus* type (Vedder 1978: 232). To produce good spawn require a specialised knowledge in biology, particularly hygienic conditions to avoid contamination, and economic resources that are normally beyond the means of growers, unless they are very big ones as in the US, where some of the big spawn makers are also very large growers.

The first step to develop a mushroom strain consists in producing an isolate made of mycelium grown from carefully selected spores. According to Mike Walton (1987: 4), from Sylvan, the Sylvan group produced over 20,000 isolates between 1983 and 1993, but only a reduced number of the most promising had been selected for intensive pre-commercial testing. During these tests, the strains selected are compared to existing commercial strains. Once the company considers a strain to be satisfactory and gives the go-ahead, the laboratory staff mass produces batches of inoculum by vegetative transfer, which means that the original DNA copies itself as many times as needed. According to Walton, random errors can occur during the replication of the DNA, and the only way to detect them is to keep performing tests of samples of inoculum before the laboratory finally dispatches it to the spawn factories. The quality control sections of the spawn plants also perform tests before they put the spawn for sale. At the time Walton was speaking, 1993, Sylvan was yielding 500 tonnes of mushrooms per year from all these tests. Different strains have different effects in the way in which work is organised in a mushroom farm. Walton said (1987: 4-5):

Hybrid strains are far less forgiving and have narrower bands of acceptancy than their parent types and the first rule of management must be to respect that fact and to attend to every detail throughout the crop cycle; hybrid strains are extremely reactive to the climatic environment, each strain has its own specific requirements.

Debbie Moore, mushroom adviser, Armagh (TMP, June 1991: 14) also said that, 'The modern hybrid mushroom strains require very precise environmental conditions to achieve their full potential.' Some strains produce larger fruit bodies than others, and are easier to pick but slower to grow, etc. Growers can also influence the percentages of pinning per mushroom bed, to retard or accelerate the growth of mycelium and mushrooms, etc., by playing with environmental factors such as temperature, humidity, and ventilation (Fritsche and Sonnenberg 1988: 112-13). Yet, the right way to grow a mushroom crop of a given strain is established during the pre-commercial tests that spawn makers perform, in-built in the genes of the mushroom strain. This does not

mean that spawn companies determine also which production system (i.e. growing in bags, trays or shelves) is the best. The price of labour, the structure of the industry, the structure of the market for mushrooms, the degree of technological development, etc. are factors that determine which production system is more viable.

By creating and developing mushroom strains, particularly hybrids ones, spawn manufacturers play an important role in the determination of the work process in mushroom farms. It makes sense then that they include technical advice within the price of their spawn. The role of these advisers is to tell growers how to grow different strains of mushrooms. They also act as liaison officers reporting back to the spawn manufacturers the problems that growers find with their crop. In the normal run of things, if there are problems with a crop, such as mushrooms turning brown unexpectedly, or patches without mushrooms in a bed of compost, mushroom growers will tend to blame the compost and the compost producer; compost makers will blame either the spawn (and the spawn manufacturer from which they received it) or the inability of the grower to grow mushrooms; and the spawn manufacturers will blame either the compost maker or the growers. Although there have been cases in which spawn makers have recognised viral infections in their spawn which have originated in the spawn plant, growers, small and fragmented, are normally the ones who take the blame and also the ones that absorb any losses.

What are Quality Standards?

At the beginning of September 2005, an inspector audited Paul's farm in order to renew the Euro-Retailer Produce Working Group Good Agricultural Practices quality scheme (EUREP-GAP). Each Irish mushroom farm had to pass this inspection, performed by a third-party accreditation body, once a year. It is a voluntary scheme, but failure to comply could lead to the cancellation of the contract to use the EUREP-GAP certificate and, in practice, cause the inability to supply mushrooms because certain standards have become a market requirement.

EUREP-GAP was a retailers' initiative dated from 1997 to develop accepted standards and procedures for certification of Good Agricultural Practices. It followed after food safety scares such as BSE (mad cow disease), the wrong use of pesticides, and GM foods. The main stated concern, therefore, was with good security. Other concerns were environmental, workers' and animals' welfare (<http://www.eurep.org>). Therefore, it is a code of good practices for food businesses based on consumers' concerns, according to EUREP-GAP. The Irish Food State Agency, Bord Glas,

promoted it in collaboration with CMP in the Irish mushroom industry. The Irish mushroom industry had its own food scare in 1999 when salmonella contamination was found in mushrooms, accelerating state intervention in the implementation of a food safety compliance programme given the economic importance of food production in Ireland in general and mushrooms in particular (see Wall 2001).¹⁰⁰

Paul also complied with three other schemes: Tesco's 'Nature's Choice', Marks and Spencer's 'Field to Fork', and CMI assurance scheme, all for Britain. The certs were displayed in the office and Joseph showed them proudly. It was not clear for how long the certificates were valid. CMI, for example, did not have an expiry date. 'That's the kind of cert I like,' Joseph said. The farm needed to comply with the four schemes to supply mushrooms to its four main market agents: Monaghan Mushrooms, Walsh Mushrooms, Unimush and Hughes Mushrooms. The inspection for EUREP-GAP should have been unannounced, but the grower knew months in advance that it would take place in September and one week in advance knew about the exact date. During the two weeks prior to the inspection I carried out a mock inspection with Joseph.

Most of the points to comply with were related to health-and-safety issues to guarantee consumers' safety. Mushrooms had to be traceable; each grower was given a number, so each punnet could be traced back to the farm. If there was a complaint, Paul could even find out, in some cases, what employee picked the mushrooms as in some punnets pickers added their own picker numbers. The scheme also demanded growers to keep for a minimum of two years all records requested for each crop, mainly with information about watering and application of chemicals. Joseph had all that recorded in crop-record charts. Crop-record charts, as a TEAGASC advisor told me, contain all the information needed to know what is going on the farm, like temperature and levels of CO₂ and yields day to day. Advisors use them to know whether the grower is working in the right way (this is what contract farming is about)

Other documents required, among the most relevant, consisted in a certificate from Bord Bia that spawn used was not genetically modified, and water samples by the Environmental Protection Agency. Having a look at the crop-record charts constituted the best way to check the correct use of chemicals, but how could it be proven that the grower did not lie? Once a year, for the inspection, an accredited laboratory had to perform a Maximum Residue Limits test from a sample of mushrooms. Paul had to comply with both the MRL for the UK (demanded by Tesco, Marks and Spencer, and CMI) and Ireland (Bord Bia), and the approved products in both countries. But random

¹⁰⁰ Patrick G Wall (2001) Fresh Produce Conference 2001

tests were rarely performed (see next chapter). One requirement, for example, was to put a sign at the door of the tunnels when chemicals had been applied because it was not safe to go in. I never saw such a sign (without workers' control it is difficult to implement). Joseph warned me never to enter a tunnel on my own.

One point of the scheme, as Joseph said, was that to comply with all points was costly because it demanded working time, efficient organisation, and material means, which only the most efficient and capital-intensive farms had. Chemicals such as pesticides and disinfectants had to be stored in a separate room with walls and floor made of concrete, a step down to contain spillages, with no windows, separated, and a fire proof door. The inspectors also required check-lists of cleaning records of toilets, knives, picking equipment, tunnels, control of fridge temperature (4°), a proper store and packaging area, check lists for all cleaning routines, proper lighting, etc. John and other small growers did not comply with some points because they had no time and were pained to invest the money needed.

In practice, however, inspections were not strict enough and I did not know of any farm that had stopped supplying mushrooms because it had not complied with some major points. The inspection in theory was unannounced, but inspectors gave enough time for growers to get the farm ready to pass. EUREP-GAP general regulation document (version 2.1 Jan 2004) for fruit and vegetables did not indicate how long a grower had to fix a problem after a warning. A couple of growers I knew had been in touch with an inspector trying to solve some deficiencies for a period of over six months. Some market agents could even turn a blind eye and accept mushrooms from small growers who *could not* comply. Paul's farm was one of the best and most modern in Ireland, and passed on all major points but failed in one of the minor ones (training records for using heavy machinery) and a recommended one (the analysis of heavy metals in the water they used for irrigation, which was the same water workers and Paul drank).

These are some of the aspects of food quality standards. Another aspect is the particular product requirements demanded by retailers, which are considered as consumer driven. Joseph, in Paul's farm, did not agree with that view, as for him, retailers drove quality standards. 'Tasty and good apples wouldn't pass the test of brightness, which a machine performs, because they are not waxed enough,' he said.

Walton (1987: 4) defined a good-quality mushroom as a smooth, firm-tissued, white, closed mushroom, with the ability to remain closed and develop only slowly after the harvest. It was at that level that competition between spawn makers took place. Four

days after they are picked, at ambient temperature (15-20°C), mushrooms start to deteriorate. The ideal temperature to make them keep the required quality longer is 2 to 4°C. A cool chain must be organised from farm to shelf. Research at TEAGASC Research Centre in Kinsealy, Co. Dublin, found that the capacity of a mushroom strain to remain closed as long as possible was the most difficult factor to get right. The factors that affect quality include the compost, husbandry practices, environment control, strains, handling, packaging and transport. Environmental conditions, husbandry and handling practices being equal, different spawn varieties performed differently. Tests at Kinsealy showed, for example, that the best strain was one known as U1. Four days after being harvested, handled, and stored at ambient temperature (15-20C), 75 percent of them remained white; 69 percent, closed. In the next best strain, A5.1, the percentages were 76 and 43 (Gormley 1987).

Good quality mushrooms have been generally defined according to visual appearance as closed cup, white with no marks or deformation, and a certain stem length. Some definitions can include dry-matter content as an element to measure quality. Quality is also seen as a process involving different factors such as (1) Production materials, (2) Environmental control, (3) Harvesting, (4) Post-harvest handling, (5) Hygiene, and (6) Management.¹⁰¹ A key question to produce good quality mushrooms, as it used to be stated at mushroom conferences and by mushroom advisors, was attention to detail. The satellite system was more cost-efficient than the old system based on large tray farms, but it was also considered as more efficient in relation to quality standards (Kilpatrick *et al.* 1991:41):

The concept of small family owned production units has undoubtedly accounted for much of the success of the system. In spite of being labour intensive, such small units are run by highly motivated and dedicated growers. They can give the meticulous attention required to grow mushrooms to a high standard.

The fundamental idea behind the satellite system was to cut labour costs. The piece-wage system proper of the ‘domestic industry’ made supervision ‘in great part superfluous’ as Marx (1967: 518) said, ‘since the quality and intensity of the work are here controlled by the form of wage itself’. But quality had not been a big issue until the shift to supermarkets in the 1980s, after tray farms had disappeared. On the other hand, supervision in the modern ‘domestic industry’ became increasingly more important, as quality standards also became more important. The result was a drive towards capital investment and a tighter control of the labour process by retailers, fundamentally

¹⁰¹(Debbie More, mushroom advisor with the Department of Agriculture of Northern Ireland, *The Mushroom People*, vol. 3A, 4, June 1991)

through mushroom groups and their intermediaries

Control of the Work process

In spite of the public display of confidence that government institutions and mushroom groups showed about the high quality of mushroom produced by satellite growers, British buyers started to complain in the 1980s of unreliability. Marks and Spencer had doubts about the enforcement of quality controls in the decentralised satellite system, and it seemed that there was a wide variation in the quality of the mushrooms grown by different growers due to lack of proper handling or cooling facilities on farm (Anderson 1986). The transition from wholesale markets to retailers and the viability of the satellite system depended, therefore, on the implementation of strict quality controls. A report at the time recommended the implementation of a 'quality assurance scheme' to guarantee access to the British market (Anderson 1986). Publications within the industry reflected at that time that pressure towards the introduction of a code of practices and food quality standards if growers wanted to sell. An editorial from *The Mushroom People*, August 1985, for example, indicated that:

soon almost 90% of grocery and fresh food sales will be handled by the multiples and hypermarkets ... These large chains are very tough buyers. They must have the product, whatever it might be, picked, packed and delivered to their standards, not those of the producer, transporter or wholesaler... So the casual or careless buyer is disappearing and the casual or careless mushroom grower will, most certainly, eventually disappear with him.

Oliver McCann, an advisor from a compost company, also said that,

Quality mushrooms are the only mushrooms which will sell at an economic price. Hence, if you don't obtain a viable price for the mushrooms you will not stay in business. Gone are the days when you could get away with long stems, half opens, or even opens, in the bottom of the chip, also blotch or pitting. These standards apply particularly to the 'old-established' growers mainly in Northern Ireland, and I'm afraid that if they do not change these set ways there is not a future for them (*The Mushroom People*, August 1985, p. 11).

Pat O'Kane, managing director at Kernan Mushrooms before 1991, complained in an interview to *The Mushroom People* (May 1991, p. 1) that the marketing division of this company had lost sales opportunities because of the lack of quality mushrooms. In his opinion, 'The biggest problem facing many growers is their reluctance or inability to produce that quality of mushrooms that are now required to meet supermarket demands.' A manager from Kernans indicated in 1988 (TMP, Dec 1988) that the company must have 'total control of both manufacturing and sales. One without the other leaves a fundamental flaw in any organisation and can be exploited by European

competitors.’

Lorraine Kirby (1989: 41), from TESCO UK, put forward at a mushroom conference organised by TEAGASC the idea that quality ‘stresses the fact that mushrooms are essentially a finished product when picked ... Mushroom growers must therefore see themselves as factory managers.’ In the 8th National Mushroom Conference, Snell (1990:38), from Monaghan Mushrooms, said that growers were ‘still relatively unsophisticated’ and that standards already in place in the rest of the food industry were coming. That meant ‘more procedures, self-audits and independent audits, checks and more checks. Our independent growing units and farms will have to become food production plants in their own right. This affects all of us here and the people we employ.’

The message was clear: old domestic industry methods were not the way; large-scale industry methods had to be applied to small farms. It was in this context that Monaghan Mushrooms later entered production as we have seen in chapter 1. The implications for growers were that they would have to work according to routines planned by others. New quality standards implied that retailers and agribusinesses had to know nearly everything farmers did in their farms. *The Mushroom People* (August 1992) explained to growers:

Supermarket chains need to show that all reasonable steps have been taken by them to ensure that they offer for sale healthy food. They pressurise their suppliers to comply, and this chain links back to the primary producer who is you the grower. Soon the grower will be required to have documented systems in place to ensure compliance with all current legislation, otherwise if a problem arises with his produce he may end up in court.

Marketing groups and the IMGA were instrumental in promoting code of practices, which were developed by An Bord Glas. This state institution adapted the Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) developed by the Euro-Retailer Group (EUREP) in 1997. A condition to receive state aid was to participate in the Bord Glas Quality Programme that was first set up in 2001. Bord Glas started to carry out the farm inspections, but by 2005, when I was doing my fieldwork, it was the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI), a third-party institution, which was carrying them out.

Getting to know what went on in farms and controlling the work process, however, had started much earlier with the satellite system. Oliver McCann (TMP, November 1986), compost advisor with Reen Compost, used to complain that growers did not keep crop record charts properly, so they could be monitored. He put the example of a grower who complained of low yields to him. The grower insisted that he had levelled the

house correctly, added enough water in the casing, and monitored correctly CO₂ and RH. But he had not registered all that in the crop record charts. So this advisor could not tell whether he had really done it.

Monaghan Mushrooms had a team of advisors working with satellite growers. According to Bannon (TMP, Dec 1987), who first worked for ACOT and later for Monaghan Mushrooms, the firm went from 1 advisor in 1981 to 4 in 1987, providing a minimum of four visits per month to each grower. The advisory programme included demonstrations on grower units, visits to the grading centre for the grower and the pickers, blue-print growing instructions and specific targets for improving the presentation of the trays. Growers selling through Hughes&Company worked under a code of practice laid down by this company, which also included a Liaison Office to regularly visit farms and check that the Code of Practice was applied (TMP, July 1994: 7). The increasing intrusion provoked conflicts between growers and mushroom companies. Sean Kernan, quality control of the Kernan group, explained to *The Mushroom People*, August 1988 p4,

Quality and quantity of mushrooms per crop is what determines the margin of profit for the grower ... The grower must always hold himself or herself responsible for the grade they are being returned. It is not enough to quote the old myth that Kernans downgrade your mushrooms depending on demand or that they pay you processing price and then sell your mushrooms to supermarkets.

In a meeting of the SAFE with growers (TMP, Dec 1988), a Coop representative complained that 'clamps and restrictions' in grading were 'anti-grower devices'. The SAFE representative could, according to *The Mushroom People*, convince growers that 'the measures advocated', the tightening of quality demands, were 'in their own best interests, and definitely necessary for the future of the industry'.

The tendency shown here was towards the methods of large-scale industry, which in the end required certain levels of capital investment that were out of the question for small family growers. However, small farmers were applying those methods. Martin Kernan, in an interview to *The Mushroom People*, Dec 1988, gives more clues on the implementation of quality standards:

We are using every possible means to improve quality and encourage our satellite growers to grow to specifications...Satellite growing is...suitable because quality control on a daily basis is expensive and the grower-owner can do it automatically.

The point was to pass the cost to growers in what was a labour-intensive industry. Statements like those took for granted unpaid labour, and the same methods applied to the *owner-managers* who hired labour. Martin Kernan (TMP, August 1988) called them

‘factory managers’:

The quality of your mushrooms can be determined very early in the crop... Now we come to the big problem, quality in the picking. You must check your pickers daily. The best way to do this is if the grower is doing the packing and weighing. If you have a picker that is not size-grading your mushrooms or not presenting the supermarket what it wants you must realise that he or she is costing you more money than their hourly rate. The first thing you must do is tell them and then monitor the progress; after this if they don't do the job you must look for a replacement.

The ‘factory manager’ had a model to follow in the person of Ronnie Wilson, admired, respected, feared, hated, known for being ruthless, having a hands-on approach to his companies and paying careful attention to detail. A visit to the newly-absorbed Kernan Complex (TMP, August 1993) illustrated that managerial style:

the dark-suited Mr Wilson, sartorially correct as usual, drew the attention of a member of his staff to the fact that the front door handle on the main Kernan office block needed to be replaced. He then ensured that the first impression of any visitor to the business would not be marred by the fact that the door handle didn't work properly, for first impressions are very important.

Quality or Quantity

From a different point of view, quality has become a competitive advantage in an overcrowded market. Does it mean that there has been a shift from quantity to quality? Let's see what Marxist theory can say about it.

According to Lebowitz (2003), the first barrier to the growth of capital is at production level, the generation of plus value. This does not mean that the only role of circulation is the realisation of plus value. Marx (1981: 117) starts *Capital*, Volume III, by saying that the ‘immediate production process does not exhaust the life cycle of capital ... it is supplemented by the process of circulation ... the capitalist production process, taken as a whole, is a unity of the production and circulation processes.’ So, Baber (1987: 46-7) says that the creation of value takes place at the articulation of production and exchange. The second barrier to the growth of capital is its realisation (and the time it takes) in the sphere of circulation. According to Marx (in Lebowitz 2003: 10), capital must expand this sphere by creating ‘more points of exchange’, and generating ‘new consumption’. There are three ways to achieve this: (1) by ‘quantitative expansion of existing consumption’; (2) ‘by propagating existing [needs] in a wider circle’; and (3) by the ‘production of new needs and discovery and creation of new use values’. Large retailers, according to Bush and Bain (2004: 329), base their growth on the creation of demand, and they do it in a remarkably efficient way:

A leading firm will add a new product to its product mix. Alternatively, it will

provide a previously seasonal product year-round. Or, it will expand the range of products in its fresh produce section. Or, it will introduce an exotic fruit successfully. Supermarkets are constantly experimenting with new fresh and packaged products to entice consumers into their stores as well as to encourage repeat sales (Kaufman *et al.* 2000). In industrial nations, supermarkets put 30,000 new products on store shelves annually, although most fail (Food Marketing Institute 1998).

The reduction of the time that products are in stock constitutes a competitive advantage in retail sales. According to Marsden (1997: 185-86), British retailers have grown faster and bigger than other European retailers because the average days stock is held has gone below the 25 to 30 days span, which is the European average. Supermarkets contributed to expand consumption by creating more points of sale throughout the UK in the last 20-30 years. And not only in the UK. In Western Europe, mushroom production, for instance, went up from 412,970 tonnes in 1980 to 841,600 tonnes in 1999. Although the latest crisis of the industry reduced production to 803,400 tonnes by 2003. The third barrier to overcome, therefore, is overproduction. The consumption of mushrooms in the U.K. market grew at an average of 5 to 10 percent a year in the 1980s. Irish exporters, with the collaboration of the Irish state, helped new growers in getting grants and technical advice. At present POs play that role. That is how the number of Irish mushroom growers went from about one hundred in 1981 to over 500 in 1995. Mac Canna (1985: 56-7) explains how the market expanded:

Mushrooms are a very suitable product for modern retailing techniques. They are high value and use supermarket space effectively. They are visually attractive and are available all the year round in reasonable predictable supply and quality. It is therefore in the interests of retailers to promote them. Consequently growers will find buyers from the multiples anxious to expand demand by presenting mushrooms in varied packs and containers. They will also wish to create new demands for speciality mushrooms such as small buttons or large flats. In many cases the ability to provide the speciality mushroom required may be necessary to gain a market for main mushroom lines.

Irish mushrooms growers had gained their share in the 1980s because they could produce good-quality mushrooms, according to the requirements of British market. Their quality was seen as similar to mushrooms produced in Britain but 'significantly cheaper' (Anderson 1985: 53). Dutch and later Polish mushrooms also entered the same market. The British mushroom market became saturated, supply was larger than demand, several times in the 1980s and 1990s, but it was around 2003 when the crisis of overproduction looked worse than ever. Excess of supply led to lower prices, which in turn led to expansion of production. Those who could not keep up had to give up. In Holland the number of farms went down from 852 in 1990 to 415 in 2004; in Great Britain from 280 in 1997 to 75 in 2004 (*Mushroom Newsletter*, 22, 2004). Strong

competition for the British market hit British growers harder: British output shrank in spite of an expansion of the British market while the Irish and Dutch industries increased their share (see table).

Source: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Great Britain)

Tonnes (thousands)	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2007
Irish imports	36	40	44	41	54	42
Dutch imports	7	11	10	17	32	42
Total Imports	49	56	57	63	94	100
Total British Production	79	68	50	61	53	69
Total British Market	128	124	107	124	147	169

In a saturated market margins became tighter, and growers tried to increase yields to maintain the same level of income. When the margin, say, per kilo of mushrooms, goes down, because marketers are paying less per kilo to producers or input prices increase, or both, to maintain the same level of profits growers must increase total output. But other growers will try the same strategy and prices will go down even further, as the history of the Irish growing system teaches us (see chapter 2). A crisis is then the way to restore the balance. When capital moves into an industry, it does it by introducing new techniques, and, therefore, revolutionising the productive forces. Some companies then will be more productive than others and will capture a larger share of surplus value. With the introduction of new techniques the amount of objectified labour per commodity diminishes, and with it the value of these commodities. At the same time those companies with the old technique must produce by using a higher amount of concrete labour. Development is uneven. This movement also depreciates the value of the means of production, and capitalists cannot realize their old value, the value they had when they acquired them. They were bought to produce commodities at the value before the introduction of the new technique.¹⁰² Capitalists will try to lengthen the life of their means of production. And because they do that, they fall behind, their companies become obsolete, and a restructuring must take place. This is the logic behind the tendency of profits to fall, and the crises of accumulation. The credit system

¹⁰² Organic/technical composition of capital versus value composition; when one increases, the other diminishes

increases the temporal gap between production at old and higher values and realization of capital at new and lower values. So difference in value is even higher. The state, with subsidies, on the other hand, prolongs the life of obsolete industries. So when the crisis takes place, it does it at a bigger scale. At the end, crises eliminate obsolete capital and this destruction elevates the rate of profits again. As Weeks (1981: 214) says, quoting Marx, 'a portion of capital is sacrificed for the well-being of capital-as-a-whole'. Capital then starts a new cycle; building on what there was before. That is how structural changes take place. What matters is not the individual capitalist, but the class as a whole.

A look at planning permission applications in County Monaghan shows that between 2003 and 2006, while the number of mushroom farms went down from 87 to 30 in County Monaghan (from 342 to 129 in the Republic of Ireland as a whole) 7 mushroom farms applied for planning permission to build 37 new mushroom houses of the Dutch type, a considerable expansion in a time of crisis. The disappearance of the smaller and more obsolete farms, on the other hand, increased the market share of the remaining farms. For example, in 2003, 342 farms consumed 291,346 tonnes of compost, an average of 852 tonnes per farm. In 2005, 152 farms consumed 242,376 tonnes, an average of 1,544 tonnes per farm. Towards the end of 2006, the mushroom market started to recover. Paul Mooney (*Irish Farmers' Journal*, 18 November 2006) wrote, 'since mid 2006 the supply situation across the EU and in the UK has reversed as capacity shrunk...after a decade of declining prices and margins, the mushroom sector is showing tentative signs of recovery.'

The point is that retailers can afford to be picky and quality becomes a salient feature. But the opposite can also happen: if demand is high and supply is low, quality requirements are reduced and the mushrooms that would only pass, in the previous situation, as second grade will make premium grade. This is what growers used to say during my fieldwork in 2005 and 2006. Marketing agents such as Monaghan Mushrooms, in their opinion, downgraded mushrooms when supply was higher than demand and was generous giving 'A' grades when the market was undersupplied. But as the tendency is for supply to increase faster than demand, the role of quality tends to be constantly reinforced.

Productivity (pounds or kilos of mushrooms per tonne of compost) and quality depended on the quality of compost, the use of compost supplementation, good mushroom strains, proper casing and watering. Yet environmental control (humidity, temperature, air flow, ventilation) was essential for 'spawn and case run, breaking or

initiation, cropping and disease control' (Staunton 1985: 8-9). In the 1980s and the 1990s, it constituted the major capital investment in mushroom farms. In the 2000s the chief capital investment consisted in the upgrading from bags to blocks, from blocks to shelves, and from phase II to phase III compost. The average number of tunnels started at 3 in the early 1980s. It increased to 4 in the late 1980s, to 5 in the mid 1990s, and to 6 with the shelf system and a minimum production of around 20,000 pounds per week in the 2000s. In the end, the 'domestic industry' could deliver neither quantity nor quality.

4. The Rural ‘Sweatshop’

In the previous chapters I have looked at the development of mushroom growing systems, market competition, capitalism in the epoch of neoliberalism, the rise and fall of the contract system, and the emergence of the capitalist grower. While chapters 2 and 3 dealt chiefly with growers, chapter 4 is concerned with wageworkers. In this chapter I will also go beyond the (strict) sphere of production¹⁰³ to consider other forces in the configuration of the mushroom industry and class relations within it, such as the labour market and migrations into Ireland. The central issue in this chapter is the ‘exploitation’ of mushroom workers. The mushroom industry is described in this chapter as a rural ‘sweatshop’, a modern ‘sweating’ system. Chapter 4, therefore, closes the structural analysis of the mushroom industry and the forces that established the framework within which struggles between workers, growers, agribusinesses and retailers were fought out in the public domain during 2006 and 2007.¹⁰⁴

Two Periods

Farmers started mushroom growing, initially, as a part-time activity to complement other activities such as dairy farming; but some also started as full-time growers. The work of the contract grower was supplemented by the work of his wife, children, relatives, and two or six casual part-time pickers, normally neighbouring housewives in

¹⁰³ We can only consider conceptually *production* as a separated sphere. Economic forces cannot be divorced from class struggle (politics). Marx deals with both aspects, although *Capital*, for example, leans more on economics. Other works are concerned with class struggle (*The 18th of Brumaire*, *The Civil War in France*).

¹⁰⁴ Some authors such as Miriam Wells (1996) make the point that *class struggle* creates that framework, rather than the *logic of capitalism*. This is an old debate that has to do with the relationship between *structure and agency*. The second part of the thesis deals with the political aspects. We can see, however, class struggle unfolding in both parts I and II. Concealed, hidden in the first part; open and public in the second part.

need of extra income. Work, particularly picking, was not a regular job. In farms with three or four mushroom houses and crop cycles of 9 to 10 weeks with only four weeks harvesting, some weeks there was very little or not any picking at all. In the 1990s, farms added more mushroom houses and total yield increased. The upgrading to the Dutch system in the 2000s increased yields. Growers had to employ more pickers and full-time workers were preferred. The problem was that the expansion in the mushroom industry coincided with the beginning of a long period of economic growth in Ireland, and, as wages in agriculture were lower than in other sectors, on top of worse working conditions, labour became scarce. Growers solved the problem by sourcing workers from Eastern European countries, where they were redundant and living standards much lower. There are, therefore, two different periods in the industry in relation to the labour market and labour force.

Contract growers; ‘part-time’, casual local workers

Sarah, from County Monaghan, was the only Irish picker in Paul’s farm in 2005. She started picking mushrooms in the 1980s when a man living nearby started growing mushrooms with a three-house unit and went around looking for women. ‘I wasn’t looking for a job, but it suited me at the time; it was handy, and I took it. On the farm there were six pickers, coming and going when they were needed,’ she said. Sarah did not see her job as either part or full-time: ‘because you pick mushrooms when they have to be picked.’ It was occasional and it suited her. She worked for 2 or 3 years for that farmer, paid by the hour, until he went out of business.¹⁰⁵ In her second farm Sarah worked until it closed down in 1997. Her third farm closed within a year and her fourth was acquired in 1999 by Paul H. In early Autumn 2005, at the time of my fieldwork, she used to go to Paul’s farm when he needed ‘help’, which according to Sarah also suited her. Sarah’s husband worked and she was happy with getting some extra cash to pay bills. ‘Help’ in that context meant that sometimes it was so busy that extra pickers were in demand. *Helpers* used to be on the payroll, that is why in Paul’s farm normal staff was around 25 workers but there used to be over 35 on the payroll.

Margaret started to work for Joe D. as late as 1999 and until 2001, when migrant

¹⁰⁵ Some growers paid time wages, particularly when pickers were difficult to get, and growers were desperate for occasional help to cope with peak harvesting days. Later, in the 2000s, growers would exchange among them full-time immigrant pickers to cope with peak harvesting days, when one farm was in need of ‘help’, and the ‘helping’ farm was not busy. In that case, pickers would be paid by the hour, because it was ‘help’. Pickers used to say that they were paid by the hour so they could not compare piece rates between different farms. In the first half of the 2000s, wages of €5 per hour for ‘helpers’, below the NMW, used to be the norm.

workers substituted the Irish workforce on the farm. Joe had then 5 houses, growing on one layer of bags, and five pickers. Margaret, who lived only a mile from Joe's farm, was not looking for a job, but Joe needed pickers and asked her. She worked from Monday to Friday for piece wages around four hours a day, from 8am to noon, because she had to be back home to make lunch. Her job, however, was never that regular: some days Joe did not need her, so she only went to work when Joe phoned her. Other pickers worked more hours because 'they were available'. Between 1999 and 2001, they mostly picked 6lbs blue punnets; 250g punnets were introduced at the time she left in 2001. She did not leave *for any particular work related reason*, as she said. Joe leased the farm to another grower for a year to take a break, and Margaret also took a break, but she did not go back. In good days, she could pick 20 trays of 6lbs in four hours. That would make a maximum picking rate of 30lbs/h, and a maximum hourly wage of £3.60/h (at 12p/lb), below the minimum wage set up by the Joint Labour Committee for Agricultural Workers.¹⁰⁶ But her average picking rate and wages were probably lower since there were days in which there was more thinning out than others, or just fewer big mushrooms. The rest of the pickers were also women from the area and 'all had their families'. She thought that they had also left after Joe took the break because they had found other jobs. For her part, Margaret did not look for any other job after she left Joe's farm. She insisted that Joe was very 'nice' and that there were never any problems with him, contradicting what Joe had told me. But I only interviewed Margaret once and it was Joe who phoned her to make the interview happen.

Bess started to pick mushrooms in 1988 with five other pickers in a five-house mushroom unit (on one layer of bags) in Smithborough, Co. Monaghan. Recently married and with no children she was looking for a full-time job. Sometimes she started at 7am; some days there was very little work; other days it was very busy and there was no 'help', so she had to work over 12 hours. Like Sarah, she did not think in terms of part-time or full-time job. Growers, for their part, did not see it as a full-time job either. It was just 'help', not even a job. As it was a very irregular, flexible *job*, growers expected pickers to be available when they were needed, and that was the main point of conflict between pickers and growers, which was not resolved until migrant workers arrived. Bess was always available.

At that time, neither workers nor growers used to take note of the hours spent

¹⁰⁶ The minimum wage for agricultural workers from August 1999 was £4.14 for workers over 19 not on training; £4.44 in August 2000; £4.85 (€6.16) in April 2001 (www.irishstatutebook.ie)

picking. The piece rate in those early years was 6 pence per pound picked.¹⁰⁷ Bess was making between IR £45 and IR £100 per week, depending on how many pounds of mushrooms she picked, which in turn depended on how many hours she worked. When she received the maximum pay, once every three weeks, she used to leave her house very early and return late at night. Now she realises that IR £100 for so much work was a ‘misery’. The minimum wage for Agricultural Workers was £124.74 per week (39 hours) and £3.20 per hour in 1992. She said about growers,

They always complained that they were not getting any money, but they lived in the big new house and you lived in poverty... I had a great time with the girls. It was brilliant. We went out together on Friday night... I stayed on that farm for five years, but even if we had that good time we always were thinking of leaving the job. ‘Next year we’ll get a better job’. But that never happened...

Thinking back, I was very naïve. We had a relationship with the grower as if we were a family and would do loads for him, but we never made any money and he was making a lot. But I didn’t know it back then. He always said that business was bad. Now I know what they are like.

Robin M., SIPTU organiser who later took part in SIPTU’s organising campaign in the mushroom industry, was the son of an agricultural labourer in Wexford. He remembered that wages used to be always very low, but labourers were given plenty of vegetables and other products on top of the wages. Farmers, according to Robin, were generous like that but never with the money. As a young man he worked some summers on the farm with his father and only got fed as payment. Arensberg and Kimball (2001) found during their fieldwork in County Clare in the 1930s exchange of work among farmers, ‘cooring’, but between agricultural workers and farmers a relationship of that kind could not be based on equality. Therefore, cultural practices such as ‘help’ concealed in fact exploitative relations between farmers and farm workers in the mushroom industry. On the other hand, mushroom growers truly helped each other out. When Joe or John went on holidays, other growers looked after their farms, just as they would do in return. Growers did exchange some machinery and expertise as well. And, they exchanged workers, as we will see below. Unequal power relations, on the other hand, did not stop growers to interpret work relations in terms of old cultural and social practices.

Sources within the industry claimed that there was scarcity of labour at the time. Bess, however, remembers that growers could afford being moody and arbitrary because they could replace pickers easily. According to Bess, it was normal for them to say, ‘if you don’t like it I can get other pickers.’ In all the years that Bess worked on mushroom

¹⁰⁷ Bess’s memory was very imprecise, and she used to get piece rates and dates mixed up. I have checked out facts and corrected them according to my estimations.

farms, she never heard talk of trade unions. And there was very little open resistance. She could only remember of one collective dispute on a farm where she worked in the mid 1990s. Her sister, who also worked there at the time, led the protest because the rest of the workers 'respected her', and she was considered a good worker. The entire picking staff agreed to demand a pay rise and went to the farm office to talk to the grower's wife, Rachel, who was in practice running the farm. The meeting took place in the canteen. When the husband, Christy, knew about the meeting he 'went crazy'. He screamed at them saying that they all could leave the farm and that he would get new pickers (the same attitude that Paul showed to his immigrant workers, as we have seen in the previous chapter). Later on he went back to talk to the 'girls' and said that he would raise the piece-rate by 1 pence per pound (Bess thought they were getting 8p at the time of the protest), but they would have to wait a couple of months to get the wage increase:

They accepted his word because the girls had no confidence and could do nothing about it. There was no choice. Some of the girls married very young and some were separated.

Her point about confidence, however, remains valid, as we will see. Staff turnover according to Bess was high. 'The reason to leave was always the money, but there were always replacements. They always could get someone new within a week.' That situation only changed at the end of the 1990s when loads of girls who had previously worked with her on mushroom farms, according to Bess, got jobs in the shopping centre when this opened in Monaghan town. Fundamentally, 'there was better money in those jobs.' Until then growers had been able to hire housewives in need of extra incomes or women with no other options, like Bess. Picking was a job of the lowest category in terms of wages and working conditions. It was 'help', and only for women. Jim M. told me that picking, like sewing, was a job for women. Women had more delicate and flexible hands and were better suited for the job. Many growers thought also in the same terms. However, I had to remind Jim that he could pick as fast or even faster than women, and other growers claimed that too. In the end, Jim had to confess that it was a job for women because men were the breadwinners and had to bring home a family wage. In fact general operators were normally paid time wages at the standard recognised in the Employment Regulation Order-Joint Labour Committee (ERO-JLC) for agricultural workers. Even male migrant workers tended to get the NMW, although they were not paid overtime rates and other supplements. Still, women tended to set some conditions when 'helping'. They were not powerless. We have seen that they

tended to subordinate work to family schedules at home. When the industry was made up of small farms, growers could overcome that problem. But at the end of the 1990 the labour pool available to pick mushrooms had vaporised, precisely when farms were under a strong market pressure to expand production.

When Bess arrived at Christy's farm there were 5 houses and 7 pickers, and when she left in 1998 there were 9 houses and no foreign pickers. In 2005 there were 15 houses and no local pickers, except for the picking supervisor, a woman in her 60s who had been there since the early 1990s. Bess thought that at the beginning the grower and his wife, who picked alongside them, were 'good people'. They were a young couple, had small children, and 'were not greedy'. Rachel used to make sandwiches for them if they worked late, but stopped making them when the farm got bigger and the workforce increased. 'Maybe we were too many to feed,' Bess said.

I remember one day we had been working for the whole day. It was 11pm and there was still more picking to do. But we were not prepared for that long day, didn't expect to work for that long, and hadn't brought enough food. I went to the house [of the grower] and knocked the kitchen door to ask for some bread. She gave me some and I thought she would do it again, but I never asked again.

Bess felt that she should not have had to ask, that Rachel should have offered some food on her own initiative. She was not going to knock her door for a second time. During the six years that she stayed on that farm, she also witnessed changes in the organisation of work. Punnets were introduced for the first time, and because they slowed them down, the rate per pound for punnets was increased to 10 pence.¹⁰⁸ Presentation (cups up, similar size, clean mushrooms) also became important. Pickers were not allowed any more to smoke, eat, or have tea in the mushroom house. A canteen was built.

Growers had different recollections. John (see chapter 2) remembered that the first pickers were housewives who just wanted to supplement their husbands' wages, amateur pickers who worked when they could. 'That run down the industry because it wasn't a proper job,' he said.

In mushrooms there is lots of work at the weekends ... the Irish pickers had to leave their children with someone, when they were not in school. I couldn't leave them on their own. I had to stay with them because here it's not a nice thing to leave people on their own when you get them to work for you. I couldn't do it. Sometimes my wife had to mind their children in our house while they were picking. The problem was that we couldn't get pickers when we needed them.

Joe D. (see chapter 2) remembered making in the 1990s more money as a grower than

¹⁰⁸ Marketing companies and mushroom groups also paid higher to growers per pound of mushrooms picked in punnets.

he had been doing as a mechanic in a garage previously. In his 4-tunnel farm he had 5 to 6 pickers employed normally from 8am-9am to 1-2pm, from Monday to Friday. They were housewives unwilling to work more than that. They had to leave before 2pm to make dinner for their families, and some would not work during the summer because their children were not in school. So, Joe had 'always problems with the pickers'. 'You had to please them. I suppose I let them walk on me. I was too soft with them,' he said, and went on to add, 'they would come in the morning and said that the big mushrooms had been picked after they left.' Joe also pointed out, raising his eyebrows, that all the women were local and knew each other quite well, which did not stop from creating conflicts among themselves. 'Some pickers thought they were better than the rest and liked ordering people around,' Joe said.

As we have seen in the previous chapter being 'nice' was at loggerheads with profits and modern management practices, at least in the mushroom industry. That points to a change in cultural and social practices grounded in a structural change based in turn on market pressures. Dimitra Doukas (2003: 60) noticed during her fieldwork in New York State in the US two opposing cultural logics, one of them rooted in American traditional values from the times of the American Revolution, supplanted at the end of the 1800s, in which 'the pursuit of great wealth for its own sake was simply not honorable – it was *worshipping Mammon*', in the religious language of the Protestant variant. She called that tradition 'The Gospel of Work' as opposed to 'The Gospel of Wealth'. That tradition survived in the US labour movement and the American working class. It was based on the ideas and material conditions of life of the small owners of property and labourers who made the revolution against the aristocratic British order: the people 'free to pursue happiness through employing their labor on their own land, free to enjoy the fruits of their own labor, the people who vigilantly guard their liberties.' (2003: 63). To succeed in business, however, capitalists of the second half of the 1800s could not be 'too good'. Capitalists had to be ruthless. 'Good people' could not succeed; business could not succeed without evil (2003: 67). We see the same transformation in the mushroom industry as growers turned into capitalist farmers, even if they claimed from time to time that they were oppressed by big capital (the retailers).

Joe's pickers might have been unruly and difficult to control, but they did not ever make any overt claim over pay increases. He had no answer to that question. Bess would have explained that pickers' moaning was a way to avoid being bossed around. Growers were always moaning too that they were not making money in order to justify low wages. Wages, in turn, could be kept low because, as I have explained, the labour

force was made up of a majority of housewives whose intention was to supplement family wages. But, implicitly, pickers' claims were about money. Big mushrooms allowed for higher picking and piece rates. Suspicions about big mushrooms being stolen at night was a way to tell growers that wages were very low and that growers were greedy. Bess thought that workers' claims in Joe's farm about the big mushrooms being picked after the workers had left could have been true, because it happened lots of times. She remembered going back to the same bed where she had worked the previous evening to notice that 'mushrooms had not grown', and 'more spaces between them'. She suspected that it was the grower and his family who had picked them.

On the other hand, mushrooms grew better in some beds than in others. If a very good picker had to move to an area where an untidy and careless picker had been working the previous day, her picking rate would go down. That used to cause friction between pickers. Ordering around was a way to get better patches and better wages. As Bess used to say, pickers had no confidence to ask for more money, so they had to resort to other strategies. On one occasion, Bess was picking brown mushrooms and another picker, with a very wide skirt, complained that Bess had loads of big mushrooms, which according to Bess was true because she had thinned out her bed properly. When the two went for lunch the other woman had hers very fast and went back to the tunnel on her own. When Bess returned, she noticed that the woman was holding her skirt like a big bag and that it was full of Bess's mushrooms. On another occasion, the rage provoked by long hours and low wages, according to Bess, was directed at the grower. Three pickers took bunches of mushrooms and threw them in the spaces between mushroom bags before quitting the job. The grower only found that out when emptying the house, but by then the pickers were gone to never return. We can see how conflicts over bad working conditions and low wages were expressed as little sabotages and gossip about the boss, and as competition among workers (see Scott 1985; 1990; and Silver 2003).

Growers like Joe got cheap workers, but they also wanted hard workers available to work at any time. In the 1980s and early 1990s, before the economic boom, some workers like Bess picked mushrooms *full-time* because there were no other jobs for them, had no skills or education, as she put it, to do anything else, and had no children. But they were a minority, and they got jobs elsewhere at the end of the 1990s. When Joe returned to his farm in 2002 after taking a year's break, he was 'handed down' a staff wholly made of migrant workers. The 'fussy' and 'lazy' Irish pickers were gone and the new pickers were ready to work as many hours as the grower demanded, and without complaining. Or so it seemed. The new workers were not rooted in the local society, had

little or no knowledge of the English language, and had arrived to make as much money as they could. That trade-off promised good returns for mushroom growers, who portrayed the arrival of these workers as a gift. A whole epoch was about to close; another one, about to begin.

Capitalist growers; full time migrant workers

As we have seen, mushroom farms increased in size during the 1990s, and small contract growers turned capitalist in the 2000s. It was not a necessary consequence, but those changes led to the breakdown of the satellite growing system. On the other hand, while the drive to expansion was strong towards the end of the 1990s, a tight labour market did not allow for that expansion to take place until 1999, when workers were sourced from Eastern European countries such as Latvia and Lithuania.

Shortage of pickers

Individual growers repeatedly pointed out during my fieldwork that the mushroom industry would have collapsed without the arrival of migrant workers. Jim M. considered doubling the number of mushroom houses in 1995, but did not try because he could not find full time pickers. Instead he decided to grow brown mushrooms because yields were lower (but better paid), around 450 lbs against 600 per tonne of compost, and needed less labour. When four years later the first Latvian pickers started to arrive in Cavan through employment agencies he was already considering how much longer he would stay in business. None of his children were willing to take over the farm and, having his investment paid, he decided to continue with his five tunnels until he retired. The arrival of migrant workers, however, allowed him to get full-time pickers. David K., from Co. Derry, had 5 to 6 part-time Irish pickers before 2000, when the first Latvian and Lithuanian pickers started to arrive in the area. According to him and his wife, it was impossible to find local pickers to work full-time, and those who were available to work only wanted to work from 9am to 2pm, and have weekends off, 'but you can't pick mushrooms commercially from 9 to 2.' In the North growers did not expand as fast as in the South, partly because they lacked state investment grants, and according to David it was not until 2002-2003 that he decided to hire migrant pickers. It was then that he expanded, and by July 2005 he had a team of 8 migrant full-time pickers.

For John, from Co. Monaghan, migrant workers, unlike the Irish, were only happy if they worked many hours. 'They don't like when they work only a few hours.' He also

could leave them working on their own. ‘They can organise themselves. It’s much easier [with the Lithuanians]. They want to be [on the farm] even on Sundays.’ Joe upgraded to three-tier blocks in 2002, and later to shelves because he could hire a full-time migrant workforce. Luke remembers that at the end of the 1990s he, as well as many other growers, was about to give up mushroom growing because of labour scarcity, but then ‘the Latvians came in’. Joseph, in Paul’s farm, also thought that the industry would have disappeared around 2000 because of scarcity of pickers. Paul bought Robert’s farm because the Lithuanian and Latvian labour markets, swarming with cheap labour, were opened to Irish growers thanks to the Irish work-permit system.

Without migrant pickers, growers would probably had lost ground in the British market, unable to compete with Dutch and Polish growers. The industry would have likely declined. Irish growers, as we are going to see, were unwilling or unable to compete with wages in other economic sectors in Ireland. They demanded of their employees to work unsocial hours and be available for work at any time, and for all that they considered that the minimum wage was too high. Only migrants from Eastern Europe on work permits *accepted* (it was rather a *temporary* trade-off) those wages and working conditions. Later, growers tried to import Thai and Chinese workers, when Eastern Europeans did not need work permits, and turned out to be ‘not reliable’.

One day in August 2005, while I was carrying out fieldwork on Paul’s farm, Joseph went on about the cost of labour and the reduction of margins because the prices of mushrooms kept going down and costs such as compost going up. According to him, this was a very difficult situation and the only solution for him was to increase the intensity of picking, to get employees to work harder. ‘At the end growers might end up going for slaves, on work permits, to China.’ He made the gesture of using a lash, and he finished by saying, ‘but I’m not going to go there.’

In 2007, a Bord Bia labour horticultural review (Bord Bia, no date) highlighted that horticulture had no price support as did other sectors in agriculture, hence the reason why horticultural growers had been forced to drive costs down ‘in order to maintain competitiveness’ as labour costs represented 30 percent of all input costs. The report also noticed that any increase in the minimum wage implied an automatic increase of costs. The implicit assumption was that the Minimum Wage for agricultural workers was a ceiling not the bottom, which was why growers *had to* bring in migrant workers and why these made up the overwhelming majority of workers in horticulture in the 2000s. Compared to other sectors, horticulture could hardly attract workers other than those on work permits tied to a single employer, without a chance to move between

jobs. Construction, on the other hand, was attracting an increasing number of workers, and competing for workers with agriculture, chiefly because the NMW for the lowest category of construction operatives was €14.52 per hour from July 2007 (in Agriculture it was €8.65). ‘Horticulture must actively compete for its labour against a range of sectors that have better rates of pay and often easier and more comfortable working conditions,’ the report said.

Labour scarcity in context

In 1999, Tom Parlon, the Irish Farmers’ Association president, announced that the Irish mushroom industry needed an extra 1,000 full-time workers, which growers could not find in the Irish labour market (Irish Times, 08/03/99):

What was once an advantage [access to a flexible local labour force to harvest the crop] has now become the single biggest threat to the future expansion or indeed viability of the mushroom sector as potential workers are finding employment in other areas of the economy.

Aidan Ryan, chairman of Irish Mushroom Growers Association, brought the figure nearly a year later up to 1,400 immediate vacancies (IFJ, 04/12/99). He still emphasized the part-time nature of the job and demanded that the work-permit system considered the need of mushroom growers for very flexible workers to work only when they were needed. *The Irish Farmers Journal* insisted at that time on considering mushroom growing a seasonal activity (25/12/99), which was not and is not the case. A survey Bord Glas commissioned in 2002 found that the labour shortage in horticulture was ‘the biggest constraint’ in this sector.

Labour shortages in horticulture are widely regarded as the biggest constraint on the development of this industry. The growth and very survival of many sectors of Irish Horticulture is based on having a supply of unskilled non-EEA workers to do the jobs Irish workers are unavailable and increasingly unwilling to do.

A grower in Limerick, *Farmleader* (21/7/01), complained that companies such as Dell had dried up the labour pool in the Mid-West and he had to bring Latvian workers on work permits to pick mushrooms. He said,

We found it very difficult to get Irish labour, and even more difficult to hold on to them. We needed committed workers. Mushrooms sometimes have to be picked at 5am.

The general mood among growers was very well expressed in the opinion of a grower quoted in the Bord Glas survey: ‘Without the foreign workers we would have closed down a few years ago, you simply need staff to run your business and Irish people won’t work here.’

‘Committed workers’ can be understood as a term to refer to workers with no other choice but to work on a farm, and in one only. The work-permit system, which bound workers to a single employer, was until May 2004 the way to get those committed workers. Non-EU Migrant workers on work permits started to arrive into the horticultural sector in 1999. By 2001 they represented 40 percent of the horticultural workforce at primary production level (4,080 workers); 62 percent of these migrants were Latvians and Lithuanians (Bord Glas 2002); 1,940 of them, or 47.5 percent of all agricultural workers on work permits, worked in the mushroom sector. The percentage of non-EU workers in this sector was close to 70 percent only two years after the arrival of the first migrant workers. By 2007, over 94 percent of mushroom workers were not Irish, but the total number of workers had fallen to 1,850 from a peak of 4,431 in 2002 (Bord Bia no date). The fall in employment was less pronounced in other horticultural sectors. In horticulture as a whole employment fell within the same period to 6,119 from 10,800. The mushroom industry was the sector in Ireland with the highest concentration of non-EU workers, certainly until May 2004, but in any case with the highest concentration of non-Irish workers throughout the 2000s.

In relation to the wider Irish economy, Mr Robert Berney (*Irish Times*, 20/11/2004), head of Irish Small and Medium Enterprises (ISME), said that the country needed 20,000 migrant workers per year. Sister Stanislaus Kennedy, chairwoman of the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI), on the other hand, spoke of 30,000 workers per year (IT, 15/12/04). The Central Statistics Office (CSO) raised the figure up to 50,000 (IT, 20/12/04), which was more or less the number of migrants coming in annually since the late 1990s. The Irish labour market was actually attracting just the number of migrant workers it needed through the work-permit system, at least until the accession of new member states in May 2004.

On the other hand, according to the ICI (IT, 14/09/04), ‘most immigrant workers are at the lower end of national wage scales, with three-quarters of all work permits going to low-skilled occupations.’ For Mr Robert Berney (IT, 20/11/04), the ‘construction, catering and food processing sector, together with the hospitality sector, are almost completely reliant on immigrant labour in order to stay in business.’ In 2004, for example, 14,571 work permits (42.7 percent) went to service industry, 8,306 (24.3 percent) to hotel and catering, and 3,721 (10.9 percent) to agriculture and fisheries. These were casual and low-paid jobs that had become ‘non acceptable’ for national workers.

The report of the ICI, *Labour Migrations into Ireland* just assumed that ‘people in

the world's wealthy regions are in many cases no longer prepared to do the dirty, dangerous, arduous and ill-paid work which needs to be done in any society.' The report, however, did not question why 'people in the world's wealthy regions' do not want to do those jobs, and, above all, why 'ill-paid work... needs to be done in any society.' The only two attempts at explanation in the report, in passing, were the demographic (reversed Malthusian) argument that birth rates in wealthy countries cannot maintain the level of labour force needed, and the effects of Globalisation in the casualisation of work, the disappearance of skilled occupations, and the growth of traditionally low-paid jobs. But there was no attempt, again, to understand or question why that was the case. We will see that unions, at least SIPTU, started a campaign against the 'race to the bottom' in wages and working conditions in 2006, which challenged the *need* for ill-paid jobs. However, the official discourse, before unions claimed generalised workers' exploitation, was a bucolic view of migration into Ireland as a rainfall for Irish employers, the Irish economy, and migrant workers.¹⁰⁹

Migrants' tales

The *Irish Farmers' Journal*, 19th February 2005, reported the case of a Slovakian man working on a dairy farm in Co Wexford. Miroslav, after graduating from an Agricultural University in his home country, decided to find work in Ireland, on a farm, 'to gain more experience, to improve [his] English, to get to know Irish people and to earn better money.' He planned to save between €20,000 and €24,000 in two years. He lived 'in a comfortable self-contained apartment in an outbuilding Scott converted... Since his arrival he [had] joined a walking club in Wexford, which [kept] him busy most weekends.'

The article, 'East meets West', was a publicity report of an employment agency specialised in selecting experienced workers from Eastern European countries for full-time skilled jobs on dairy, tillage, and pig farms. The article started with a statement on the shortage of labour in the agricultural sector and tried to show the reasons why experienced workers from Eastern Europe would be happy taking jobs Irish workers would not take. It mentioned, for example, that a Ukrainian man, after working for two years on an Irish farm, returned home with €22,500, 'equivalent to 20 years work in the Ukraine'.

¹⁰⁹ As Richard Herding pointed out (1977: 260-1) once unions, particularly the labour aristocracy, accept the 'rules of the game' (i.e. Partnership) they change from the strategy of increasing the share of labour in the national economy to the distribution of the share from the less to the more privileged layers of workers.

The need of migrant workers to earn a living and the need of local employers for this kind of worker, happy to work for just the minimum wage, seemed to dovetail. Michael Casey, former chief economist at the Irish Central Bank, wrote in the *Irish Independent*, 27/03/06:

Most immigrants are happy to work for wages which are lower than those in the host country - though not, of course below the legal minimum... Employers are happy and the immigrants are happy. Irish employers could use this windfall gain to restore competitiveness, grow their businesses and employ more people in the future. Consumers... could also benefit from lower prices.

Everyone was wining; everyone was happy. That was Mr Casey's thesis. And he was not alone arguing that. According to a Bord Glas labour-force review of the horticulture sector (2002), 85% of the non-EEA workers interviewed (all Eastern European) 'expressed a high level of job satisfaction and felt that they were treated equally alongside their Irish counterparts... The majority of those interviewed felt that they were paid a reasonable wage based on the numbers of hours worked.' A survey in late 2002 (Conroy *et al.*, no date: 8), however, showed a different side:

The study found that migrant workers at both ends of the occupational hierarchy were relatively satisfied with their circumstances ... At the lower end of the hierarchy, the study found rural agricultural workers, located in isolated areas in single nationality teams. Their pay was below minimum standards of pay, their English poor to non-existent and their working day very long. They did not complain.

Arrivals

Vincent Turley, as we will see in the next chapter, worked for Monaghan Mushrooms as a human resources consultant at least since the early 1990s. Sometime in 1999 or 2000, he set up 'Recruit Eastern Europe Ltd.' to bring Eastern European workers to Ireland, mainly from Lithuania, although his main client was Monaghan Mushrooms. The company's headquarters consisted of a two-room construction attached to his house, in Monaghan town. He established a partnership with an employment agency in Vilnius, Lithuania, and employed a Lithuanian woman. Marija had a Masters in Business Studies, like her boss, and arrived in Monaghan in 2001. She had previously worked for a French bank in Vilnius, but lost the job and entered a job competition for Vincent Turley's company. Mr Turley was in touch with Irish employers in need of workers. Most of the migrants were hired for low-skilled jobs in agriculture, among them mushroom farms, and the meat industry. According to the Monaghan immigration officer at the local GARDA station, the first 'non-nationals', referred to as 'aliens' before 2001, arrived in Monaghan as high-skilled workers on work permits. They were

mainly doctors and nurses who got jobs in the hospital in Monaghan town. There were also some groups of mushrooms workers. In 2001 a 'big kick off' took place, first in the mushroom industry and later in the furniture industry. By 2005, the immigration officer believed that migrants represented 10 percent of the population in County Monaghan (around 5,500 migrants).

Some employers did not need to hire workers who could speak English. Others asked for a group of workers including one who could act as a translator. The agency in Vilnius was in charge of looking for the workers according to employers' requirements. Employers paid a fee to the agency in Monaghan; workers, to the agency in Vilnius, but they also had to pay for their flights to Ireland. Normally Marija was at the airport waiting for them. Part of Marija's job was to inform workers of their rights, how to register in the police station, and how to get the PPS number. Around that time there was another employment agency in Monaghan to bring Eastern European workers run by John Word, who specialised in Polish workers.

Sometimes employers complained that their employees were lazy and, as there was a period of guarantee, they had to be replaced. It was easy, as the agency had so many candidates. Employees normally did not complain, but on one occasion a group recruited for a mushroom grower in Northern Ireland phoned the agency claiming that the employer did not pay the agreed wages, deducted money from wages, had taken their passports, and offered substandard accommodation. Marija managed to move them to one of the companies of Monaghan Mushrooms and reported the case to the Work Permit authorities in the UK, which did not do anything about it. In her opinion, employers always got away with breaking the law. She knew many cases of workers paid as little as half the minimum wage, but nothing was done about it. Marija co-operated, with Turley's approval, in the report, 'Migrant Workers and their Experiences' (no date, probably 2003) commissioned by the Equality Authority, IBEC, Congress, CIF and Know Racism. Both employment agencies in Monaghan closed down after May 2004.

Doloreta arrived from Poland in November 2003 to work on the farm run by Monaghan Mushrooms in County Armagh. A friend in Poland advised her to go to an employment agency. The agency offered her a job nine months after she left her CV. The offer consisted of picking mushrooms for £4.05 an hour and work an average of 39 hours per week. They gave her a copy of the contract in both English and Polish, and within two weeks, and after paying the agency €250, Doloreta was in Ireland. She travelled by bus, at her own expense, with ten other people (7 women and 3 men) from

the same agency and to work on the same farm. In Dublin they took a bus to Dungannon, where a van was waiting to take them to their accommodation in Armagh. The houses were all right and rent and bills were not deducted from their wages. Monaghan Mushrooms offered the best conditions within the Mushroom Industry.

Other workers came from countries like Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus. Olena was a restaurant manager in Kiev and had studied Hotel and Catering in college. An agency in Kiev told her that there was a job for her on a mushroom farm in Ireland. She was looking for a job abroad 'anywhere to do anything'; mushrooms was not her choice. She arrived in Ireland in 2002 to work in Kilnaleck Mushrooms, Co. Cavan, where 17 workers walked out in January 2006. For Victor, from Minsk (Belarus), the question was also simple; he did not have a choice:

If someone had told me to prepare the luggage to leave in the morning, I would have done it without asking where I was going, because the situation was very bad at home. 95 percent of people leave just to make money.

He went to an employment agency, paid \$1000, and two weeks later they told him that there was a job waiting for him on a pig farm in Co. Monaghan. He was in his second year doing a Ph.D. in veterinary medicine. Through a friend in the university lab he knew about job opportunities in Ireland, and made some phone calls to enquire about them, but it was the employment agency that decided to send him to Ireland. Victor did not trust the employment agency, 'many take your money and disappear', but it was his only option. They never told him what the money he handed in was for, but they paid his ticket to Shannon airport. The rest of the journey to the farm in Monaghan, in the winter of 2001, was at his expense. He had to make the way to the farm on his own. The information he got from his agency was reduced to the name of the employer, the address of the workplace, and the minimum wage that he was meant to get.

Large farms could hire their workers directly in origin through local employment agencies. Dick Duffy owned a 56-house farm on two sites in Co. Clare. He went to Sebastopol in the first half of 2003 to hire workers, getting at least 12 in one go. On the farm there were also workers from Latvia, Russia, and other countries, 50 migrant workers in total. Three of the workers from the Ukraine recruited between June and October 2003 had to pay to the agency in Sebastopol between €1,725 and €2,000 for the work permit, air fares and other costs. Once in Ireland, the employer demanded within four months €500 from each one to renew the work permits, which according to legislation, the employer had to pay for. In the three cases the employer retained work permits and passports. He later dismissed the workers because they refused to pay for

the renewal of their own work permits.

In January 2000 (TMP, Jan 2000), Brendan Dunleavy, an 'International Food, Agro-Industry Consultant' based in Co. Cavan, offered males and females aged 20 to 40 years of age, with second and third-level education, basic English (10-15 percent with very good English who could act as translators), 'in good health and energetic... trustworthy, hard-working and enterprising.' They would be recruited mainly in the regions of Moscow and St. Petersburg, but also through recruitment agencies, agricultural enterprises, and training centres in Poland, Hungary, Ukraine, Baltic States, Hungary, Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Albania. Employers would have to pay a fee per worker between £450 and £600. In another publicity report the following month (TMP, Feb 2000), Mr Dunleavy added, 'Russians are not very interested in clubs, associations or organisations. They take little part in trade/industrial disputes or litigation.' Some time later (TMP, September 2002), 'The Association of Agricultural Workers', based in Kiev, with a mobile phone number in Ireland and directed by Vitaly Zhdanov, offered to pay fees (€500 per worker) for the work permits, something that employers should pay. In the issue of October 2002, the Association even offered to pay for the training period (€200). On top of paying for the work permits it appears that workers had to pay for their own training period.

In February 2003 (TMP, February 2003: 12) DETE announced its intention to tighten the process of issuing Work Permits because of changing labour-market conditions, or not issuing them when there is enough labour supply with the required skills. John Coleman, chairman of the Irish Farmers Association's Horticultural Committee said that between 4,000 to 5,000 workers, mainly from Eastern Europe and on work permits, worked in horticulture:

The days of horticulture producers being able to source Irish workers ended with the rise of the Celtic Tiger and this is not about to change. While unemployment is increasing in this country, it would take an economic collapse before horticultural producers would have any hope of sourcing Irish and EEA labour.

There were no official indications, however, of a ban on recruitment of migrants for horticulture and the mushroom industry (TMP, July 2003: 8). Finally, after the accession of a number of Eastern European states in May 2004 no more Work Permits were granted to the mushroom industry. Yet, the Sector Based Scheme (SBS) for mushroom workers from outside the EU, in Northern Ireland, was still reprieved for another year in June 2005 because Northern growers took the case to the Home Office alleging that SBS workers were more reliable (TMP June 2005: 6).

In May 2004, Ireland was one of the three EU-15 countries to open its labour market

to the citizens of the new ten member states (the others two were the UK and Sweden). A majority of the workers in the mushroom industry, Latvians and Lithuanians, were from those states and, suddenly, became free to move from one job to another. Since an abundant supply of labour was made available to the Irish economy in May 2004, The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) decided not to issue any more new work permits unless employers were 'seeking to employ highly qualified or highly specific personnel and where there is also a demonstrable and verified shortage of such staff in the labour market.' Some mushrooms growers started then to report high staff turnover of their formerly committed Lithuanians and Latvian workers, and demanded of DETE to speed up the concession of work permits to get Thai and Chinese pickers.

Since the May 1st accession, growers report that pickers from EU states are moving on now more than previously, because no permits are involved ... One grower took on a picker from a new member state a few days ago and she is gone already. Some growers are keen to recruit Chinese or Thai pickers as they have found them to be very reliable workers ... There is always an uncertainty about pickers staying on farm no matter what country they are from.' (*The Mushroom Newsletter*, 23, Summer 2004)

The Report of the Mushroom Task Force (Department of Agriculture and Food, 2004) pointed out that from May 2004, in a scenario of freedom of movement of a majority of the workforce, 'reliance by the industry on the ongoing availability of a low cost force may be unsustainable into the future... The availability of labour from non-EU countries under the permit system should continue,' the report recommended.

In the end, growers had to adapt to the freedom of movement. They could not replace their new EU workers with non-EU25 mostly because of political developments outside their hands. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment did not allow, in theory, new work permits for mushroom growers. In practice, a small number of new work permits were granted. In Cavan and Monaghan, for instance, there were 76 permits issued in 2005 for mushroom farms, but only 11 of them were new work permits (DETE). It is likely that the main reasons for the concession of a reduced number of new work permits was the scandal of abuses that the media started to uncover in 2004 and 2005, mainly the GAMA and the Irish Ferries affairs, and the media campaigns, revealing abuses in the mushroom industry, of SIPTU and Migrant Right Centre Ireland (MRCI).

High labour turnover, in the end, did not materialise, or only took place in particularly badly-run farms. Most of the workers with freedom of movement were middle-aged women with very poor English. Only young and school-educated

mushroom pickers with fluency in English were able to find better jobs, but they were only a minority. On the other hand, there was no shortage of EU10 workers trying to get jobs on mushroom farms.

The way in which workers were recruited changed after May 2004. Growers started to ask their workers for relatives or friends to fill vacancies. A picker could phone a relative or a friend in Latvia or Lithuania and this person would be working on the farm within a week. There were still a number of workers employed from non-EU states such as Ukraine. Employers just kept renewing their work permits annually. After five years their work permits became permanent. It was in the immediate interest of these workers not to confront the boss in order to keep renewing their permits.

The Sweatshop

The term ‘sweatshop’ has its origins in the nineteenth-century European industrial development, particularly in Britain and normally denoted a workshop in which subcontractors paid piece wages to mostly women and children, and made them work long hours for very low wages (James 2005: 215-6). Marx characterised a *sweater* as ‘someone who undertakes to deliver a certain quantity of work at normal prices to an entrepreneur, but who then has it carried out for a lower price by others. The difference, which goes to make up his profit, is *sweated out* of the workers...’ (Marx 1976: 1071). At present, the *Global Sweatfree Movement*, for instance, defines a ‘sweatshop’ as ‘any factory where workers’ basic human rights to form independent trade unions are violated, or where employees are not paid ... enough money to support their families with dignity.’ And it also adds that ‘sweatshop workers face dangerous and exploitative conditions ... and arbitrary discipline.’¹¹⁰

The term ‘sweatshop’ also draws attention to the uneven development of capitalism in the most industrially-advanced countries in the world, as we have seen in the previous chapter. The General Accounting Office in the US defines a ‘sweatshop’ as an employer that violates more than one federal or state labour laws. According to the Department of Labor in the US between 40 to 60 percent of registered establishments violate wage and overtime legislation. A more reduced number of establishments, counted in their thousands, also seriously violate safety and health legislation (Collins 2003: 2). In Ireland, Mike Jennings, organiser of SIPTU’s campaign ‘to clean up’ the Irish mushroom industry, referred to mushroom farms as ‘sweatshops’.

It is not possible to know the percentage of mushroom farms that were sweatshops at

¹¹⁰ (www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/sweatshops/)

the start of SIPTU's campaign on the mushroom industry in March 2006. The analysis in the previous chapter leads one to think that most mushroom farms were 'sweatshops' in the modern sense. On some farms, some pickers claimed to get the minimum wage, but that was not the norm. On the other hand, pickers did not generally get overtime rates of payment, which had to be paid at time and one-third after a 39-hour week. Any time worked on Sunday had to be paid at time and two-thirds, and time by two on Public Holidays.¹¹¹ Thanks to the network of contacts that MRCI built between July 2006 and September 2007, we know about the experiences of 441 mushroom workers, or around 23 percent of all mushroom workers (of a total of 1850). If we adopt the definition of 'sweatshop' given above, MRCI was not able to find a single farm that was not a 'sweatshop'. There were workers who claimed to get the minimum wage and average weeks of 39 hours, although a small minority, but they still complained of not getting holiday pay, overtime when they worked over 39 hours, nor Sunday and Bank holiday premium. On top of that, or maybe because of it, workers had no union representation, they could be fired and replaced easily, and the supply of labour was much higher than its demand. But it was not only a question of economic exploitation beyond that allowed by industry or sector agreements. There was also oppression.

Migrant workers started to arrive in 1999, but the first scandals of gross underpayment, mistreatment, and abuse did not reach the media until 2004. However, there had been hints in the media for some time before 2004. The Equality Authority, IBEC, ICTU, the Construction Industry Federation and, Know Racism commissioned a survey of migrant workers and their working conditions, which was carried out in autumn 2002 (*Irish Times* 19/05/03). The survey found, among other things, that piece rates for fruit-pickers ranged between €1.25 and €2.50 an hour, and attributed them to a lack of migrant workers' knowledge of their rights (Conroy *et al.*, not date). Yet, it was not until the GAMA scandal that cases of abuse started to pour out and have an impact on Irish politics and society. Some mushroom pickers, even before this, had started to step forward. In November 2004, for example, a mushroom picker was awarded €8,000 for unfair dismissal (*Irish Times*, 06/10/04). She claimed working 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, for €220, and living in a caravan on-farm. The grower deducted €20 per week for accommodation.

A report in the *Irish Times* (12/11/05) focussed on the 'widespread' cases of exploitation of migrant workers. It introduced the theme with the story of the 13 periwinkle Latvian pickers that their boss abandoned on a November night with light

¹¹¹ www.irishstatutebook.ie

clothes at Colt Island, just off the north Dublin coastline. The report also mentioned cases of exploitation of mushroom pickers and made this comment:

Exploitation is now no longer as simple as failing to pay the minimum wage: it's forcing people to work without overtime, no extra pay for weekends, no holiday pay, dismissals for being sick or getting injured. Trade unions and groups have encountered exploitation of migrant workers in low-skilled jobs in every industry from construction to services to the unregulated domestic work sector.

The worst case of exploitation on a mushroom farm, and the best covered by the national media (18th January 2006, RTÉ1 news, and 19th January, *The Anglo Celt* and *The Irish Times*) was uncovered when 17 mushroom pickers were fired after a walkout on a mushroom farm in Kilnaleck, Cavan. The first collective case, however, started to unfold in 2004 in Belmullet, Co. Mayo. But before dealing with some of these cases that I will give a brief description of a MRCI report that appeared in November 2006, and where for the first time the underpayment and mistreatment of mushroom workers was made public in a detailed way.

MRCI report

The actor Martin Sheen, who at the time was studying for a degree in Galway, wrote the foreword to the MRCI document 'Harvesting Justice', where MRCI summarised the abuses reported by some of the 50 mushroom workers, part of the MRCI network at the time (see chapter 8). The actor said that unscrupulous employers had openly taken advantage of workers' vulnerability and it was not only immoral but a violation of fundamental human rights (MRCI 2006).¹¹² Among the most glaring breaches of the ERO (JLC) for Agricultural Workers the report found that workers could be paid anything between €2.50 and €7.50 per hour, and an average of €5 to €6 per hour (Then the NMW was €8.12/h). Normally, growers did not leave any evidence of hours worked, so it could not be proven that workers were underpaid, but MRCI sometimes came across growers who honestly indicated the number of hours worked. A particular pay slip, for example, indicated that a picker had been paid €5.25/h. There were many instances of irregular PRSI contributions, or no contributions at all, apart from illegal deductions for accommodation on farm up to €50 (the maximum was €22.85 per week). It is interesting how the document portrayed the oppressive environment in which workers were permanently on call and overworked:

This is the case especially for general operatives who live on the site next to the mushroom tunnels and who were expected to be on call virtually 24 hours a day,

¹¹² <http://www.mrci.ie/publications/documents/HARVESTINGJUSTICE.pdf>

seven days a week. There is constant pressure of being called back to work at any time. Some speak of having one day off in a month and others fear asking for a day off even when they are sick. Some pickers speak of how there are times when there is a gap in picking on their farms they are sent to harvest [usually called ‘help’, as we have seen] on other farms. The long hours are difficult and demanding especially over long periods and workers speak of how these long periods without proper rest affects their overall health and well-being on the farm and in general. Many workers expect to work hard in order to earn money. However they feel that the number of hours is unsustainable.

Overtime rates were not paid. Workers did not receive annual leave, or this was not paid in full. Some growers would deduct a percentage from workers’ wages, which they amazingly put in the pay slip, corresponding to holidays, normally 8 percent. Therefore, workers paid for their own holidays. The most drastic cases were those of employees on work permits left undocumented by their employers, after their permits expired.

Another topic was health-and-safety issues. In general workers lacked training in that regard. In some cases workers claimed to have entered the tunnels after chemicals had been sprayed without knowing whether it was safe. Some workers reported to MRCI headaches, nausea, dizziness, and vomiting soon after entering the tunnels, but also some more long-term ailments and health problems such as eye problems, skin irritation, hair loss, menstrual and breathing difficulties. There were also reproductive concerns among pickers, who were mostly women.¹¹³ The most tragic case was that of

¹¹³ In the first collective case of workers against their employer in the recent history of mushroom farming in Ireland, Belmullet, there had been a number of health-and-safety concerns on the part of workers, which MRCI documented also in its report ‘Harvesting Justice’. Bess remembered that growers, particularly before 2005 applied ‘a lot more chemicals’. She could smell them and sometimes her nose would be runny and the skin inside her mouth would peel off. She found it sometimes difficult and laborious to breathe at night, particularly after picking flats or working in houses with diseases.

When I worked on a farm in 2005, the list of products allowed (fungicides, pesticides, and disinfectants) was quite reduced. This farm did not use pesticides and the only fungicide used was Sporgon 500. After this product was used there could not be picking until after four days. Normally it was applied well before the first flush in a crop. The interflush period was normally two days, so if it was used then, there could not be any picking during the first two or three days of the next flush. Saulius, on Frank Tiffany’s farm, claimed that Sporgon was used while pickers were working, which was a very serious claim. There were some organic products for flies that were not harmful.

On 7 November 2006, RTÉ Radio 1 dedicated a whole programme to the use of illegal products in Shannonside Mushrooms, owned by the Hogan brothers. The programme found out that the Department of Agriculture had conducted 175 random tests of mushrooms for residues since 2000, but only 6 in 2006, 10 in 2005, and 9 in 2004. The majority then were carried out between 2000 and 2003, 150 of them, when Salmonella was discovered in some mushrooms but originated in contaminated mushroom casing. On the other hand, DAF inspectors never carried out any inspection on Shannonside Mushrooms. A RTÉ researcher called me while doing some research for the programme and asked whether the low number of inspections surprised me. I said that only unionised workplaces could guarantee the implementation of health and safety standards, because only workers could closely monitor compliance. Harm to workers health

Justinaz Gleiznys, 14, who in August 2005 died after inhaling hydrogen sulphide while helping to dispose of mushroom compost. I found out later that Justinaz died on the 8th August, the same day I started work on a farm in Co. Monaghan. He was on school holidays visiting his mother, who was a picker on this farm. That same day, Lena, a Lithuanian picker, was on her first day of work. She was in the tunnel picking with the boy's mother when a man arrived asking for water because the boy had fainted. The grower said later that the boy was just giving a hand. He was not prosecuted.

Threats, abuses, and intimidation were other aspects dealt with in the report. Any question raised, let alone complaints were met with threats like 'there are plenty of flights to go back to Vilnius every day.' Verbal abuse would take place in front of other workers and undermined workers' self-respect and dignity. There was a general feeling of powerlessness on top of isolation for living on farm, in the countryside, and the lack of public transport. The MRCI report was a general summary; its goal was to contribute to the public launch of the MWSG.

Atlantic Mushrooms, Belmullet, Co. Mayo

The Gaeltacht region of North West Mayo, Erris, is about the size of Co. Louth but it had only a population of 10,000 at the turn of the millennium, and was considered 'an unemployment blackspot'. Between 1999 and 2000 the prospect of an IR£3.2 million investment in a mushroom enterprise brought some excitement to the area. A local mushroom grower, Anthony Blowick, was behind a project that intended to create 80 jobs. He already had a 12-house mushroom farm in Belcarra (later expanded to 17 tunnels), which he upgraded from bags to blocks in 1997. A year later he showed interest in the Dutch shelving system and inspected shelf farms in South Armagh (TMP, April 1997; March 1998). He was the son of Joseph Blowick, a *Clann na Talmhan* TD from Mayo between 1943 and 1965 who took part in two inter-party governments as Minister for Lands. *Clann na Talmhan* represented mainly small farmers in the West of Ireland. Mr Blowick's father had been a farmer (Wikipedia).

caused by non-authorized products or because of using them in a wrong way can cause certain social concern, but what usually causes social alarm is possible harm to consumers' health. Shannonside had a 14 percent share of the Irish mushroom market. As a PO it received EU grants, and grants from DAF. The workers lodged claims through SIPTU for underpayment and also the use of illegal pesticides. The products were used, among other reasons, to bleach the mushrooms, so they looked whiter. The workers took pictures of these products. However, an inspection carried out by DAF on the 24th October 2006 found nothing irregular. In a phone interview, Ronnie Wilson, from Monaghan Mushrooms, claimed that those products were used on the continent but not in Ireland because they were not allowed; although they could be used 'here and there' as it had been revealed by RTE. Shannonside over the years had won a number of Bord Bia quality awards. The company closed down in 2007.

So, Mr Blowick came from an influential family in the area. He could mobilise enough resources to start a second mushroom farm on a 60-acre site near the town of Belmullet. Behind the project were *Udarás na Gaeltachta*, which sold the land to Blowick in 1998/99, *Guinness Ulster Bank Equity Fund*, managed by *NCB Investments*, and *Comhair Iorrais Teo*. Part of the funding came from the EU. Monaghan Mushrooms was the marketing partner. Planning permission was granted on 10/05/1999 for a 72-tunnel farm, storage tunnels, canteens, packhouse, crèche, waste compost facilities and Sewage treatment plant (www.maycoco.ie). In the end only 36 tunnels, a canteen/plant building, and a basic industrial store building containing a cold store and a portacabin used as offices were built (www.valuation-trib.ie; IFJ, 24/6/2000; 12/06/2004).

Anthony Blowick expected to employ 25 full-time workers in quality control, grading, depot and despatch duties. He added, ‘the balance of 60 or so jobs will be part-time for mushroom harvesting.’ Blowick expected that pickers would be local ‘married women with young children’, so there was a plan to build a crèche to encourage them to take the jobs. In relation to availability of workers he said (IFJ, 24/6/2000),

Availability of labour in the region and the fact that Belmullet is an unemployment blackspot were primary considerations in setting up the project and in getting the necessary backing. We have no worries at all about either the quantity or the quality of people available for work.

Probably local workers were available, but it is difficult to believe that, considering the dimensions of his adventure, the stage of the development of the mushroom industry in 2000, the partnership with Monaghan Mushrooms, and his knowledge of the industry, Mr Blowick still thought that picking was a part-time occupation.

By June 2004, however, Monaghan Mushrooms had taken over Atlantic Mushrooms, both the 17-house and the 36-house sites. The IFJ, 12/6/2004, mentioned the price pressure in the UK because of competition with Poland as the reason of this consolidation in the Irish mushroom industry. Atlantic Mushroom employed in 2004 over 100 workers, 80 on the site in Belmullet. Half of the workers were Eastern Europeans. The manager of the Belmullet site, Ian McAndrew, announced that after the takeover there were plans to double the size of the farm (*Irish Independent* 19/7/04).¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ At the end of April 2010, Monaghan Mushrooms announced its intention to close the mushroom site in Belmullet with the loss of up to 70 jobs (*Western People*, April 28, 2010). The purpose was to concentrate production in Tyholland, Co. Monaghan, where the company had its only remaining packhouse in Ireland. The company opened a new 18 house-€12m-investment-large-farm on the 16th August 2010, creating 150 jobs. It expected to yield 6,000 tonnes of mushrooms per year. According to the *Irish Times*, 16th August 2010, Monaghan Mushrooms is Europe’s leading mushroom producer and employs 2,297 people across Ireland, the UK and

A different side of Atlantic Mushrooms appeared in the media in 2005, although it had been brewing for a while. On 22nd February, the *Irish Independent* published an article about working in ‘sub-human conditions’ at Atlantic Mushrooms. At a hearing at an Employment Appeals Tribunal in Castlebar, Co. Mayo, Laila K., employed between 2001 and fired in April 2004, said that she had been unfairly dismissed and that she had worked for gross pay averaging €2.20 to €2.50 an hour, between 65 and 90-plus hours per week. In total four workers brought charges. The company, through their Defence Counsel, denied the charges, arguing that three inspections by DETE found nothing and that inspectors were happy. The case resumed on July 11th, and Laila also claimed that tunnels were sprayed with chemicals and that she suffered ill health. Working days often started at 7am and finished at 10 or 11pm. The defence argued that since 2000 the company had employed 240 workers from Eastern Europe and that it was the first time that there were complaints (*Irish Times* and *Irish Independent*, 12/7/05).¹¹⁵ The legal case did not go further, however, because Blowick, facing overwhelming evidence, proposed a private settlement, which the workers accepted in November 2005.

In 2004, up to 17 migrant workers (12 from Ukraine, 3 from Latvia and 2 from Russia) from Atlantic Mushrooms, Belmullet site, got in touch with a Citizen Information Centre in Castlebar, which in turn put them in touch with MRCI in Dublin. Their intention was not to lodge claims against the company but to enquire about the status of their work permits and how to access unemployment benefits. Some were afraid of pressing charges for fear of being deported. One of the pickers, fired in September 2003, only three months after starting the job, had approached SIPTU for assistance but had been told that the union could not provide her with any assistance. Around April 2004, MRCI told Atlantic Mushrooms that the workers were going to lodge claims, and contacted the Department of Justice about the regularisation of these former mushroom workers and emergency assistance since they had been paying PRSI.

In the end only 13 workers went against the company. The legal team representing the workers made claims on 11 grounds, which included excessive number of hours, unlawful deductions, underpayment, employment unlawfully terminated, no paid holidays, health and safety violations, etc.

Canada. In Ireland, it has still a network of 27 independent growers. The company also has a share of 17% in the Irish market and 45% in the UK market, the largest in Europe.

¹¹⁵ Since there were only around 50 in employment in 2004, start turnover rate was certainly high.

Kilnaleck, 2006

The case of mushroom workers' exploitation that has concentrated most media coverage to this day took place in Kilnaleck Mushrooms, Co. Cavan. On Wednesday 11th January 2006 a group of 17 mushroom pickers (Latvian and Lithuanian women) walked out of their jobs in Kilnaleck mushrooms and went to the SIPTU office in Cavan town. The workers claimed working weeks of between 80 and 100 hours for around €250 per week without holidays or days off, not even Christmas Day. The employer, Eamon Murray, deducted €25 from their pay slips no matter what amount of wages the workers were making and without indicating under what heading. There was a further deduction of €50 for rent for 10 workers sharing accommodation in a house provided by the employer. The employment agency had told the women when they were offered employment that they would be paid the minimum wage. The SIPTU's assistance organiser in Cavan town said that it was one of the worst cases she had ever come across and that every single piece of labour legislation had been broken (*Irish Independent*, 18 January 06; *Irish Times* 19 January 06). The straw that broke the camel's back, however, was a change of working practices, according to which all workers would have to finish picking at the same time, implying that faster pickers would have to 'help' the slower ones and, therefore, take part of their (piece) wages. That is what triggered the walk out.

When a union representative rang the farm, Mr Murray said, 'they are not with me now, they're with SIPTU'. That statement cost him dear when the Employment Appeals Tribunal determined that the workers had been unfairly dismissed because they had joined a union. Mr Murray was ordered to pay to the workers 2 years salaries (€26,000 each one) on top of compensation for lack of notice, annual leave and holiday pay to the 13 workers that finally lodged claims; €355,850 in total (O'Farrell 2007).

On February 19, eight Lithuanian pickers, part of a group recruited through an employment agency in Vilnius to replace the previous batch of workers, were also dismissed. They all had been given contracts describing them as self-employed agricultural contractors, with a normal working week of 50 hours, and wages of €115 per week (SIPTU 24 Feb 2006). As SIPTU officials explained to me in Cavan that was a not very clever way to avoid paying the minimum wage. When a picker from the Ukraine on a work permit lodged a claim against Mr Murray in February 2005, he also argued that she was a self-employed contractor. It was plainly a contradiction, according to SIPTU officials: a worker on a work permit, held by the employer, cannot become a self-employed contractor.

Another claimant against Murray, in this case a general operator paid time-wages, worked on the farm between the 1st of March and the 3rd September 2005. He complained about weekly deductions of €25, totalling €675. He also asked for a compensation of €800 for the non-payment of 2 weeks holidays, owed when his employment ended. Murray claimed that the worker was a self-employed contractor with no right to annual leave and that the €25 were deducted to pay for taxes that the claimant owed as a self-employee. The Rights Commissioner, David Iredale, found at the hearing (2/08/2006) that the claimant worked loading mushrooms onto a truck under the complete control of the respondent and that his was a contract ‘of service’ rather than ‘for service’. Murray was ordered to pay a sum of €1,200 to the claimant (Rights Commissioner’s decision, Payment of Wages Act, 1991, ref. r-040108-pw-06-DI). Therefore, he was only ordered to pay approximately what he owed to the worker. There was no fine.

How could Murray get away with breaking the law as early as February 2005, and continue business as usual after the events of January 2006? (see chapter 6). The day that RTÉ1 reported the news of the walkout on the 6 o’clock news, I sat watching with a housemate from Germany. The reporter and a cameraman had tried to contact Mr Murray, but ‘he was not available’ to make any comments. They filmed the farm from a distance. My housemate sat back astonished and said that if that had happened in Germany the police would have already been there, and the farm closed with yellow tape. Maybe. Some months later we sat watching on television how a meat factory was closed in Ballybay, Co. Monaghan, because it had breached food-safety standards. Labour standards, however, were not in the same category.

Eamon Murray, from Loughgall (Co. Armagh), set up Kilnaleck Mushrooms in February 2005 when he leased for three years former Carrickacroy Mushrooms, owned by P.J. Galligan, who decided to become a builder at the peak of the housing bubble, rather than continuing to grow mushrooms (SIPTU file).¹¹⁶ It was a 12-tunnel unit with the Dutch growing system, which Galligan had expanded from a 9-tunnel block farm between 2001 and 2004. Olena B., from Kiev, Ukraine, arrived in May 2005 by the hand of Fitzgerald Recruitment, an employment agency based in Maynooth, Co. Kildare. She signed a contract specifying that she would work 39 hours per week and get the NMW. This, however, as she told me, was only on paper because in the real world ‘each boss would tell that these conditions have nothing to do with them.’ Bosses argued that pickers had to be available to pick mushrooms when they needed to be

¹¹⁶ The contract stipulated a €850 weekly rent and €10,000 deposit.

picked and that could not happen if they stuck to the contract, and ‘if you didn’t like they told you, ‘you can go’.’

Sometimes they worked only two or four hours, but 3 to 4 times per week they worked between 10 and 19 hours. A working day started normally at 7am, but if it was busy they started at 5am. With Galligan there were no problems with taking breaks, and there was no clocking system except for the men, because were paid by the hour. Galligan, according to Olena, paid only the margin that he decided that he could afford, and did not bother about the JLC for agricultural workers. It was in the interest of the workers, if they wanted to make money to take as few breaks as possible. On the other hand, they worked until they finished the area that they had been assigned. That is, faster pickers finished earlier. Olena thought that she was the fastest picker. She could pick 3 to 4 crates per hour when ‘mushrooms were easy’. If that had been her average, she would have got the NMW since Galligan paid €2.50 per crate. Indeed, her contract specified that after two weeks in employment she should be able to pick 3 crates (‘baskets’ in the contract) per hour. Galligan did not comply with the JLC in relation to accommodation either, because he charged €50 for individual bedrooms; €35 sharing. Olena, however, never had any problem with him:

He was polite. He always asked: ‘please, can you do this?’ He and his wife always said hello and goodbye. It all changed when the new boss took over the farm. He was always very angry. He said, fuck this, fuck the other thing,’ or, ‘what the fuck are you doing?’ Of the pickers who used to be on the farm with me [20], there are only three now [November 2005]. People are changing all the time.

On this farm bad management caused high turnover. Changes in work practices were frequent and mostly looked arbitrary to workers. A grower told me that if Murray was so nasty with the ‘girls’ it could have been because ‘he wanted to change them... break them in’. The new boss decided to grow flats. He made them pick ‘for a long time’ very small mushrooms. That was reflected in Olena’s wages, which suddenly went down to €3-4 per hour. Other pickers were slower and only got €2/h. Her P60 with Galligan for 2004 indicates €16,536, or a weekly average of €318/week gross. If her average week was 60 hours a week, that meant €5.30/h, well below the NMW, or €6.36/h if she worked an average of 50 hours per week, also below the NMW. Galligan, as nice as he was, did not pay overtime, or public holidays rates either.

She worked for Murray only three weeks until she was dismissed, getting €161, €206 and €210. She claimed that in those three weeks she worked between 50 to 90 hours per week including breaks and 40 to 80 without including them. In three weeks she did not get a single day off either. She went to the nearest Garda station when Eamon Murray

assaulted her in his office in front of the supervisor, a Latvian woman who was also Murray's girlfriend. According to Olena, she just asked him why he was deducting €25 every week from her wages and Murray took her by her clothes, partly ripping them, and told her to leave the farm.

Working conditions, therefore, deteriorated after Murray's takeover. In a press conference in SIPTU's office, after the walkout, pickers claimed that working weeks were between 80 and 100 hours per week and average wages around €250. If average working weeks were of 80 hours, picking rates were then around 28 lbs/h. That would have been a very low picking rate, but excessive working hours, bad management and growing skills could account for those picking rates. So, it is likely that workers were telling the truth. The following chart shows the wages and total weekly pick of a picker over 23 weeks from 21/3/2005 to 08/01/2006. Wages varied between €105 and €334 per week, with an average of €235. This particular worker claimed working weeks of over 80 hours, but she did not write down in her picking diary start and finish times, except for the first four weeks.

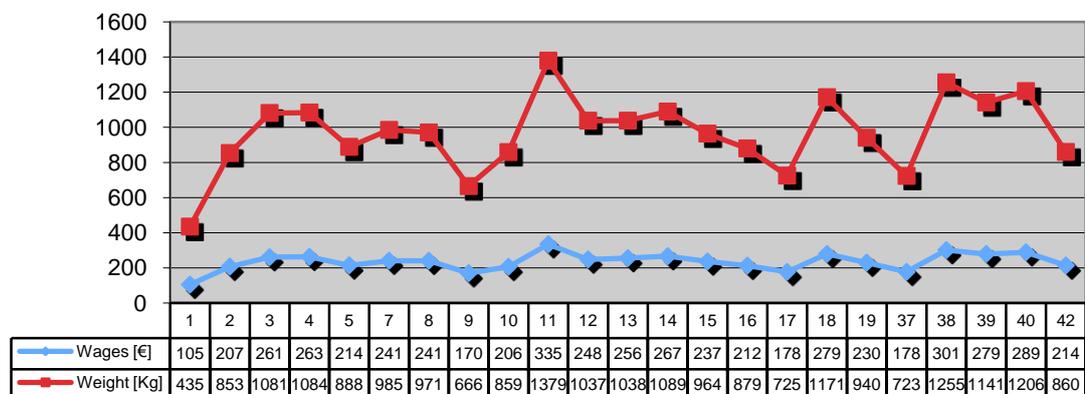


Chart 15: a worker's weekly wages (€) and weekly pick (kgs)

With these facts it is not possible to know how many hours this picker worked and what her hourly wage was. But we know those facts for the first four weeks.

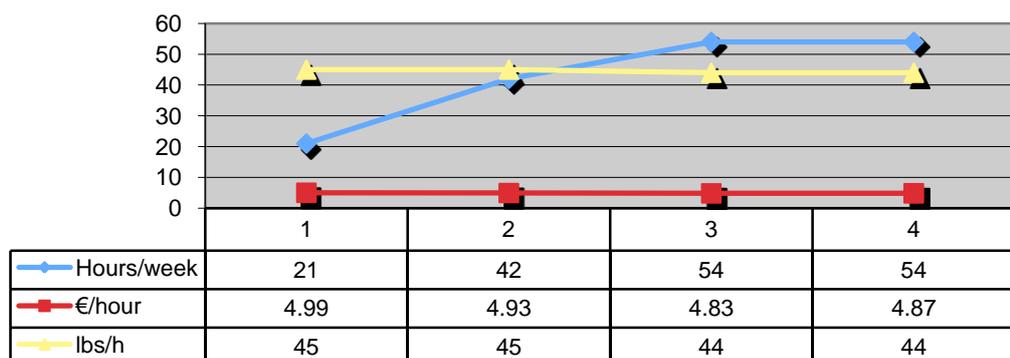
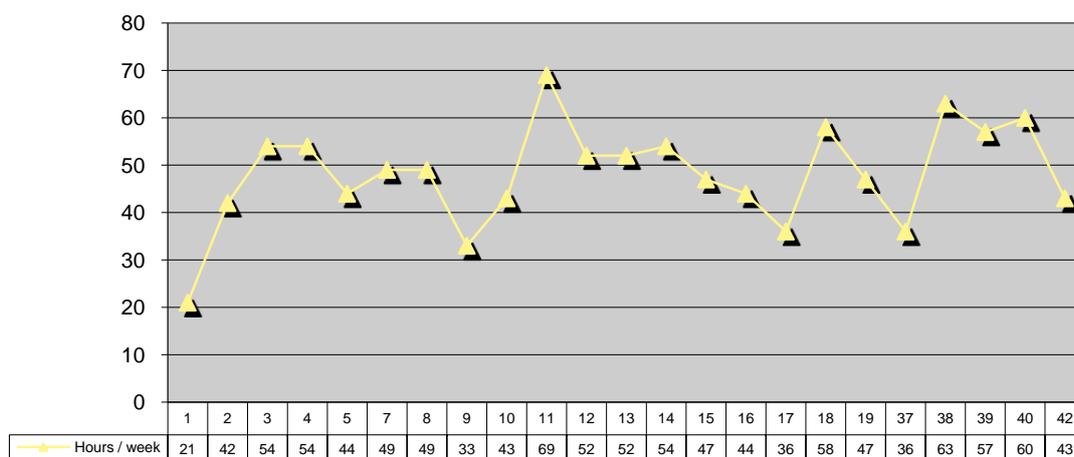


Chart 16: a worker's weekly working hours, euros earned per hour and pounds picked per hour

The hours worked over four weeks (42.75) are significantly lower than the average claimed by the workers, under the maximum of 48 hours per week over a period of six months. The average wage per hour, however, is well below the minimum wage, and there is also unpaid overtime. We can try and extrapolate these results as the pounds picked per hour remain similar for the four weeks (in kg: 20.7; 20.3; 20; 20), an average of 20.25 kg per hour (which was actually quite high). The next chart shows an average of around 48 hours per week, with wages of just under €5/h, and picking rates averaging 44lbs/h. There are also approximately 190 hours that should have been paid at least at the normal overtime rate, which was higher on Sunday.

Chart 17: hours worked by a worker per week



So, did the workers exaggerate their claims? It looks in the case above that she doubled the number of hours and therefore halved the wages per hour when she made her claim. But perhaps I cannot extrapolate from only one case, or the facts are not accurate. Given their powerlessness, it would make sense that workers exaggerated the number of hours worked. But even without exaggerating, it is clear that they were underpaid. Most of the figures on ‘exploitation’, however, were filtered through the media, NGOs, and trade unions. Growers, on the other hand, tended to indicate the highest wages pickers got as if they were average wages, when in fact they were achieved when mushrooms were ‘easy’. In private interviews, workers used to give much more accurate figures and portrayals of their experiences working on mushroom farms.

Laima started working in Kilnaleck Mushrooms in August 2005, after a friend on the farm phoned her in Lithuania about the job. She worked on the farm until May 2006,

when Mr Murray closed it down and moved back to Co. Armagh. The first three weeks on the farm, her wages were €60, €80 and €123. After that she used to get between €250 and €300, but on one occasion she made €400. In January 2006, when the walk-out took place, she was in Lithuania on unpaid holidays. She described Murray as a 30-year-old man, attractive but always angry and saying all the time things like, ‘quick, lazy women’. The supervisor, Liana, from Lithuania, had been a picker until she became Murray’s girlfriend and was made supervisor. According to Laima, she also turned angry all the time: ‘She was in love with him and wanted to do anything for him. She didn’t tell him what went wrong on the farm or with the girls. She didn’t want to make him angry.’ On other farms, in which migrant workers became supervisors because of their language skill, similar attitudes developed, *whether they were in love with the grower or not*. These supervisors tried to hide any problems from the grower. If workers wanted to complain to the grower, the supervisor would not transmit their grievances either. These supervisors tended to develop a servile attitude in relation to the bosses, trying to interpret and anticipate their wishes.

After the walkout in January 2006, Murray decided to get another supervisor and moved Liana to the office. He also reduced the length of the working day. Before that, they used to start at 4am, or even at 3am. On one occasion, according to Laima, they worked 36 hours in a row with only tea and smoking breaks, and on two or three occasions they worked 24 hours in a row. After January, starting time moved to 7am. Still they only knew when they started, not when they were going to finish. For a month, Murray introduced a bizarre system. All pickers were paid £170 stg independently of the number of hours they worked. But he finished the experiment because pickers were complaining a lot. Some complained that they worked harder and got the same wages than those who did not work as hard as them. After January, the office also moved to Northern Ireland and workers started to get their wages in sterling. Other practices, however, continued. All pickers had to take their breaks together, for only 15 minutes, and there was only one kettle in the canteen.

In her opinion, they worked so many hours and got such low wages (implying low picking rates) because mushrooms were very tight, because Murray was a bad grower. The farm was only a bit understaffed in relation to more efficient farms. There were two teams of 8 to 9 pickers for a 12-house farm growing on shelves and using bulk compost. Joe had 12 pickers for a farm exactly half that size. Paul’s farm was slightly larger (7 tunnels that made for 14 on Murray’s farm), but had normally two teams of 12-13 pickers. Some growers that I consulted said that unless pickers were very slow, very low

rates could be caused by overpinning. A number of experienced pickers also said that when mushrooms were too tight, 'bad mushrooms', there was a lot of work and very little money.

Laima, after losing her job, got in touch with SIPTU and the MRCI, becoming from September 2006 a member of the MWSG. Thanks to the encouragement and help from the group, she started attending English language classes in Cavan town, where she had moved. When I arrived at her house, she was making a pizza in the oven, which we had with several mugs of coffee in the kitchen. She slept beside the kitchen, in the living room, which had been turned into a bedroom. Her housemates were from Latvia and Lithuania. The sun shone outside and she often went out to the garden to have a cigarette. It had been a normal practice to start work at 4am and finish in the evening or close to midnight. 'We were very tired but we had to continue', she said. I asked then how they had tolerated that tyrannical work regime apart from very low wages. She was smoking, looking up at me from a chair. She turned her head down to the grass. I had known her for some months but we had not had the opportunity to talk on our own before. 'We didn't know anything about the law when we were working on the farm,' she said. There was a long silence. Then she exhaled deeply, put out her cigarette, and looked up at me again. Her lips were trembling:

We signed contracts with the work agency before we started on the farm. They said that we were going to get the minimum wage, and everything was legal, hours too. But we needed the money. We had to work. What could we do [about it]? We could do nothing.

Laima felt uneasy. Her first response was to deny any knowledge of basic rights such as the minimum wage. For migrant groups, journalists, and trade unionists it made sense, so their response was to inform workers about their rights. It was a good first step, but the shortcoming was to believe that it was only a matter of informing migrant workers about their rights. Basic information about rights had been in the contracts that migrant workers were offered by employment agencies at home. They did not know all their rights. Olena denied knowing about a maximum working week of 48 hours over a period of six months, but she knew that she was underpaid. In her opinion, it did not make a difference to know her rights because 'all bosses' were the same. 'If you don't like you go away,' they would say. Still it was difficult to come to terms with having accepted such humiliating working conditions. It made sense when they were working, as they were isolated, living in a separated world with its own rules. What looks to us abnormal from the outside can be perceived as normal from the inside to a certain degree. But once they left and got in touch with unions and migrant groups, that world

they had previously inhabited was turned into pieces, became unreal, and it was difficult to come to terms with it.

Hegemony, as argued in the introduction, is more about the rules of the game which we play. We normally make challenges in terms of a given framework, but only rarely have we the power, or the boldness, to challenge the rules themselves. It is true that the 'rules' of the farm had little to do with the 'rules of engagement' agreed in the Irish industrial relations system, and in the end they were challenged because of the existence of those rules, when MRCI and SIPTU stepped in. The 'exploitation ring' was facilitated by lack of state interest in uncovering it. Unions until May 2004, and the GAMA and Irish Ferries affairs, had also a share of responsibility. Employers and unions shared to some extent that productivity and competitiveness came first, as we will see in the next chapter. Therefore the 'rules of engagement' could be bent to not compromise jobs and competitiveness, on employers' terms.

Powerlessness and workers competition

Isolation in the Irish countryside, far from home, lack of English language skills, small workplaces, low wages, tyrannical work regimes. Migrant mushroom workers felt powerless vis-à-vis the employer. Bess, an Irish picker, had talked about lack of confidence as a signifier of powerlessness. Some Irish pickers continued working during the 2000s, but were paid better than migrant pickers. According to Bess, it looked well in the neighbourhood to have some Irish workers, and it was handy for the grower and his wife because they had someone to talk to. As we have seen in this chapter, Irish workers could put up some resistance to bosses, although they had little bargaining power. Overall, however, Irish workers had been too troublesome in the opinion of growers. That had been acceptable during the 1980s, when farms were very small, but that type of workforce became *outdated* in the 1990s. Migrant workers from Eastern Europe were cherished: 'they were only happy when they worked many hours.' But under the surface, there was another side that was kept very private. But once MRCI and SIPTU started to campaign and get in touch with mushroom workers, cases of mistreatment and underpayment poured out. It was not easy, though, to document the cases, and to obtain hard evidence.

Some workers had taken notes about hours worked because they wanted to keep track of the hours they worked to avoid being cheated, although it was not clear how they were going to be able to get the money back. That was the case of Alexander Splodytel. He did not register starting and finish time when he had to pick mushrooms.

As he was paid by the weight, he did not consider, wrongly, time an element to take into account. But it was otherwise when he worked as a general operator, because he was paid by the hour. During the three months that he worked on time wages for Mark Adams (Ashfield, Coothill, Co. Cavan), between May and August 2003, he wrote in a notebook when he started, when he took a break, for how long, and when he finished.

His job offer, through Fitzgerald Recruitment, specified that he would get 13 cents per pound of mushrooms picked and that he would be paid by the hour during the first week. His boss deducted from his wages a total of €500 during the first eight weeks. That was the price of his work permit, which the employer was supposed to refund on the eleventh month. The contract also included an illegal deduction of €30 for accommodation, which did not include electricity or food.

In 13 weeks, Alexander worked 737 hours as a general operator, or an average of 56 hours per week, and made €3,283, an average of €4.45/h. On the other hand, Alexander's weeks were much longer than 56 hours, because he also had to pick mushrooms, particularly during the first half of his employment, for which he made €651. Even if Alexander had been paid the lowest wage for a worker on structured training, €5.10/h, he was underpaid. But he was not in structured training. As a first-time job entrant, which was not the case either, he should have been paid €5.44/h. €6.81 was the rate corresponding to his job from the 23rd May 2003. In fact, Alexander was paid €6.51/h during the first five weeks in employment, which corresponded to the pay rate before May 2003. In week number 6, he hardly picked any mushrooms, but worked 85 hours as a general operator. For some mysterious reason, Mark paid him €4/h for 48 of those hours, and the same rate for the last five weeks in employment. Alexander lodged a claim with the Employment Appeals Tribunal in September 2003 with the help of SIPTU in Cavan. He claimed that on the 25th August 2003 the boss gave him 'the boot without foundation' and without handing him any documents, and only 28 days to leave the house.

Some workers also lived under a regime of terror. In August 2006, a group of workers from a farm in Castleblaney got in touch with MRCI. They complained about pay slips, wages, and health-and-safety issues, but their main concern was that they were afraid of Andrew, the farm *supervisor*. They claimed that Andrew made threats such as 'I'm going to kill you', or 'someone I know in town is going to hang you'. Some research showed that Frank Tiffany, from Northern Ireland, had leased the 10 house-farm to Seamus Boyd, and that he also had a mushroom farm in Portadown, Co. Armagh. It was his wife, Bernadette, who normally answered the phone when

representative from MRCI made phone calls. Bernadette was at first very annoyed and complained that pickers did not understand English when it came to carry out work instructions, but that they knew it very well when it came to money. She added that she was not responsible for the women because they were from an agency, WH Recruitment (in Co. Armagh), the same agency that Eamon Murray had used. A representative from MRCI only made the point that if they did not do anything about Andrew's threats he would have to call the guards. This seemed to be another case of growers using the border to get workers on lower pay rates. This representative from MRCI spoke to Bernadette on the 1st of September. The following day, Saturday, Frank went into the tunnel and asked the pickers who had talked to MRCI, but no one said anything.

Andrew's problem solved itself because the farm was closing down and he just left. By the end of September there was picking in only one tunnel. The others had been shut down one by one as the harvest had ended. On the 29th, a representative from MRCI rang Bernadette to ask when the workers would be paid their wages and holiday money. She went into a rage on the phone, screaming that only employees had rights and that they had none. Later on this MRCI representative was on the phone with Frank, and he said that those who had left without giving a week's notice would not get holiday pay. There was also the problem of getting the P45, particularly for those who had left without notice.

One of the pickers who had left without giving a week's notice was Saulius, who still was waiting in October for his P45. He had worked as a general operator on time wages with two others. One of them was Andrew, who also seemed to be in charge when Frank was not on the farm. Normally, Saulius worked from 8.30am to 5pm, 6 or 7 days a week. But some days the truck with compost arrived as late as midnight and he had to work, filling the tunnel, until 2am. That used to happen no more than three times every two weeks. On other occasions pickers finished later than 5pm and he had to wait for them. Frank used to say that it was their fault because they were too slow.

Saulius's wages were £200 stg independently of how many hours he worked. According to him, Andrew only worked from Monday to Friday, but got £400 stg, did not have any extra responsibilities, and was often out or talking to Frank. Both seemed to be good friends. What Andrew did was to establish a reign of terror. He claimed to be an IRA member and that he knew people who could kill anyone for €500. One of the Lithuanian pickers became his girlfriend. One day, Saulius's mother, a picker on the farm, quarrelled with Andrew's girlfriend, and Andrew told Saulius that he was going to kill his mother. On the 9th of July 2006, soon after that happened, Saulius left the

farm without giving Frank any notice.

Workers' competition

Across the border, Doloreta worked in County Armagh on one of the farms belonging to Monaghan Mushrooms. The starting time was 7.30am, but finishing time was never fixed because as Doloreta said, 'you work while there are mushrooms'. Finishing time varied between 2 and 8pm, but average working weeks were 40 hours, and workers were guaranteed the minimum wage in the UK for agricultural workers, £4.05/h (November 2003). The company had also a bonus system for workers who achieved over 40lbs/h, although Doloreta never made it. It seemed that working conditions were legal in Monaghan Mushrooms.

Doloreta lived through one instance of collective action, which had a component of ethnic solidarity. Most of the pickers on the farm were either from Poland or the Ukraine. On one occasion, at around 8pm, ten pickers, all Polish, decided to stop working and leave. The Ukrainian workers stayed. The following day the manager was very angry but not one of them was fired. Doloreta did not have a good opinion of the Ukrainian workers. She said, 'I'm not racist but they are mad about money. I don't like them.' As in most of the cases I came across, rivalry between workers took place when pickers tried to 'help' others.

In the piece-wage system the more pounds in weight that a picker gets, the higher the wages at the end of the week. Some pickers are faster than others, or some pickers working in a different tunnel might end earlier because there is less work to do. So it is a normal practice to try and 'help' other pickers who are busy. When mushrooms are very tight there is a lot of thinning out to do, work is arduous, but there is little money to make. In that case, pickers hope for 'help'. But other times mushrooms are 'easy', they are well spread, and of big sizes. In that case, picking rates are high, so pickers do not want any 'help'. The problem is that wages are lower for slow pickers, which acts as an incentive to get faster. Good and fast pickers tended to be both admired and resented by the rest of the workers. It depended on whether they 'helped' when mushrooms were 'easy' or 'difficult'. A fast picker on the farm where I did fieldwork was appreciated because she used to 'help' when mushrooms were 'difficult'.

In any case, on good farms, pickers tend to have similar picking skills, and to finish at the same time means to finish within a range of 10 or 15 minutes. On the farm where I worked I witnessed tensions and arguments between workers of different teams over 'help'. On another farm, Lizete, a 55-year-old Latvian picker working for Christy D.,

used to fume over the issue of 'help'. She was the fastest picker on the farm but was not on good terms with most of the other pickers. She complained that she got no 'help' when mushrooms were 'difficult', but other pickers tried to sit at her bed when mushrooms were 'easy'. She felt isolated on the farm and focussed on getting as much money as she could, in competition with the rest of the workers.

On the Monaghan Mushrooms farm in Co. Armagh, Doloreta's team was very busy on one occasion. They worked from 7am to 9pm, but they did not complain because mushrooms were 'easy'. During a break in the canteen some Ukrainian women from another team, who were not busy, started to fight with the Polish pickers because they wanted to 'help'. Doloreta said that the Ukrainians became very aggressive. One of them threatened Doloreta with killing her. She did not back off and said to her, 'Kill me if you want.'

This competition was recurrent regardless of workers' ethnic identity, but it went a step further when ethnicity was a factor. It happened also that after May 2004 workers from Poland and the Baltic states did not need work permits, while Ukrainians, Russians and Byelorussians still needed them. It was maybe not an accident that Ukrainians, the majority among the mushroom workers on work permits after 2004, were considered harder workers. On Doloreta's farm, the fastest picker was a Ukrainian. She used to take shorter breaks, ten minutes, in order to make more money. She used to get the bonus nearly every week. 'I thought she was like a robot,' she Doloreta.

In Cornalaragh Mushrooms, Carrickmacross (Co. Monaghan), owned by Peter and Katherine Connolly, four Lithuanian pickers worked alongside ten Ukrainians and two Irish on a 12-house mushroom farm (Dutch system (3/3/3) in 2006). Three of the Lithuanian workers got in touch with the MWSG. They normally got the minimum wage and did not work above the legal maximum of 48 hours per week over a 6-month period. Most of the days they worked from 8am to 3pm, but some days they could work 11 or 12 hours. Their main problem was that they were not getting Sunday or Saturday premium, public holiday payment, or full holiday pay. But what upset them most was that they claimed that the two Irish pickers got more money for the same work (hourly wages plus bonus) and did not work on bank holidays.

They also complained about the Ukrainian pickers. The Lithuanian workers wanted to be paid according to the JLC, but the Ukrainians did not want to do anything about it because it meant 'troubles' with the boss. The Ukrainians then became 'unfriendly' to them (see also chapter 7 on the same issue). On a neighbouring farm, White Hart Mushrooms, owned and run by Thomas (Peter's brother) and Patricia Connolly,

however, all workers were Lithuanian and were not willing to face their employer either.

The suspicion that Irish workers were on better wages was widespread when there were Irish pickers working on a farm. That their working weeks, usually from Monday to Friday, and their working hours, not beyond 40 per week, were more favourable, was easy to observe. We have seen that growers thought that Eastern Europeans were happy to work weekends and as many hours as they could, although that was mainly motivated by low wages and the temporary nature of the work that they were doing in Ireland. But there was no choice either, and it was expected that Eastern Europeans would be permanently on call while it was not expected from Irish workers. On the farm where I worked there was only one Irish picker. On one occasion, one of the pickers said in front of her in the canteen that the Irish picker was getting more money than the rest for the same work. The Irish picker denied it. She denied it to me as well when we were on our own. It maybe was the case, but I came across a case in which an Irish picker openly admitted to have been better paid than non-Irish. Bess's last permanent job picking mushrooms was on a farm in Ballybay (Co. Monaghan). The farm specialised in flats and for that reason the grower had decided to pay time-wages. That was in 2002, when the substitution of Irish workers had taken place. According to Bess, the Irish pickers were getting €6/h (the NMW was then 5.97/h), but she discovered that migrant workers were only getting €4.50/h.

Lena started to work for Danny Malanaphy, Swanlinbar (Co. Cavan), on the 8th August 2005. It was a modern 7-house Dutch farm (4/4/4). Her cousin, who worked on the farm, had phoned her about the job offer, and Lena left her job in a crèche in Lithuania. Both shared a bed in a caravan, where there was also a man living with them, and paid €25 each per week, above the legal two general operators (Lithuanian) and a supervisor (a Latvian woman). The boss did not perform any physical work but was constantly supervising all the work, while his wife did the office work. The couple had grown-up children but none of them did any work on the farm.

The boss was very nice to her at the beginning. He did not know that Lena could speak English and she did not let him know. The supervisor, however, found her out and grew afraid, thinking that Lena could tell the boss about problems with tools, machinery, or picking. So, all the boss knew was that there were no complaints about work or about money, and that his Lithuanian and Latvian workers were very happy working around the clock for wages below the minimum wage.

The supervisor also tried to keep workers divided. She used to 'play games' with them, putting people against each other by spreading rumours, convincing them that

others were talking about them, gossiping behind their backs. She was helping the already fierce competition between workers unleashed by the piece rate system. Lena did not get any training other than from her cousin. At first she could not get more than €200 per week, but after three months she got very fast and started to make around €350/w. On her own initiative she focussed on picking as many big mushrooms as she could, 60mm, which many pickers were afraid to do because they preferred to pick them at an earlier phase of development in case their cups opened and did not qualify for prime quality.

Work used to start at 3am, although the boss did not ask anyone to start that early, and he did not arrive before 7am. But that was the only way to pick the whole bed area assigned without getting any 'help'. 'You can kill for money,' Lena used to repeat to me. Only friends were allowed to 'help', and only when the day was not long enough to finish the area assigned. Lena remembered that one day she started at 3am on Monday and worked with no break until Thursday evening, until she finished, without any 'help', her picking area. Still there were wide wage differentials among workers, which were the cause of jealousies. Increasingly the boss tried to control the work process. At first workers did not have to clock going in and out the tunnels, but later the boss introduced a clocking system, and imposed a limited number of breaks, which had not existed before. At the end of each week, he wrote the amount of kilos picked by each worker on a board, for everyone to see. Sometimes Lena was at the top, but normally she would come third. She remembered getting 1,500 kilos once. That work pace, and the lack of friendship and solidarity among the workers – she thought that they behaved like animals – and the low wages, caused in her an increasing sadness.

In February 2007, she joined the MWSG. In the group meetings she learnt that one member had become sterile while working on a mushroom farm. At that time, Lena was having strong headaches and thought it was because of the use of chemicals, but she was also sleeping only 4-5 hours per day. When the boss got a letter from SIPTU he got very angry. By then he knew that Lena could speak English, and yelled at her, 'you called them!' Often, the boss would go near her and say, 'bitch, bitch, you stupid bitch!' The supervisor also started to complain that Lena was not a good worker, and the boss started to say that she was always making mistakes. In the end, Lena's husband asked her to leave the farm.

Political economy, power, and hegemony

We have seen in the introduction to this dissertation that capital expresses its inner logic

through competition among many capitals. Chapters 1 and 2 show that logic working in practice, transforming the mushroom industry, turning satellite growers into capitalist employers, but also eliminating most of the rest. Competition among workers, on the other hand, can only benefit capital since it allows capitalists to capture the fruits of cooperation in production. It also pushes wages down and increases the rate of exploitation as workers compete against each other. Competition between pickers contributed to increase the extraction of surplus value and the rate of exploitation.

As Hyman (1975: 177-79) argues, workers' experience is rooted in a particular industry, enterprise, and occupation. These are demarcations imposed by the capitalist division of labour. But workers are also born and socialised in particular contexts, according to social and cultural divisions such as race, gender, skill, or ethnicity. Employers try to cut costs in general, but particularly labour costs, by investing or transferring production (offshoring) where wages are lower. They can also outsource some services or production lines to other countries, or subcontract production within the same country. Migrant workers, willing to accept lower wages can also be brought in, as well as agency workers, to lower labour costs.

These are capitalists' strategies. It does not mean that workers are deprived of agency. For class struggle to take place there have to be conflicts and frictions, sometimes open and sometimes hidden, between employers and workers. We have seen in this chapter the agency of employers; the following chapters will deal with the agency of workers, how they viewed their subordination, whether they consented to it, whether they fought back, and in which circumstances. In dealing with that, we will be dealing with the political economy of labour, based on solidarity and combination instead of individualism and fragmentation. Here we have seen the fragmented, individualist worker, but before turning to the next chapters we shall have another look at the class struggle going on on mushroom farms as we have seen it in this chapter, and begin to see workers' agency.

At the beginning of the satellite system, growers made use of casual, part-time pickers. That work was not included in the ERO (JLC) for agricultural workers. Pickers on the large tray farms of the 1970s had been covered by REAs and had been members of trade unions. The satellite system mobilised labour in a very different way at farm level. There had been some full-time pickers such as Bess, but their work, even if it averaged more than 40 hours per week, was not considered full-time either. So, these workers were not covered by the ERO. That irregular situation was allowed because it was a generalised understanding that pickers performed only casual work; in other

words, 'help'.

Workers used to differentiate between 'nice' and 'greedy' growers, according to the *growers' ideology* of 'help', which was based on previous and more egalitarian work practices like 'cooring', carried over to a different system of social relations. Workers used the dominant discourse to frame their demands and grievances by appealing to hegemonic values and practices. As Scott argues (1990: 77), the promises made to the subordinate constitute the basis for conflict and protest movements. The strategy of the dominated is to make demands that can be accommodated within the existing social order, which does not mean or imply consent to it. Or as Scott argues (1990: 103): 'For anything less than completely revolutionary ends the terrain of dominant discourse is the only plausible arena of struggle.' The dominants must also live up to the public image that they have created of themselves, which constitutes the justification of their domination.

According to tradition, the grower was expected to be polite and generous with food, tea, breaks, and chat rather than with money. But wages were also important. As Bess said, most pickers used to leave the farm because wages were very low. That is why on some farms, in an industry characterised by piece wages and very low piece rates, some growers paid time wages. Workers had a way to put pressure on growers. They imposed limits to the working day to suit their family duties. Growers found Irish pickers troublesome. That is an indication that they did allow growers little control over their work. At the beginning, pickers would take tea breaks and smoke in the mushroom houses. The struggle over quality requirements and higher picking rates did not make any impact until the late 1990s, just before migrant workers arrived. As pickers were local women, from the community, and there was little social differentiation between growers and pickers, growers felt that they had 'to please pickers, be 'nice' to them. Pickers, particularly full-time pickers like Bess, still noticed that many growers were 'greedy'. While moaning that they were not getting money, they were building nice homes, 'the big house'. Pickers like Sarah and Margaret, casual workers, agreed that they worked as casual pickers for low wages because it suited them, which allowed them to impose conditions. It was different for pickers like Bess, who needed a job to live. Bess's option was to change between farms, to play in that way with the need of employers for full-time pickers. But her options were far more limited.

As market pressure compelled growers to expand and turn capitalists, growers stopped being 'nice' and showed their 'greedy' side openly. It came with a tighter control of the labour process. Close personal relations became something of the past.

Workers, both casual and full-timers, fought back in the ways that they considered more effective, refusing open confrontation, as they did not believe that open confrontation could be successful. There were, however, moments in which a collective open conflict erupted, fuelled by low wages, but also by the 'greediness' of growers. As Scott argues, the hidden transcript, rehearsed in private, constituted the basis for open protests. But more normally, workers only responded, individually by complaining about growers' 'greed', how they had changed, gossiping about large mushrooms being stolen at night, etc. There could be also little acts of sabotage or working carelessly, but in general the only alternative was to find another job. When the Celtic Tiger started to arrive to rural areas at the end of the 1990s, most pickers left.

Migrant workers came to Ireland to make incomes that they could not achieve in their home countries, and brought with them big expectations. In the year 2000 the National Minimum Wage was introduced. It became also problematic to argue that picking was still an occasional and part-time job. More frequently growers argued that it was not possible to pick mushrooms on a 9-to-5 basis. But the NMW brought to the forefront the need to achieve higher picking rates, and a tighter control of the labour process. Growers used migrant workers, their urgency to make money, and their isolation from the rest of society to take shortcuts in a very competitive market. The old ideology did not match new social relations of production but the arrival of migrant workers allowed growers to break completely with past, obsolete traditions. The mask was lifted, at least within the walls of the farm. To the outside society, however, a public face was still maintained according to wider social values, to which later migrant mushroom workers could appeal.

Migrants had been seen as godsend for growers and it suited migrants because they could make much more money than in their own countries. In relation to wages and labour standards, they assumed that would be implemented. The state did not implement any controls or checks. Exploitation was not even detected in large companies such as GAMA Ireland until 2005. Unions preferred not to interfere with economic development. The alarms at union headquarters only went off after May 2004, when the opening of the Irish labour market to citizens of the new member states threatened a 'race to the bottom'.

Some stories of exploitation of migrant workers started to reach the media before 2005, but they did not cause social alarm. Between summer and winter 2005 I used to attend the meetings of a Monaghan migrant support group organised by the local churches and some volunteers. Their main concern was with asylum seekers, but there

used to be interest in migrant workers. In a discussion about the migrant workers and the minimum wage, I argued that most mushroom workers were paid below minimum wage. The Monaghan garda immigration officer was at the meeting and denied that migrant workers on mushroom farms were exploited. He mentioned particular cases of growers, friends of his, that were paying well above the minimum wage, and that workers could easily make €400 per week and over. Growers that I interviewed, almost all of them, affirmed that such was the case. An advisor within the industry also made the same comment to me, but later said that, to make that money, pickers had to work many hours. One grower also recognised that he was not paying overtime rates, but no one was, and he thought that he was fair with his workers. Another grower admitted that most workers were not getting the minimum wage. Growers had erected a thick wall that insulated them and their workers from the rest of society. Until workers started to come forward, and SIPTU and MRCI took interest in the mushroom industry, those walls did not start to crack.

Under worse conditions than Irish pickers, migrant workers did offer some resistance as we have seen in the Belmullet and Kilnaleck cases, but more normally class struggle went on in more concealed and hidden ways. There were two sources of conflict. Underpayment was one of them. In general workers knew that they were not getting the minimum wage, but most did not know the extent of their underpayment. Some went to citizen information centres or got in touch with SIPTU or with MRCI. Another source of conflict was mistreatment. We have seen that underpayment could be bearable if the grower was 'nice'. But a tighter control of the labour process, increases in picking rates, and improvements in quality standards were implemented by means of bullying tactics and insults, which offended the personal dignity of workers. Not all growers tried to 'break workers in' in the same way, but authoritarian and oppressive work regimes were established on many farms. Economic exploitation and attacks to personal dignity can create an explosive combination.

A strategy in oppressive work regimes was to play dumb. Workers who knew English tried to hide it as a way to avoid growers' impositions and orders, and therefore it constituted a form of class struggle (see Scott 1990: 133). Growers used native supervisors to transmit orders, but supervisors in their understanding and in order to look efficient tried to hide from the boss lack of effective transmission of orders and its implementation. Growers tended to react with anger. Smaller growers, who had their investment paid and had no intention of expanding, normally did not interfere with the work of their pickers. It was different with those who were upgrading and investing.

The office worker at the farm where I carried out fieldwork once compared mushroom workers and their work conditions with those of slaves. He blamed market conditions and retailers. But we can strictly speak of bonded labour on mushroom farms, as almost all migrant workers were on work permits before May 2004. It was both the work-permit system and the particular working conditions in the mushroom industry that recreated a bonded labour system on mushroom farms.

The political economy of labour, the topic of the second part of this dissertation, is more problematic as it is subordinated to the hegemonic political economy of capital. But both are part and parcel of capitalism: thesis and antithesis: the product of the interplay between employers' and workers', and their institutions. The labour movement necessarily, then, operates back and forth, between both political economies, and different and contradictory tendencies operate within it. Part II of this thesis will deal with these issues.

PART 2: The Political Economy of Labour

Considering themselves and acting as the champions and representatives of the whole working class, [trade unions] cannot fail to enlist the non-society men into their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades, such as the agricultural labourers, rendered powerless by exceptional circumstances. They must convince the world at large that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions.

Karl Marx, *Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council*, 1866

5. Partnership Unionism

In 2006, SIPTU announced an organising campaign to clean up the mushroom industry at exactly the same time as the only branch of SIPTU in the mushroom industry, in Monaghan Mushrooms, was about to disappear.¹¹⁷ ‘Servicing’ and ‘partnership’ were the models of unionism that had been practised in this company. In this chapter I cover the period between 1993 and 2006. In February 1994, SIPTU members went on strike over phases 2 and 3 of the Programme of Economic and Social Progress (PESP). The union branch at Monaghan Mushrooms was then at the peak of its power. Workers lost the strike and the union branch began a slow decline until its disappearance in 2006. I argue that the neutralisation and subsequent destruction of this branch by the company was the result of a long-term strategy by the company that must be understood within the framework of Social Partnership and a global capitalist neoliberal offensive: a combination of lean production strategies globally and Social Partnership nationally. The company successfully implemented more flexible labour practices and cut labour costs. SIPTU, however, never questioned that framework, not even when it tried the switch from *servicing* to *organising* during the mushroom campaign, as we will see in the next chapter.

This chapter also looks at unions as institutions that are the product of historical and contradictory processes. Unions are comprised of officials with different responsibilities

¹¹⁷ I refer here to the branch in Monaghan Mushrooms fresh division in the last packhouse of this company in Ireland, located in Tyholland, Co. Monaghan. There were also union members and a shop steward in the compost yard in Kabeyun, Co. Monaghan (compost division), which did not disappear, but the number of workers in that branch was greatly reduced, fewer than 20. In this chapter I do not deal with the compost division.

and power as well as members with different skills, interests, degree of participation, different ethnic and gender identities. The labour movement operates in a world structured by the political economy of capital in which the drive towards fragmentation and competition is far stronger than the drive towards combination. Decisions by union officials, stewards and members are conditioned by labour legislation, type of bargaining with employers, the labour process of specific industries, size of the enterprises, etc. (Kelly 1985). Union models must be understood in a dialectical way, as dynamic institutions. Nevertheless we can recognise different types of union structures and tendencies.

The trade union constitutes the focal point where the political economy of labour is politically and openly articulated first. Scott (1990) in his study of collective resistance of the *weak* makes the point, as we have seen, that most social and labour unrest are not open and not led by organisations with a group of leaders nor with a public written body of counter ideology. But even when he deals with open struggles, he disregards the role of leadership and formal organization. It could be argued that he deals with the hidden and covered struggles of slaves, serfs and peasants rather than with wage workers. However, Scott draws parallelisms with workers' struggles in a generalising way. He could have perhaps made his argument stronger if he had kept in mind through his work what he says towards the end (1990: 202): 'an appreciation of the public and backstage transcripts of the dominant and the weak can illuminate power relations in a novel way.' The dialectical relation between hidden and unorganised, and open and organised collective resistance could offer the best insight. This chapter deals mainly with the organised struggles of wage workers represented by trade unions. The hidden unorganised aspects are also considered, more so in the following chapters, where attention is also paid to the role of leadership in both hidden and open struggles, whether formally or informally organised.

Union Structures

Sheila Cohen (2006: 4) speaks of a fundamental distinction between 'union-as-institution', the formal, official structure that prioritises institutional survival, and 'union-as-movement', rooted in the class needs and demands of union members. While the former tends to be bureaucratic and representative, the latter is participative, member-led, and based on direct democracy. This distinction is useful because we will see the tension between the two tendencies throughout this second part of the dissertation. However, both tendencies co-exist in trade unions as will be seen. Unions

as movements also take institutional shapes, whilst unions as institutions cannot function without some type of members' mobilisation. On the other hand, the contradictory tendencies towards sectionalism or solidarity and unity must also be seen in a dialectical way. Hyman (1975) explains that unions do not [normally] organise and unite all those who work for a living. Rather, they combine workers along narrower lines. Sectional organisation, however, constitutes the basis for a broader class movement. Solidarity grows out of sectionalism. This happens because the labour movement starts from a divided and fragmented working class along demarcations established by the division of labour under capitalism. The primary form of class-consciousness arises from work experiences in a particular workplace and segment of the labour force (1975: 35-36, 177-79). A powerful type of segmentation also takes place along ethnic lines, particularly when there are groups of immigrant workers in a country. The same can be said about the relationship between union members and the union as an institution, as well as workers in general. The relationship is always dialectical.

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the contradictory aspects of SIPTU as a 'servicing' union that tried to implement an 'organising' campaign in the mushroom industry. I use the term 'partnership unionism' to characterise what is both an ideology and a practice within the labour movement that incorporates fundamental ideological principles of the political economy of capital in the current period of neoliberalism.

The Mushroom Workers Support Group (MWSG) (chapters 7 and 8), for its part, was not a union. Following the model of worker centres in the US, MRCI tried to organise workers by establishing a group that aspired to be member-led, participative and based on direct democracy. It also constituted an alternative in its own right to SIPTU ideas and practice. Yet, bureaucratic aspects and democratic deficit were also present in the MRCI campaign in the mushroom industry.

Union structures and tendencies within unions have developed over time, within particular contexts that have to be described. For Hyman (1975) they are determined by the criteria of inclusion and exclusion. In Britain, for example, he speaks of three types: craft (the most exclusive), industrial and general unions (the most inclusive). These are not pure models, and these structures *per se* do not tell us anything about members' participation or bureaucratic deformations. They do, however, reflect the contradictory tendencies between unity and solidarity as well as sectionalism. Craft unions were based on the monopoly of skill and the division of labour between high-paid and low-paid workers. Their members were the *aristocracy of labour*, who reaped the rewards of the

increasing prosperity in British society in the 1800s (1975: 45-6). Their material basis, however, was undermined by the emergence of large employers, the creation of a national market, and, fundamentally, the introduction of new technologies that rendered obsolete the crafts of these workers. This deskilling was also a means of cutting labour costs in the context of increasing foreign competition after the 1870s.

It was in the context of the labour upsurge of the late 1880s that general unions emerged in Britain. These ‘new unions’ were open to semi-skilled and low-skilled workers across different industries, but also based on spontaneous activism and rank-and-file militancy. However, once they became established, servicing existing members took precedence over recruiting the unorganised workers because it ‘demanded time and energy which were fully committed to servicing’ (Hyman 1975: 52-3). Also, sectional tendencies reappeared quickly among general unions because it was easier to exclude an alternative labour force than recruit it. The closed-shop practice, whereby one union represents all the workers and only union members can be employed, may or may not be the product of exclusionary tendencies. In the hands of an open and democratic union it can improve conditions for all, raising standards, since standards lower than those negotiated by the union would not be tolerated (i.e. the United Farm Workers, UFW, used it, see Mooney and Majka 1995). In the hands of an exclusionary, sectional union it can be used to maintain a privileged segment of the working class based on skills, gender or race to the exclusion of the rest.

An important factor in union structures is the relationship between unions and the state, the legal framework in which industrial relations take place. During most of the 19th Century unions were either outlawed or barely tolerated, while labour legislation was scarce and very limited. The incorporation of unions into the state only took place after World War II (WWII) both in Europe and the US. This process had begun at the end of the 19th Century as some minimum welfare benefits were implemented in European states, which also had the effect of turning the labour movement nationalist (Munck 2002: 137). According to Hobsbawm (in Munck 2002: 138), ‘having won the right to be full members of their nation through their movement, they now behaved as full citizens were supposed to’. We can understand then how labour organisations (with few exceptions) supported their national bourgeoisies and states in each country that took part in WWI in spite of the internationalism and firm opposition to war displayed by all labour leaders in the congress of the second international in Basel in 1912.¹¹⁸

From the end of the 1940s to the 1970s, the labour movement enjoyed its (for some)

¹¹⁸ <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/1912/basel-manifesto.htm>

‘golden era’, with a further incorporation of the labour movement into the national state through the development of a partnership between labour and capital. As Munck (2002: 25, see also MacPartlin 2008: 84) indicates, the crash of the markets and the general crisis of the 1930s (in the capitalist advanced countries) provoked a social shock that moved the state and employers to temper market forces through state intervention. This was one of the factors that led governments and the capitalist class to incorporate unions. Perhaps a more important element was the labour upsurge during the second half of the 1930s and at the end of WWII when a socialist revolution in the advanced countries became a possibility. Without the threat to capitalism, the ‘countermovement’ may never have started. It was therefore better to incorporate unions than to challenge them, which, as we will see, is one of the reasons why a *partnership* between capital and labour was established in Ireland in 1987. Unions are usually more effective than employers at controlling workers (Hyman 1975). Polanyi (in Munck 2005: 2) speaks of the shift, the ‘double movement’,¹¹⁹ as a natural reaction of society to the excesses of the free markets to protect themselves. It is an interesting idea but it does not tell us when and how such a reaction will occur. Kim Moody (1997) was witnessing a global reaction of the labour movement in the mid 1990s (also Munck 2002). A decade later, Moody (2007) wrote that the ‘reform’ from the top, a *countermovement*, had ended in failure and that the promise of a reaction from the bottom has not materialised. Munck (2002), and many others, saw the *countermovement* starting in the joint mass protests of unions and social movements against the effect of globalisation in Seattle during the meeting of the G8 in 1999. After some 30 years of neoliberalism and a general offensive of capital in the ‘North’ against workers rights and material improvements achieved during the ‘golden era’ there were material basis for a counteroffensive. The problem was how and when that counteroffensive would take place.¹²⁰

An increasing amount of literature (see next chapter) is looking at strategies and union models that work when trying to organise workers, but the determining factor will be a labour upsurge, which will occur independently of the work of trade unions. The right conditions are there, but the question is why is it not happening? This dissertation will throw some light on the circumstances that both facilitated and hindered workers in the mushroom industry coming forward and unionising their workplaces, and whether control of the union-organising drive was a critical factor. Beyond that it is not possible

¹¹⁹ ‘whereby ever wider extension of free-market principles generated a counter-movement of social regulation to protect society’ (Munck 2002: 2)

¹²⁰ According to Tarrow (1998: 199-200) changes in political opportunities and constraints ‘play the strongest role’ in explaining social movement and in triggering cycles of contention.

to generalise. A focus on the ‘hidden transcript’ of the working class might be the key to reveal the present ‘level’ of consciousness of the working class.

I am not trying to offer a historical analysis of the structural evolution of trade unions, their relations with employers and state, between union officials and members and the wider working class. A brief overview suffices to bring us to the period of Social Partnership in Ireland, which must be looked at in a more detailed way to understand the relationship between unions, the state and employers; Irish unions and migrant workers in general, and mushroom workers in particular during the period covered by this and the next chapter.

Partnership between labour and capital in Ireland

On a global scale, the partnership between labour and capital –the ‘configuration’, Fordism, that bound big labour, capital and big government, according to Harvey (1990: 142)– began to break down in the 1970s with the first important capitalist crisis since the 1930s. In that context, a shift from Fordism to Flexible Accumulation (also known as lean production) took place, or from Keynesianism to Neoliberalism (Moody 1997, 2007; Munck 2002; Harvey 1990, 2005).¹²¹ The shift consisted of a tendency towards sub-contracting, temporary work, but fundamentally an attack on organised labour, which made it possible to import sweatshop practices to developed countries (Harvey 1990: 150-1).¹²²

The Keynesian (or Fordist) period had introduced a corporatist system in which unions seemed incorporated into the system of governance rather than simply tolerated or accepted. On the other hand, it also implied a process of unions’ *domestication* in which the union leaders’ role was to impose a restraint on workers economic and political demands (Moody 1997: 118-9). The worst case of union degeneration provoked by the ‘cooperation’ of capital and labour probably took place in the US, where the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) used funding from the United States Agency for International

¹²¹ Moody (1997: 43) defines neoliberalism as, ‘the policy of dismantling much of the national regulation of economic life throughout the already existing capitalist world in favor of market governance, a process euphemistically referred to as ‘reform’ or ‘liberalization’.’

¹²² Corporation power, however, did not diminish. Rather, there was an increase in mergers and corporate diversification. James Roderick, chairman of US steel in 1979, said that, ‘the duty of management is to make money, not steel’ (in Harvey 1990: 158). So, at one end there was diversification and mergers in the corporate world; at the other end, small businesses, patriarchal and artisanal organisation such as the sweatshop, and self-employment. Small businesses, on the other hand, were agglomerated through the dominance of financial or marketing organisations (1990: 158).

Development (USAID) and the National Endowment for Democracy to fight Communism and promote ‘business unionism’. The British Foreign Office also funded the British Trades Union Congress during the cold war in a similar way (Moody 1997: 227-8). ‘Business Unionism’ in the US was a non-adversarial type of unionism that promoted labour-management cooperation, of which Social Partnership was the European equivalent (Moody 1997: 233).

The ‘golden era’ brought high economic growth in the developed world as well as very low levels of unemployment. In particular, it gave to workers the welfare state; and trade unions and social democratic parties gained influence within the state. The most important concession from the capitalist class, however, was the reduction of the gap in the share of the national income between capital and labour, which did not disturb capital due to high rate of profits after WWII (Harvey 2005: 10-15). The share in the national income for the top 0.1 percent of the population in the UK went from over 11 percent in 1913 to just under 7 percent in 1938, but it went further down to 3 percent in 1953, and 1 percent in 1978. By 1998, however, it had risen above 3 percent. In the US, it was under 9 percent in 1913; 5 percent in 1938; under 3 percent in 1953; and 2 percent in 1978. However, it had risen to 6 percent by 1998 (Harvey 2005: 17).

The corporative state, however, came to an end mainly during the 1980s in the U.K. (under Margaret Thatcher) and in the United States (during the Ronald Regan administration). Overall, it was part of a global project that spread to every corner of the world via the IMF and the World Bank from the 1980s onwards, after these institutions were purged of Keynesians. Harvey (2005) describes it as process of restoration of class power as can be seen in the rising share in the national income of the top 0.1 percent of the population from 1978 on; more pronounced in the US than in Britain. That restoration of class power, for Harvey (2005: 19), is the most important aspect of neoliberalism, more important than being successful at guaranteeing accumulation, at

	<i>EU 15</i>	<i>Ireland</i>
1960-70	-	77.9
1971-80	74.5	75.9
1980-90	71.8	71.2
1991-2000	68.7	62.3
2001-2007	67.3	54.0

Table: share of wages of the total economy between the 1960s and the 2000s in the EU15 and in Ireland

which capitalism has not been very successful in the last period. The pre-1970s economic rates of growth have never been achieved since then. In the EU-15, and in Ireland in particular, there was a similar process of restoration of class power, as we can see in the evolution in *the share of wages of the total economy between the 1960s and the 2000s* (source: Allen 2009: 46).

We can see that the rise of (capitalist) class

power was more pronounced in Ireland than the average for the EU 15. Total expenditure on social protection also fell in Ireland between 1991 and 2002, from 19.6 percent of GDP (nearly 7 points below EU15 average) to 16 percent (nearly 12 points below EU15 average) (ibid.). According to this, Ireland would be one of the most neoliberal and unequal countries of the EU15 (see also Kirby 2010).

The global neoliberal offensive took place in the form of structural adjustments; a self-induced crisis. Obsolete capital was destroyed so profitable accumulation could restart. Unemployment increased, industries were relocated, and foreign capital gained entry in both the US and UK. Public industries were privatised. In the US, tax rates for corporations were reduced as were top tax personal rates. Over 30 years of neoliberalism gave rise to a high concentration of corporate power worldwide, very far from the *competitive capitalism* utopia. Britain emerged after the 1980s as a low-wage country with a compliant labour force. The labour movement was neutralised through capital displacement and massive job losses in manufacturing: in the latter case, more so in Britain than in the US (Harvey 2005).¹²³

The situation in Ireland is quite peculiar. There has been the privatisation of public companies, a growing gap between poor and rich – social protection is even low compared to the EU15 average – and a very flexible labour market has been enforced. Yet, if we compare Ireland with the US and Britain, the peculiarity is that Ireland is a neoliberal economy with a social partnership.

After an upsurge in strikes between 1967 and 1971, there was a move towards centralised bargaining with the National Wage Agreements (NWA) of the 1970s in Ireland. Wages in some sectors had increased above the rate of inflation and the NWA tried to put an end to the ‘chaos’ of out-of-control decentralised bargaining (Roche 1997). That system broke down in the 1980s with a return to decentralised bargaining after the number of days lost by strikes reached a peak between 1977 and 1981 with close to 3.5m days lost, 2.8m between 1967-71. One of the reasons to abandon the NWA from the point of view of employers was that unions considered the agreements as a floor to secure higher pay rises (Hastings *et al.* 2007: 3, 110).

According to Peter McLoone, IMPACT general secretary, Social Partnership (SP) was seen as an alternative to Thatcherism, then on the rise in Britain (Hastings *et al.*

¹²³ An interesting feature is that this restoration of class power was presented as an advance for individual freedoms, which spread confusion in the labour movement. The labour upsurge of the end of the 1960s had been based on individual freedoms but also with social justice as their main aim. In the neoliberal project, instead, personal freedoms were equalised to market freedom and the freedom of corporations (Harvey 2005).

2007: viii). The period up to 1986 had also seen a dramatic rise in unemployment, as we have seen in the introduction, which weakened the labour movement. The idea matured among top union leaders, who according to Hastings *et al.* (2007: 17, 19) were ‘more attuned to the dynamics of an increasingly competitive economy and also to the impact of global competition’, and thought that decentralised bargaining was not yielding results. Key union leaders, according to Peter Cassells, had to make use of strong leadership to make Social Partnership happen (Hastings *et al.* 2007: 18). ICTU was ready to abandon its adversarial style in favour of a co-operative one, as MacPartlin (1997: 99) puts it. That new co-operative style also meant that trade unions would sacrifice wage increases (‘immediate gains’) in exchange for –or rather– in the hope of economic growth and recovery in the context of the crisis and increasing unemployment of the 1980s. This trade-off linked wages and jobs to economic growth, work reorganisation, productivity and competitiveness. As Des Geraghty, former SIPTU president, admitted, this was ‘the way Irish industry should go’ (2007: 90). This new approach on the part of union leader brought praise from John Dunne, former IBEC director (Hastings *et al.* 2007: 48):

Some of these people had a great sense of the strategy. They believed that the old style confrontational approach would be negative from their own members’ point of view. It required a fair amount of leadership to bring that [change] about.

Once the first Social Partnership deals was agreed in 1987, ICTU went a few steps ahead by changing its position on privatisation in 1990. It was deemed inevitable that some privatisation would have to take place (Hastings *et al.* 2007: 50). Union recognition was not included in the partnership deals and unions also accepted that corporations coming into Ireland would not be bothered by trade unions. John Carroll, former ICTU president, used to meet top managers of foreign companies to convince them that they would not face ‘a communist onslaught’ (Hastings *et al.* 2007: 63). On the other hand, ICTU and IBEC members Kevin Duffy [then BATU general secretary] and Turlough O’Sullivan ‘formed a sort of special fire fighting double act to counteract these headlines cases [major disruption].’ In Duffy’s words, they had to ensure that ‘the process was not damaged by either unions or individual employers going offside’ (2007: 70). As a result the number of strikes and days lost fell dramatically, which in turn undermined members’ activism.

The account of Social partnership that I have presented is based on the most comprehensive account published as a book with a preface by IMPACT general secretary, Peter McLoone (Hastings *et al.* 2007). The authors are Tim Hastings

(independent consultant also teaching at the National College of Ireland), Brian Sheehan (editor of *Industrial Relations News*) and Padraig Yeates (former industry and employment correspondent with the *Irish Times*). The book is based on interviews with top-level government officials, top-level union leaders, and employers' representatives. It lacks an explicit political economy analysis and presents exclusively the point of the view of those who negotiated Social Partnership agreements. However, it represents implicitly the point of view of the political economy of capital, which is the reason why this book is given attention in this dissertation. The kind of kinship created between those who negotiated partnership agreements is shown throughout the book, but a particular quote illustrates it in a very simple way, as Paddy Teahon, former secretary to the Department of the Taoiseach, puts it (2007: 57):

You were giving them good food, lunches, dinners and coffees through the day. So there was a level at which they saw themselves, one hundred people or so, as spending a couple of months of their life every three years in Government buildings... There was a whole atmosphere of people coming together.

At the top level, this was the non-adversarial relation between leaders of labour and capital organisations. However, the book portrays partnership deals as non-ideological and pragmatic. All sides were 'pragmatic' and left behind their ideologies, particularly trade unions, the book argues. As a result the agreements were 'ideology free' (2007: 27). Patricia King, SIPTU regional secretary, believed that Ireland had to be made attractive for inward investment, so Social Partnership was not ideological but pragmatic.

Karl Polanyi wrote *The Great Transformation* in the 1940s (in Graeber 2001: 10) to show, among other things, that the free market is not a natural phenomenon at which we arrive inevitably as Adam Smith, Malthus or Ricardo believed. It was necessary to use the coercive powers of the state to make it work, which implied, among other things, the wiping out of the peasantry in Britain (Worsley 1984: 94-5). In recent times, it has become a common idea that the market economy is a natural phenomenon. Its complete hegemony has led us to assume that there is no ideology behind it, and that even ideology itself is not relevant anymore. The point is that, as Graeber states (2001: 89), what most postmodernists argue when they proclaim the end of ideology, or its identification with reality, is 'nothing but the ideology of the market: not even the reality of the market, since actually existing markets are always regulated in the interest of the powerful.'

There was some opposition to partnership, but the book only mentions in passing the 'old left', represented by Mick O'Reilly, who was of the belief that with partnership

union members simply turned into passive consumers of trade unionism rather than producers. Without class conflict on the shop floor members would forget about the importance of trade unions and their mobilisation against the capitalist system. For the authors (2007: 186), O'Reilly's views had no chance in a country with 'weak ideological underpinnings, and belonged to a bygone era that had passed in mainstream Europe'. The authors therefore put forward the new centre alternative represented by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, which in their view would not be ideological but pragmatic. The public demands modernisation of services, better customer services and more flexibility. It has no tolerance for industrial disputes, particularly in transport or energy. So, the strike weapon has become outmoded (2007: 196). Problems such as Irish Ferries or GAMA could also be avoided with regulation, but were a warning that unions can go back to old ways (2007: 197).

This ideology had also gained ground in the 1990s among British trade unions after a decade of defeats and loss of union power by the conservative neoliberal administration led by Margaret Thatcher. John Monks, TUC (Trades Union Congress – UK) General Secretary, cleared the way forward for British new trade unionism in the 1990s when he said that he expected, 'strong commitment to economic success and a strong commitment to social justice' (Taylor 1994: xi), and added that this was the message he used to get from employers and employees in his journeys across Britain.¹²⁴ So Monks decided that trade unions had to serve the wishes and interests of both workers and employers, as if there was an equal relation of power between labour and capital. David Begg, current ICTU president in Ireland, was less utopian in relation to Social Partnership. He acknowledged that 'Social Partnership' was the wrong term to characterise labour-capital relations in Ireland because there was no balance of power. He would prefer to call it 'social dialogue' (Begg 2008: 53). Begg and Monks, however, are both putting forward the European consensus model and share similar ideas. Monks, in a climate of employers' and state attacks on organised labour in order to improve economic performance, put forward the idea of 'Social Partnership' so capital and labour could cooperate to make British companies competitive and at the same time create jobs: the reward left for labour. He was appealing to government and employers, but from a position of weakness.

Monks further claimed that in the past industrial relations had been about conflict

¹²⁴ Here Monks is ambiguous because he presents that single wish by combining what employers wished, commitment to economic success, and what employees wished, commitment to social justice. In other words, he is misleading the reader. His idea is that both wishes, class interests, can be combined and fulfilled simultaneously.

resolution but that in the future they should be about ‘consensus building’. TUC committed itself to the creation of a ‘world class Britain’ based on ‘the production of competitive, high quality products and services’ and ‘real partnership between employers, trade unions and government’. Social Partnership in that vision was about ‘an acceptance by both employers and trade unions of common aims’, ‘a joint commitment to the success of the enterprise’, ‘a recognition that there must be a joint effort to build trust in the workplace.’ (Taylor 1994: 198)

A document elaborated by the ‘independent’ Involvement and Participation Association (IPA) in 1992 argued at length for the creation of an Industrial Partnership, and was signed up to by a number of trade unionists. It emphasised the common goals of management and trade unions in the success of the enterprise in the interest of customers, suppliers, employees, shareholders and the community (Taylor 1994: 200). The logic was that workers were the most interested in the economic success of their companies (and the British economy by extension) in order to have jobs first, and therefore increase incomes. A rigid definition of jobs and a clear demarcation of responsibilities, however, did not lead to economic success (1994: 201). In this chapter, we will see that the logic of the argument was ultimately about the devaluation of labour, the main factor in keeping the success of the enterprise, which implied the scrapping of benefits and bonuses, leaving workers only on the minimum wage and low standards. According to the IPA document (1994: 201):

Job control hampers an organisation’s ability to meet the challenge of competition through rapid change; it also limits the individual from developing his or her full potential by imposing artificial restrictions.

The document appealed, as we can see, to individual freedoms as personal development, but the British government ignored it (i.e. was not interested in partnership). It is possible that employers could obtain workers’ ‘co-operation’ and ‘consent’ to flexibility and wage cuts without the help of unions. British unions had been weakened during the 1980s and British employers were in no need of partnership. They decided that they could gain more by confronting unions. In Ireland, employers had agreed to national bargaining in 1987. But that balance, however, started to change after May 2004 in favour of the employers when an abundant labour supply, virtually union free became a reality after the accession of 10 new member states from Eastern Europe.

Brian Sheehan, editor of *Industrial Relations News*, noticed how some Irish companies such as Irish Ferries, Ryanair, Independent Newspapers and Aer Lingus began to break free from the Irish industrial relations system by refusing to implement

recommendations from disputes resolution agencies and the National Implementation Body (NIB) (Sheehan 2008: 10). The Irish labour relation system is based on voluntarism, but the balance of power between unions and employers changed during the economic boom. Since 1987 unions have become weaker at the local level with the increase in non-unionised companies, although they have gained influence at the national level as a consequence of Social Partnership. The Irish economy was not as globalised in 1987 as today. Irish employers were not competing as fiercely with employers in other countries at the end of the 1980s as they are now over 20 years later. Foreign direct investment (FDI) companies in Ireland are free to apply a different model of industrial relations, which also has had an important influence in large Irish companies, with a number of them adopting a anti-union style of management (2008: 106-9). For Sheehan (2008: 110), the use of *non-national* labour has facilitated the increase in non-union practices. He gives several examples of companies that have been able to ignore state pressure to comply with the spirit of Social Partnership and traditional labour relation practices. Independent Newspapers, for example, refused an invitation by the NIB to attend the Labour Court in 2004 to discuss a redundancy plan. Aer Lingus, then a semi-state company, refused to comply with a Labour Court recommendation in 2002 over transfers of cabin crew (ibid. 113-114).

Sheehan also points to one important factor in the shift in industrial relations, namely labour immigration since May 2004. By 2008 migrant workers constituted 15 percent of the Irish labour force and brought a new challenge to the implementation of labour standards. One product of the partnership discussions of *Towards 2016* was this implementation. As a result of union concerns, the government created the National Employment Rights Authority (NERA) and increased the number of labour inspectors from 31 to 90. In relation to avoiding a new Irish Ferries case, the new partnership agreement would provide a special Redundancy Panel to advise the Minister of Enterprise Trade and employment on particular cases and to refer them to the Labour Court for a binding opinion, but would not affect 'normal business restructuring' (2008: 120). Sheehan concludes that, as unions are not in a position powerful enough to ensure employers' adherence to norms, they have to rely on the law to help them (ibid. 123-124). That is, the adherence to Social Partnership (shown particularly during the present crisis in spite of having been abandoned by employers and government) is a consequence of unions' weakness in the workplaces. Compliance with Social Partnership in the end depends more on unions' strength, as in any agreement, than that which is written in those agreements. The ethnographic case in this chapter shows this

to be the case. However, Brian Sheehan, arrives at the opposite conclusion (2008: 125):

This poses a major challenge for trade unions and the dispute resolution system itself. Employers may need persuading, not coercion, that by adhering to the 'rules of engagement' they will secure the sort of productivity ... identified as essential in today's high cost, competitive economy. A case perhaps of 'good' employer meets 'good' union.

The opinion of Sheehan is that persuasion and not coercion is what will make employers enter partnership again. It means, first of all, that unions must renounce strikes and collective action. The condition he demands of unions is that productivity must be secured; not just productivity, but the kind of productivity demanded in today's high-cost, competitive economy. In relation to the rules of engagement, he sees them as 'neutral', pragmatic, non-ideological. Who has more power to define the rules of engagement is not questioned either.

Wage labour and Capital

The ideology of cooperation between capital and labour is not new at all. New ideas on industrial relations are presented with an air of novelty, as if they corresponded to a completely new period in the epoch of capitalism, but in fact they are very old. They can be traced to early nineteenth century capitalism. It was Karl Marx who first offered an analysis of them at the end of the 1840s in his 'Wage Labour and Capital'.¹²⁵ At present employers (in what follows I will refer only to Irish employers) are trying to use the current economic crisis, which began at the end of 2007, to reduce wages and living standards, claiming that it is in the interest of workers. The pretext is that Irish companies must become more competitive than companies in other countries. In that way there will be an increase in exports and more jobs will be created in Ireland. If workers do not accept cutbacks, then jobs will be lost.

In July 2009, Mary Harney, Health Minister, declared that the minimum wage in Ireland would have to be cut in order to make the country more competitive. Brian Lenihan, Minister for Finance, then added that 'if the minimum wage becomes an impediment to job creation the Government has to look at it'. Peter Bacon, government advisor for the setting up of NAMA, recommended general wage cuts of 10 to 15 percent on top of the cutbacks recommended in the Bord Snip report. Social welfare cuts should be around 5 percent (*Irish Independent*, 21 July 2009; *Irish Times*, 22 July 2009).

The logic underlining the employers' point of view is that only capital can generate

¹²⁵ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/wage-labour/index.htm>

wealth and jobs. Therefore, both classes gain if the conditions for accumulation are improved. Employers make their profits and workers are paid their wages. In order to do this, they argue, both workers and employers must defeat other competitors by lowering wages and by bringing public sector workers down to the level of private sector workers. The union UNITE, for example, has argued that Irish wages are already low compared to other EU countries and that employers pay lower taxes in Ireland, while enjoying the second highest level of profits.¹²⁶ They also claim that EU economies with higher wages than Ireland are also more competitive. Capital-intensive industries pay higher wages and are much more competitive than labour intensive industries based on low wages. The problem is that Irish companies lag behind in capital investment.

In his well-known essay, 'Wage Labour and Capital', Marx explained not only how wages were determined, but also argued that the interest of capital and labour were antagonistic. Capital, Marx argued, can only exist and expand through its constant exchange for living labour power, since only labour can create value. Machinery simply represents dead labour power and cannot add any value to the commodities it helps to produce. Workers, on the other hand, can only make a living by hiring themselves out to those who own the means of production. They only have their labour power to offer. So Marx says:¹²⁷

Capital therefore presupposes wage-labour; wage-labour presupposes capital. They condition each other; each brings the other into existence... And so, the bourgeoisie and its economists maintain that the interest of the capitalist and of the labourer is the same. And in fact, so they are! The worker perishes if capital does not keep him busy. Capital perishes if it does not exploit labour-power, which, in order to exploit, it must buy. The more quickly the capital destined for production – the productive capital – increases, the more prosperous industry is, the more the bourgeoisie enriches itself, the better business gets, so many more workers does the capitalist need, so much the dearer does the worker sell himself. The fastest possible growth of productive capital is, therefore, the indispensable condition for a tolerable life to the labourer.

During periods of sustained economic growth as occurred at the turn of the 1900s, the period between 1945 and 1973, or in Ireland in the late 1990s, workers gained access to more commodities. Wages increased, but profits grew faster than wages. This meant that the gap between workers and capitalists also increased, except during the period in which class struggle reduced the gap, as we have seen. As I have argued, the wage share of national income went down from 71.2 to 54 percent between the periods 1980-1990

¹²⁶ Unite published 2008 two report arguing that case:

http://www.unitetheunion.org/news_events/2008_archived_press_releases

¹²⁷ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/wage-labour/ch06.htm>

and 2001-2007 in Ireland. During those years there was a huge transfer of wealth to the elite. Marx argues,¹²⁸

Therefore, although the pleasures of the labourer have increased, the social gratification which they afford has fallen in comparison with the increased pleasures of the capitalist, which are inaccessible to the worker, in comparison with the stage of development of society in general.

The implications are that the more capital grows, the more power capitalists gain in relation to the working class. Marx uses the term ‘relative wages’ to express that balance of power. Relative wages ‘express the share of immediate labour in the value newly created by it, in relation to the share of it which falls to accumulated labour, to capital.’ During a period of economic growth, for example the years of the Celtic Tiger, nominal wages (money price) and real wages (what nominal wages can buy) increased, while relative wages decrease. Social inequality, therefore, increases. ‘The power of the capitalist class over the working class [grows], the social position of the worker [becomes] worse, [is] forced down still another degree below that of the capitalist.’

The concept of relative wages allowed Marx to regard both wages and profits as shares in the product of the worker. Therefore, the interest of Wage Labour and Capital were ‘diametrically opposed’:¹²⁹

In whatsoever proportion the capitalist class, whether of one country or of the entire world-market, distribute the net revenue of production among themselves, the total amount of this net revenue always consists exclusively of the amount by which accumulated labour has been increased from the proceeds of direct labour. This whole amount, therefore, grows in the same proportion in which labour augments capital – i.e., in the same proportion in which profit rises as compared with wages... Finally, to say that ‘the most favourable condition for wage-labour is the fastest possible growth of productive capital’, is the same as to say: the quicker the working class multiplies and augments the power inimical to it – the wealth of another which lords over that class – the more favourable will be the conditions under which it will be permitted to toil anew at the multiplication of bourgeois wealth, at the enlargement of the power of capital, content thus to forge for itself the golden chains by which the bourgeoisie drags it in its train.

Competition and wages

The growth of capital also brings an increase in competition between capitalists and crises of overproduction. Competition between capitalists, on the other hand, increases competition between workers and pushes wages down. It is worth quoting Marx here at some length.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/wage-labour/ch06.htm>

¹²⁹ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/wage-labour/ch07.htm>

¹³⁰ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/wage-labour/ch08.htm>

The one capitalist can drive the other from the field and carry off his capital only by selling more cheaply. In order to sell more cheaply without ruining himself, he must produce more cheaply – i.e., increase the productive forces of labour as much as possible... And so there arises among the capitalists a universal rivalry for the increase of the division of labour and of machinery and for their exploitation upon the greatest possible scale... But the privilege of our capitalist is not of long duration. Other competing capitalists introduce the same machines, the same division of labour, and introduce them upon the same or even upon a greater scale. And finally this introduction becomes so universal that the price of [his commodity] is lowered not only below its old, but even below its new cost of production...

As a result competition between workers increases with the introduction of machinery and the further division of labour:¹³¹

The greater division of labour enables one labourer to accomplish the work of five, 10, or 20 labourers; it therefore increases competition among the labourers fivefold, tenfold, or twentyfold. The labourers compete not only by selling themselves one cheaper than the other, but also by one doing the work of five, 10, or 20; and they are forced to compete in this manner by the division of labour, which is introduced and steadily improved by capital.

Furthermore, to the same degree in which the division of labour increases, is the labour simplified. The special skill of the labourer becomes worthless. He becomes transformed into a simple monotonous force of production, with neither physical nor mental elasticity. His work becomes accessible to all; therefore competitors press upon him from all sides. Moreover, it must be remembered that the more simple, the more easily learned the work is, so much the less is its cost to production, the expense of its acquisition, and so much the lower must the wages sink – for, like the price of any other commodity, they are determined by the cost of production. Therefore, in the same manner in which labour becomes more unsatisfactory, more repulsive, do competition increase and wages decrease.

The labourer seeks to maintain the total of his wages for a given time by performing more labour, either by working a great number of hours, or by accomplishing more in the same number of hours. Thus, urged on by want, he himself multiplies the disastrous effects of division of labour. The result is: the more he works, the less wages he receives. And for this simple reason: the more he works, the more he competes against his fellow workmen, the more he compels them to compete against him, and to offer themselves on the same wretched conditions as he does; so that, in the last analysis, he competes against himself as a member of the working class.

With the introduction of machinery fewer workers can produce a higher outcome. Therefore, the number of the unemployed also grows and with it the competition for jobs, making it easier for the employers to lower wages. In order to force workers to accept lower wages the employers and the government need to reduce social welfare. I began this section by referring to attempts to reduce wages, including the minimum wage. The cutbacks in social welfare recommended by the Bord Snip Report have an easy logic. Government sources from the Tánaiste and Enterprise Minister Mary

¹³¹ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/wage-labour/ch09.htm>

Coughlan warned that, 'We wouldn't like a situation to arise where it is more attractive to be on social welfare than be out working' (*Irish Independent*, 21 July).

Marx exposed in 'Wage Labour and Capital' the logic of the political economy of capital. Trade unions show two different tendencies in relation to that political economy. Because unions are not homogenous institutions, I prefer to talk at this point in terms of union leadership. On the one hand, some union leaders have accepted and assumed the logic of the political economy of capital, interiorising it. We can speak here of consent to hegemony in words and in deeds. This does not mean that consent is guaranteed, and here I have in mind particularly workers' consent. Gledhill (2000: 77-78 fn), for instance, argues that *hegemony* represents an unstable equilibrium and a dynamic process between different segments of the elites and different segments of the subaltern, which is more useful to understand as *struggle* than as *consent*. The point is that class struggle is what changes ideas and those equilibriums. Fantasia (1988: 8-9) makes a similar point when he warns that Marx saw the process of the proletariat becoming a *class for itself* (as opposed to a *class in itself*) as the product of class struggle:

When Marx wrote about nineteenth-century working-class movements, his focus was neither on the reading habits of workers nor on how thoroughly they had been imbued with certain ideas, but rather on the extent to which their processes of internal organisation and their activities as workers represented a revolutionary consciousness.

Class-consciousness is not something that exists in the collective mind of a group or a class but something played out and developed in the course of collective action, so it is never fixed, neither static nor idealistic, as Fantasia argues (*ibid.*). On the other hand, union leaders may be seen as accepting the logic of the political economy of capital when they frame their demands within the framework and in the language of that political economy. This is not necessarily the case. The dominated normally make their claims in the language of the dominant in order to be heard (Gledhill 2000: 87; Scott 1985; 1990). More important is to assess the direction in which counter-hegemony is moving and how political opportunities are used.

Effect of partnership on union structures and union members

Des Derwin, the SIPTU President for the Electronics and Engineering Branch and a member of the Dublin Regional Executive Committee (Derwin 2005), echoing Mick O'Reilly, argued that around twenty years of partnership agreements had turned union officials into 'amateur lawyers and advocates at the Labour Court', transferring collective bargaining 'from the workplace to the heights of Government Buildings'. As

a result, 'for many, full general meetings are a nostalgic memory. Some branch AGMs have long been getting attendances below 5%' (Derwin 2005).

Kieran Allen (2009) also establishes a relationship between Social Partnership and decline in union members' participation. He mentions that there has been a 'coincidence' between decreasing union density and Social Partnership. As we have seen in the introduction, decreasing density started early in the 1980s due to increasing unemployment. Other factors, also seen in the introduction, can explain why union density kept decreasing in a context of low unemployment levels.¹³² For unions it is difficult to recruit when so many new workers are entering the economy, particularly in low-wage and low-skilled jobs, in work places that tend to be small. On the other hand, unions constrain themselves by renouncing, for example, organising in multinational corporations, as we have seen. Unions in which members have little input might find it very difficult to recruit workers, particularly immigrants, as I will argue in the next chapter. The question is that the union itself can constitute an obstacle for recruiting workers, a factor not normally considered in the literature on industrial relations.

SIPTU, the largest Irish union, has been practising a type of 'business unionism' that has grown into a negative version of a servicing model during the partnership years (Allen 2009). As wage increases were negotiated at the top there was little scope left for local bargaining. When PESP, 2nd partnership agreement (signed in 1991), was negotiated there was a 3% local bargaining clause that left some room for local bargaining, unless the company could prove that it could not afford it, but it was highly criticised by employers and not introduced afterwards. There was some scope for negotiating, for example, pensions, but by-and-large unionism in the work place was reduced to 'casework' normally carried out by union officials, with no input from members, and claims (as we will see in this chapter) were usually taken to the Labour Commission Relation and the Labour Court. There were also some types of restrictions to workplace activism that were less obvious, as the following example shows (Allen

¹³² MacPartlin (2008) argues that the growth in employment has been led by the service sector that towards the end of the 2000s concentrated 67 percent of employment in Ireland at the same time that employers' resistance to unions has grown. For Roche (2008) an explosive growth in the workforce also explains the lack of higher density rates since unions will find it difficult to organise at the same pace as that growth. On top of that, the larger share of the growth has been in contract, temporary and part-time jobs where union density was lower before the growth in employment started. Migrant workers, on the other hand, are less likely to join unions. Union density among EU-10 new member states was 12 percent towards the end of the 2000s. Roche also adds that migrant workers, mainly from Eastern European countries, former 'Communist' states are suspicious of trade unions because of former experiences with state-run unions. As we will see in the next chapter, union officials were of the same opinion. In general that statement is assumed uncritically.

2009:60):

In order to get the national pay rises, all union members were asked to vote on the following measures for local authority workers. The *Towards 2016* agreement specified that there had to be extended opening hours of offices and other facilities, greater flexibility in attendance patterns, staff deployment and reassignment, an acceptance of 'shared services' in a variety of areas ranging from water treatment plants to data capturing, and acceptance of public-private partnership schemes ... The vast majority of unionists who voted on these concessions were non-local authority employees. But before local authority workers got their pay rises they had to submit reports to a verification body on how exactly they had implemented these provisions. If their relevant management did not add their signatures to these reports, local authority workers would not get the increase. If they dared engage in any form of industrial action on issues covered by this range of issues, they would also be denied the pay rise.

According to Allen (2009: 51), the above led to a decline in participation:

SIPTU is organised into branches that average between 2,000 and 3,000 members. These, in turn, group together workplace sections that are represented by section committees. The decline in union participation was most dramatically illustrated in the erosion of the branch structure. Attendance at many annual general meetings of the branches declined to a tiny handful and often retired members came to play a more prominent role. Sections rarely held workplace meetings and so 'the union' often became a small number of core activists who formed the section committee.

Allen (2009: 59) also points at the development of a common outlook, as we have seen above, of groups of leaders from different 'key economic interests groups' involved in corporatist arrangements over a period of time. In that context, the influence of full-time officials increases at the expense of lay members. More importantly, 'the pressure to achieve a consensus with employers and government also leads to a "sealing off" of key areas of decision-making from grassroots pressure.' As a consequence, Allen elaborates, elections by union delegates at regional conferences replaced elections by members to the National Executive Council in SIPTU. In addition, he warns that elections for the three national officers could also be removed.

From another point of view, as argued in this dissertation, there is a double powerlessness of workers in relation to both employers and trade unions, which is provoked by national partnership agreements by both reducing workers' bargaining power in the work place and workers' participation within the unions. Unions negotiate Social Partnership agreements on behalf of the workers but without their participation. In theory, workers participate through their unions, and delegate conferences agree to partnership deals, but democratic deficiencies are amplified by increasing reliance on deals at the top. Ultimately, more direct forms of democracy are based on the active participation of rank-and-file members. As this participation decreases, union officials

increase their influence. Hyman (1975: 177) argues this point quite well:

The ability to negotiate with the employer(s) over a significant range of issues represents a source of power within trade unionism: centralised bargaining over the main substantive conditions of employment normally consolidates the control of the central negotiators over the union membership; where substantial decentralised bargaining occurs, there exist important sources of countervailing power towards the union leadership. Whether a company cedes the principal negotiating power to an employers' association, retains it at the level of its own senior management, or diffuses it (deliberately or otherwise) to first-line supervision can thus be of crucial significance for union democracy.

Partnership unionism also implies, as we have seen, an ideology that further turns the balance towards employers, as the trade union movement assumes employers' ideas about competition and flexibility.¹³³ In the next chapter we will also see that partnership and business unionism are not the only tendencies in trade unionism. We will have a look at some of the literature on union renewal, which promote a unionism based on members' democratic control, militancy and participation, and the practice of an adversarial unionism that implies a different ideological project and is based on a different political economy.

Partnership was a temporary peace truce between labour and capital when in the US and Britain, and to a lesser extent in the rest of the developed countries, there was an all-out-war against organised labour. The cases of Irish Ferries and GAMA workers were the first visible cases of changing scenarios in which employers started to open hostilities, a prelude to the breakdown of partnership in 2009 in the context of the latest crisis of global capitalism. Under the apparent peace truce of partnership the class war went on. Irish companies pursued their own agenda by getting concessions from unions, while companies in countries such as the US and the UK pursued it by refusing to negotiate or even recognise unions. The following ethnographic case will illustrate the points that have been so far discussed. It represents a case of 'partnership unionism' practised during the 1990s and 2000s in Monaghan Fresh Division, at its main packhouse in Tyholland, County Monaghan.

An ethnographic historical case of partnership unionism

Monaghan Mushrooms was a unionised company since it was set up in 1981. At the

¹³³ Jack O'Connor (in Hastings *et al.* 2007: 185), current SIPTU president, defended partnership agreements by arguing that they were in the tradition of Larkin and Connolly, as workers got wage increases above inflation, in pursuing social democracy as conceived by them 'and all the other visionary pioneers of the labour movement.' But the gap, as we have seen, between capitalists and workers widened in a global context of restoration of class power.

beginning of the 1990s the company decided to implement a labour-cutting cost plan, which was presented as a more efficient way to run the company in a context of increasing competition. Flexibility, competitiveness and productivity became company goals, and their acceptance by SIPTU the precondition for agreements on new company-union contracts. These conditions had already been accepted in partnership negotiations by trade unions. So, it was a matter of putting them into practice locally. In practice, any company proposal implied a lowering of wages and a worsening of labour standards. If workers refused to agree, the company threatened unilateral imposition, but until 2004, the process of negotiation took place by adhering to the 'rules of engagement' in order to secure the level of productivity looked for by the company. After 2004, the company departed from the 'rules of engagement' and the union was too weak at the workplace to organise a strike.

The 1994 strike: the beginning of the end

On the morning of the 16th of February 1994 between 70 and 80 workers formed a picket line outside Monaghan Mushrooms' central pack-house in Tyholland. A Garda presence ensured that strike-breakers, whom the company brought from Northern Ireland, could pass the picket line without hindrance. A spokesman from the company said that there were some delays in the supply line, but that the 'emergency staffing' had allowed the company to keep business 'more or less' as usual (*Northern Standard*, 17 Feb 1994).

According to the *Northern Standard*, the weekly newspaper based in Monaghan town, the reason for the dispute was the refusal of union members to implement a change in work practices in the mushroom plant based on a 7-day week basis, as recommended by the Labour Court (NS, 17 Feb 1994, front page), which the company had been negotiating with the union since 1990.¹³⁴

According to the *Northern Standard*, SIPTU's Regional Secretary had said that negotiations between the union and the company broke down when union members refused the Labour Court recommendation, which the newspaper put down to a change in work practices. The union asserted that when they were close to reaching an agreement the company had introduced new proposals. Only at the end of the article, the paper mentioned that,

¹³⁴ Vincent Turley (human relations manager at Monaghan Mushrooms during the 1990s and 2000s and chief negotiator of the ERO, later REAs, for the mushroom industry in 2007 on the part of the growers) was related to the editor of the *Northern Standard*.

The dispute centres around payment of the third phase of the current PESP agreement amounting to 3.75% and the company willingness to pay only in return for an agreement on new terms and conditions in respect of the 134 [union members] involved.

The paper omitted to mention that the company proposals, apart from a change in work practices, also implied a loss of earnings. The article constituted an apology for the company's position, behind which there was a particular ideology:

Because of the perishable nature of the product involved, the production of mushrooms is, in effect, a seven-days-per-week-operation. Because mushrooms become available and must be picked fresh, processed and delivered to the market within a very short timescale, the company argues that flexibility in working arrangements is vital if it is to maintain and expand its customer base and remain competitive.

Further, it went on:

By the nature of its product, the normal working conditions that apply in manufacturing industry are obviously not applicable. Everyone in the industry must adapt to the unpredictable growth of the mushroom itself... The mushroom industry fits perfectly into the small farming way of life in this part of the country. People who have always been familiar with farming life accept that they have to adapt their working hours to the unpredictable – the weather, claving, pigging, lambing and so on.

The union was not in fact opposing working time flexibility. The problem was that the company had not paid what it had owed to the workers according to PESP, and was subordinating payment of a PESP clause to those changes. On the other hand, it was unclear that 'normal working conditions that apply in manufacturing are obviously not applicable'. Yet, the union never made a case against that argument. As a grower in Wexford showed (Ciarán C.), it was possible to introduce shifts similar to those in a factory on mushroom farms. Years later growers would cite the same reasons to justify long and irregular working hours, as well as the need to eliminate overtime rates on farms, which were also eliminated in the mushroom plant. It was more a question of cutting cost. The argument was one of maximum flexibility, increase in intensity of work and lowering of labour standards akin to the employers' strategies of the epoch of neoliberalism and lean production. The argument was also based on ideas about traditional agricultural practices in rural Ireland. In 1946, for example, when the Federation of Rural Workers (FRW) in Ireland was fighting for a one-week holiday for agricultural workers, which industrial workers already enjoyed. *The Standard*, a newspaper sold at the church gates on Sundays, argued that working conditions and wages on farms could never be like in factories in cities. The paper also added (20/09/1946; in Bradley 1988: 85),

In the natural traditional way of farm life – at least since the bad old days have ended – real half-holidays and whole holidays were not those ones which are counted on the clock, but real holidays such as... a wet day in a loft where the conversation was often weird, wonderful and romantic.

The Standard never mentioned that agricultural wages in the 1940s were barely enough to buy the most basic and cheap food to feed a family (*Irish Times* editorial, 08/08/44; in Bradley 1988: 76). That middle and large farmers' ideology, as expressed in heavily ideological papers such as *The Standard* and *The Northern Standard*, was complemented with, as we will see, an antiunion ideology, which was historically rooted and to which publications such as the *Irish Farmers Journal* (IFJ) gave full support over decades.

In 1979, the government were about to introduce new taxes, such as VAT and a land tax for farmers. The IFJ ran articles and columns of opinions for months on that issue. One of the columnists, Joe Bruton, wrote about the hard life of farmers, deprived of rights, and the easy life of unionised workers and union officials, who had entitlements and rights. In his critique of the new taxes, Joe Bruton made unionists the target of his attacks. He wrote (IFJ, 17/2/79),

I was amused at Michael Dillon's [a farmer] description of expending a nasty Sunday morning at this sort of work, and then coming home to hear a radio interview in which a trade unionist was suggesting that farmers and self-employed should do a little work and pay taxes.

He then asked rhetorically how a trade unionist would define a worker, as a 40 hours-a-week trade unionist or as a 70 hours-a-week farmer? He went on to tell a story he heard while waiting to be served in a pharmacy:

There was this farmer standing in a chemist's shop waiting for his veterinary medicines to be *assembled*. He was talking away enthusiastically about his recent holiday in Rome. There was also a lady standing there who was waiting for her prescription to be made up, and she was listening to the *travelogue*. When the farmer had gone off with his medicines the lady waxed indignant about farmers living it up on their excessive wealth. 'Were you ever in Rome yourself?', asked the chemist. 'Oh yes, but I prefer Lourdes', said she. 'What about your family?' 'Oh the daughter always goes to Greece, but the sons prefer to stick to Spain', she answered. 'Well', said the chemist, 'I know that man well and I can tell you that this was his first holiday since his honeymoon 12 years ago. Why do you begrudge it to him? He doesn't even get the Sunday off?'

Joe Bruton was arguing that farmers worked very hard and were not as wealthy as people thought; something that growers also argued to their Irish pickers. He also opposed farmers to town people. He tried to mobilise deeply-rooted feelings and ideas about hard work and the peasant way of life for a particular end, opposing workers' *rights* to farmers' *rights*. He never made a reference, though, to the opposition between labour and capital, which could have allowed for some common interests between workers and small and medium farmers versus capital. He finished his column by talking more personally about his father, and the farming way of life, about the times when he drove his cattle the day before the market in Dublin to the assembling point, and how they had to keep the cattle on one side of the road, how 'heavy rain or slippy ice surfaces were distressing to man and beast.' And they were lucky because others had to walk more than 10 miles, double or more. Then, the day of the market his father had to be up at 3am and have all in order by 5am. At another time they were living near the market and Bruton and his mother would stop at the market to leave father hot tea and sandwiches: 'He would leave them untouched for hours. My mother would be annoyed to hear later that some well-breakfasted buyer had absent-mindedly eaten them for him.' This is was a timid expression of another hated class, which did not go beyond that quick reference, but that it is enough to tell that farmers (peasants) viewed themselves as a 'class' between workers and buyers, or rural bourgeoisie and town people.



A touching story, but most farmers in Ireland did not rely on wage labour, and were not capitalist farmers. Bruton's ideology was closer to the interest of large farmers, which the IFJ tried to articulate. During the 1994 strike and battle for the public opinion the main beneficiaries were not large farmers but mushroom groups. On the 14 July 1979, the IFJ published a cartoon to make a graphic illustration of the points that Bruton made in his columns (see above). That same schema was used during the 2009 offensive against public-sector workers. Farmers and private-sector workers, alternatively, could have taken the place of the emaciated figure, lying next to the beer-bellied trade unionist or the public-sector worker.

The large farmers' ideology was articulated again during the 1994 strike but in a neoliberal context. According to *The Northern Standard*, the question was that in order to bring Monaghan Mushrooms 'into line with its competitors' it was essential to introduce a flexible seven-day-week with flexible starting and finishing times. Buried within a pro-employer rhetoric of the farm way of life, the paper also voiced the need to 'avoid excessive overtime payments' (i.e. the need to reduce labour costs). The strike, from the point of view of the workers, was against a decline in both working conditions and incomes. They had previously agreed to terms of employment and incomes that the company wanted to change for the worse. The NS accused union members of 'threatening a new Monaghan industry ideally suited to the pattern of life in the county and which holds out great prospects for the future. This industry involves probably up to 2,000 people in the Cavan – Monaghan area...' That argument was based on a quote of the vice-president of the Monaghan Chambers of Commerce and Industry, also in the same article:

Obviously, dealing as it does with the big English multiples, any disruption of the supply to the supermarket shelf would prove fatal to the industry. There is no need to enlarge on the effect of the loss of the £30 million annual pay-out to the Company's 210 growers in this country or the £4 million plus loss in wages to the Company's employees. Add to this the hardship that would ensue from the loss of 428 jobs of Company employees and the large number of households sustained by part-time employment from the growers and jobs in ancillary, industry servicing...

The strike therefore, which constituted the ultimate means of workers to advance their interests, was categorised as harmful to people's interests. The employers, apart from exaggerating the potential effect of the strike on the local economy, believed that they represented the interest of the whole society. Within this model, unions must be subordinated to what employers conceive as the general interest even if that interest is primarily that of the employers. The editorial of the NS elaborated the point further:

We believe it would be very difficult for SIPTU to defend itself against the allegation that they have done most to inhibit industrial progress and the creation of jobs in this area ... Certainly those responsible for the guidance of SIPTU nationally should seriously consider whether the bull-in-a-china-shop, dinosaurian tactics being employed at Monaghan Mushrooms is appropriate to their role in the future progress of this country in the conditions that prevail at the present day.

The editorial blamed the union nationally and regionally for allowing Branch secretaries 'an amazing degree of autonomy in bringing about strike action without bringing the matter to the top of the organization'. In the editor's opinion, it was the responsibility of union officers to advise their members 'wisely'. This meant that union officers should have convinced workers not to go on strike but to accept the company's proposals in the interest of all. In fact, SIPTU's Regional Secretary said to the NS that the union was aware of the seriousness of the situation, that they were ready to accept the Labour Court recommendations and that the conflict would have to be settled at the table of negotiation. In the end this is what happened, but how could workers and the union achieve a position to negotiate the best possible deal? The battle for public opinion, to start with, seemed to have been lost, as there was no voice in the community other than the NS. Further, the union did not try to get external support, or, as Lopez (2004) argues, to turn what was purely a workplace matter into a justice issue. The strike settlement did not stop the company imposing its proposals, which it partially achieved soon after the strike was over, or force them to pay increases agreed in Social Partnership.

The cries of the Chambers of Commerce and the NS regarding the destruction of the whole industry and all surrounding network was exaggerated. Nevertheless, it had an effect on the perceived legitimacy of the workers' strike action by the local community and prevented them from showing any solidarity to the strikers. Both workers and union could have obtained some sympathy from other sectors within Monaghan, including contract growers in the mushroom industry. During the 1980s there had been disputes and friction between Monaghan Mushrooms and its contract growers. One of the most important and open conflicts took place in July 1981 when contract growers in the Northwest region with Monaghan Mushrooms, and members of a Mushroom Growers Association according to the NS (30 July 1981) complained about the prices that the mushroom group offered them. After a meeting of the Association one of them said,

When the growers commenced production and contracts were entered into the company [sic], we were assured there would be [sic] a re-negotiation of a more beneficial price for our supplies after a few months trading, but this did not happen;

with the renewal of contracts now coming up, we feel it is imperative that producers fight for the best possible price.

This grower claimed that prices offered (35.5p/lb) were ‘totally uneconomical’, and that only 50p per lb would make the investment and labour involvement viable (the ‘enterprise worthwhile’). Another critique was that ‘a marginal difference of 7p per lb from top to second grade is a bit harsh’. For the NS, this conflict represented a threat to the ‘young company’. The following week (August 6), the newspaper presented the company version. Ronnie Wilson and his financial controller, Enda Monaghan, said that the company had a ‘harmonious’ relation with growers, that there was only a critical minority of one or two growers, and that the company had invested 2 ¼ m pounds in the region. Peter Sherry, chairman of the growers’ association, had made the point also that growers had invested 1.5m pounds in 180 mushroom houses in four counties. The company blamed the growers saying that there was a problem with picking rates, which should have been around 25 lb per hour, and which ‘can be achieved with experience and some changes in improving technology’:

The average picking rate is around 14 or 15 lbs but there are some cases where it’s as bad as 9 lbs, which admittedly leave the enterprise uneconomical... especially when growers haven’t their own labour... If the company can afford to increase the price we will do so ... we have the product; we have the market, and that spells success.

R. Wilson also remarked that the best option for growers was to increase picking rates because that is better than ‘paying for increasing inefficiency in production: ‘real increases in earning power, rather than compensatory increase.’ At this point, the newspaper highlighted the economic importance of Monaghan Mushrooms: ‘present mushroom exports in monetary terms from the area are equivalent to total production for the rest of the country’ since the current value of the industry in the Republic is 11 m pounds and turnover at the Monaghan plant is between 5.6 to 5.7 m pounds.’ And, it gave figures of planned future investments and creation of jobs.

Hence, there were material bases for an ‘alliance’ between workers and contract growers, but one that required a different discourse and leadership. Did the union advise ‘wisely’ to union members in relation to how to conduct the strike and win it? The strike at Monaghan Mushrooms lasted four days and ended when the union called it off. By Friday evening it was over and employers and union were at the table of negotiation again. It had been only a battle in a war that was going to last over a decade.

SIPTU’s ‘servicing’ record

At the time that SIPTU started its campaign in the mushroom industry, April 2006, the

last group of Irish workers, and SIPTU members, at the packhouse of Monaghan Mushrooms in Tyholland (Co. Monaghan) was trying to secure statutory voluntary redundancy payment from the company. The company had managed to push SIPTU members out after a struggle that had started in earnest in 1993. This was not a case of a non-unionised workplace in the mushroom industry. SIPTU had a branch in the company since this was set up in 1981. After a long battle wages had been reduced to a single rate of pay for all hours worked. Liam, the last shop steward, was only being paid €8.70/h, €1.10 above the NMW, after 16 years in the company.¹³⁵ Overtime rates, Saturday allowance, shift allowance and Sunday premium payment had been scrapped after the company unilaterally imposed a new payment system in July 2004, one which SIPTU members had rejected twice in secret ballots.¹³⁶ The Labour Relation Commission ruled that the company had to offer a compensation payment for the loss of incomes to be paid in four instalments over a year. Robin M. (SIPTU branch organiser) thought that there was not really much more to do as the industrial relation process in Ireland was voluntary. Overtime and other wage supplements were not compulsory in the food industry. Industrial action was the only option for workers, but Robin did not think that this was likely after the defeated strike of 1994. By 2006 the union branch was about to disappear and a strike required a strong shop-floor organisation. Liam, who joined the company in March 1990 and took part in the strike of 1994, also thought that a strike was not possible. He was unhappy at how the union (i.e. union officials) had negotiated the settlement of the strike, and did not think that it achieved enough for them in the long run. At the end of April 2006 the company agreed to make the remaining SIPTU members redundant through a voluntary agreement.¹³⁷

From July 2004 onwards only immigrant workers (mainly Lithuanians) earning the bare national minimum wage had joined the company, filling the space left by Irish workers. The contract of Jecis, a Lithuanian hired in September 2004, simply stated in relation to the duration of the working day that, ‘You will be expected to work the hours required to fulfil your responsibilities. This may include evening shift work or weekend duties when business needs dictate.’ The dream of management had come true at last.

¹³⁵ As a quality supervisor he also got a bonus of €60/week. His weekly gross pay was €399.

¹³⁶ Members voted 60 against it and no one in favour in a ballot on 18th November 2003; 33 against and 2 in favour on 14th June 2004 (source: Files in Monaghan SIPTU branch). The difference in the total number of votes between one ballot and other was mainly due to the closure of the prepared product department on April 2004.

¹³⁷ According to a SIPTU official M. only two Irish girls in the packing line and a supervisor stayed in employment in the packhouse. Perhaps the launching of SIPTU’s campaign in the mushroom industry had an effect on management at the packhouse. Before, they had stubbornly refused to pay statutory redundancies, of which the company only had to pay 40 percent.

As it had happened on mushroom farms, the replacement of Irish workers implied a reduction in wages and worse working conditions. According to Liam between 20 and 25 people worked in his shift, and maybe 50 to 60 in total. In his shift there were 8 or 9 Irish workers; the rest mainly Lithuanians, but only the Irish were SIPTU members. Since 2004 the Irish workers had decided, as advised by the union, not to agree to any overtime in protest at the unilateral imposition of a reduced wages structure.¹³⁸ In this way, it was only the ‘foreigners’ who worked overtime. The company subsequently intensified the level of harassment and bullying of Irish workers, ‘roaring’ at them, and ‘stopping’ them ‘from going to the toilet’ or ‘taking breaks’. At one stage, Ronnie Wilson, Monaghan Mushrooms chairperson, shouted at them in the shop floor, ‘If you want war you will have it!’ Liam was unclear as to whether the Lithuanians were bullied into working overtime. There was very little contact between the Irish and the rest. I got word from one of the SIPTU organisers in Cavan that both shop stewards in Monaghan Mushrooms blamed the foreign workers for the deterioration in working conditions and absence of wage increases. Liam knew that the working conditions of the Lithuanians were much worse. Apart from lower wages, it was expected of them to do 16-hour shifts with only two tea breaks of 15 minutes each. It was difficult to make them join the union because of the high staff turnover, ‘perhaps because they didn’t like the job’, but neither Liam nor head office tried either. The high turnover rate in the packhouse was not even normal on mushroom farms. He knew of a Lithuanian girl who worked for 21 days, 80 hour-weeks, without a single day off until she suffered a breakdown. It was clear that management had used them for their particular ‘race to the bottom’, but it was also true that migrant workers had only started to arrive in significant numbers after 2004. The ‘race to the bottom’ had actually started in 1993. During the strike, management brought in strike-breakers from the North. After the strike the company hired the services of Dessie Hughes, a contractor from Newry, through whom the company employed workers on lower wages and higher flexibility (see below). Liam’s wife had been one of those workers for four years, until she managed to work directly for the company.

When in 2006 I related the above to the MRCI director, she asked, ‘How can SIPTU allow all that to happen?’ It was not as simple at that, but the question was food for thought. To answer this it is necessary to highlight first the most significant developments and negotiations between Monaghan Mushrooms and SIPTU since the company was set up. A closer look at the history of industrial relations in the packhouse

¹³⁸ Source: files in SIPTU branch office in Monaghan, letter 23/12/2004 to Vincent Turley.

will also show us a case of partnership at a local level.

Ronnie Wilson, the descendent of Protestant local shopkeepers from Monaghan town, founded Monaghan Mushrooms Ltd after an agreement with the Dutch company Holland Conserven. It was an integrated operation covering the production of compost, contract growing, and the processing and marketing of mushrooms funded by the Industrial Development Authority (IDA).¹³⁹ This funding implied union recognition, and from the beginning ITGWU had a union branch in the company among the main divisions of the company (compost and processing, then later fresh and prepacks).¹⁴⁰ The initial agreement between the company and the union established a working week of 40 hours (later changed to 39 hours) in 5 days. The company got 10 hours per week as reasonable overtime (paid higher) and a condition for employment, including exceptional circumstances related to the 'perishable nature' of the product, which the agreement did not define. Overtime applied after 8 hours of daily work, an achievement for the workers. There was also, among other wage supplements, a shift allowance of 16.5% on basic rates for workers starting after noon, so flexibility was not unconditional.¹⁴¹

In 1985 Monaghan Mushrooms broke with Holland Conserven and focussed its commercial activity on the fresh market. At the beginning of the 1990s, 90 percent of output went to the fresh British market (LCR 14263, SIPTU files). The increasing levels of competition, particularly during the *supermarket wars* (see chapter 2) in the UK led the company in 1993 to propose a change in work practices. The company alleged that the crisis of sterling, higher unit labour costs than their competitors in Ireland (i.e. Walsh Mushrooms), and the demands of the fresh market effected these changes. At this stage, the company employed 225 workers at the packhouse and a compost yard. 130 were SIPTU members (LCR 14263, 30 Nov 1993; CD/96/71, SIPTU FILES), that is, 57.7% union density.

On the other hand, the company wanted to cut wages by freezing any wage increase under the Social Partnership agreement for at least two years. Under the terms of Programme for Economic and Social Progress, 1990-1993, second partnership deal (PESP: 91), the company had to implement three pay increases in three years (or

¹³⁹ At that time the company's main product consisted in canned mushrooms for the Dutch market.

¹⁴⁰ Jim Larkin was one of the founders of the Irish Transport and General Workers union in 1909. This union merged with Workers Union of Ireland (WUI) in 1990, also founded by Larkin, to create SIPTU.

¹⁴¹ Agreement, no date (probably 1981), SIPTU archive in Monaghan.

phases) of 4%, 3% and 3.75% of basic pay and in that order. Clause 2 of the agreement stated that the increases had to 'be negotiated through normal industrial relations machinery, due regard being had to the economic and commercial circumstances of the particular firm, employment or industry.' The company stuck to that clause when an opportunity arose. Monaghan Mushrooms was due to introduce the second phase from 1st August 1992 but it was initially deferred until 1st Feb 1993 as the company alleged the 'sterling crisis'. At the same time it proposed 'drastic changes in conditions of employment to alleviate the situation', including a 2-year wage freeze. The company also postponed the implementation of phase 3 (CD/96/71). According to company sources, it had been very costly to change from mushroom processing to the export of fresh mushrooms (LRC14263). However, the company never declared losses (CD/96/71), and between 1985 and 1993 sales increased from £11m to £50m.¹⁴²

The Labour Court recommended in November 1993 (LCR14263) that the company pay arrears of phase 2 between August 1992 and February 1993, and implemented phase 3 with effect from 1st January 1994. At the same time, the Labour Court recommended starting discussions in relation to changes in conditions of employment. In a letter to the SIPTU branch secretary in Cavan (15th December 1993), the company stated that the recommendations of the Labour Court were 'prohibitively expensive'. Yet, in accordance with the second recommendation of the Labour Court, the company proposed to implement its restructuring plan 'in order to move forward on the recommendations'. That meant that payments owed to the workers had to be subordinated to the implementation of the restructuring plan. The implementation of phase 3 did not take place till 1998.¹⁴³

The plan meant that overtime would only be considered after 39 hours in a week, rather than 8 hours in a day, and the 100% overtime rate after midnight from Monday to Friday would be reduced to 50%. The company also proposed to eliminate the shift allowance and make starting times more flexible. In compensation, the company would buy out the employees' loss of earnings on the basis of one-year's loss. An employee

¹⁴² Appendix 3, labour court recommendation LCR14263, CD93524

¹⁴³ The Productivity Proposal of 1997 intended 'to outline the changes in working arrangements and conditions of employment that Monaghan Mushrooms Limited [was] seeking in return for a 3.0% [3.75%] increase in the basic rate of pay as provided for under 'clause 3' [that is a mistake perhaps intentional as Clause 3 was on local bargaining. It should read 'phase 3'] of [PESP]. Over three years after the settlement of the strike and the recommendation of the Labour Court the company still maintained that its proposals had to be implemented first. Management had for a couple of years claimed that Phase 3 had been subsumed in the settlement of the strike in February 1994, but Finbarr Flood, deputy chairman of the Labour Court, ruled that 'The Court having considered all the information before it is satisfied that [phase] 3 PESP did not form part of the strike settlement.' (Letter 24/7/1996).

shareholding scheme was proposed but it was never taken on. The letter concluded that if this proposal were implemented the company would be 'in a position' to pay arrears of PESP, full PESP, and the buyout amounts. In other words, the proposal had to be implemented beforehand and, even so, the company, management argued, had to be in a position to pay. There were no guarantees that would happen. The Labour Court recommended '[paying] phase 3 from 1/1/94 and phase 2 in arrears, and [entering] negotiations on company proposal [sic]'. So it can be argued that the company had to pay first (LCR14263). Union members rejected the recommendation because they did not agree with the company proposal, so they demanded the wage increase that the company owed them. In a secret ballot SIPTU members decided to start industrial action from 8am on the 16th of February 1994. The union (letter 17th Jan 1994), in a last-minute attempt to avoid the strike, communicated to the company that the workers would accept the proposals but only after PESP 2 and 3 were paid in full. However, this came to nothing as the company refused. After four days the strike was defeated with the use of strike-breakers and the union negotiated a settlement with management on the 20th February. The main concessions were a working week of five days over six in all Departments, overtime after 39 hours, and abolition of payment of 8 hours for 5 hours worked at weekends. The company agreed to compensate workers at twice the annual loss (SIPTU 1996).

The link between competition, productivity, jobs and wages

The Labour Relations Commission recommended on 21 February 1994 (with the agreement of the company and the union) that the company would pay the 3rd phase of PESP from 1st August 1993, and that Con Murphy (Murphy 1996) (third party) would 'evaluate and report on the restructuring of the Company's operations'. If particular points of the restructuring programme were not agreed, they could be referred to the Labour Court. Other points of the settlement included the payment of arrears of 2nd phase of PESP 'when arbitration is completed'. The report recommended that public-holiday pay changed from time multiplied by 3 to time by 2; that the 16% premium for those starting after noon was moved to 3pm (in the 1998 agreement a 10% premium after noon was adopted); and that there could be work till 8pm due to mushrooms' perishable nature. For those asking for voluntary redundancy (the company was offering 3 weeks and the union asked for 4.5 weeks average payment per year worked and statutory entitlements), the report recommended 4 weeks. If Saturday was the fifth working day there would a premium of £6; as a sixth day it would be considered 1.5

time for the first 4 hours and 2 times for the rest. Those recommendations constituted the basis for a new agreement between the company and the union in 1998, which replaced the 1981 agreement. Murphy's impressions on the negotiations that commenced on 24th February indicated the changing level of the divide between the union officials and shop stewards, and company's management:¹⁴⁴

For the first four or five weeks there was little progress because of mistrust, mutual antagonism and acrimony; these were replaced progressively by respect, co-operation and amity

A union official who took part in those negotiations said that meetings lasted until the early hours in the morning and that no settlement or agreement should have been negotiated like this. 'We were very tired and after a long day would sign anything for pure tiredness', she said. Some time later 'mutual antagonism' turned into 'amity'. How was it possible to bridge the differences? Was it just a matter of the union accepting the impositions of the company? We have seen that representatives from unions, government and employer went through a similar process during the negotiations of the first partnership agreement. In fact, by bringing in *scabs* the company had precipitated the end of the strike. Behind that there was the fact that both the union and the company agreed on the fundamental principle that wage increases under the partnership agreement had to be linked to productivity and competitiveness. This is what workers had initially rejected when they turned down the Labour Court recommendations of the 30 Nov 1993 (LCR14263; CD93524). As we have seen, partnership implied the subordination of jobs and wages to productivity and competition. The company had won the ideological battle from the beginning and in the end the union gave into the company's demands. In a letter to McKiernan, SIPTU branch secretary in Cavan (15/12/93) P. A. Alley, managing director of Monaghan Mushrooms, said clearly that they would be in a position to pay arrears of phase 2, implement phase 3, and compensation only after the company applied the changes that they wanted to negotiate with the union. He also added that:

[The objective is] not to reduce employee income. Moreover, it is our overall plan to increase employee income in due course through greater flexibility and income sharing that may arise on natural job wastage.

That pay increase never took place, rather the opposite. In his report, Con Murphy (Murphy 1996) also made a clear link between wage increase, productivity, and

¹⁴⁴ Agreement between Monaghan Mushrooms Ltd and the services, industrial, professional and technical union ('the union'), 7 April, 1998 (SIPTU files in Monaghan town)

competition:

Because survival in the market place has been a dominant theme in these negotiations there is no longer any need for it to be determined separately. The negotiators are conscious of decreasing prices, increasing competition and an increase in corporation profits tax.

The union-company agreement of April 1998 stated that link in its introduction:

The Company's success has been built on its commitment to quality and customer service which can only be achieved by the continued effort and commitment of its employees. The nature of the business in which the company operates demands a continuing need for adaptation and change in our operations and the products themselves if the company is to survive, remain competitive and provide secure employment... The future success and security of Monaghan [Mushrooms] will depend on all employees making an effective contribution to the company's activities and responding positively to the changes demanded by increasingly sophisticated technology and customers.

After SIPTU members rejected unanimously by ballot an additional, poorer wage structure proposed by the company in 2003, SIPTU-Monaghan wrote to Vincent Turley in these terms (2/12/2003):

We have in our recent meeting recognised the company indications of the competitive pressures in the market place... We have to date engaged with the company in a pro-active manner for the purpose of addressing the issues required *to maintain competitiveness as being in the best interest of those employed at the company*. We again re-iterate that this approach continues to be our position. (Italics: my emphasis)

In a further letter to V. Turley, after the new wage structure had been unilaterally imposed, the SIPTU branch secretary from Monaghan still said, 'we fully recognise the company's position indicating the need to maintain its competitiveness in the market place.' The union had also argued over time that the company had never declared losses, but at all stages the company supplied some evidence of price cuts from retailers, currency crises, international competition and crisis in the mushroom industry. They used crises as an excuse to cut wages without returning them to their previous levels in periods of better market circumstances.

The 1998 Union Company Agreement (SIPTU files 23/10/97) was preceded by a programme of structural change that the company introduced in July 1997 as one of the aftermaths of the 1994 report. This included the introduction of 'the concept of team working and improved communications between operatives and management' in the Fresh Division; greater flexibility within the 39 hours week 'to facilitate more effective management of what is a natural process'; a 'contingency arrangement' in the Processing Division 'to provide for shortage in supply of mushrooms [which] will

guarantee continuity of supply to our customers'; and a cross-training employee' programme to 'develop the skills of employees' in the Administration Department. It also introduced multiskilling for the first time. The most interesting point was the introduction of new statuses of employment, which allowed for higher levels of labour flexibility in order to reduce labour costs:

1. Permanent
2. Part-time I: in activities with major daily fluctuations, four hours guaranteed per day, and 5 days over 6.
3. Part-time II: difference is that it is more flexible and more focussed on fresh/bulk, while the other one is more for grading in processing division.
4. Temporary: also guaranteed 4 hours, and used to cover for absences or 'in the event of major uncertainty'.
5. Student: for weekend and holiday cover, 'employed at management discretion'.

Another aspect was the possibility of temporary lay-offs and the 'need' for more flexible arrangements to 'avoid' them:

Both parties recognise that there may be circumstances outside the company's control which necessitates short-time working or lay-off. In order to delay or avoid such circumstances, employees must be prepared to co-operate with all reasonable measures proposed by management e.g. accept reasonable alternative work, the re-organisation of holiday schedules.

In the processing division, the company had already managed to get workers to agree to flexible start times, 'in the event of a shortage of supply of mushrooms.' Hence, a flexible working day was introduced in the 'factory' operation of the company, where the 'natural perishable nature of the mushrooms' did not apply. The company considered the possibility of the introduction of a second shift if customers' orders increased, but it only came into effect some years later. In the absence of capital investment, these productivity targets had to rely on the intensification of work without wage increases, reduction of wages, or both (production of absolute surplus value). The position of the union was to demand capital investments in order to increase productivity (production of relative surplus value), but without making it a condition for an agreement.

Another great struggle between management and the union was fought around the use of contract workers. The agreement of 1998 gave legal course to the subcontracting of a number of activities such as cleaning in all divisions and the delivery of compost, but workers and the union maintained that it was a long-term strategy to push wages down and get rid of union members. John Hall, operations director, wrote to SIPTU-Monaghan (letter 27/11/1997):

During the current negotiations on the new union-company agreement it has been alleged that the company consider the use of sub-contract workers as a cheap alternative to direct employees and a mechanism for displacing union members. Management want to assure all employees that this is not the case... the use of contract staff is not the company's preferred option but has been dictated to us by the difficulty of recruiting direct employees due to a continuing shortage in the local labour market over the past twelve months.

That argument had started earlier, in 1996. The company had agreed that external contract workers would be removed and that new employees would be hired to do their work, particularly in the processing division (letter 19/4/96). An AGM of members in processing (25/4/1996) pointed out that the use of contract workers was in breach of the agreements reached between the union and the company. They rejected in a ballot (1/05/1996) to go on strike over this.¹⁴⁵ Pat Kiernan, SIPTU-Cavan, indicated to Robert Brady, regional secretary, that 'the company introduced contract workers from outside the state [the North] to assist in busy periods at a lesser rate than our members performing the same work and without consultation or agreement.' (Letter, 13/5/1996). The company was as slow in replying to union queries in this regard as it was on implementing wage increases under partnership agreements. Joe Leonard still insisted in October 1996 (letter, 8/10/96) to SIPTU that market uncertainties necessitated the use of contract staff:

Due to the continuing problems with the short supply of mushrooms [and late delivery from growers], the working arrangements for employees in the processing division continue to be disrupted with late and uncertain starting time... The only option that the company has available to deal with this situation is to use contract staff currently in use in a crate washing operation on the Tyholland site... *If the supply of mushrooms increases to such a level that is viable to offer employment to direct employees on temporary or part-time basis, then this option will be used in preference to contract staff* (Italics: my emphasis)

There were, however, clear indications that the use of contract staff was the company's preferred option, particularly to get rid of union members. Around three months later, Kiernan wrote to Sweeney (letter 24/1/97), as a matter to be highlighted at a conciliation conference to be held in February 1997, that the company had dismissed two union members due to lack of work while at the same time employing contract workers. After the conciliation conference, a union official complained to Jim Brennan, Manager of Fresh Division, that while there was a high level of overtime in the fresh division, there were temporary workers on a 3-day week (and members of SIPTU) who could be upgraded to permanent status. The staffing problems, in her opinion, were caused by the

¹⁴⁵ Source: letters 19/4/96 and 25/4/1996 to Vincent Turley. The result of the ballot was 12 for, 8 against, 8 unmarked.

company's policy of not replacing permanent employees (letter 20/3/97). A year later, SIPTU brought the matter to the Rights Commission Service indicating that contracting out of Blancher Washer duties in the process department was in breach of agreement and that SIPTU members used to do these some duties as overtime. Without the threat of a strike, workers could offer very little resistance to management; therefore the company continued contracting work. The courts, on the other hand, could only make recommendations, but the company could simply decline to accept such recommendations.

The 1998 agreement also imposed limitations on the right to strike, as partnership did. The grievance procedure comprised of four stages to solve disputes: (1) by informal discussion between employee and supervisor and with the mediation of the shop stewards; (2) if not solved, those considered 'extremely serious' would be referred to the Divisional Manager and a meeting arranged with the full-time official or senior shop steward, or both; (3) if unresolved, the conflict could be referred to the Rights Commissioner (individual grievances) or the Labour Relations Commissioner (collective grievances); (4) if still unsolved, it could be referred to the Labour Court or the Employment Appeals Tribunal, the latter in case of dismissal. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the *Northern Standard*, the voice of the employer during the strike, accused the union, particularly SIPTU top union officials of irresponsibility for failure to prevent strike action. Therefore, the union in the 1998 agreement was made responsible for controlling its members and limiting grievances to a lengthy legal course that could not affect the normal work process until all legal means had been exhausted:¹⁴⁶

During the period in which the above procedure is being followed no strike, lock-out, walk-out, sit-in, go-slow, or any other form of industrial action designed to bring pressure to bear on either party will take place, until the procedure has been followed by both parties and at least 14 days have elapsed following the issue of a Labour Court Recommendation or a determination of the Employment Appeals Tribunal. Any industrial action will require that two weeks' written notice be given by either party.

The limitations to industrial action also specified the role of shop stewards:

The Shop Steward will not encourage or commit any act which interferes with the normal operations leading to disruption of work or loss of production, other than by means of official action, authorised in advance in writing by the SIPTU office in Cavan after the procedure for settling disputes has been exhausted. In the event of any action which is seen to be contrary to the terms of this protocol, the Shop

¹⁴⁶ The company did not do that in 2003. Rather it imposed the new wage structure without following any procedure.

Steward will do everything possible to end the action and restore normal working so that the cause of the action can be handled via the agreed procedures contained in the Company/Union agreement.

The last battle: the 2003 proposal

In 2003 the company was again ‘facing enormous competitive pressures in the market place’ because Dutch suppliers were undercutting prices. Monaghan Mushrooms customers were putting up orders for auction, thereby lowering prices. Polish suppliers were offering fresh mushrooms in the UK market 2p below prices paid to Irish growers (60p/lb). Management complained that Polish wages were 25% lower in relation to Irish wages. That competition had resulted in a 10% [25% since the Euro had gone from £0.62 to £0.71 stg.] reduction in prices paid to growers. [Companies such as Blue Prince (UK) went out of business and Sainsbury de-listed Carbury Park (Ire).] (Turley, 2003)

In the first draft of the restructuring programme (June 03), the company blamed the buying power of UK retailers and their little loyalty to suppliers for the reduction of the prices of mushrooms: 7-10% in the first half of 2003. This paragraph was dropped in the draft of October 2003 because, we can conclude, it did not apply any more, but the company did not alter the rest of the document. The restructuring programme would be applied even if prices paid by UK retailers were not reduced, which was the alleged reason to apply it. Vincent Turley made the claim that ‘most operators are paying the National Minimum Wage’ in a ‘labour intensive low skill environment’, while Monaghan Mushrooms had ‘traditionally’ paid ‘well above the industry average’ (Turley, 2003). Because of the increased competition they could ‘no longer sustain this level of wages’. Wage levels were, he continued, ‘putting our ability to maintain jobs at risk’. The refusal of SIPTU members to accept the restructuring programme led the company to impose a new wage scale unilaterally. The logic of competition, accepted by the union from the beginning, led to this situation.¹⁴⁷ Now the company had the goal of reducing pay to the legal minimum wage.

The restructuring plan included the closure of the compost yard in Foxfield with the loss of 50 jobs and the relocation of the prepared product (processing) department from Monaghan to the UK. The prepack operation in Tyholland would be expanded and 20 new jobs created. The company also announced a redundancy programme that would result in the loss of 10 jobs in the administration and support services. The company demanded even more malleability this time with ‘a flexible seven day week operation’, changes in working practices as well as start, finish, and break times. But the

¹⁴⁷ The workers, however, rejected that logic in December 2003.

fundamental proposal was a new composite wage rate, which consisted of a single rate of pay for all hours worked.

The company complained that there was ‘a major problem with the level of overtime’ because of the lack of skilled workers. In fact, they were not introducing measures to increase skill and all new incorporations after 2004 were of non-skilled migrant workers on just the NMW, working double shifts, which was illegal. In an appendix, the company calculated the loss of earnings for workers:

Job	total hours week	Gross pay	Average hour	Proposed Gross Pay	Average hour
Crate washing	45.83	369.84	8.07	344.20	7.51
Despatch	48.60	495.07	10.18	390.14	8.02
Pre-pack Grading	42.16	419.40	9.94	350.96	8.32
Bulk Grading	37.47	373.07	9.95	311.48	8.31
Pre-pack packing	38.86	328.08	8.44	314.95	8.10
Quality Assurance	35.77	344.64	9.63	309.81	8.66
Collection	46.56	468.00	10.05	432.48	9.28
Maintenance	44.04	555.43	12.61	544.36	12.36

The reduction of earnings varied not only in relation to the total number of hours but also in relation to the type of overtime rates and wage supplements applied. Some overtime was paid at 1.5 hours and other at 2 times. As a compensation for the loss of income, the company offered a maximum of one year’s loss of earnings to be paid in 4 quarterly payments in arrears. On 19th May 2004, Seamus Sweeney, Labour Relations Commission (LRC), sent to the Monaghan SIPTU branch the final proposal of the company. Sweeney indicated that the proposal was ‘the result of lengthy negotiation at two conciliation conferences... and is *the best that can be achieved in all the circumstances*’ (my italics: my emphasis).

A general meeting of SIPTU members unanimously rejected the first proposal of the company on 9th November 2003. On the 18th November, the company submitted a slightly modified proposal, which was also rejected. An infuriated Ronnie Wilson wrote to the chief shop steward (27/1/2004), ‘If we cannot get an agreed position before 8th February 04, we will be forced to implement the new payment system and the offer of compensation for loss of earnings will be withdrawn.’ It was finally imposed in July 2004. The only thing that the SIPTU official from Monaghan could do was to complain

that ‘the company absence of utilising agreed industrial relations machinery is contrary to current good practice’ (letter to Turley, 29/7/2004), and advised members not to be available for work in excess of their 39 hours (letter to Turley 23/12/2004). The union felt powerless to do anything else.

Workers’ militancy

Since the shop-floor organisation was at its weakest by 2004 a strike seemed to be an unrealistic option, but perhaps other means were available. Opting for campaigning, for example, could have broken the dilemma between either negotiation or strike. Perhaps a year later, in the context of the GAMA strike and the Irish Ferries Affair. This could have happened. Workers were not given any other choice or alternative advice in 2004, and there are no indications that it would have happened otherwise in 2005 or 2006. The branch was left adrift.

I met Liam between March and April 2006, while he and others were trying to obtain voluntary redundancies. I suggested, given the company’s opposition (albeit a little late since most union members had already left) that I could help them with a local campaign to make public the way the company had treated its workers in the last decade. The idea was to try to create a movement similar to that of the Irish Ferries workers the previous December, but more local. In the wake of SIPTU’s campaign in April 2006, it was the right moment to do so. It was a matter of contacting institutions, unions and associations in Monaghan, go to the media, organising petitions, contacting TDs and local councillors who could sympathise with their cause, and encouraging most of the workers in Tyholland to join the union and link them up with SIPTU’s campaign in the mushroom industry. SIPTU had to be put under pressure too. What Liam and the others could achieve with all of this was a decent redundancy package while salvaging their dignity. It could also have helped to reconstitute the union branch. Liam talked to the rest of the workers who were in conflict with the company and later told me that they had agreed to do so. He also said, ‘We were waiting for someone like you. We never got any of that from SIPTU’. My proposal was that they organise a meeting to discuss the campaign as soon as possible, to which Liam agreed. About a week later the company made the workers redundant. Now there was no longer a reason for the proposed campaign.

The company had finally won. Now they could profit from the almost limitless supply of migrant workers on the bare NMW. During SIPTU’s campaign in the mushroom industry, the SIPTU union branch in Monaghan Mushrooms simply faded

away, unacknowledged. By 2006 the union branch existed only on paper. Not even a meeting was organised to reorganise the branch and elect a new steward. When the branch nearly disbanded after the imposition of the new wage system in 2004 and the closure of processing with the two shop stewards leaving, Liam just 'took it on'. There had not even been an election. Liam's main job as shop steward was to listen to members' grievances. He tried to bring them to the attention of managers, but 'they wouldn't listen' nor would they give him any union time during working hours. Liam used to meet the SIPTU branch organiser in Monaghan to ask for help. The branch would 'service' union members, but branch meetings were not organised. During SIPTU's campaign in the mushroom industry I asked this organiser several times whether they were considering meeting with the Lithuanian workers to re-launch the union. Liam had told me about a Lithuanian worker he was in touch with and who could potentially become a shop steward after he left. Around the 10th of May I learnt that the organising unit had tried to get in touch with her to organise a meeting, but it never happened. A Polish worker who got a job in the packhouse in November 2006 appeared surprised when I asked him about the union in January 2008. He had never heard anything about any union in Tyholland. The branch had simply vanished into thin air.

Susan remembered the union branch in a very negative light. She worked in the packhouse in 2000 for only three months. What angered her most was that management had lied to her at the job interview. She was supposed to start at 8.30am and finish by 4.30pm. They always finished later than that, as long as there were mushrooms left. She had to stand at a conveyor belt for the whole duration of the working day. It was cold and noisy as well as impossible to talk to others without shouting.

Immediately after commencing employment a shop steward asked her to join the union, to which she agreed. However, during the three months that she was employed by the company there were no union meetings. She also noticed that in the canteen both shop stewards and managers sat at the same table together. She described the workplace as a hierarchical system based on *clientelism* (my term):

Most of the workers seemed to be related to management. No one would tell you the money they were getting. A girl told me that it was better not to enquire... There was a trade union officer [sic] but I think he was getting more money, and definitely was on the side of management. I think there were some workers getting extra cash in the brown envelopes to pay for their loyalty... And they were not friendly. They would sit in the canteen in closed groups and would bitch about each other. I sat with those who accepted me.

Susan could not be sure that there was extra money to pay for loyalty in those brown envelopes. She could not offer any proof of union stewards siding with management

either. She said, though, that among the staff there were workers who were relatives or friends of managers. She did not trust her shop stewards. Her impression was also that workers did not trust each other because of the ‘reward’ system, and that there was no clear division between management and the workers. Shop stewards, she thought, seemed to be closer to management than to the workers in order to get material rewards.

This was a really bleak picture she painted, and we could conclude that was no trade union consciousness. Perhaps this was the case when Susan worked there. There is some evidence to show that a degree of class struggle took place at shop-floor level. Liam told me once about Daniel H., the most militant shop steward in Tyholland, who worked in processing (Prepared Product). Liam told me that ‘he was always asking questions and that caused him awful trouble’. He refused to be interviewed, but in the correspondence between the union and management I found interesting references to him. They were complaints from management, which do not contain the point-of-view of D.H. or the union. However, we can get an interesting picture through them.

Around 1996-2001 there was a manager in processing, Joe Leonard, who was constantly quarrelling with the workers. In a meeting with Turley and Leonard, the union complained about the attitude of a supervisor (22/4/1996). Earlier in the month, a worker had complained about harassment, but the company had not replied to the union. In a general meeting on the 22nd April that year the workers also discussed the attitude of Joe Leonard, but no one wanted to give their names ‘for fear of reprisals’. There were also complaints about Marion Burns, new supervisor, over interference and general ‘badgery’ of members, and about Paul H., operation director of the fresh market division, who had allegedly harassed workers (and physically touched one of them on Easter Saturday) because he wanted them to work to finish. Three members felt routinely victimised. On the 5th of May, Pat McKiernan, SIPTU-Cavan, communicated to Vincent Turley that ‘Our members complain of being belittled in front of their colleagues and constantly shouted at ... Mr Leonard’s statement at our meeting on 22nd April that his job was ‘to make them work’ is indicative to us of a management style which disappeared decades ago.’ The company replied that those were unsubstantiated allegations and that management were annoyed because of them (letter from V. Turley, 12/6/1996).

On one occasion, the company had instructed workers to work on the bank holiday of the 3rd of June 1996. The union had to remind them that ‘the work agreement does not provide for mandatory working on Public holidays.’ (Letter 14/6/96 to J. Leonard). Workers tended to confront management about the length of the working day,

sometimes overtly. Joe Leonard wrote a *warning* letter to all staff in the prepared product department regarding an incident that involved most of the staff (letter 17/7/2001):

On Friday last 13 July we had a very serious incident. ASDA updated estimates were not available at 3pm. I informed all employees that we had not the updated orders and we would have to wait for them to come in (as normally happens). I made a few phone calls and at 3.35pm got some figures... When we went to inform the staff, all but four people had clocked out and gone home (three students and one full time)... So I rang as many people as possible. Three people came in (two students and one full time). A number of people who I rang said they did not care and refused to come back... you should be aware that if any employee refuses to co-operate to complete customers orders, management will be left with no option but take disciplinary action.

Over the years, the union and management had to deal with warnings from the company over members failing to work overtime, not working to finish and being late to work. In some cases it led to dismissals. During a conciliation conference (14/5/1997) Vincent Turley even argued against sick pay on the grounds that it would promote absenteeism and undermine the competitive position of the company. Daniel H. got his first warning in writing on 04/05/96 for failing to go to work the previous day at 6am as 'agreed'. He got his second warning on 5/6/96 for refusing 'to implement a simple procedure which [would] help in the smooth running of the processing plant.' (Letter from company to H., 6/6/96). On the 6th March 1997, Joe Leonard wrote to D.H. over another incident related to his role as a shop steward:

I have received a complaint from the manager of the fresh department that you were holding up his production on the prepack line by holding discussions with his operatives. Today you have not been at your designated area and have been found having discussions with fresh department operatives. In a letter to you on 11/12/96, I pointed out to you that if you want to leave your work station or conduct union business you must get prior agreement from your manager. When confronted on 6/3/97 regarding the above problem you were very abusive to your manager and used foul abusive language.

Two days later, 8/3/96, P. Kenny, a duty manager in the fresh department, also complained about Daniel. Joe Leonard wrote another letter to him:

[P. Kenny] approached you regarding damage you had done to a pedestrian doorway in the dispatch area. Instead of walking around to open the main door, you tried to force a trolley jack through a passage way which was too small. When P. Kenny had spoken to you regarding this incident, he said he was verbally abused by you... When I asked you in front of P. Kenny what happened, you refused to comment.

Management also tried to interfere with D.H.'s activities as shop steward in other ways. For example, the company did not allow him to attend a union training course in Cavan

in January 1997 (letter 27/1/97 to Turley). On the 7/6/1996 in a statement from Joe Leonard over an incident on the shop floor we can see D.H. in action in his role as shop steward:

I came out of my office and went into the Brine room. On entering I saw an employee standing on a pallet containing buckets, which was in excess of 4ft high [driven by Hugh O'Brien] ... All filling line staff had stopped work and were watching the incident. When Hugh O'Brien saw me he lowered the pallet ... I called him to my office with his shop steward [D.H.]. The shop steward told him to say nothing until he had spoken to him. Hugh O'Brien confirmed what happened. D.H. immediately said that there were no witnesses. I informed him that most of factory had seen it. D.H. again insisted that I had no proof ... [Hugh] confirmed that probably all the filling and packing line employees ...

Daniel H. also complained about 'servicing from the union' and a meeting with him was arranged for the 18/3/1997. Unfortunately, no written documents of that meeting exist in SIPTU files.

The company, the union, and the workers

During the 25 years of formal labour relations at the Tyholland site, only one strike took place. It represented the peak of workers' militancy at the moment when the union branch was at its maximum strength in terms of number of members, union density in the company, and militancy. They were defeated by the company's use of scabs, Garda assistance, and a lack of social support. From the beginning the company won both public support and ideological battle by mobilising the local media, appealing to growers and their networks as well as the local populace. The strike, they argued, represented a threat to the mushroom industry, the economic success of the 1980s, the pride of the county, and the livelihood of thousands of people. If the company wanted to maintain its leading position, workers had to adapt to a new environment in which productivity, flexibility and competitiveness were essential for economic success. This, in turn, was in the interest of everyone in the county. The alternative, they argued, was to return to poverty.

The union did not try to fight at that level. It stuck to partnership agreements, accepting that workers had to cooperate with the company to make it more productive and competitive. In return it expected that the company would implement partnership agreements in relation to wage increases. When it came to putting forward workers' interests, the union followed 'the rules of engagement': if the shop steward could not solve a problem, the union official would intervene; if dialogue did not produce agreement, then the Labour Commissioner or the Labour Court were the procedures to

follow strike action was a last resort. There were no other strategies to follow. The problem was that strike action was only carried out in a strictly formal way, while the company mobilised ample resources and won the battle for the public from the very beginning, leaving the strikers completely isolated and vulnerable.

Workers followed the lead role of union officials in matters of ideas and principles around which struggles over incomes and job control were fought out. They also followed the lead in terms of strategies and expected the union to achieve results on their behalf. The strike, however, was no more than a skirmish. The class war unfolded over a long period, most of the time in an individualised rather than in a collective manner. Union meetings to discuss grievances and voting over revisions of the union/company contracts also took place with frequency during the 1990s. Liam, who took part in the strike, said that some union members felt that the union could have done much more and that union officials did not negotiate a good agreement. One problem was that most members did not know what went on during the negotiations. He also had the feeling that the union had let the workers down on different occasions afterwards. After the strike a period of low-intensity class struggle followed. After 1998 labour conflict started to decline, at least in the correspondence between the union and the company. The company finally obtained a complete victory in July 2004, when it unilaterally introduced a flat rate for all hours worked and got rid of wage supplements in exchange for labour flexibility. The company won the war of positions because workers were isolated. There were no links with other workplaces or with the local community. At a national level, labour disputes were reduced to a minimum and union density was in decline. The more battles that were lost over job control and incomes, the more union members looked for redundancies, and membership, participation as well as militancy decreased. There were 130 union members in 1994. It then decreased to 110 in 1996, 60 in 2003 and 35 by 2004. The branch itself disappeared in mid 2006.

Increasing opportunities in other economic sectors made jobs at the Tyholland site less attractive. While other sectors were expanding, the mushroom industry was contracting (consolidating). The number of temporary, part-time and contract staff grew in relation to full-time permanent staff. Some sections closed and the number of employees decreased in general. Time played against the union. During the negotiations between the company and the union in 2004, management informed SIPTU members that if they did not accept the new wage agreement the company would close down the site in Tyholland (the last packhouse that Monaghan Mushrooms had in Ireland) and relocate to Britain. According to Liam, the company had already closed Foxfield

(Cavan), Belmullet (Mayo), Kiernan (Co. Armagh), and two more packhouses in Tipperary and Donegal. After investing €1m in expanding and upgrading the packhouse in Tyholland in 2005 (including government grants), it looked unlikely they would do such a thing, but workers remained wary. These threats to shut the company were not new. They started in 1993, when the company threatened to withdraw a planned investment of £2.5m if workers did not accept the proposal to change working practices. But at the time the union was still strong.

The company's hegemony was partly based on an anti-union rural ideology that found expression during the 1994 strike, which was also assumed by growers, as we have seen in the first part of this dissertation. On the other hand, partnership agreements meant that this ideology, at national and local levels, was also legitimised via the trade union. The hegemonic political economy of capital at a local level was as much based on traditional ideas as on modern practices and ideas (neoliberalism, lean production). It drew on large farmers' ideology, peasant traditions, and new economic opportunities based on contracting, or maximum flexibility, which sat well in areas with a large presence of underemployed small farmers.

Union officials never opposed the need for flexibility, competitiveness, or productivity in exchange for jobs. Workers opposed loss of incomes and declining working conditions. Union officials assisted workers to get the company to comply with partnership and company-unions agreements, and to fight back further losses of incomes, and job flexibility without compensation. The union, as well as the workers, witnessed with increasing anxiety how the company was increasingly employing contract, temporary and part-time workers, while getting rid of union members. They appealed on the basis that the economic position of the company did not justify it, or that they were using management practices of a bygone era, etc. They also argued that increases in productivity were based on a devaluation of labour through prolonging the working day without compensation (more unpaid work), or working harder (absolute surplus value) rather than by capital investments (relative surplus value), which could have contributed to keep permanent, well-paid, unionised jobs.

Did all this mean that the union consented to and assumed uncritically the political economy of capital? Union officials' actions indicated this type of consciousness, but it is difficult to make a proper assessment without having done participant observation. The next chapter will expand on that point. The fact is that union officials could not see beyond the framework of neoliberalism or at least did not challenge it at the local level. Initiative and active opposition or intervention from union officials came only when

members demanded it. Workers had expected the union to help solve their problems. The fact that the union as an institution could not obtain for them what partnership agreements entitled them to or the fact that their situation kept worsening rather than improving contributed to them viewing the union in a negative light. Workers seemed to have assumed the service model of unionism. Liam expected the union to do more for workers. There was not an identification of the workers with the union as in, 'we are the union'. The union did not offer alternative ways to fight back, such as campaigning, gaining public support, etc. When the union branch was about to disappear there were no initiatives from the top to reorganise it

Members were fighting over concrete issues such as the extension of the working day, the value of labour, and job control. Complaining, absenteeism; rejection of overtime, working to finish or working public holidays were usual ways to confront the company. The presence of the union helped workers to express grievances openly through the proper channels, without fear of dismissal at least for those who were union members. It was different for non-union members, including migrant workers. Workers were also increasingly divided as the proportion of non-union members increased with the employment of temporary and part-time workers. In the end there was a division between national and non-national.

Some of the trade union officials whose names appear in the correspondence between the union and the company later took part in SIPTU's campaign in the mushroom industry. They participated in the initial meetings to organise the campaign and later were suppose to take control of it locally. The branch organiser in Cavan who took part in the negotiations between the union and the company later became the chief organiser of SIPTU mushroom campaign at the beginning of 2007. They were all familiar with this branch. However, SIPTU never tried to reactivate the branch to include it in the campaign. On the part of the company, Ronnie Wilson and Vincent Turley led the mushroom growers employers group that negotiated an Employment Regulation Order for the mushroom industry between 2006 and 2007.

The SIPTU branch at the Tyholland site represented a local case of 'partnership unionism' based on the 'servicing' model that SIPTU applied in earnest until Jack O'Connor was elected SIPTU president and plans to turn to an 'organising' model were drawn up. The next chapter constitutes a case study of SIPTU's 'organising' turn.

6. The Organising Turn

This chapter describes the efforts of SIPTU, the largest union in the Republic of Ireland with 276,000 members in 2008 (Begg 2008), to eradicate underpayment and mistreatment of migrant agricultural workers in the Irish mushroom industry through an ‘organising’, top-down approach between 2006 and 2007. This ‘organising’ model of labour unionism was based in an apparatus trained to ‘service’ existing union members and to negotiate at top levels with employers and the state in the context of national Social Partnership agreements. Accordingly, SIPTU’s campaign in the mushroom sector managed to increase the rate of employers’ compliance with legal labour standards by lobbying state agencies and employers rather than from workers’ pressure at workplace level. This achievement, however, fell short of the mark that SIPTU set itself when it launched its campaign to ‘clean up’ the mushroom industry in April 2006, which was presented as an organising campaign.

It is not even appropriate to characterise SIPTU’s campaign as *organising* from the top; rather it consisted in recruiting in order to constitute union branches on some farms with the consent of the grower. As we will see, a participative, democratic, and militant rank-and-file movement constitutes a necessary condition to implement a successful ‘organising’ model. Therefore I start this chapter by differentiating between different ‘organising’ models and by dealing with the circumstances that led SIPTU, in the context of a more general shift in the UK and the US, to attempt to go from a ‘servicing-business’ (or ‘partnership’) to an ‘organising’ model of trade unionism. The contradictory relations between union officials and workers will be also considered, as

well as the obstacles that make it more difficult for workers to join trade unions.

Union power and popular power

SIPTU's attempt to change to an 'organising' model began to take shape at the end of the 1990s, at the time of the ascent of Jack O'Connor to the presidency of the union. According to MacPartlin (2008: 88) 'social unionism' was mooted for a time but discounted because of 'the realisation that what members want most is job security, protection and reasonable wages and conditions'. That was an appreciation based on surveys. We have seen in the case study in the previous chapter that union members expected exactly all the above. The problem was that the union was not able to deliver because the company managed to postpone the implementation of wage increases negotiated in national partnership deals by subordinating them to increases in productivity, flexibility and competitiveness. That was only on the surface. The company was able to use that framework to pursue its real goals, as shown during the decade between 1994 and 2004: the reduction of wages to the minimum legally allowed and the introduction of the maximum job flexibility allowed for labour in Ireland.

By mid 2006 all wages had been reduced to the National Minimum Wage; there were no overtime rates; working weeks were calculated over a seven days working week, etc. That had been accomplished, in part, with the incorporation of migrant workers. This only contributed, perhaps, to accelerate the company's plans. The attack on the workers and the union had begun by the use of scabs during the 1994 strike, and by subcontracting services as well as hiring increasing numbers of casual workers in the 1990s. As the proportion of non-unionised workers increased, it became easier for the company to change the terms and conditions of employment. In 2004, the union was so weak in the workplace that the company could introduce its last reform unilaterally with very little and manageable opposition. We have seen in the previous chapter that some large Irish employers began to break the 'rules of engagement' when they felt strong enough to do so. Monaghan Mushrooms was just another example of that tendency. The weakness of the SIPTU branch at Monaghan Mushrooms constituted merely a reflection of the weakness of trade unions at the national level, of the cul-de-sac in which unions were in Ireland. Michael Crosby, chair of the SIPTU commission that prepared an action plan for the Special SIPTU Delegate conference of 2008, said that if the plan was not implemented SIPTU would have to buy a big gravestone in Glasnevin cemetery (MacPartlin 2008: 100-101).

'Servicing' members is an important function for a trade union. All unions must do it.

But the ‘servicing’ model coupled with national bargaining helped to demobilise members, reduce participation and union democracy. This was not just a local or Irish phenomenon. The decline of trade unions in the US and UK since the 1980s, according to academic literature (see, for example, Clawson 2003; Gall 2009; Lopez 2004; Moody 1997, 2007; Munck 2002; Tait 2005), has manifested itself in three main ways: decreases in union density, membership militancy, and democratic participation. In Ireland, ‘organising’ had been abandoned for decades. As a result, unions were unable to recruit workers at the pace of growth of the work force: so, union density had decreased and competition between workers had increased. A loss of union power had taken place. The ‘servicing’ model could not ‘service’ members, i.e., it could not guarantee *job security, protection and reasonable wages and conditions*. The opening of the Irish labour market in May 2004 to citizens of new member states implied a further challenge to the Irish labour movement. Labour leaders were ambivalent in that regard. Pat Rabbitte (*Irish Times*, 3/01/06, p. 1), Labour Party leader at that time, expressed one tendency within the labour movement by blaming migrant workers for the ‘race to the bottom’. He talked about displacement of Irish workers in the meat, construction, and hospitality industries. His proposal was to reduce entry rights to workers from new member states by re-introducing work permits for them. In general, trade union leaders put the emphasis, at least in their public discourse, on organising the unorganised (although later, at the end of 2008 they did not agree with freedom of movement for Romanian and Bulgarian workers unless the government could guarantee the implementation of labour standards for all workers in Ireland). Overall, SIPTU started to put an increasing emphasis on a shift to an organising model in order to stop ‘the race to the bottom’.

The movement towards an ‘organising’ model had begun first in the US, then moved to the UK, and then to Ireland. In Britain union membership fell to 6.5m in the mid 1990s from over 12m in the early 1980s. A new trade unionism project was set up in 1996, and it yielded some results as the decline had been halted by 2000. An organising academy was set up in 1998 to train full-time organisers rather than specialists in collective bargaining, and many came from the ranks of the normally unorganised: women, ethnic minorities, young people and part-time workers. The priority for these organisers was to develop teams of workplace activists. 160 were trained in the first five years (MacPartlin 2008: 88-9). MacPartlin’s assessment is that (2008: 90),

[Organising] has to be built into everything the union does and therefore a cultural shift throughout the whole union is required. It is the model to achieve trade union

goals which are to increase membership and density, to strengthen workplace organisation and to be relevant.

That new project to rebuild union strength, however, only considered members' participation as a means to achieve that aim, rather than an end in itself. We have seen in the previous chapter that company management policies, notwithstanding union structures, can have a strong effect on union democracy, 'whether a company cedes the principal negotiating power to an employers' association, retains it at the level of its own senior management, or diffuses it (deliberately or otherwise) to first-line supervision' (Hyman 1975: 177). Union democracy does not depend exclusively on the trade union, or its leaders. Nevertheless, a shift to an 'organising' model based on participation and militancy should increase internal democracy.

Hyman (1975: 84-6) argues that unions must be agencies of power for the working class, and their goals must be defined in terms of members' own aspirations. His point is that union leaders tend to distinguish between means and ends, since it is common to consider that the way to achieve the unions' goal is a technical matter in which decision-making must be handed to experts, without questioning the framework of decision making, because it constitutes the most efficient way to achieve those goals. What is missing is that the goal of labour is *popular power* because it is not generally considered that one of the functions of trade unions might be to challenge the domination of capital over labour. In other words, unionism tends to be considered exclusively as guaranteeing *job security, protection and reasonable wages and conditions*.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, decision-making should not be viewed as a technical matter on the assumption that union goals are uncontroversial, as defined by the hegemonic political economy of capital: i.e. (and again) to guarantee *job security, protection and reasonable wages and conditions*. To sum up, the pressure to prevent *popular power* is very strong, as strong as the tendency towards bureaucratisation and centralisation of decision making in the hands of experts within unions, which in turn is a consequence of the hegemony of the political economy of capital. An inverse tendency, on the other hand, is likely to appear in periods in which the hegemony of capital is challenged, as in the early 1920s and late 1930s, or late 1960s and 1970s. It was in those periods that labour upsurges took place, while job control, popular power and union democracy become salient demands (see, for example, Herding 1977).

The 'organising' model that SIPTU was trying to adopt can be traced to the North

¹⁴⁸ We will see later that surveys tend to be misleading, as they cannot reveal workers' consciousness or aspirations. These are only revealed in the course of struggles (Fantasia 1988), and in the 'hidden transcript' (Scott 1990).

American Service Employees International Union (SEIU). In the context of a dramatic decline of union membership in the US, the SEIU has been the fastest-growing union in the US: 500,000 members in the 1970s; 1m in 1996; 1.5m in 2003, and 1.8m in 2006.¹⁴⁹ The SEIU, however, is organising workers in sectors not threatened by relocation, such as health care and public service. Part of its growth, however, has been based on absorptions and affiliations. One of the novelties introduced by this union was a plan to spend up to 50 percent of its budget on growth (MacPartlin 2008: 91-92; Moody 2007). The success in terms of organising can also be traced to the hiring of leftists, veterans of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Moody 2007: 186). According to Tait (2005: 85, 121), union activists hardened in *poor workers' unions*,¹⁵⁰ in labour community activism and rank-and-file movements entered the mainstream labour movement in that way. In 1979, for example, Rhode Island Workers' Union (RIWU) affiliated with SEIU, which at the time was interested in organising low-paid workers. RIWU was set up as a union around 1973 (formally in 1976) to organise nursing homes. This poor workers' union started as an association for the unemployed in 1971, the Unemployed Workers Union (UWU). Under the leadership of Nee, an organiser inspired in Cesar Chavez's (leader of the United Farm Workers) rank-and-file social movement unionism, the UWU moved from 'servicing' to 'organising'. In the early 1980s, SEIU affiliated with another poor workers union, the United Domestic Workers of America, based in San Diego, California. However, this union also drew from other sources. According to Michael Piore (in Moody 2007: 186):

The ideas that underlie it were drawn from the business management literature. The staff read widely in the business press and the more scholarly literature as well. Their single most important source was probably the *Harvard Business Review*. As noted, the union hired the American Management Association to do staff training.

The SEIU presents, therefore, contradictory tendencies, which have been reflected in successes such as the Justice for Janitors Campaign, particularly the one launched in Los Angeles in 1988, but also in internal problems in relation to union democracy that have come out in the 2000s with virulence.¹⁵¹ Centralisation and corporate organizational norms, according to Moody (2007: 188), began to become predominant

¹⁴⁹ According to Moody (2007: 185) 60% of SEIU members are women and 40% people of colour.

¹⁵⁰ Poor workers unions (Tait 2005) are defined in the next chapter. Those outside the remit of traditional trade unions, the unorganized, created them, as rank-and-file militant organisations relying on direct action rather than legal mechanisms to solve grievances.

¹⁵¹ I later describe in more detail SEIU's 'organizing' model and will talk about *social movement unionism* and trace its origins. More detailed accounts, from which I draw, are to be found in Moody (2007) and Tait (2005).

at the turn of the 21st century. SEIU locals that resisted a reorganisation from above to give way to larger locals were put under trusteeship; some locals voted to decertify from the SEIU or left (2007: 188-191).

Vanessa Tait (2005: 200-1) explains that local 399 in Los Angeles (25,000 members) had grown in the wake of the *Janitors for Justice campaign* with many Latino and African-American members among its ranks. In 1995 a Multiracial Alliance ran an electoral platform against the leadership of the local and won the 21 contested seats on the executive board under the banner of democratic reform and leadership diversity. But the president of local 399, a position the platform had not contested, did not allow the new officers to hire staff or meet in an official capacity. The conflict that ensued ended, after a 21-days hunger-strike, with local 399 put under trusteeship. The SEIU argued that there was chaos; while for rank-and-file members the issue was that they wanted to run their union. Steve Early, from *Labor Notes* (in Tait 2005: 207), said after the 2003 AFL-CIO organising summit,

Some unions –SEIU, UNITE, HERE, and AFSME– still fervently believe in ‘staffing up’ ... By hiring, training, and rapidly deploying large crews of full-time organizers and researchers –often recruited from outside their own ranks– they approach the ‘challenge of growth’ like a corporation retooling its sales force

Those contradictions, acknowledged or not, are bound to have an effect on SIPTU as a union that was little prepared for an ‘organising’ turn. SIPTU’s 2000 strategic development initiative recommended that SIPTU turned into a servicing and organising union. An Organising unit was set up and in 2006 hired organisers from the new migrant communities, who were meant to work with branch officials. The monitoring of sector campaigns would be the responsibility of the Organisation and Development subcommittee of the National Executive Committee, and regional and national industrial secretaries would head campaigns. Mike Jennings, Midlands Regional Secretary, ran the mushroom campaign during 2006 until he left SIPTU to take a position in a different union. The goal was to spend a 10% budget in organising by 2009. As a visual and explicit sign of the organising turn, the title of Branch Secretary was changed to Branch Organiser. The organising approach also intended to break the division between members and non-members since the idea was to take wages out of competition (MacPartlin 95-97).¹⁵²

¹⁵² The idea of taking wages out of competition is never explained. For trade union officials this probably means to negotiate all wages with employers. Strictly speaking if wages were taken out of competition, capitalism would be abolished since it is based primarily on the existence of a labour market, as I have already explained in the introduction. To take wages out of

A SIPTU report on a successful organising campaign in Aircoach in 2006 (*On the buses*, unpublished) claimed to have followed seven of Bronfenbrenner and Hickey's 'ten tactics that work'. That campaign started a year before the mushroom campaign and finished in mid 2006. Comparisons will be drawn later in this chapter. Bronfenbrenner was invited to the conference, held at the National College of Ireland in Spring 2008, 'Unions in the Twenty-First Century', the papers being published later in a book (Hastings 2008). She shared the platform with labour leaders such as David Begg (ICTU president) and Ruairi Quinn (Labour TD). There she talked about the US organising experience and the 'ten tactics that work' (Bronfenbrenner 2008).

In the US, unions are trying to organise in a much more hostile environment, where companies spend fortunes in aggressive union-busting campaigns. Research carried out in the late 1980s showed that US unions were more likely to win NLRB elections when they used rank-and-file tactics, person-to-person contact, representative committees, volunteer rather than professional organisers, and that these tactics had a more significant impact in winning than other factors (Bronfenbrenner 2008: 201-202). According to her, there is a set of up to ten tactics so that, when used in a combined way in a comprehensive and consistent union-building campaign, each additional tactic increases the likelihood of victory by 9 percent (*ibid.*). The ten tactics are:

- 1) Adequate and appropriate staff and financial resources
- 2) Strategic targeting and research
- 3) Active and representative rank-and-file organizing committees
- 4) Active participation of member volunteer organizers
- 5) Person-to-person contact inside and outside the workplace
- 6) Benchmarks and assessments to monitor union support and set thresholds for moving ahead with the campaign
- 7) An emphasis on issues that resonate in the workplace and in the community
- 8) Creative, escalating internal pressure tactics involving members in the workplace
- 9) Creative, escalating external pressure tactics involving members outside the workplace, locally, nationally and/or internationally
- 10) Building for the first contract [terms and conditions agreement] during the organizing campaign.

For Bronfenbrenner the most important tactic is the representative committee that gives members ownership of the campaign.

competition, however, although probably not intended, would imply a challenge to capital and capitalism.

In 2008, SIPTU invited an organiser from UNITE-HERE, one of the unions with the most aggressive approach to organising in the US, to help organising in the Hotel sector. This was a sign of the importance that SIPTU gave to organising tactics that work in the US. The campaign in the mushroom industry, therefore, will be assessed in relation to these ‘tactics’. The campaign in the mushroom industry took place in a sector in which migrant workers constituted nearly 100 percent of all workers. Union officials, according to MacPartlin (2008), were primarily concerned about the kind of exploitation of migrant workers taking place on mushroom farms. Therefore, the campaign was not the outcome of previous research in the sector. In a talk in NUIM about union organising and migrant workers in April 2008, a SIPTU organiser from the Organising department, who took part in the mushroom campaign, also revealed that the campaign was initiated after the union learned about ‘horrible stories’ coming from mushroom farms. I have already argued that the main reason for organising the campaign was the need to gather and voice evidence of a ‘race to the bottom’ in the context of partnership negotiations, which is why the mushroom campaign was prepared in a hurry. This does not mean that the union was not concerned about those ‘horrible stories’. During my contacts with union officials in the Cavan branch, before the campaign started, I could see that there was a real concern about the type of exploitation taking place on mushroom farms, and of migrant workers in general. Union officials, on the other hand, recognised that it was very difficult to organise on mushroom farms as these were isolated and scattered in the countryside. Some background on the relations between migrant workers and SIPTU will precede the description of the campaign.

Outside the remit of unions

Migrant and low-paid workers in general constitute groups of workers outside the labour movement. Unions in Ireland are trying to organise migrant workers from a rights-based approach ‘grounded in a belief in inalienable rights for all people and opposition to discrimination and exploitation’ (Krings 2006: 49). According to Krings (2006), these ideas are based on self-interest because employers can use migrants to undermine the wages and working conditions of Irish workers, ‘any section of the workforce that remains outside of the remit of unions automatically undermines their bargaining position’ (2006: 51). Evidence supplied by Krings, however, indicated that there was only limited evidence that migrant workers actually contributed to lowering the wages and working conditions of Irish workers, and according to him there was no

proof of displacement taking place (Krings 2006: 46-47).

There was, however, some evidence at the time that wages in the economy as a whole were decreasing in relative terms. Under Sustaining Progress, the partnership deal up to 2006, absolute minimum wages should have increased in the private sector by 4 percent for the 12 months to June 2005, but they only increased by 3.3 percent in business services, by 2.7 percent in retail trade, and by 2.4 percent for all industrial workers. Furthermore, the rise in employment was not reflected in PAYE tax returns, which led SIPTU to consider that ‘many new workers’ earned below the tax threshold and perhaps the minimum wage (SIPTU, 8 Nov 2005). There is logic to all this. In ICTU’s opening statement in relation to labour market issues before starting negotiations on a new partnership deal, we can read: ‘It is an iron law of economics that an abundant supply of labour pushes down its cost. It is insulting people’s intelligence to pretend otherwise’.¹⁵³ SIPTU, however, only realised this fact after May 2004, the GAMA strike and the Irish Ferries conflict.

Therefore, it makes sense to organise non-unionised workplaces, including those with a high proportion of migrant workers. What is interesting is that Krings emphasises the need to organise migrant workers in the context of the renegotiation of Social Partnership in 2006, which constituted the main means for unions to try to enforce employment standards. ICTU refused, according to Krings (2006: 51), to engage in those negotiations until they got some assurances from the government because:

[a]mong unions the expectation is that with this stronger enforcement architecture, the rights of both indigenous and migrant workers are protected and that the latter are no longer a cheaper option of the former ... [but this] cannot be enacted by legislative change alone. This is particularly true as often migrant workers are not aware of their rights and may sometimes be satisfied with less than they are entitled to. Thus, the task for unions is to convince migrant workers to actively involve themselves by joining a ... union.

National partnership agreements alone, as ICTU admitted, could not guarantee the implementation of labour standards. Workers had to get ‘actively involved by joining a union’. The problem was that unions were trying to turn towards an ‘organising’ strategy while also trying to avoid any confrontation at the workplace, the key objective of Social Partnership. Union officials, in practice, did not believe in the feasibility of strike action or collective (as oppose to bureaucratic) bargaining on the part of migrant workers, particularly those on work permits. They, therefore, relied on the legal mechanisms to resolve industrial conflicts. As a union official said (González-Pérez *et*

¹⁵³ <http://www.spectrezine.org/europe/Denny5.htm>

al. 2007):

... due to the work permit scheme, if immigrant workers strike, they have the underlying threat of dismissal, the consequences of which might include the loss of their permit to stay in Ireland or deportation. Immigrant workers must be made aware that they have other ways to fight for their rights, and they must have confidence that there is enough support in the Irish legal system to prevent unfair treatment. Irish policy and legislation should be adequate to immigrant workers.

This strategy of relying on ‘the legal system’ rather than on workplace militancy was according to union officials the product of the fear they attributed to migrant workers and their reluctance to challenge their employers. Union officials interviewed cited other obstacles to organising such as the lack of communication between migrant workers and unions due to language, the presence of migrant workers in sectors where most new jobs were created and where unions were weak, lack of information on employment rights, fear of being deported [for those on work permits] as well as lack of social and community support. They also argued that Eastern European workers did not like unions because of negative past experiences with state-controlled unions in former ‘Communist States’ (Krings 2006, González-Pérez *et al.* 2009, fieldwork notes). A SIPTU union official involved in the recruitment campaign on mushroom farms in 2006, in a moment of despair, even referred to the individualism of Eastern Europeans as the most important obstacle to organise these workers:

‘[They] don’t help each other out, unlike the Irish when they were abroad. I don’t believe [organising] is going to work’ (fieldwork notes).

What the sources, referred to above, do not consider is that unions as institutions can constitute an obstacle to organising migrant workers. Articles published in Ireland on these matters tend to be based on interviews mainly of union officials. Some union officials point, in passing, to the negative role that partnership has played on workplace bargaining and therefore grassroots activism. Unions have not been able to penetrate migrant networks either (González-Pérez *et al.* 2009: 165, 170). As I argued in the introduction, however, union officials’ arguments can be reversed to show that union officials might rather be speaking about their lack of resources and the bureaucratic framework within which they fight out industrial disputes. The bureaucratic structure of unions can present a major obstacle for new organising and membership participation.

In 2001 SIPTU decided to set up an organising unit, which later included Lithuanian and Polish organisers, in order to reverse falling density rates. Migrant workers and particular industries were targeted. As a result, around 30,000 migrant workers joined SIPTU (Allen 2009). The union, however, used a top-down approach. Recruitment did

not involve members' activism. It was the job of a 'professional core of organisers'. For many union officials, 'bogged down with individual casework', this merely added to their work (Allen 2009). This type of approach, therefore, was not suitable for recruiting new members as well as turning them into active members who were 'empowered' workers. Moreover, Krings (2006) reported that SIPTU's campaign to recruit migrant workers in the mushroom industry had helped to improve working conditions and workers' incomes but had yielded few new recruits.

SIPTU started an 'organising' turn, but 20-odd-year experience of national Social Partnership had consolidated a highly bureaucratic apparatus that discouraged collective bargaining at the workplace, and replaced it with national agreements at the top and individual casework at the bottom. An organising approach currently is in contradiction with SIPTU's long-term practices and structures. This does not mean, however, that the organising turn was not a positive and necessary move. The previous chapter dealt with the type of unionism, 'servicing', practised by SIPTU in its branch in Monaghan Mushrooms between 1994 and 2006. This chapter is about SIPTU's campaign in the mushroom industry between 2006 and 2007 and its 'organising' turn. In both cases, the underlining question is the contrast between the interests of the union as an institution and the collective interests of the workers, and the question of 'popular power' or workers' ownership of their own institutions.

The mushroom industry campaign

In the context of mobilisations against displacement and replacement in Irish Ferries, which I have described in chapter 1, on Friday 13th January 2006 a group of 17 mushroom pickers walked out of their jobs on a farm in Kilnaleck, Co. Cavan, and went to the SIPTU office in Cavan town. That story has been told (chapters 1 and 4). Here I take it up where I left it. These workers had never had any previous contact with a trade union. Without expecting it, 17 migrant workers had knocked on the union door and provided the union with evidence of the 'race to the bottom', illegal working conditions for migrant workers, and lack of law enforcement. After the Employment Appeals Tribunal (EAT) award,¹⁵⁴ a SIPTU statement indicated, (SIPTU 2006e):

The decision vindicates the right of every worker to join a trade union and sends a very clear message to employers that the justice system in this country will protect trade union members.

¹⁵⁴ The Employment Appeals Tribunal ruled that the 13 workers that took up their case to EAT had been dismissed for 'mere membership of a trade union'. They were awarded €26,000 each in October 2006 (SIPTU 2006e)

Hopefully the decision will mark the beginning of the end of the flagrant disregard for the rights of employees, particularly non-nationals, by rogue employers and it will provide inspiration and encouragement to all those vulnerable workers who are reluctant to speak out against exploitative employers for fear of reprisal.

That was the other side of the coin, and it pointed to the goal of SIPTU's campaign. The Kilnaleck case received wide media coverage in January 2006. On Tuesday the 17th three labour inspectors and journalists from RTÉ1 and the Anglo-Celt gathered in SIPTU's office in Cavan to interview the workers. In the following weeks, there were talks in Liberty Hall (SIPTU headquarters in Dublin) about getting involved in migrant issues in general and in the mushroom industry in particular. The Regional Secretary for the Midlands and South East and in charge of the campaign on exploitation and displacement was trying to organise this.¹⁵⁵ According to some sources, the most important reason to get involved was that ICTU was negotiating with employers and government representatives a new partnership deal. In any case, SIPTU had not been very interested in organising before, but that had changed. The first thing was to gather information and work on a plan that included the mobilisation of the organising unit. SIPTU officials were aware that the most effective way to enforce the law on farms was to get workers organised, but did not have much hope about organising a significant number of workers.

The first overt move took place on the 25th March, when a newspaper article (*Irish Independent*, 25th March 2006) announced that SIPTU was about to launch a nationwide campaign aimed at highlighting the abuse of migrant mushroom workers by 'asking consumers to use their 'purchasing power' to ask sellers what efforts they have made to ensure that the mushrooms on their shelves are not being picked by a migrant worker earning €2 an hour'. SIPTU had already written to leading supermarkets including Dunnes Stores and Tesco, asking them to join its campaign for a better deal for the mushroom workers. In December that year they (along with MRCI representatives) met with a number of supermarkets and Irish mushroom industry representatives in London at Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) headquarters.¹⁵⁶ Another strategy consisted of writing to the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, asking him (a) to ensure that mushroom factory owners in receipt of grants from DAF were implementing decent labour standards, and (b) whether there was any inspections being done by the Department of Agriculture. All this

¹⁵⁵ <http://www.SIPTU.ie/campaigns/EXPLOITATIONandDISPLACEMENT/>

¹⁵⁶ Tesco, for instance, which is the largest seller of mushrooms in the UK claim to apply ETI base code to all primary suppliers, which includes that employment is freely chosen; there is freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining; living wages are paid; working conditions are safe; and, there are not excessive working hours, among other points (TESCO 2005: 22).

was part of an external leverage campaign, which in the end constituted the chief focus of the campaign and the only means to achieve some positive results.

In a SIPTU (2006b) press release, 31st March, Mike Jennings further declared that SIPTU would ‘help mushroom pickers all over the country to organise themselves to seek better pay and conditions. But it will be a very difficult task because of the very high levels of fear that exists in the industry. People have been instantly dismissed just for querying their pay calculations.’¹⁵⁷ To that effect, ‘SIPTU has put together a special group of full-time organisers from all over the country to co-ordinate the [u]nion’s efforts to improve pay and working conditions in the mushroom picking industry ... Members of the group comprise union organisers from Dublin, Mayo, Meath, Cavan, Monaghan, Kildare, Westmeath, Roscommon and Tipperary.’ SIPTU officials also told MacPartlin (2008) that the campaign was planned ‘using the media and *workers who could speak for themselves*’ (my italics).

The campaign therefore was planned to act on three fronts. On the one hand, it was meant to appeal to consumers to not buy mushrooms that were the product of sweat labour and to supermarkets to subscribe to ‘fair’ labour standards. Mike Jennings in the SIPTU press release, for example, indicated, ‘We take time to buy coffee from those countries where workers get a fair deal – but do we ever stop to think who we are supporting when we buy mushrooms?’ This aspect of the campaign never took off. The second and third aspects of the campaign consisted of putting pressure on the government and in organising mushroom workers. Putting pressure on supermarkets was limited to the December 2006 meeting at ETI headquarters. I will deal with the other two aspects of the campaign at length in the next two sections.

But before dealing with those topics it is important to point out that the SIPTU campaign in the mushroom industry overlapped and was influenced, particularly at the beginning, by the campaign of MRCI through the Mushroom Workers Support Group (MWSG). The next two chapters deal with the work of MRCI and the MWSG and will help to understand SIPTU’s campaign better. I will occasionally refer to MRCI and MWSG in this chapter. For now it will suffice to say that MRCI had started on its own initiative the MWSG in 2006 by gathering information about the working conditions on mushroom farms and building a network of contacts among mushroom workers. The MRCI supplied SIPTU with information and in that way exerted a significant influence on the first stages of SIPTU’s campaign. Initially, MWSG approached workers by

¹⁵⁷ That happened to Olena in Kilnaleck in February 2005. Eamon Murray physically assaulted her.

organising open meetings. Then with EU funding, it hired a Latvian former mushroom worker to act as a community worker. This worker built on the small network of contacts the group already had. Members' meetings took place once a month from late 2006, with attendances of between 9 and 17. The members discussed their work experiences and MRCI community workers proposed lines of action based on these discussions. In mid 2007, members re-launched the group as Agricultural Workers Association (AgWA), but group activity had ceased by 2008.

Appealing to the state

The article of the 25th March 2006 (*Irish Independent*) highlighted the working conditions on Irish mushroom farms that SIPTU came to know through the Kilnaleck case and from information supplied by MRCI. It described 16-hour days for weekly wages of €100, workers being put up in caravans and told to leave if they complained, and the intention of mushroom growers to replace Eastern European with Thai and Chinese workers. Summing up, Mike Jennings characterised the mushroom industry as one of the worst sweatshop industries in Ireland:

[Growers] are applying for the right to bring in workers from Thailand and China. There is already a big debate about displacement and these employers are pre-planning for the next stage of displacement. Irish workers have disappeared from the mushroom industry. This is being done to drive down pay. It's now one of the worst sweatshop industries

The link with Irish Ferries here was direct, and given that government, employers and unions were negotiating a new partnership deal it helped unions to demand concessions such as more labour inspectors in order to achieve better enforcement of labour law. The article of the 25th March, for instance, quotes a spokeswoman for the DETE as saying that labour inspectors would focus specifically on sectors where migrant workers were employed, including the construction, hospitality and agricultural sectors.

Within a week of launching the campaign, on the 6th of March, a SIPTU delegation, facilitated by the Taoiseach Bertie Ahern met Minister Tony Killeen, Labour Affairs; a senior civil servant representing Brendan Smith, Minister for State at the Department of Agriculture and Food; and the head of the Labour Inspectorate, Eddie Nolan (SIPTU 2006c). The points discussed included proposals to guarantee the enforcement of labour law in the mushroom industry and demands that grant-aid to growers should be conditional on compliance. 'The Department [DAF] must move from words to action', Jennings demanded. The absence of workers' representatives in the Mushroom Task Force (DAF 2004) underscored that point. DAF said that it had been an oversight, but

for Jennings that was a ‘lame’ excuse since ‘the entire workforce in this sector [was] an oversight.’ Other demands included an end to the requirement of work permits for non-EEA citizens to work on mushroom farms and that the labour inspectorate carry out an enforcement ‘blitz’ of labour law.

The enforcement ‘blitz’ did not take place until October-November 2006 when labour inspectors carried out 55 inspections, half of mushroom farms in the Republic. They found irregularities and said that they were dealing with them, but that they would not publicise the results (fieldwork). The meeting of the 6th of March, however, had in some cases immediate practical results. On a farm in County Monaghan, for instance, one grower started paying overtime rates to his general operators after receiving a tip-off –he said to his workers– from his Producer Organisation that SIPTU was due to inspect farms.¹⁵⁸ The grower assembled all the workers in the farmyard and warned them not to talk to anyone about their working conditions because SIPTU could close the farm and they would lose their jobs. This grower did not differentiate between labour inspectors and union officials. He probably misunderstood the information he received from his PO. One could guess that DETE informed Producers Organisations about the meeting with SIPTU and of impeding labour inspections. The PO to which this grower belonged, Commercial Mushroom Producers (CMP), in turn, passed the information to members. Reactions within SIPTU were mixed but positive. The branch organiser in Monaghan, for example, thought that the media campaign and the *pressure* from DETE [from DAF there was no pressure as we will see] would have some effect on those employers who were more conscientious, but others would not take it into consideration because they were not afraid. Overall, he was not convinced that pressure alone would deter abusers. Nevertheless, there had been some improvement on some mushroom farms and the ‘freedom’ of growers to exploit their workers beyond the limits allowed by the ERO for agricultural workers had been curbed. Mike Jennings was not convinced that such pressure was enough to ‘clean up’ the mushroom industry. However, he underlined the positive aspects of it:

Since first highlighting the issue of exploitation in the industry we have had several reports of workers getting unexplained pay increases and overtime premiums for the first time. Obviously our message is getting through and some employers are trying to clean up their act to avoid prosecution (SIPTU 2006d)¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ There were only two male general operators on that farm, earning time wages. The pickers, on piece wages did not get that increase. It was much easier to observe non-compliance when paying time wages.

¹⁵⁹ I wonder whether one of the reports was mine. On April 13th I had told the branch organiser in Monaghan about the case I have described. Jennings’s statement appeared on the 5th May.

He did not say however that pressure alone was not enough, although he *knew* it. He was sending out a message that state regulation could work, which was not the case, but he also was attributing the immediate success to union pressure. Levels of non-compliance, however, remained high according to MRCI. Labour inspectors did not find evidence of unlawful breaches unless workers gathered evidence at their own risk. Even when this happened, growers only paid a maximum of six months' wages in arrears when deemed to be at fault. Generally speaking, the labour inspectorate and courts did not want to put farms at the risk of closure.¹⁶⁰ There was, therefore, no incentive to comply. For example, between 2006 and 2007, labour inspectors performed a total of 3,944 inspections, finding 296 cases of breaches, but only one prosecution was initiated. Labour Senator Alan Kelly indicated after those figures were released (*Irish Times* 15 February 2008):

There does not seem to be a good enough deterrent for employers to adhere to the law, especially as they see it is not being enforced. Even if they are caught exploiting people, they may only have to pay back the arrears and possibly a €1,500 fine if they are prosecuted and that's simply not good enough... The deterrent needs to be more. Quite simply, employers that are exploiting their employees need to be named and shamed, in the same way those who are tax defaulters have their names published. This will in some way act as a deterrent.

The inability of the labour inspectors to uncover evidence of underpayment was shown in the GAMA affair, as we have seen. In the mushroom industry, labour inspectors were contacted to inspect the two most glaring cases of mistreatment and underpayment in this industry. In one case (Belmullet) they could not find evidence, in the second case they did not even visit the workplace. We already know about the Kilnaleck case. Nearly a year before the walkout, in February 2005, Olena, a Ukrainian picker filed a claim with the Garda Síochána against Eamon Murray for assault. Two months later the Cavan Branch organiser went to the Gardai and discovered they had not acted on the complaint. SIPTU then called to the Labour inspectorate, but the labour inspectors never got back to SIPTU. We are also familiar with the Belmullet case (chapter 4). A labour inspector visited the farm on 6th July 2001 and found that the Employment Regulation Order was not on display. Other irregularities consisted of Public holiday pay not recorded; Persons under 16 years of age working past 8.00 p.m.; Protection of Young Persons poster not displayed; Some employee(s) receiving less than the minimum rate of pay; and time and two thirds not paid for Sunday work. The letter from

¹⁶⁰ This is anyway something to prove. Unless growers opened all their books there was no way to know whether they could pay or not. So that was plainly an assumption on the part of DAF and DET.

DETE to the employer only demanded the payment of £7.36 to an Irish female worker, and stated that all other breaches had been rectified. On the 6th Feb 2003 another letter from the labour inspectorate asked the grower to have records ready for another inspection. The visit took place on the 20th February 2003 and only found one breach: ‘payslips do not itemise deductions.’¹⁶¹ The farms in Belmullet and Kilnaleck constituted the two worst cases of sweatshops found in the mushroom industry. Yet labour inspectors were not able to uncover anything. In the case of Kilnaleck there is no evidence that they even visited the farm.

Even after a wave of inspections took place in October-November 2006 labour inspectors usually could not prove breaches of law, therefore no prosecutions resulted. Labour inspectors normally secured evidence of underpayment when workers could produce them. One case will illustrate this point. A group of workers from a farm in Tipperary got in touch with MRCI and this NGO contacted the labour inspectors. When they visited the farm (January 2007), the inspectors could not find any evidence of breach of the ERO. The employer showed them documentation citing the total number of hours the employees had worked and the payment they received. According to these records workers were paid the minimum wage. But with the mediation of MRCI, workers showed to inspectors their own notes and pay slips, which they had carefully kept (on the advice of MRCI) proving that they were paid below the minimum wage. In one case, the grower claimed that an employee worked 34 hours in one week but that same employee produced evidence of having worked that same week a total of 58 hours for exactly the same wages.¹⁶² According to MRCI, the labour inspectors were willing to do their job properly but needed evidence, and this could only come from the workers themselves.

Some mushroom workers were convinced that labour inspectors would not uncover evidence and that they were on the side of the employers. In one of the first meetings of the MWSG (24th March 2006), a member of the group said that he knew of a mushroom farm (which he did not name) that labour inspections had visited. They could not find anything because ‘the employer had prepared everything [‘cooked the books’] for that particular visit and avoided prosecution’. In another meeting, in May 2007, another member of the MWSG claimed that labour inspectors did not collect evidence of law breaches because they had been bribed. In his opinion, because growers had

¹⁶¹ Copies of letters (confidential source).

¹⁶² The NMW for agricultural workers was €8.30/hour at that time. The worker earned €289 that week, which according to the NMW corresponded to 34 hours work. But according to the worker’s evidence he only got €5/hour.

connections with state institutions there was a need for independent inspectors. These two MWSG members were arguing that it was futile to lodge complaints with labour inspectors, indicating their distrust of state institutions, extended sometimes to unions (as we will see later in chapter 8). They did not have any proof of this ‘class alliance’ between growers and the state. Nevertheless, their intuition was proved to be correct at a general level, as we are going to see.

Grant-aid and class interests

As we have seen, SIPTU had demanded that grant-aid to mushroom growers should be conditional on compliance. DAF and DETE had no problems in reassuring SIPTU in that regard. SIPTU, however, never clarified in any written statement whether DAF and DETE had fulfilled that promise. SIPTU knew that compliance could only be based on having workers organised on mushroom farms. SIPTU was not in a position to check out DAF and DETE promises until the union organised branches on mushroom farms. MRCI, through the MWSG project, unlike SIPTU, was in touch with a number of mushroom workers on different farms. They were, therefore, in a position to check whether growers receiving grant aid were complying with the law. But in order to verify this, it was necessary to determine who was getting grant aid. For DAF such information was confidential.

There were two types of grant aid for the mushroom industry, apart from EU funding through Producer Organisations. On the one hand, there was the ‘Capital Investment Scheme for the Marketing and Processing of Certain Agricultural Products’. Only those involved in marketing and processing could avail of these grants. That was the case of, for example, Monaghan Mushrooms Ltd, but also some individual growers were engaged in that activity. The names of the recipients were published in the website of DAF. In that way it was possible to know, for example, that a farmer involved in a court case, Peter Connolly (*Cornalaragh Mushrooms* in Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan) received grant aid of €190,256 in 2002, representing 40% of the total capital investment.¹⁶³ There was also the ‘Scheme of Investment Aid for the Development of Commercial Horticulture’ under the ‘2000 - 2006 National Development Plan for the horticulture sector’. This grant aid scheme was aimed at all horticultural growers, including mushrooms. In 2006 DAF approved a total of €19m in grant aid (for 150 growers, including 34 mushroom growers) of an overall capital investment of €54m. For mushroom growers it represented €2.155m in grant aid of a total capital investment

¹⁶³ <http://193.178.1.112/debates-02/9Oct/Sect17.htm>

of €6.157m.¹⁶⁴ The total grant aid actually *given* to mushroom growers (190 of them) between 2001 and 2006 amounted to €5.011m. See following table for a breakdown.¹⁶⁵

Year	No of growers	Amount of grant aid
2002	66	€0.834m
2003	43	€0.567m
2004	30	€1.137m
2005	31	€1.433m
2006	20	€1.040m
Totals	190	€5.011m

There is a discrepancy between grant aid approved for 2006 (€2.155m for 34 growers) and actually given (€1.040m for 20 growers), which was probably motivated by the crisis of overproduction that reduced the number of farms at that time. Some of those who were awarded the grant closed down and others decided not to proceed with the investment plan.

DAF, however, vehemently refused to disclose the names of those mushroom growers who received grant aid, which was the only way to determine whether DAF had been true to its word. I do not have any evidence indicating that SIPTU asked for the list of names. Clearly, they had the influence and power to do so. So, one can guess that SIPTU did not try. MRCI, however, asked DAF for the list, but DAF declined, citing confidentiality, even after MRCI applied for a second time under the Freedom of Information Act. Junior Minister for Horticulture, Brendan Smith, simply replied in a letter to MRCI that growers not complying would be refused grant aid and that they would be reported by the labour inspectors. As I argue in chapter 7, the problem was that labour inspectors had said to MRCI that there was no communication between them and DAF.¹⁶⁶ Clearly, DAF was protecting mushroom growers who were not complying. There were grounds for a campaign over that, but neither SIPTU nor MRCI initiated one. The state, arguably, was protecting the interests of the growers by turning a blind eye to ‘exploitation’.

¹⁶⁴ <http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/index.jsp?file=pressrel/2006/62-2006.xml>

¹⁶⁵ Parliamentary Question No. 80 (6 Nov 2007) by Labour TD Seán Sherlock. Ref No. 27079/07

¹⁶⁶ The National Employment Rights Authority (NERA) was set up to link the work of different departments and state agencies in order to better enforce labour standards.

The recruiting campaign

The first action after announcing the campaign consisted of organising a series of meetings with union officials from branches in Counties with a significant number of mushroom farms. The first of those meetings took place in Athlone on Wednesday, 29 March 2006. One of the workers from the second batch in Kilnaleck was meant to attend the meeting and there were expectations that she could become an organiser. But she did not attend the meeting and did not get involved afterwards. The plan after two meetings in Athlone came down to transfer the responsibility of dealing with any recruits to branch 'organisers'. SIPTU set up a basic structure to carry out its campaign but without a special branch for agricultural workers, nor a specific Employed Union Officer (EUO). Moreover, the initial recruiting work was to fall on the Lithuanian 'organiser' working in the organising unit, but most of her work consisted in servicing the growing Eastern European workforce who were members of SIPTU (Lithuanians, Latvians, Russians, and Ukrainians). How she was to allocate time to go out and recruit mushroom workers was not clear.

Some local branches were better equipped than others to deal with any new recruits. The branch in Monaghan town, for instance, was not. It consisted of one branch *organiser* and two part-time secretaries performing just data entry work. The organiser's work consisted of casework, which demanded him to do overtime some weekends. SIPTU's organising campaign was, thus, going to charge this already overworked union official with helping to recruit and, on top of that, organise and develop activists, without any knowledge of the sector or spoken languages. As an example, SIPTU produced a poster with information in Polish, Latvian, Lithuanian and English on the minimum wage (SIPTU 2006d). During the month of May 2006 I noticed bunches of posters for the mushroom campaign (the poster was produced at the beginning of the month) piled up in the hall that led to SIPTU's offices, exactly where they had been delivered. At the end of May, the branch organiser asked me if I could put them up in shops, at least a number of them. The only posters that could be seen about the campaign in Monaghan town were those that I put up. The branch in Cavan had two organisers. The assistant organiser took charge of all aspects relating to the mushroom campaign. A number of posters could be seen in different shops in Cavan. I will return later to the role of the Cavan organiser in the campaign.

A Russian speaker 'organiser' in the organising unit had been hired around six months before the campaign started, but not as an organiser. She had never been a

member of a trade union before nor trained to be an organiser.¹⁶⁷ In spite of that she was given the job of part-time organiser, or rather recruiter. After that any new recruits would be passed to the local branches. I met her for the first time in Liberty Hall on the 10th of May. I learnt that her priority had become the mushroom industry even if she had to keep doing her normal job. I talked to her again on the 25th of May. She said that she was not getting any phone calls. I reminded her that in our previous meetings she had said that her plan was to start visiting farms, and that I had offered to go with her. She asked me where the largest farms were and replied that in County Mayo. She paused and said, 'I think it would be better if we start in Cavan and Monaghan [they were much closer]. Could you get a list of farms and the number of workers per farm?' I said that I could try. On the 30th of May, I told her that I had the list of farms and my own estimate of the number of workers based on the number of mushroom houses and production system. She said that maybe the following week we could meet, but did not seem to be very eager. In my fieldwork diary (30th May), I wrote:

On the phone, she always looks full of second thoughts. If I say that we could visit farms in Cavan, she says that in Monaghan. Then, later, she goes back to the same issue and says that she will ring me to start visiting farms, but then she doesn't know when it will suit her.

Her attitude made some sense. It reflected the little coordination and preparation of the campaign. She was not an organiser and that was not her job, but she was asked to do it, with no training and on top of her job. Trying to visit farms by hanging around was not the best option either. Not even MRCI tried to do it when a full-time 'organiser' was hired, as we will see in chapter 7. When the second phase of the recruitment campaign started in earnest in March 2007, however, the attitude of this organiser had changed. I leave that for later in this section.

The role of this organiser at first was reduced to waiting for phone calls from SIPTU branches, or from workers who had seen the poster or the advertising in a Lithuanian magazine. She was asked, though, to give priority to calls from mushroom workers. In spite of SIPTU's lack of planning and resources to recruit mushroom workers, some recruiting took place during the initial stages of the campaign in 2006. On three farms in three different counties some workers approached SIPTU and joined. Seven workers out of around a 60-strong workforce on a farm in County Kildare joined.¹⁶⁸ More workers

¹⁶⁷ Interestingly that made her a better organiser in the end since she never got the bad habits of union officials under the aegis of Social Partnership, as we will see later.

¹⁶⁸ The workers on the farm in Co. Kildare made contact after reading an ad in a Lithuanian newspaper.

did not join because by the end of May the situation on the farm, Carbury's (leased to the Monaghan Mushrooms group), had improved according to some workers. The Russian speaking organiser told them that it had improved because of the campaign, 'it hasn't been the work of an angel'.¹⁶⁹ 'It is not an easy work', she said to me. A group of pickers from Tullamore got in touch with her, also in May, after reading some advertising about the campaign. The SIPTU organiser had to turn back when she was on her way to meet them because the grower had called them unexpectedly to work. There were visits to a farm in Virginia (Co. Cavan) and to a farm in Baltinglass (Co. Wicklow). A phone call from Charlie M.'s farm in Monaghan was followed up, and SIPTU in Monaghan took up the case of a worker claiming holiday money. The pay slips were not correct either according to the SIPTU organiser from Monaghan. A worker on that farm joined SIPTU confidentially. It was part of SIPTU's plan to affiliate workers confidentially first and go public when there was a significant number of them. But all that changed some months later, when a 'partnership-recruiting model' was put in place.

As we know, there were two groups of pickers from Kilnaleck in touch with SIPTU. Later a group in Sheelin Mushrooms, County Cavan, joined thanks to the work of MWSG. It was the SIPTU assistant organiser who kept in touch with them. Although she was motivated, it was a new experience for her to organise those types of workers. Servicing had been her normal job and she did not have the language skills needed either. Both shortcomings were partly solved with the help of the MWSG. A community organiser hired by MRCI established links with SIPTU in Cavan and gave a hand to the union. This unofficial arrangement meant that SIPTU would take the legal cases and MWSG would help to mediate the contacts with these workers. But there was not any recruiting or organising plan.

An example can illustrate SIPTU's lack of planning, coordination and resources. As I detail in chapter 7, two workers from a farm in Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan, applied on the 24th March for membership in SIPTU through the mediation of MRCI. SIPTU officials were informed but no one from SIPTU got in touch with these workers. On 30th May these two workers joined Independent Workers' Union (IWU).

¹⁶⁹ The main problem for these workers had been a lack of tea-breaks or the need to ask the boss any time they had to leave their post. Another issue was verbal abuse and constant insults from the boss. The boss suspected that some workers had joined SIPTU, and he got more polite, giving also more breaks.

Growers-SIPTU agreement

The first phase of SIPTU's campaign had ended in a success in media coverage and some promises from the government that were only partially fulfilled.¹⁷⁰ By the 25th July, there were some contacts with mushroom workers, but 90 percent of phone calls' received were from migrants looking for jobs on mushroom farms. It was around this time that SIPTU's campaign took a different turn. Rather than discussing and trying to come to terms with the shortcomings in the campaign, SIPTU tried a shortcut. It was not a complete new turn. In a press release on May 5th (SIPTU 2006d), after noting the improvement in wages and working conditions on some farms, Mike Jennings also indicated, 'We hope to build a relationship with good employers in the industry and develop a 'fair trade' label supporting good employers.' Here there was a shift from asking the supermarkets to appealing to growers to develop a 'fair trade' label.¹⁷¹ It is interesting to trace the genesis of this turn.

As a reaction to the article of 25th March announcing the SIPTU campaign, a grower from Co. Wicklow, wrote a letter to the *Irish Independent* (published on the 6th April) assuring that he complied with employment regulations; that his staff was being paid above the minimum wage; and that non-complying growers 'should be brought to task'. He also argued that fair labour standards and profits were compatible in the Irish mushroom industry. I interviewed him on the 19th April, followed by an article that I published in *the Mushroom People*. He mentioned the case of a grower who tried to get one his clients by offering him cheaper mushrooms: A loss for his business that he would have had to accept according to market practices. But this grower was paying his staff well below the minimum wage. It was, in his opinion, a case of unfair competition that also damaged the public image of the mushroom industry. So, he conceived the idea of creating a Fair Trade Label for mushrooms, which he had proposed to his Producer Organisation (PO), Dewfresh Mushrooms, of which he was a director. He also believed that marketing groups should ensure that growers complied with labour standards and helped growers to comply with them; otherwise, marketing groups should not buy mushrooms from them. Later it came out that this grower might not be complying as he

¹⁷⁰ The main demands during the partnership negotiations in that regard were the creation of a new State agency to monitor and enforce employment standards, opposed by IBEC, and to increase the number of labour inspectors (*Irish Independent*, 13/2/2006; 27/3/2006). But then the mushroom campaign took its own life when union recognition was exchanged for a new ERO for the mushroom industry.

¹⁷¹ 'Fair trade' is fully placed at the level of circulation, over the price of labour. We are talking here of bargaining at circulation level, capitalistic function of unions in the labour market (see Gramsci. in Kelly 1988: 54-58). 'Labour standards' relates more to the workplace and job control, second aspect of unionism.

claimed.¹⁷²

Ciarán's proposal was likely to divide growers into two opposed groups if it went ahead. In a nutshell, there was a small group of very efficient and large growers, a very uneven group of small growers on inefficient production systems or too small to compete, and growers with high capital investment but with high levels of debt (see chapters 2 and 3). The surveillance of the media and the pressure from DETE and SIPTU exposed the two latter groups. To comply with the NMW for agricultural workers meant to both accelerate the elimination of obsolete capital and increase the market share of growers who survived. Efficient growers were therefore interested in prosecuting 'unfair' competition. SIPTU could exploit that division to achieve the goals of its campaign. I explained all this to some SIPTU officials and gave them Ciarán's phone number.

During the summer and autumn of 2006 there were meetings between SIPTU, CMP and other representatives from employers. The outcome of these negotiations was union recognition in exchange for an Employment Regulation Order (ERO) for the mushroom industry that basically would get rid of overtime rates of pay.¹⁷³ So, SIPTU would be able to recruit workers with the help, or rather neutrality, of mushroom growers. Meetings with workers were arranged between growers and SIPTU and took place on farm. This was more in tune with SIPTU partnership habits. Growers set up a Mushroom Employers Group and chose three representatives: one of them was Vincent Turley, Human Resources Management adviser of Monaghan Mushrooms, and the other two were from Dewfresh Mushrooms and CMP. Negotiations lasted from September 2006 to February 2007.

The adverse publicity that SIPTU's campaign generated and the pressure from DETE and the Labour Inspectorate had an effect. An example can illustrate this pressure. At

¹⁷² In mid July 2006, the boyfriend of one of the Latvian pickers on that farm made a phone call to SIPTU. A SIPTU organiser went to Baltinglass and heard that some of the pickers used to get a bit below €300 per week (the grower had claimed said they were around €400), and working weeks were long. The grower said that there were two daily shifts of 9 hours (including 1 hour break), but pickers used to work, according to pickers, 6 days a week and sometimes did not have days off. A pay slip showed a 56 hours week (6 days) and €300 in wages. The grower did not pay breaks, which were supposed to be included. But even if we consider that this employee worked only 48 hours (excluding breaks), the hourly average would only amount to €6.25, well below the NMW. The grower was not applying the ERO for agricultural workers on his farm, at least in that particular case. The worker supplied SIPTU with anecdotal evidence. In 2010 a newly organised SIPTU union branch at Ciarán's farm corrected improper bank holiday pay and challenged disrespectful practices such as monitoring and timing worker bathroom breaks (SIPTU and MRCI 2010).

¹⁷³ An ERO is an agreement on payment and working conditions for an employment sector made by a Joint Labour Committee and registered with the Labour Court. Mushroom workers were covered by an ERO for agricultural workers.

the beginning of November 2006, Ronnie Wilson and Vincent Turley paid a visit to MRCI headquarters in Dublin. They wanted to meet in Monaghan but MRCI refused. They asked MRCI to stop sending news to the media for a while because it was causing them ‘a lot of harm’, so they had time to make growers comply. It seemed that it was small growers who were not complying, not they, but they needed some of the small growers to meet the orders they had from supermarket chains. They predicted that in the future those small growers would disappear.¹⁷⁴

The MWSG had access to a draft of the new ERO in February 2007 and it was discussed at the meetings of the group on the 11th February and 1st April 2007. The new ERO had some positive points such as a guarantee of a minimum of 30 hours per week plus sick pay. But overtime rates disappeared leaving a flat rate, exactly as Monaghan Mushrooms had done in its packhouse in Tyholland. On the other hand, Sunday pay (time + 2/3 in ERO for agricultural workers) was bought out for a bonus of €10. Growers also wanted to extend the training rate (lower wages) to 6 months even if most growers never entertained more than a couple weeks training. The new ERO meant a wage cut. At a practical level, however, it could mean a wage increase since workers were grossly underpaid. It was a negotiation over the price of labour. For SIPTU, however, that was the only way to get union recognition. For some large and efficient employers, supposedly paying the NMW, the new ERO was going to bring a reduction in labour costs and avoid bad press that was damaging the public image of the industry.¹⁷⁵ Small growers, however, were completely opposed to union recognition because they were not even willing to pay the rates of the new ERO. That would make the projected ERO fail in the end.

Recruitment starts

During the first year of SIPTU’s campaign there had not been any serious attempt or strategy to recruit and organise mushroom workers. When an agreement over a new ERO was reached, the recruitment campaign started in earnest. The Growers Committee supplied SIPTU with a list of farms and the union arranged the visits by making phone calls to growers. I followed three farm recruitment visits in County Monaghan on the 4th

¹⁷⁴ MacPartlin (2008) claims that these negotiations were the outcome of talks with supermarkets members of ETI, in which growers’ representatives also took part. But contacts had started earlier.

¹⁷⁵ The reduction would take place for those who were complying with the ERO for agricultural workers. However, there is enough evidence to suggest that most growers on the Dutch shelf system, the most efficient, were largely not paying overtime rates. In that case labour cost would remain the same. For some it might even increase.

April 2007. The plan was to complete all farm visits in Monaghan in the two first weeks of April. The first stop was McAuley Mushrooms. 21 pickers attended the meeting. The SIPTU organiser explained in Russian the new ERO including no overtime pay, but workers would get the Minimum Wage, twenty working days of paid holidays and a Sunday work bonus. But they had to join SIPTU and vote in favour of the agreement. This was better than their current terms. She insisted that the more workers joined the union, the better contract SIPTU could negotiate. For a minute or two, workers hesitated. Then one of them asked aloud for a pen and a form. After that everyone followed. The second visit was Charlie's farm. 12 workers were present at the meeting, including a general operator who had confidentially joined with a couple of others before the visit. Charlie, the grower, came into the room with us. The SIPTU organiser asked the workers to keep smiling and not to worry because Charlie could not understand Russian. Charlie left for a moment and everyone filled in the forms, even those who had joined confidentially.

Before the third visit we stopped at Joe D.'s farm, but he told us that the workers had left after waiting around for a while. He asked me in private if I had said anything about him to SIPTU. I asked him back if there was anything to say.¹⁷⁶ The third stop was in Smithborough, a small town between Monaghan and Clones. It was an 8-house farm of the old type (blocks) on an 8-week cycle. The owners had been growing mushrooms for the last 20 years, but never been satellite growers; they had always marketed their own mushrooms. One of the SIPTU organisers talked to the grower and his wife while we waited for the workers to arrive. He explained that the visit was part of an agreement between SIPTU, CMP and the Employers Committee. 'If we want to guarantee that the industry's going to comply for its own sake, workers have to get fair wages for a fair day of work. It'll benefit good employers, because there are employers who compete unfairly by paying very low wages', he said. The employer replied that he knew some of those 'cowboys', but that it was also unfair to compete with growers in Poland, where labour was so cheap.

The employers, a mature couple, looked nice. The meeting with the workers revealed that they were working Mondays to Fridays, around 40 hours per week, weekends off, and that they had a decent canteen. The problem was that wages were only €250 per

¹⁷⁶ It was up to the workers, not up to me to say if there was anything wrong, and the purpose of the visit was just to unionise the place and then implement the new ERO. SIPTU was not interested in anything else unless it came from the workers. In any case, I only knew that he had told me once that he had not been paying overtime, and I had no evidence of it either. Joe was among the group of growers 'making it'.

week. That is, €6.25/h, well below €8.30/h, the NMW, and they had to buy their own gloves.

In the 3 visits in Monaghan nearly all workers, around 40, signed up for the union; in County Cavan only 10 in 5 visits. In Cavan the local SIPTU organiser visited the farms with an interpreter (MWSG community worker). The difference was attributable to the ability to speak Russian and engage on that basis, directly in Monaghan but through a translator in Cavan. The SIPTU bilingual organiser in Monaghan, on the other hand, was a very forthcoming recruiter and clear and convincing about the need to join the union to implement rights and entitlements. The union official in Cavan at the beginning of the campaign had strong doubts about the feasibility of organising in the mushroom industry. The success of the Russian-speaking organiser in Monaghan, on the other hand, questions to some extent the supposed obstacles to migrant organising, namely, individualism and suspicion of unions.

The next step, organising, was going to be the difficult one. SIPTU had to consolidate the union in the workplaces, get shop stewards elected, and train them. That process would take a long time and SIPTU would need a full-time organiser for the mushroom industry to be permanently in touch with the new branches, help the shop stewards by training them in the methods of unionism, etc. Otherwise, all the recruitment work would be for nothing. Members might leave as fast as they entered the union. So the main reason to make concessions to the employers in the new ERO, union recognition, would end in failure. According to SIPTU, several hundred completed forms were collected during the recruitment campaign between March and April 2007. The number of potential members meant that union fees, some union officials recognised, would be enough to pay at least one full-time organiser. Yet, SIPTU never had any plan of hiring an organiser. Forms were not even followed up because negotiations between SIPTU and mushroom employers broke down. So workers who signed up did not become SIPTU members, at least at that stage. Yet, MacPartlin (2008) claimed that SIPTU had 400 out of 900 mushroom workers organised on farms.

SIPTU's recruitment campaign faced opposition from small growers. In a press release in July 2007 (SIPTU 2007b), SIPTU announced that it was abandoning the projected ERO for the whole industry because of 'the failure of the Employers' Group to live up to previous commitments'. According to SIPTU, 'some employers [were] actively discouraging their workers from joining a union', which meant a breach of the neutrality agreement. SIPTU, however, still claimed that 'to have [workers] represented and organised by the union' was the only way to 'ensure the proper maintenance of

employment standards.’ Therefore, SIPTU decided to use the Agreement reached for an ERO as the basis for a Registered Employment Agreement (REA) with the individual employers that were willing to sign up. The rest of farms would still be covered by the ERO for agricultural workers. The first REA was signed on the 12th of December 2007 between SIPTU and Drimbawn Mushroom Ltd, a division of Monaghan Mushrooms Ltd (SIPTU 2007c; EIRO 2008). 20 more REAs were signed between May 2008 and October 2009.¹⁷⁷

SIPTU’s strategy consisted, therefore, in waiting to reach agreements with employers first and organise later. Only after the first REA was signed, SIPTU’s organising unit put in place a plan to train shop stewards and organise union branches. It could be argued again that SIPTU followed this strategy because of lack of resources and because it made recruiting easier. But it can also be argued that organising was subordinated to ‘partnership’ with employers, although the union always presented organising as the chief strategy to ‘clean up’ the mushroom industry. This fact highlights the contradiction generated when a union tries to apply an organising model through a structure developed in the context of partnership and casework. SIPTU was more successful in improving working conditions by putting pressure on the DETE, its Labour Inspectorate, and employers without organising workers *per se*.

SIPTU employed most of its efforts and resources in negotiating with employers and the state over the implementation of labour standards and the opening of farms to unions in the context of the re-negotiation of Social Partnership in 2006. SIPTU did well according to partnership standards at these negotiations but not at organising. That is, SIPTU did well at what they were good at, but we have also seen that without proper organising servicing turns into a dead end. Its bureaucratic structure, overdeveloped during the over twenty years of national partnership deals was little suitable for organising from scratch workers in low-paid jobs. Agriculture was never an easy sector to organise. The cost of organising these workers, according to a union official, outweighed its benefits, and resources were scarce. Migrant workers were much easier to recruit, in higher numbers, in larger companies in other sectors of the economy, particularly where the union already had branches.

Recruitment and organising with the means and method tried by SIPTU was plainly impossible. So, SIPTU tried to do it with the help of the employers. In itself there was nothing inherently wrong with it, but in the conditions in which it took place it meant to apply a top-down approach to recruiting, which could only achieve results in those

¹⁷⁷ Labour Court Website

terms. We cannot speak of any organising campaign because organising did not take place. Then, after the signing of the first REA a plan to train shop stewards from the new recruits was put in place. One question here is whether that will work.¹⁷⁸ SIPTU ‘organising’ turn presents important difficulties. It is not possible to change old habits without challenging old principles. It is also likely that old principles will only change in the course of struggles rather than through conferences and reports. By *old principles*, on the other hand, I mean the ideology behind partnership unionism. There are older principles that still live in some of the speeches and statements of current union leader, and which correspond to an early period in the history of the Irish labour movement. They could return from the grave in the eventuality of a labour upsurge. As it is stated in the report from a SIPTU organiser on which the next section is based, the tactics put forward by Bronfenbrenner would have not surprised Larkin and Connolly.

Aircoach

We cannot conclude just from a single case that SIPTU’s ‘organising’ turn was a failure. In the same way, we cannot attribute the faults in the mushroom campaign to the failures of some individuals. This thesis, on the other hand, does not attempt a detailed comparative study of SIPTU’s ‘organising’ turn, but it would be interesting to have a look at some of the best type of organising that some SIPTU officials are capable of doing. The organising campaigning in Aircoach constitutes an example of a successful

¹⁷⁸ [Update] For a long time after the signing of Registered Employment Agreements (REAs) with individual farms, union branches in farms were not organised. In January 2010, however, SIPTU allocated a full time organiser for the mushroom industry, who had previously worked as a community worker for MRCI in its mushroom campaign between 2006 and 2007. The idea was to organise union branches in the farms that had signed REAs, which for the moment does not include targeting the around 60 farms that did not sign this union recognition agreements. Under an Equality Authority funded project for migrant women agricultural workers MRCI and SIPTU worked in partnership. MRCI also obtained funding to allocate a community worker to the project for six months in 2010. The idea was also to create “a brand-new model for effective NGO-trade union partnership that capitalises on the strengths and expertise of both organisations.” (SIPTU and MRCI 2010). Both ways are described in chapters 5 to 8. According to the Final Report (SIPTU and MRCI 2010) 1237 women mushroom pickers participated in collective activities such as discussion, decision making and collective action, out of which 729 workers attended group meetings and 508 undertook collective action. The Report also states that 93 workers signed up as new SIPTU members and that 27 shop stewards were elected. All this contributed to the implementation of the REAs for 440 workers that were underpaid and the improvement of working conditions for many of them. The second phase of the project that SIPTU is currently trying to implement consists of further training for shop stewards and the creation of two ‘Lay Organiser’ positions for mushroom pickers acting as part-time union organisers.

campaign in the private sector to organise a union branch in a company where there was no union previously. I hope to briefly illustrate in this way the difference that leadership can make, but also the structural constraints that even effective campaigns cannot solve. I depend exclusively on the internal report of Aircoach campaign, rather than on direct knowledge, so this case must be approached critically.

The report (SIPTU 2006f) claims that the organising campaign in Aircoach followed seven of the ten tactics that work in the US according to Bronfenbrenner. This company runs services from Dublin city, Belfast and Cork to Dublin city and Dublin airport, as well as car-park shuttles at Dublin Airport and Belfast international airport. It employed around 150 drivers in 2006. SIPTU selected it as a strategic target in late 2004 because First Group, owner of the company, intended to use Aircoach to take the routes of the public privately run transport company (CIÉ) if these were liberalised, and because First Group recognised unions in the US and Britain. An organiser was assigned to the campaign. The first step consisted in distributing letters with a reply post-card to drivers asking for pay and conditions and contact details to which a dozen drivers replied. These workers stated that they worked over 48 hours (70%), did not get sufficient breaks (75%), and were not paid a good rate (80%). All of them agreed that there should be collective representation at the company.

There had been a previous attempt to organise a union, which according to the report ended in a 'disastrous unofficial strike'. One of the contacts from the previous attempts became the link between the union and the workers. SIPTU could produce and distribute through him a newsletter for Aircoach drivers. The SIPTU organiser also distributed the newsletter and talked to drivers when they stopped for a break at Dublin airport, at an area not under 'close' management surveillance. One of the main issues in the newsletter was that unionised First Group drivers had better terms and conditions of employment in the US and Britain.

One of the obstacles to organising, notwithstanding management pressure, was the feeling among drivers that the union had let them down in the past. That is, workers' previous experiences with unions and the expectations they had about them were obstacles to organising that the union had to face. The report let us know that this was achieved by direct contact, one to one, between the organiser and the workers, the work of the 'insider', a veteran and respected worker in the company who carried out the bulk of recruitment together with an organising committee, and the issues addressed in the newsletter that struck the right chord. Important, in that regard, was the injustice of workers being treated worse than their British and American counterparts.

By June 2005 over a third of the drivers were union members and SIPTU, with workers' agreement, decided to contact management. Aircoach responded by constituting an 'Employee Representative Committee' chosen by management among anti-union workers with favourable rosters and higher pay rates, although two SIPTU members were chosen by mistake. According to the report that Committee had little credibility and management intimidation tactics (the insider worker was suspended for a week after getting a final written warning) only angered workers. The company for its part, unlike Monaghan Mushrooms, showed 'extreme unwillingness' to recognise the union in the talks that ensued. And, in February 2006 it organised a ballot, 'out of the blue', distributing a letter to the drivers with the following content:

You yourself might feel that it would indeed be better if everyone had and did exactly the same or you might prefer to be treated individually so that there are different arrangements to suit people's needs... you would not thank me if the company was closed down because we spent more than we earned... if there was any attempt to push up wages on these services faster than we can afford it, they will be judged uneconomic and will be withdrawn. This would mean a loss of jobs, which would be a pity.

The ballot papers were numbered in order to identify the voters; CCTV cameras would record the voting; the votes counted by management, and stored in Aircoach offices. Workers organised a successful boycott, in which the use of text messaging played a great part. The report mentions that this collective action served to unite workers. In May 2006 a new postal ballot was organised and overseen by the LRC. Out of 141 drivers balloted, 85 voted in favour and only 9 against union recognition (71 votes in favour were needed). Part of the success of the ballot was that management agreed to remain neutral, according to the report.

The ten tactics, the report concluded, 'are not simply shiny new bolt-ons to the same old union – to reproduce the important, but hardly earth-shattering, success at Aircoach on a large scale requires fundamental change in the union, not the mere application of a 'laundry list' of tactics.' The report also recognised that union recognition legislation is not essential to organising but that the lack of it makes organising 'highly expensive, massively time-consuming, and requires a level of leadership and bravery beyond most ordinary people.'

Of the ten tactics, the Aircoach campaign claimed to have applied seven (all except 4, 8 and 9), including a rank-and-file committee, an ad hoc union group that recruited most of the workers. In relation to resources one organiser was considered enough, but he also had the help of other organisers and administrative staff from the union. All in all, the report offers a view into an organising model in which rank-and-file

participation is essential, but cannot be confined to a particular campaign or campaigns; it must lead to a 'fundamental change in the union'. What kind of change? The reports breaks at that point; its last part is confidential. To what extent did the workers own the Aircoach campaign and the new union branch organised afterwards? They are questions that I cannot properly answer without carrying out fieldwork. The report, although very clear in many aspects and reflecting a full-fledged organising approach, also represents the point of view of a union official rather than the workers, although one committed to implementing an organising model that aspires to be rank-and-file based. The Aircoach branch, however, was meant to operate within a union based on partnership unionism long-term habits. In that context, the branch once constituted would have to rely on collective bargaining from the top. The organiser who participated in the campaign moved on to other campaigns, leaving the branch under the supervision of another official.

There are also structural constraints that do not depend on the trade union. Rick Fantasia (1988: 118-120) in his description of two successful wildcat strikes at a steel-casting factory in New Jersey, USA, followed by a failed challenge to the local bureaucratic union leadership speculates that in the event of a successful overthrowing of the leadership, the successful radical rank-and-file leadership would have not been able to change *the basic nature of the union*: 'they would have had to negotiate periodic contracts with management and would then presumably have had to sell them to the membership, to learn to live with them themselves, and to enforce them among the rank and file.' Fantasia was speaking of the 'powerful structural barriers to what can be achieved in any single workplace': relocation of production, antiunion labour legislation, etc., which contribute to undermine what Fantasia termed as 'cultures of solidarity' between workers. Therefore, the SIPTU organiser who wrote *On the buses* was right in demanding drastic changes within the unions, but in the end, bureaucratic tendencies and accommodation to employers and governments are ultimately the product of the practice of unionism in a particular capitalist context in which the hegemony of capital looks at its strongest point in history, although this might change in the near future.

The campaign in the mushroom industry, on the other hand, did not apply, purely, any single tactic, as there was no members' involvement at any point in the campaign. Tactic six, benchmarks, perhaps was applied internally, without members' involvement. Tactic nine, pressure tactics using outside members, was not strictly applied. Apart from the lack of resources, the main one being the lack of a full-time organiser, the campaign

main shortcoming consisted in the complete absence of workers' involvement, one of the chief features of a *proper organising model*. Therefore, the campaign cannot even be considered to be organising from the top as it did not go beyond recruiting (but even recruiting in Spring 2007 cannot be considered recruiting as it did not go beyond collecting forms that were not even activated), at least till December 2007 when the first REA was signed up and plans were drawn to train shop stewards.

Leadership and Consciousness

The Aircoach campaign turned out to be successful from the point of view of workers' involvement. Union leadership, however, played an essential role in the application of a number of tactics, in challenging negative union views on the part of the workers, and in exploiting opportunities as they presented themselves. The Aircoach report, therefore, brings to the forefront the issues of leadership and consciousness, of both union officials and workers.

Workers' consciousness is uneven, an expression of workers' different work experiences, different political traditions, and outside-work influences. During the mushroom industry campaign and before it, SIPTU officials tended to emphasise the obstacles to recruiting migrant workers. One of the obstacles was the very negative view of trade unions that they attributed to Eastern European workers because of previous experiences with state-controlled unions in their countries during the soviet era. That assumption was taken for granted. Even the Lithuanian organiser at SIPTU's organising unit was of the opinion that in Lithuania 'people don't like unions ... We don't go to unions, we don't know about [unions]... My mother was a shop steward in Lithuania but I never knew about unions... [Union] Density is 12 percent.' The mushroom picker's diary quote, at the beginning of the introduction (chapter 1), does not indicate that lack of interest in trade unions. This mushroom worker considered her oppression to be the product of an opposition between boss and management, on one side, and workers on the other side. In spite of her early socialisation in Ukraine in the 1970s and 1980s, where unions were state controlled, she wanted to join a union. Similarly for other migrant workers from former 'communist' countries and members of the MWSG, there seemed to be little inherent resistance to unions. The issue of joining a trade union, or asking for help to them, normally came up when there were problems at work, grievances to solve. It is true that there were some cases of resistance to unions on the part of some workers. We have already seen that it was also the case of Aircoach workers at the beginning of the 2005-2006 organising campaign. At MWSG meetings,

the most active members believed that unions had to prove that they could solve workers' problems before workers joined them. Others wanted to know more about unions. Two MWSG members from one farm joined SIPTU, three joined the Independent Workers' Union (IWU), although they could not convince their fellow farm workers to join with them because the Ukrainians workers were willing 'to do anything for the boss in order to get their work permits renewed'. Rather than dislike of unions or lack of information (the other big obstacle according to unions and NGOs), fear of the employer was normally cited as the reason to not join unions. The bilingual SIPTU organiser could collect a good number of applications from during SIPTU recruiting campaign in Spring 2007 because recruitment took place on farm, with the farmer's neutrality.

In relation to previous experiences in unions or political organisations in former 'communist' countries, I noticed that some MWSG members were actually proud of their Komsomol¹⁷⁹ membership in their youth, recalling with pride at MWSG socials the responsibilities they held and the speeches they made during that time. During a meeting, the husband of one of the pickers, who worked in a mushroom compost yard, said that the October Revolution should be carried out again in order to solve the problems that workers had on the farm, although he was a bit drunk and his wife asked him to shut up. One MWSG member had studied Marx's *Capital* as a part of his academic training in Belarus. After leaving his job in Minsk, he worked for two years on a mushroom farm in Ireland. One night after a meeting, he recounted that he first thought that workers in the 'West' had rights and these were respected but his time on the farm reminded him of the type of capitalism that Marx had described in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century – which he thought was something of the past. Another mushroom worker, who challenged her employer, said that if her employer could make any money at all, it was because workers picked the mushrooms. Employers, in her opinion, made profits on the backs of workers.

We must take, however, the foregoing ethnographic examples in a careful way because they were not representative of all mushroom workers. The workers members of the MWSG constituted the most militant section of all mushroom workers. Most of them were former mushroom workers who had taken a case against their employer (some of them while in employment). They challenged the farm regime, and that experience radicalised them politically. The MWSG meetings contributed to this, that being its role. Any account of working conditions was presented in terms of workers

¹⁷⁹ Communist youth organisation in the former Soviet Union.

versus bosses – two social groups with opposed interests. This response emerged organically but not spontaneously. It matched their immediate experiences, and the MWSG was instrumental in igniting it. The lead organiser from MRCI, for example, had defined its goals: i) to bring migrant workers together, ii) to offer a space where they could share their experiences, iii) to work on the main issues that affected the lives of these immigrant workers, and iv) to allow them to decide how far they wanted to go in challenging their current situation at work or in society.

The most forthcoming members of the MWSG, however, were not convinced that Irish unions were effective enough. As I have already said, they believed that unions had to prove that they could solve their problems before workers joined them. Some already had been in touch with unions in Ireland and were told that the union could not help them.¹⁸⁰ On the other hand, previous experiences with ‘state controlled unions’ had certainly created expectations about unions. In the former Soviet Union workers used to bring up individual grievances with shop stewards. Rank-and-file collective activism was suppressed.¹⁸¹ It was a variant of service unionism. MWSG members expected that when the state knew about mistreatment and underpayment on farms the problems would be quickly fixed. When they realised that this was not the case, they expected that the union, once it was known, would solve the problems, case by case. Lizete, a mushroom picker in her fifties, left a copy of the Mushroom Workers Newsletter (produced by MRCI) on the table in the canteen of her farm for the boss and other workers to see, thinking that letting them know that workers were aware of their rights would be enough to solve their problems. At an open MWSG meeting in November 2006 she complained bitterly that no one was doing anything. This picker had reasons to distrust unions but she was, however, the first to sign up SIPTU application form when the union visited her farm in Spring 2007. She asked for a pen and the rest of the workers followed after her. The farm was taken over by a nearby farm and a REA was signed on October 2008, a formal branch was organised, and a shop steward designated, but Lizete still complained in January 2010 that grievances were not followed up; they just piled up. Nothing had changed in her opinion. The expectations she had about trade

¹⁸⁰ In September 1998 I was working in a restaurant in Ireland as a kitchen porter for £3.5 per hour, before the minimum wage was introduced. I tried to join SIPTU by going to the person responsible for the Hotel and Catering section at Liberty Hall, but I was told that I could not join the union because it did not make sense for one worker alone in a small workplace to join the union. I insisted strongly that I wanted to join but the union official did not back off an inch. That experience could have put me off unions.

¹⁸¹ Personal communication from Dace Dzenovska, an anthropologist working in the US but originally from Latvia.

unions had not been fulfilled or challenged.¹⁸²

Lopez (2004: 12-18) describes how academic literature based on organisers' perceptions has noticed how workers' previous union experiences affect new organising attempts. Some scholars have also noticed how expectations about unions are ingrained in workers' experiences of business unionism. But there has been less concern about how workers achieve collective action in spite of the obstacles, which he names as: (1) workers' resistance to organising; (2) need of unions' organisational transformation; and (3) employers' power to intimidate workers. He analyses two organising campaigns by SEIU in Pittsburgh, USA, in the health-care sector in the 1990s. The second campaign (1998) achieved recognition in the same workplaces in which the first one (1997) failed. The key question was that the union was not able to challenge workers' negative views about unions in the first campaign. More important than how workers related to management was how they related to the union (2004: 48).¹⁸³ He points, among other factors, to the workers assumption that the role of unions is to fight for them, and that they play only a passive role. This expectation is based on the 'ideology and reality' of servicing-oriented business unionism, which discourages participation and creates a dependency on full-time union officials (2004: 59). So workers are weary of new organising approaches.

Eastern European workers had union experiences similar to those of Irish workers based on variations of a 'servicing' model of trade unionism that were never challenged. Instead, SIPTU's campaign in the mushroom industry contributed to reinforce them. A SIPTU organiser revealed on one occasion that mushroom workers during the campaign used to tell that everything was okay, 'we didn't get the real stories'. Therefore, contacts based on trust were not built and obstacles to unionisation could not be challenged, never mind understood.

In spite of workers' union experiences and expectations, the basis for collective action, on which particularly militant rank-and-file unionism is based, tends to arise spontaneously out of the contradiction between labour and capital. In Kilnaleck, for instance, workers could not challenge openly the farm regime for a long time. But in January 2006 seventeen mushroom pickers walked out of their job. No pickers stayed behind. These workers walked out because they were being paid well below the minimum wage, working 16 hours a day, and because personal abuses, insult, and

¹⁸² I do not know whether the latest organising attempt started in January 2010 achieved any positive result for the workers on this farm.

¹⁸³ Lopez worked as a union intern in the second and successful campaign. So his views were based on participant observation.

disrespect were the norm. It was, however, a change in work practices that triggered the walkout. This sudden action does not necessarily indicate a change in consciousness in order to carry it out. It must be explained as the product of many different factors over the period the group spent working on the farm, and probably was facilitated by constant gossip and talking about working conditions and the arbitrary abuse of power on the part of the boss.

Three days after the walkout, SIPTU arranged a meeting with labour inspectors attended by media reporters. The workers told, through an interpreter, their story and then broke up into smaller groups. They greeted positively suggestions of collective action, indicating a change in consciousness and that they had overcome fragmentation, individualism and suspicion of unions. That change was the product of their collective spontaneous walkout. Yet, no one pursued this further and no one led this group into further collective action. The mood passed and SIPTU just took up their cases, individually. Perhaps, it was complicated to organise a group based on only 17 workers from a single farm. Fear to lose the job, the need to guarantee incomes in spite of mistreatment and underpayment, and an unfamiliar linguistic, social and cultural environment are serious obstacles to organising. Yet, some of these workers later joined the MWSG, becoming active members. In a really oppressive work environment and without any outside support, the staff of Kilnaleck farm decided to walk out of their jobs and go to the nearest union office. Workers' combination and collective action took place spontaneously.

Union officials, as we have seen, complained of obstacles to organising and migrant workers' lack of combination. But when the Kilnaleck case exploded that group of workers did not become organised in a trade union. The features discussed above made workers potentially more receptive to collectivism and combination via unions but they did not prefigure the kind of unionism they would engage in or be receptive, namely, servicing or organising models. However, the form of unionism and collectivism that was on offer to the migrant workers was not one that required their active involvement.¹⁸⁴ Caseworkers, labour inspectors, the Labour Commissioner or the Labour Court mediated their agency. In fact, while MRCI was able to incorporate some of the Kilnaleck workers into the MWSG, SIPTU was not able to get them organised in the union. Therefore, the case above poses the question of unions, insofar as they are institutions, as obstacles to organising.

There were attempts to challenge SIPTU's servicing ethos (but not partnership), or

¹⁸⁴ As Prof. Gregor Gall has observed (personal communication).

rather to complement it with organising. The bilingual organiser worked closely with the organiser from UNITE-HERE that SIPTU brought in 2008 to help organise hotel workers, and that experience had an effect on her. Her experience visiting workplaces in different sectors, and her contacts with different trade unionists was having an effect on her too. On the other hand, she had not been an organiser nor had she previous union experience, and because of that she was not constrained by old partnership habits. Her attitude during the recruitment visits was very different to her attitude a year earlier. After the visits to farms in Monaghan, on the way back to Dublin I went with her to a meeting with Lithuanian workers working for Irish Ferries. At the end of that meeting she said that it had been a very good learning experience for her and that she would apply it to her work with mushroom workers. At first she had placed a great hope in the law and official procedures to solve workers' grievances. She always insisted also that, unless they signed up for the union, the union could not help them. But now there was a shift from helping them to get workers to stand up for themselves.

SIPTU organised a campaign in the mushroom industry aimed at getting migrant workers organised. The union argued that this was the only way to get minimum labour standards implemented in the mushroom industry. However, SIPTU did not allocate resources to organising. Officials engaged in the campaign did not even believe that organising was going to work. Partnership unionism still constituted SIPTU's central focus. In the mushroom campaign successful recruitment only took place when it was agreed with employers. Organising was subordinated to partnership; participation and rank-and-file activism, to the quantity of new recruits.

SIPTU's mushroom campaign also took place at a time that unions, employers and the state were engaged in negotiations over the *Towards 2016* partnership agreement. There was a generalised feeling in Irish society that employers were going to use migration and outsourcing to lower wages and labour standards. SIPTU connected with many layers of workers and society at large with the slogan of the 'race to the bottom'. That helps to explain the success of the demonstrations against the outsourcing of jobs in Irish Ferries in December 2005. The walkout of 17 mushroom pickers on a farm in Kilnaleck, Co. Cavan, in January 2006 made it to the news and drew attention to the mushroom industry, which became the antonomasia of the 'race to the bottom'. SIPTU's organising approach, however, was at pains with the bureaucratic tendencies and top-down approaches overdeveloped over twenty years of Social Partnership deals, which do not require the active participation of union members.

In spite of this criticism, SIPTU's campaign contributed to highlight the mistreatment

and underpayment of migrant workers in Ireland. State agencies inspected mushroom farms. After this, working conditions and wages improved, and it was much easier for workers to step forward. SIPTU is now recognised on 21 mushroom farms in Ireland (around one quarter of all farms). Small farms, the worst offenders, are disappearing due to consolidation. Yet, mushroom workers by and large did not get organised, and there was no workers' input during the 2006-2007 campaign. The Kilnaleck case shows that the most energetic initiatives come from the bottom, yet they need a coherent organising approach from trade unions in order to turn spontaneity into organisation. That type of approach, however, cannot be implemented without reversing unions' bureaucratic structures and without an ideological shift in relation to Social Partnership.

In the US, worker centres have challenged methods and principles of 'business unionism'. At the same time there have been union renewal attempts in that country. Worker centres have been more consequent applying that approach, but they do not have the same resources and leverage that unions have since they are not mainly market institutions. In Ireland, MRCI has tried to apply the worker centres model in Ireland, although on a very small scale. The next chapters deal with this attempt to fill in the vacuum left by traditional trade unions in Ireland, namely the inability of unions to organise the low-paid such as agricultural migrant workers, particularly by following a more militant and rank-and-file type of collectivism in which workers own their organisations.

7. The Migrant Rights Centre approach

This chapter looks at a different model of workers' collective action and representation. The Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI) made a promise, as we will see, of pursuing the self-empowerment of migrant workers by constituting a migrant-led group, trying to fill a vacuum left by partnership unionism. This chapter will deal with the steps that preceded the foundation of the Mushroom Workers Support Group (MWSG), later AgWA, by the MRCI. It represents a shift from trade unionism to what we could characterise at first as community work. MRCI is a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), but this is too broad a term. MRCI resembled more a worker centre (WC) than what we commonly understand as an NGO.

This chapter will start with a brief background on NGOs, moving quickly to a critical assessment of the work that Janice Fine (2006) has done on worker centres.¹⁸⁵ I will trace also the origins of worker centres and the union renewal that started in the US and arrived in Ireland in the 2000s in order to further understand contradictions between workers and their institutions. Secondly, I will give a background about the ideas, practice, and context in which MRCI has operated since its foundation in 2001. And, finally, I will describe the work that preceded the establishment of the MWSG, the second seed of a worker centre in Ireland after MRCI's Domestic Workers Group.

In the next chapter, I will look focus on the contradictions between theory and

¹⁸⁵ As a proof of the role model that worker centres represents for MRCI, it is interesting to notice that this organisation organised a conference on migrant workers at the end of March 2009 in which Janice Fine was the guest speaker (*The Irish Times*, 16/3/2009: p. 18).

practice in the work of MRCI, as I have done in the previous chapter with SIPTU's organising campaign in the mushroom industry.

From NGOs to (Immigrant Rights) Worker Centres

'NGO' is a very loose term that refers to any organisation independent, in theory, from government control, 'not seeking to challenge governments either as a political party or by a narrow focus on human rights, non-profit-making and non-criminal.' (Willetts 2002). The United Nations (UN) created the term in 1945 in order to distinguish between intergovernmental and private organisations. According to Willetts (2002), that definition would include local grassroots organisations, community based groups, and international umbrella NGOs. They are part of social movements, and operate within the framework of the so-called 'civil society'. The latter term is ambiguous. The common usage of 'civil society' points to all public activity not carried out by government employees acting in a government capacity. More specifically, following the UN interpretation, 'civil society' is contrasted with the government and the economy (Willetts 2002).

The scope of NGOs, therefore, varies widely, from development and humanitarian aid in the third world to human rights and environmental issues, both globally and locally. Trade unions, professional bodies, and religious organisations are not commonly considered as NGOs, but for the UN they are so if they do not engage in forms of governance in partnership with the state or associations of states (Willetts 2002). NGOs can pursue their aims by campaigning and also by mobilising resources such as government grants, private donations, fundraising, or through charity shops.¹⁸⁶ Non-profit-making is an *official* requirement. MRCI is an NGO according to the foregoing, but it can also be characterised as a host for worker centres (i.e. MWSG). We have seen that human rights can be one of the objects of NGOs. We can consider then workers rights, immigrant workers rights, and ethnic minority workers rights, including their civil rights, as the main scope of some NGOs. That is what worker centres are about, but that is still not what makes them different sorts of NGOs.

Worker centres are a US phenomenon, the term being coined there. Janice Fine (2006) is the best-known scholar associated with their study. She characterises worker centres as social institutions that could be grouped with 'new types of trade unions, community based organisations, and social movement groups ... struggling to fill the

¹⁸⁶ An NGO in Ireland has a charity character, so it is excluded from taxation. To achieve that status NGOs must adopt a constitutional chapter approved by the government.

void [left by traditional trade unions].’ (Fine 2006: 2). They try to reach workers outside the remit of trade unions, in sectors not reached by the so-called traditional trade unions, such as black and immigrant workers in low-paid, labour-intensive, flexible, and temporary jobs.

After an extensive survey of 137 worker centres, Fine found three main features that characterise them (Fine 2006: 2). They engage in legal aid in order to recover back wages, inform workers about their rights, and offer other services such as English language classes. Secondly, they lobby state agencies and politicians in order to introduce more favourable policies for immigrant workers and guarantee the enforcement of current labour laws. Thirdly, they organise workers. It is the combination of service delivery, advocacy and organising what characterises worker centres. For Kim Moody (2007: 216) organising is what ‘gives worker centers the potential to play an important role in the development of unionization and a broader social and political movement.’ That is, organising, which implies a focus on workplace issues, places worker centres within the labour movement, differentiating them from other NGOs.

According to Tait (2005), *worker centres* are sorts of *poor workers unions*, a phenomenon that she has studied thoroughly and that can be traced back to the 1960s civil rights movements in the US, which was not trade-union-led. Unions were focussed on servicing their members, overwhelmingly white and male, to the exclusion of the rest of the workers and by means of legal channels rather than collective solidarity and action. Their agendas included cooperating with the bosses rather than confronting them, and containing shop-floor activism. Unions had turned into bureaucratic structures that reinforced racist prejudices and controlled members from the top. Poor workers, often blacks and immigrants, were outside the mainstream labour movement. They only could find channels of expression in the civil rights movement and in the new unions that they created, namely *the poor workers unions*. Yet, that had an effect on unions: caucuses led by *leftist radicals* were set up within unions to oppose racism and bureaucratic control. These caucuses, like poor workers unions, linked community and work-place issues. The academic literature of the 1960s registered this phenomenon under the term ‘community unionism’ (Tait 2005: 34). Tait does not really differentiate between worker centres and poor workers unions, except to say that the former are ‘profoundly local organisations’ and do equally *servicing* and *organising*. In fact, the United Farm Workers had used in the 1960s the concept of community-based ‘service centres’ to reach migrant agricultural workers away from workplaces (2005: 129-130).

Some worker centres have also realised that by providing some legal aid they can undermine collective organisation and action, demobilising and suppressing solidarity, and, therefore, playing the same role as bureaucratic unions focussed on servicing. At least that is the opinion of Jennifer Gordon, the founder of the Workplace Project in Rhode Island, 1992, who thinks that collective action is the best way to challenge exploitative relations in the informal economy (in Tait 2005: 140),

By ‘paying off’ the bravest and most determined workers with a settlement or an award the Workplace Project’s legal program plays the role of the employer who decapitates an organising effort by making a deal with its leaders.

That idea led the Workplace Project into organising. Collective responses were discussed and decided by those affected to solve their grievances. Given the marginality and lack of resources of poor workers, around one quarter of all workers in the US in 2003, according to Tait (2005: 14), their organisations could not make use of legal channels and mechanism. They had to rely on direct action and workers’ solidarity. Hence, by necessity, they were profoundly democratic organisations, owned by their members. Their scope also went beyond the workplace, merging work and community issues (2006: 9-10).

Worker centres trace their origins back to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. The same is the case with the term ‘social movement unionism’. A parallel development took place in countries such as Brazil and South Africa in the 1970s in the face of oppressive regimes, state control and bureaucratic unions, although on a much larger scale (see Seidman 1994). But unions as social movements developed independently, although in strikingly similar ways, in South Africa, Brazil and the US.

There are, however, weaknesses. Their lack of resources, which forces them to show the best side of labour as a movement, rank-and-file, militant, and democratic, also make them unstable institutions that can have a short life. This has led them to look for alliances with unions or affiliation. As Tait (2005: 120) argues,

These organizing stories illustrate a conundrum all movements face: what balance of mobilization and institutionalization will produce the best possibility for lasting social change? The flexibility and spontaneity of movement organizing are its greatest strengths, but often they come at the expense of stability. The majority of trade unions in the mid-20th century illustrated the hazards of the opposite approach: institutionalization to the point of bureaucratization. But can there be institutionalization and rank-and-file involvement and control? Institutionalization without bureaucratization?

I will come back to that issue in the next chapter. Right now, what matters here is that worker centres seem to be filling a vacuum left by trade unions, particularly in the

labour-intensive sectors of the economy, as the traditional institutions of the working class declined. Typically, however, the contemporary worker centres surveyed by Fine have not arisen spontaneously as the product of immigrant workers self-organisation. Ethnic NGOs founded 23 percent of existing worker centres in the US. Religious faith groups established a further 22 percent. Interestingly, 23 percent of worker centres were the product of union organising drives, including 9 percent set up after failed union drives (Fine 2006: 14). There is ample evidence in Janice Fine's work¹⁸⁷ indicating that trade unions and worker centres tend to complement each other. The labour movement in the US widely admits the need of organising the low-paid workers, in unstable jobs, in order to rebuild unions' bargaining power. Fine illustrates throughout her work the reasons why some unions are creating worker centres, and working closely with established ones, although she does not inform us about the scale of this phenomenon. For example, she writes (Fine 2006: 17-18),

The new leadership of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 615 opened a worker center at the union hall when they realized that they lacked effective means for communicating and building up participation among part-time Latino janitors, who had become the majority of their membership in Greater Boston. The center's goal, in addition to providing ... workforce development programs, and computer classes, is to build relationships between the union and its diffuse membership, to establish the union hall as a gathering place for immigrant members, and to build a vibrant core of new union leaders.

It seems at first sight that some trade unions (at least those in touch with immigrant workers) realise that their structures are not capable of attracting and keeping some layers of the working class such as migrant and low-paid workers. In general, the host institutions that set up worker centres have done it because they have been approached by immigrants asking for help in recovering unpaid wages, or to complain about mistreatment, and because these host organisations have also realised that a 'service approach' is not enough (Fine 2006: 15-16).

The number of workers that worker centres can potentially reach is quite large. First-generation immigrant workers in the US represent 12.5 percent of all workers in the US, but 25 percent of low-paid workers. And, nearly all of those workers are employed in the private sector of the economy, where union density only reaches 8 percent of the workforce (Fine 2006: 27, 33). Those employed in small workplaces and in labour-intensive sectors of the economy are the most difficult to organise. That deters unions from trying to organise them, although they feel the need to step in to regain bargaining

¹⁸⁷ Not in her work only. See for example Kim Moody 2007; Clawson 2003; Tait 2005; Gordon 2005.

power. In the US, therefore, that work has fallen mainly on worker centres. Some worker centre organisers understand why that is so. As one of them put it (Fine 2006: 133):

The way the industry is structured and the way the labor laws are written it is extremely difficult to organize for traditional unions because these shops are very small... For a union they have to put in the same money and staff time to organize a twenty-person shop as they do for a five-hundred-person shop in many instances.

The dilemma here is that organising low-paid workers in small work places require heavy investment in both time and resources, while the prospect of getting these workers organised, regaining bargaining power, and establishing a monopoly of labour supply is unclear. Instead, unions prefer to spend their energies in organising in strategic sectors that can allow the labour movement to grow in strength. That was the opinion of Tim Healy, secretary-treasurer of the Chicago Federation of Labour (in Fine 2006: 129):

What you get from worker centers as it relates to labor are hot shops. We're tired of hot shops. Those unions that are organizing strategically are growing. They're getting away from hot shops. They are going after the market... Our affiliates are changing the way they look at organizing. They're looking at what they've got and then where they need to be and how to get there. I don't know where the worker centers fit into this yet.

Fine (2006: 150) writes that, 'in many low-wage industries, existing union structures seem mismatched to firm structures. Efforts to build more general, craftlike unions of low-wage workers ... have been largely unsuccessful.' This would help to understand the outcome of SIPTU's efforts in the Irish mushroom industry. But the question still is whether unions should dedicate resources to organise 'hot shops' and poor workers, or forget about them and organise strategically.

Good-producing versus service-producing industries

Fine does not spell it out clearly, but she seems to say that 'low-wage industries' are outnumbering 'high-wage industries', and this is a tendency of late capitalism, a phenomenon I have dealt with in chapter 3. She believes that there has been a 'shift from goods-producing to service-producing industries' (Fine 2006: 31). It is not clear whether she means that the service sector is also strategically a more important sector. It is not clear either whether she links low pay, temporary, highly flexible jobs to both the service sector and manufacturing. On the other hand, Fine never distinguishes between labour-intensive and capital-intensive sectors of the economy, or says in which sectors of the economy lies the power to disrupt the whole (national) economy. Clarity in regard to these issues is fundamental in order to understand the tasks that the labour movement

is facing. She maintains that between 1979 and 1996 as many as 43 million jobs were lost in the US, mainly in manufacturing, and millions more were created, but of inferior quality in the 'service-producing sector'. This for her would be part of the context in which unions have entered into crisis and the need for worker centres has emerged, as traditional unionised jobs have been declining.

Kim Moody offers a more clear and elaborate account. The US manufacturing sector lost 4,131,000 jobs between 1980 and 2004, while its output doubled (Moody 2007: 19, 25). In other words, the sector lost none of its importance. Increases in productivity, which are the product of 'competitive strategies adopted by employers', accounted for these job losses (Moody 2007: 23). The tendency of capital accumulation is to expel labour as capital investment increases. On the other hand, high increases in productivity and workforce downsizing did not bring any significant increases in labour costs, just 1.5 percent between 1990 and 2003 (Moody 2007: 25). Hence, the rate of exploitation rose to new heights. Moody explains this phenomenon as the product of a 'war in the workplace' that has brought two-tier wage schemes, 'management-by-stress', outsourcing, longer hours, multitasking, and also workplace de-unionisation (Moody 2007, 1997). According to Harvey (1990: 151-153) there was a shift towards subcontracting and temporary work, which also opened up opportunities for small businesses including the revival of the 'sweatshop'. This made trade unionism, therefore, more difficult since it 'depended heavily upon the massing of workers within the factory for their viability, and find it particularly difficult to gain any purchase within family and domestic labour systems.'

The loss of four millions jobs in manufacturing, therefore, does not in itself explain the dramatic decrease of union density in that sector. Foreign Direct Investments in manufacturing, outflows and inflows, gives a picture of high fluidity in this sector that can explain deunionisation better. For example, between 1984 and 1991, inflows in \$ millions represented \$147,271 while outflows represented \$68,784. Between 1992 and 2000, inflows represented \$414,009 while outflows represented \$262,298 (Moody 2007: 20). The key issue is that many jobs, mainly unionised, were lost due to offshoring, true, but many non-union jobs were also created due to investments. There was a spatial shift within the manufacturing sector in the US to rural areas and to the South where wages were cheaper and workplaces non-unionised (2007: 44).

On the other hand, according to Moody (2007: 37), a decreasing rate in the number of goods-producing jobs is not a new phenomenon. It started in 1890 when goods-producing jobs represented 48 percent of the total, including agriculture, to 17 percent

in 2004, not including agriculture.¹⁸⁸ The service-producing sector increased the number of workers employed by 44.5 million between 1979 and 2004 while manufacturing lost nearly 5 million jobs. But as detailed above, the manufacturing sector doubled its output between 1980 and 2004.¹⁸⁹ Interestingly, the share of real GDP of the service sector in the US economy represented 58.2 percent of the total in 1980 and 55.1 percent in 2005 (2007: 35, 38). Its economic relevance has even decreased! Moody concludes (2007: 39),

The industrial core remains the sector on which the majority of economic activity is dependent. Hence it is the power center of the system.

Harvey (1990: 156) speaks of a more specific surge in service employment since the 1970s in the US; a trend he admits that had started earlier ‘as a consequence of rapid increases in efficiency in much of manufacturing industry’. The rapid increase in employment after 1972, on the other hand, was in producer services, finance, insurance and real state more so than in retailing, distribution, transportation and personal services. He makes the point that it is not clear what is exactly meant by ‘the service sector’ (1990: 157):

Some of the expansion can be attributed, for example, to the growth of sub-contracting and consultancy which permits activities formerly internalized within manufacturing firms (legal, marketing, advertising, typing, etc) to be hived off to separate enterprises.

That is, a large measure of the growth in the service sector has been provoked by their separation from manufacturing via subcontracting. The common feature in both sectors is ‘the race to the bottom’ brought about by flexible, temporary and part-time low-paid jobs and by getting rid of unionised jobs.

It is therefore in some strategic sectors, that power lies, and where via strategic organising trade unions should focus on first. High union density rates there could give the labour movement the power to disrupt the economy. In the long-term, this strategy should benefit workers in labour-intensive and low-paid jobs sector where most of the job growth is taking place, and where it is more difficult to organise. If unions become stronger, they could extend their influence to less strategic sectors. It has been the case historically that low-paid workers in labour-intensive sectors such as in agriculture have

¹⁸⁸ The evolution has been (2007: 37) 36% (1959), 27% (1980), 22% (1990), 17% (2005), if we do not include agriculture. However, government statistics put transport and utilities necessary for commodity production as service jobs. If those jobs were considered as a part of the goods-manufacturing sector its percentage of the total workforce would rise to 24% in 2005 including also agriculture (2007: 43).

¹⁸⁹ This can only be a normal development. Manufacturing is capital intensive, while the service sector is labour intensive.

become organised only in periods of labour upsurge such as in the US during the 1930s (Clawson 2003; Mooney and Majka 1995). However, workers in labour-intensive sectors, particularly where sweatshops are generalised, constitute labour, social and human problems to which the labour movement cannot ignore if it aspires to represent the whole working class instead of a section of it. In relation to that point, Marx (1866) said,

Considering themselves and acting as the champions and representatives of the whole working class, they [trade unions] cannot fail to enlist the non-society men into their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades, such as the agricultural labourers, rendered powerless by exceptional circumstances. They must convince the world at large that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions.

On the other hand, we have seen that union renewal is not coming from organised and ‘strategic’ sectors, but from poor workers’ movements operating outside the mainstream labour movement. Therefore, there are therefore reasons to pay attention to poor workers.

Lessons from Worker Centres

At this moment worker centres and poor workers’ unions seem to be the organisations with the best approach, although not the means, to organise and service low-paid workers in labour intensive sectors. This does not mean, however, that the problem of trade unions is merely one of focussing on certain sectors. As we have seen, the working conditions common in labour-intensive sectors of the economy are spreading to the capital-intensive sectors. The debate within the labour movement of ‘servicing’ versus ‘organising’ models, and the debate on ‘social movement unionism’ reflect that fact. In that regard worker centres can teach some lessons to trade unions. Organising poor workers forces them to return to the original practices and structures of trade unions in the past.

One of the elements in the crisis of unionism, according to Fine (2006: 32-33) is that the legal framework that the labour movement helped to create after WWII in the US has become obsolete:

The majority of American labor-market and social insurance policies at the federal and state levels are terribly mismatched to these current economic structures. They are premised on a 1930s understanding of employment relations that simply no longer exists for low-wage workers and has diminished for many white-collar workers. New Deal-era social-insurance programs (as well as labour laws) assumed long-term, stable employment at a single firm...

For many of these workers employed in the context of unstable firms, outmoded and

ineffectual labor laws, and an institutional firm-based scaffolding around a social insurance system that makes less and less sense, it is not at all clear what alternative models make sense. In this context, as local actors grapple with the problems of low-wage workers and cast around for models, many are turning to the approach represented by workers centers.

According to Fantasia (1988), however, it was the legal framework that developed after WWII that accounts for the decline of US trade unions. The reason is that strong, militant and democratic unions are based on what he calls 'cultures of solidarity'. The legal framework created after WWII, particularly the Taft-Harley act, outlawed the closed shop, sympathy strikes, and secondary boycotts. That is, it 'rendered illegal those forms of solidarity that had previously proven themselves effective', and also weakened the shop steward system, which was bypassed by the new grievance system. Its anticommunism also was used to purge unions of radicals (1988: 56, 58). This *new consensus* favoured bureaucratic and anti-collectivist and anti-solidarity trade unions. When in the 1980s employers and government initiated a full-scale attack on trade unions, whose bureaucratic structures had been fattened for a whole period, these were unprepared to react.

The challenge for unions, according to Fine (2006: 148) consists in building more general, craft-like unions of low-wage workers, something at which unions have been largely unsuccessful, as well as changing the legal framework within which they operate. Worker centres seem to be the embryos of those types of unions in Fine's account. The strength of worker centres lies in their community-based approach. As one community organiser put it, 'the workers are part of the community. The consumers and employers are part of the community... The power not only comes from members of the union and the contract, but the ability to mobilize that community support and the public sentiment around the workers and the union.' (Fine 2006: 139). Their weakness lies in their small scale and lack of power at the workplace. Moody, for example, mentions that worker centres normally represent a minority of the workforce in any workplace. That prevents them from direct disruption of the workplace, leaving worker centres limited to pressure tactics (Moody 2007: 220). So, they lack the collective bargaining power of trade unions. Unions in the past were able to establish a *loose* monopoly over labour supply, according to Fine, because they were based on skilled workers (2006: 146). Worker centres on the other hand, work with low-skilled and low-paid workers, many of whom are day labourers, in an oversupplied and highly flexible labour market. In that situation, workers tend to compete against each other, lowering wages. Worker centres have been able to target individual employers over money owed.

The problem is that (Fine 2006: 149),

these actions generally do little in terms of altering firm structures, raising pay scales, or changing business practices inside firms unless they are linked to an effort to create ongoing organization in a particular workplace or engage in a broader industry-wide campaign.

According to Fine (2006: 151), worker centres have been more effective when they have worked in partnership with trade unions, and at influencing policymaking and law enforcement by lobbying politicians. However, the implementation of existing and new laws is not easy. On the one hand, inspections tend to be inefficient or non-existent. On the other hand, even when employers are caught, they can get away with little consequences, as one activist said (Fine 2006: 168),

For business it is a cost of doing business. They know there is nine out of ten chance they won't get caught and if they do get a citation, they appeal it. It is really, really astonishing, the clearest display of ineffective government.

Lacking collective bargaining power, any sort of monopoly over the supply of labour or electoral power, and focussed on localised conflicts, the power of worker centres lies in,

their ability to cast issues in moral terms and capture the sympathy of constituencies that have more political power... The dramatic personal stories of their hard-working members help to illustrate the problem and evoke public empathy with their plight. This establishes a foundation on which a local campaign of support for federal immigration reform ... can be launched.' (Fine 2006: 181, 199).

That is, they appeal to values of equality and to civil rights that are widely shared, which is what can give legitimacy to their claims. In that way they can alter,

the terms of debate about economic development strategies, the nature of low-wage employment, and the responsibilities of low-wage employers to their workers... [opening] a whole new front in the struggle to improve conditions for [all] low-wage workers' (Fine 2006: 196).

In the context of a union upsurge we can guess that the work and influence of worker centres would be amplified. They might turn then into full-fledged unions of low-paid workers in the labour-intensive sector. They might even become sections of major unions as these reach broader sections of the working class. But they already constitute schools for militant trade unionists.

Worker centres also act nationally by forming coalitions with other worker centres or with the support of trade unions. More interesting is the way in which they are integrated within the labour movement, since worker centres try to respond to needs similar to those to which the early labour movement tried to in the US. They share a number of features with these early institutions such as mutual aid, spaces for migrants

to come together, grassroots activism, the building of power to engage in collective bargaining, while pressing for changes in public policies to improve living and labour standards. A significant difference for Fine is that worker centres, unlike early trade unions, are not inspired by socialism (2006: 38-40).

Prelude to an Irish Worker Centre

MRCI was the host organisation that gave birth to the Mushroom Workers Support Group (MWSG). The experience of worker centres was central for some MRCI staff. One of them took part in 'March for Justice', in the US, which constituted one of her most relevant experiences as an activist. The Central Independiente de Trabajadores Agrícolas (CITA), the Rural Migrant Ministry and Justice for Farmworkers organised this march, which started in Auburn, NY, on May Day 2004 and finished eleven days later after a pilgrimage of 200 miles in Albany, NY, with a 24 'Vigil for Hope' and a rally. The workers and their organisations demanded that the state senate pass the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act (S 3351).¹⁹⁰

The rally gathered people such as Senator Olga Mendez, sponsor of the Act, Dennis Hughes, president of the New York State AFL-CIO, and Lucas Benitez, leader of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Florida (CIW).¹⁹¹ CITA's leader, Rosa Rivera, summed up the workers' demands as a day of rest, the right to collective bargaining, and overtime pay.

The idea of organising a religious pilgrimage in order to highlight the plight of migrant agricultural workers in the US was not new. Between March and April 1966, the United Farm Workers Association (UFW)¹⁹² staged a 300-mile march from Delano (California) to Sacramento, arriving on Easter Sunday. Organised in the context of the rise of the civil rights movement in the US, the march intended to attract wide national support for agricultural workers in Californian table-grape farms, and support their

¹⁹⁰ People's Weekly World Newspaper, 05/22/04 <http://www.pww.org/article/view/5265/1/216/>

¹⁹¹ CIW was founded in 1995. This worker centre is made up mostly of migrants working in the tomato fields of the town of Immokolee. CIW acquired national media coverage when they targeted Taco Bell (part of food giant Yum! Brands, also owner of Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, etc.), the purchaser of most tomatoes to growers in the area, in order to get a wage increase of 1 cent per pound of tomatoes which would go directly to the workers. They used the boycott as their main tactic (together with three general strikes, a thirty-day hunger strike in 2003, and a 240 mile march across Florida). CIW also organised a national campaign with Jobs with Justice, church groups, unions, students (up to 22 campuses), and a network of worker centres in order to support their boycott, which they won. Taco agreed to double the percentage that went to workers, buy tomatoes only from growers that agreed to it, and to a code of conduct for fast-food industry suppliers with the CIW as a monitoring organisation (Moody 2007: 219-220).

¹⁹² Founded as National Farms Workers Association by Cesar Chavez in 1962.

strikes and boycotts of table grapes. These workers were based in Southern San Joaquín Valley, but the march was also intended to win the direct support of farmworkers outside the valley. As they passed towns and communities, there were rallies and nightly programmes. The precedent of this march had been the 1964 civil rights movement's Freedom March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama's state capital (Mooney and Majka 1995: 157). The religious element and the support of the catholic clergy, church groups, members of labour union locals, civil rights activists and college students were part of the march in 1966 as in 2004.

What model should an Irish Worker Centre follow?

MRCI laid out its organising plan in early December 2005 based on experiences like the previous one. CITA had tried to help workers to articulate themselves their demands and to communicate them to the employers, working in three main areas: (1) enforcement of the current law; (2) organising the negotiation of contracts with employers; (3) and the introduction of policy changes by lobbying the government. Following those guidelines, MRCI formulated the aims of the projected mushroom workers support group in Ireland, as we have already seen in the previous chapter:

(1) to bring migrant workers together; (2) to offer a space where they can share their experiences; (3) to work on the main issues that affect the lives of these immigrant workers, and allow them to decide how far they can go in challenging their current situation at work or in society.

This early statement became the roadmap that MRCI followed. The aims of MWSG were later defined by MRCI as, (1) share, analyse and reflect upon [workers'] experiences; (2) receive support and information; (3) build solidarity across ethnic divisions; (4) develop leadership skills; (5) be empowered to make decisions on how to go about seeking change; (6) build visibility and a voice; (7) take action on the critical issues affecting [workers or members'] lives.¹⁹³ The MWSG was not, on the other hand, the first immigrant workers group set up by MRCI – the Domestic Workers Support Group (DWSG) had preceded it. We need, therefore, to know more about MRCI in order to understand the trajectory of the MWSG.

MRCI

In March 2007, 17 MWSG members met during a weekend in a retreat house in Brittas Bay, County Wicklow, in order to evaluate the short history of the group and discuss its

¹⁹³ <http://www.mrci.ie>

future.¹⁹⁴ It was also a group-building occasion. The retreat house belonged to the Columban order. One of the founders of MRCI, a 71 year-old Columban nun, attended some of the meetings. She had come along to spend most of the weekend at the nursing home for retired nuns located in a building next to the retreat house. On Sunday afternoon, after getting mass, she had time to tell me part of the brief story of MRCI. But she started by telling the story of the Columban Society, which was founded in 1916 in Ireland, and it was known as the Maynooth Mission to China.¹⁹⁵ When the *communists* won the civil war at the end of the 1940s, the order was expelled from the country and moved to the Philippines. She entered the order in Ireland, when it had already been established in the Philippines. She moved there and spent over 20 years teaching English and doing social work. From there she was sent to Chile, where she stayed for 8 years before returning to Ireland.

She was one of the five Columban missionaries, including Bobby Gilmore, who founded MRCI in 2001.¹⁹⁶ They all had been missionaries for most of their lives in poor countries. When they returned to Ireland, they witnessed the economic growth that started in 1993-1994 and the arrival of migrant workers to Ireland. They were originally in touch with migrants from the Philippines, because of their links with this country, and became aware of the needs of this group. They wanted to make them feel welcome and also give them basic information about their rights and entitlements. At first, they thought about setting up a Filipino migrant association, but considered that it was too narrow. That is how MRCI was created. The founders of MRCI had spent ‘too long abroad’, according to the nun, and had no expertise in the Irish legal, labour, and migration systems. One of their first moves was to hire a part-time staff.

In February 2009, seven years after it was set up, MRCI had a staff of sixteen people, including five caseworkers and three community workers.¹⁹⁷ The headquarters had moved in 2005 from a basement in the Stella Maris building, beside Liberty Hall to a whole building in Parnell Square, Dublin. Through its drop-in centre and helpline, MRCI provides information, advice and assistance to migrant workers and their families. Another two programmes, community work and policy engagement, completed the work of this organisation. MRCI has tried since its foundation to influence Irish migration policy as a way to improve the living conditions of migrant

¹⁹⁴ I talk about the event in the next chapter.

¹⁹⁵ www.columban.com/histir1.htm

¹⁹⁶ He was the public face of MRCI during the first four or five years of existence of this organisation.

¹⁹⁷ <http://www.mrci.ie> (accessed 23 Feb 2009)

workers and facilitating their integration into Irish society.¹⁹⁸

Domestic Workers

It was its Community Work Programme that led MRCI to get involved in organising migrant workers. That work started with domestic workers and ended up with the setting up of the Domestic Workers Support Group (DWSG). In December 2004, MRCI published a report based on work over a six-months period in 2003 with a group of 20 migrant women employed in private homes, who had gone to the drop-in centre to ask for help (MRCI 2004: 9). The report highlighted that the net average wages of these women during that period were between €112 and €350 for working anything between 20 and 80 hours per week. The minimum wage in 2003 was €6.35 per hour. Irish families, on the other hand, were paying between €550 and €900 per child sent to a crèche, and personal care assistants were charging around €12 per hour. The cost of a place in a private nursing home was between €600 and €1000 per month (MRCI 2004: 14).

Those figures indicate that an informal market based on migrant workers on very low wages developed in the area of domestic work, mostly because of the high market price of that work and its high demand. How could that type of exploitation take place? The report says that domestic workers are not recognised as equal to other workers (MRCI 2004: 35). The Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment (DETE), on the other hand, does not grant work permits for domestic work since they are jobs open to ‘exploitation’. These permits are rather granted for care workers and ‘nannies’. According to the report (2004: 15), domestic work included tasks such as cleaning houses, clothes and dishes; shopping, cooking and serving meals. This non-definition of domestic work, according to the report (2004: 21), allowed for ‘exploitation’ to take place. The report contains interesting personal accounts of that kind of *exploitation*.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ <http://www.mrci.ie>

¹⁹⁹ One example is the story of Josie, a qualified primary school teacher from the Philippines (2004: 19). This is an extract: ‘On the first day of her employment, she was given a list of duties which was seven pages long. She was expected to carry out these duties each morning. There were 13 rooms in the house, not including bathrooms. Josie was paid €200.00 a week. Her employers informed her that she should only be receiving €160.00 but as she was a qualified teacher she was being paid more. Her contract stated she would receive €250. When she attempted to clarify the terms of her contract, she was informed this was the arrangement between the agency and the employer. Josie worked from 8am to 8pm, on average 6 days a week. She also worked two nights a week babysitting for the family. She received one hour off per day. She did not receive any extra pay for working bank holidays or Sundays. Even though her employers informed her at the beginning that she could have friends to stay, when she did bring a friend she was told her friend was not welcome. Josie’s only form of social activity outside the house was attending the local church. She knew no one in the area.’

The report found out that, although migrant workers tend to be unaware of their rights, lack of awareness about rights and entitlements was not the problem (2004: 34):

A number of the women stated they had some level of awareness of employment rights but because of the nature of the employment and the degree of control the employer has over them, it meant nothing. One woman when asked if being aware of her employment rights would have made a difference replied 'No, they were never going to treat me well'. Another spoke about the reaction of her employer when she raised questions about her contract and the agreement they had signed, she was told 'that a different arrangement had been made with the agency'.

Most institutional campaigns, however, aim at informing migrant workers just about their rights, and knowledge of these rights is a good step before claiming for them. The report points out that knowledge of rights allowed some domestic workers to renegotiate their conditions of employment with their employers. It gave them at least some confidence and arguments to argue with the employer. But in general, the fear of being deported made most women not want to face their employers, or just leave the job when working conditions became unbearable. Some women were fired for simply asking about their rights (2004: 35-6). What campaigns about rights and entitlements tend to leave unaddressed is how to implement and enforce those entitlements. They usually explain the legal path to follow, but do not recommend or explain to migrant workers how to get organized in trade unions to fight for their legal entitlements, or improve them. The community workers of MRCI were aware of that.

The report was intended at influencing policy making. It recommended, among other things, a reform of the work-permit system, so for instance the employee rather than the employer holds the work permit. But the most interesting recommendation, from the point of view of this dissertation, was the creation of a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) in the Labour Court to determine rates of pay and job description for domestic work, and the involvement of trade unions in that regard. The report says that (2004: 45),

Traditional ways of recruiting and organising trade union membership is premised on a notion of the workplace as an organised, formal space. This results in great difficulties for people employed in the private home becoming involved or having their interests represented by trade unions. Trade unions should actively seek to promote migrant women's issues and concerns as part of their core work programme, including national pay agreements. Alternative ways for involving these women in the activities of the trade union movement should be developed.

This is perhaps the statement that better connects the work of MRCI with worker centres in the US. MRCI was pointing to a group of migrant workers employed in one of the most difficult sectors to organise. Although it was not clearly suggesting the

organisation of these workers, MRCI was demanding the support of the trade union movement in order to create a JLC for domestic workers, which could potentially lead to workers' unionisation, and also opened the way for trade unions to pay more attention to women, migrant workers, temporary workers, and the low-paid in general, those who in Ireland were not included in the traditional categories of trade union members. The report also asked unions to go beyond the traditional notion of workplace. That can only mean a community approach. This was at the end of 2004, before the GAMA and Irish Ferries cases made their impact in popular consciousness, and before SIPTU, the largest trade union in Ireland, began to mobilise its resources to highlight the exploitation of migrant workers.

At the beginning of 2007, the DWSG announced that they were in the process of negotiating a JLC for domestic workers.²⁰⁰ They were looking for the support of SIPTU as well as 'good employers' to get involved in the campaign. These efforts led to a new Code of Practice for Protecting Persons Employed in Other People's Homes, which the Minister for Labour Affairs signed on 18th May 2007. Yet, the Code fell short of what the group was looking for:²⁰¹

while the code addresses some of the most shocking violations in this sector it is only aspirational, ie. it describes what should and shouldn't be done in theory... it does not have enforcement mechanisms in place to deal with anyone who is in breach of it... 'the long-term solution [frame] lies in establishing a Joint Labour Committee... [it would] have enforcement mechanisms in place.'

Either way, enforcement mechanisms were not enough for MRCI. As we have seen, the 2004 report made the suggestion that unions should get involved in the organisation of these types of workers. Mike Jennings, Regional Secretary of SIPTU, actually said in a conference on union organising and migrant workers in May 2006 that his union was closely working with MRCI in the organisation of domestic workers and that this was a model to follow in the future. The new Code of Practice, on the other hand, was the product of negotiations *Towards 2016*, and was developed between MRCI, ICTU, and SIPTU.²⁰² According to MRCI, the DWSG was in Autumn 2008 in the first stages of unionisation.²⁰³ This informal structure and the report that MRCI produced at the end of 2004 highlighting abuses to domestic workers, however, were enough to connect with wider concerns over migrants' exploitation and the 'race to the bottom' denounced by trade unions. These were the bases that allowed MRCI to have an impact on policy

²⁰⁰ Migrant Rights Centre Ireland's Newsletter 2 Jan 2007, page 11

²⁰¹ Migrant Rights Centre Ireland's Newsletter 3 July 2007, page 12.

²⁰² MRCI e-bulletin May-June 2007

²⁰³ www.mrci.ie

making.

Apart from the Domestic Workers Group, MRCI also established a Restaurant Workers Action Group in Dublin, a Women's Group, and it is running a Migrants Forum once every six weeks. The motto behind all these programmes has been the full inclusion and participation of migrant workers in Irish society. What MRCI is trying to do is to empower migrant workers, at least to the level of Irish workers. This by itself does not have to challenge the class divide and social structural inequalities present in Irish society. But a process of empowerment does not have to stop at that; it could go beyond the current legal Irish framework if workers are willing to follow that path. As MRCI states, community work aims at bringing about the active participation of those who experience exclusion in 'decision-making structures' through collective action, through solidarity rather than charity. MRCI is concerned with 'structural inequalities and power dynamics' as class structures, racism and sexism, and seek to 'understand and address the root causes of inequality'.²⁰⁴ In pursuing these goals, MRCI attempts also to work with other groups who share those concerns. It is in that way that MRCI can work with trade unions as a part of the labour movement. That clearly goes beyond giving information, advice, and legal aid to migrant workers. It is not clear, however, what MRCI means by 'the root causes of inequality and the structural inequalities in society'. MRCI has only given in written statements some clues in that regard.²⁰⁵

The Irish labour market, like in all other Western countries, continues to undergo radical changes, such as a shift to short-term contracts, reliance on agency staff, increase in low paid service type jobs, informal working practices alongside the growth in high skilled, high paid employment opportunities in IT and so on. What is also clear is that indigenous Irish people are increasingly less inclined to work in unattractive jobs, and that migrant workers will continue to be recruited into the future.

Those ideas seem to come directly from social science and community studies textbooks. Migrants, in that analysis, fill mainly 'problematic work sectors... notorious for informal work practices and non-compliance with rules and regulations.' It is, therefore, those informal work practices and non-compliance what MRCI wants to address. The root causes of inequalities, however, are not exposed, unless she refers to inequalities between immigrant and local workers, rather than between labour and capital.

In relation to the issue of accountability, private donors and state agencies fund the work of MRCI. The goals and annual plans of MRCI are discussed and approved by a

²⁰⁴ www.mrci.ie

²⁰⁵ Migrant Rights Centre Ireland's Newsletter, 4 Jan 2008

reduce number of non-elected members of MRCI's board of directors. That is, the people that they claim to represent, mostly non-EU migrant workers, are not members of MRCI and do not have voting rights.²⁰⁶ On the other hand, the groups that MRCI has created have formal autonomy and MRCI staff in theory are only facilitators. Funding for their activities comes through MRCI. In pursuing its goals, MRCI has appealed to employers and state agencies as well as trade unions. Niall Crowley, Chief Executive Officer of the Equality Authority, for example, wrote the foreword of the report on domestic work. In it he said:

The experience of discrimination by migrant workers has emerged as a significant focus for the Equality Authority in our casework. Domestic workers have sought redress under the Employment Equality Act 1998. However, previous to the enactment of the Equality Act 2004 in July 2004 this was not possible as employment in a private household was exempt. That situation has now changed as the Employment Equality Acts 1998 and 2004 provide some protection for migrant workers in domestic employment. The recruitment of people into private households continues to be exempt. This new protection for migrant women employed in the private home will hopefully deter employers from discrimination and stimulate an employment practice that is non discriminatory, that makes adjustment for cultural and linguistic diversity, and that promotes equality. This is an outcome that the Equality Authority looks forward to contributing to.

In this case, the goals of equality that the state and MRCI pursuit are complementary, although MRCI is more coherent in pursuing them. Or in other words, the state assumes those goals and enacts legislation only under pressure. Yet, the new Code of Practice for Protecting Persons Employed in Other People's Homes in May 2007 fell short of a new JLC. While MRCI is pushing legislation, the state pulls the brakes. It is here where MRCI radicalism lies in *normal times*.

Another state agency created under the pressure of trade unions and MRCI was NERA (National Employment Rights Authority), established in February 2007 as a part of the *Towards 2016* Social Partnership agreement. This new agency brought together the Employment Rights Information Unit, the Labour Inspectorate, and the Prosecution and Enforcement Unit. NERA functions consist of providing information to employers and employees, to carry out inspections in workplaces, and prosecute employers who breach the law. As MRCI and trade unions put the state under pressure, the state also put MRCI and unions under pressure in order to integrate their goals with the goals of the state. The state tries to define the rules of the game, the framework within which

²⁰⁶ A MRCI e-bulletin (Summer 2009) reported that two migrant workers had been co-opted to the MRCI board of directors, for the first time, although they had been co-opted rather than elected.

struggles over power are going to be fought out. NERA's director, Ger Deering, said.²⁰⁷

Our information campaign and inspections will focus on specific industries and businesses, and target employers and workers in these sectors. We also hope to communicate with organizations such as MRCI and use their information to help us know which sectors to target.

Another key role I would see for MRCI and similar organizations is in building employees' confidence in State agencies, i.e. in the employment rights bodies like NERA, or the Labour Court. MRCI can help to bridge the gap between migrant workers and the State and link them into the system.

Statements of this kind do not necessarily limit MRCI's goals, but it implies that demands must be framed in such a way that the state can deal with them. The vagueness of MRCI about 'the root causes of inequality' also allows for a degree of ambiguity in the relationship between MRCI and the state. A partnership with the state, on the other hand, can be part of MRCI's development approach, which consists in supporting more effective policy development. Funding constitutes another limiting factor. It is, however, pressure from below what can contribute to define MRCI's goals more precisely. Development, according to MRCI, is an aided process through which migrants engage in policy discussions in order to take up leadership positions and empower themselves. Policy-making is one of its ends. According to MRCI, 'a development approach maximizes the possibility that a person/group can pursue their complaints to a successful conclusion'. It also involves a 'person-centered versus client-centered approach' and 'building trust and communication'.²⁰⁸

An MRCI document on mushroom workers, 'Harvesting Justice' (MRCI 2006) spoke of a community approach, which is no different from the development approach:

Community work addresses the root causes of poverty, inequality and exclusion. It seeks to support people and their communities to develop an analysis of their situation and take collective action to address it. Community work seeks to bring about the active participation of people experiencing exclusion in decision-making structures.

'Popular power' (see chapter 6) seems to be, therefore, the goal, the means to achieve goals and to define them. But we had better look at these issues in the practical work of MRCI, particularly in the process of setting up the MWSG and, later, AgWA. The next section shows some of the structural limits posed by the institutional network of the state (in the context of MRCI's mushroom industry campaign) to the goals of implementing (migrant) workers' rights and 'popular power'. After that I will

²⁰⁷ Migrant Rights Centre Ireland's Newsletter 2 Jan 2007, page 8.

²⁰⁸ Migrant Rights Centre Ireland's Newsletter, 4 Jan 2008.

concentrate on the steps that led to the constitution of the MWSG.

A conference in Castleblaney

When MRCI looked into the idea of creating a support group for mushroom workers, the first step was to localise the counties with the highest concentration of mushroom workers in Ireland. One third of mushroom farms in the Republic of Ireland were in County Monaghan. The first opportunity to establish contacts with institutions working with migrant workers in and around County Monaghan arose the first of December 2005. Monaghan County Partnership organised a one-day conference, 'Employing Migrant workers – Best practices' in the Glencarn Hotel in Castleblaney (Co Monaghan). The conference was organised mainly for employers in order to help them to introduce fair work practices and promote the multicultural integration of the workforce in local companies. The main interventions in the conference argued that employers would increase workers' productivity and profits in that way.

Joe Heron, from Diversity at Work Network (DAWN),²⁰⁹ for example, said that *best practice* with migrant workers could guarantee reduced staff turnover, overcome labour shortages, open new markets, avoid litigation, and improve the companies' reputation. If most Irish employers complied with the law, he added, why should they allow unfair competition from 'cowboys'? Profits and fair practices in his opinion did not exclude each other. Denise Cranston, diversity director from *Business in the Community* in Northern Ireland, defined *best practice* as the way to get the best out of migrant workers by promoting a code of practice based on integration into the host community and preventing discrimination in the workplace.²¹⁰ She put the example of Foyle Food Group, in Northern Ireland. This company is a member of *Business in the Community*. Half of its workforce, she said, was made up of non-national workers. By applying the 'voluntary Code of Practice' of *Business in the Community* they reduced annual staff turnover from 38 to 19 percent, and absenteeism from 4.8 to 2.1 percent between 2002 and 2004.

As a matter of interest, *Business in the Community* in Northern Ireland named Musgrave Retail Partners NI (formerly Musgrave SuperValu-Centra) Company of the

²⁰⁹ 'A partnership between the Chamber of Commerce of Ireland, Institute of Technology Blanchardstown and the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism. The project is primarily funded by the EU Community Equal Initiative.'
(<http://www.nccri.ie/dawn.html>)

²¹⁰ '*Business in the Community* is a membership of companies with the leadership to translate corporate values and commitments into mainstream management practice.'
(http://www.bitc.org.uk/who_we_are/index.html)

Year 2007 in its Regional Awards. *Business in the Community* actually recognised ‘the company’s excellence in incorporating responsible business into commercial activities, with positive impacts across the environment, community and the workplace.’ The company had over 200 local suppliers, producers and growers in Northern Ireland to supply their SuperValue and Centra retail partners.²¹¹

It was also in May 2007 when the Polish section of the Independent Workers Union released a report on the ‘discrimination against and exploitation of agency workers’, mostly Polish, in a warehouse of Musgrave Supervalu Centra Fonthill, in Dublin.²¹² The company had a two-tier system: workers directly employed by Musgrave, Irish and SIPTU members, also called Distribution Team Members; and agency workers from Multiplex, DRC and MRT agencies, mostly Polish and non-unionized, although some of them had joined confidentially the Polish branch of IWU.

According to the report, the two-tier system meant that agency workers had 12-hour working days (14 hours if it was busy) when there was work, while DTMs worked 10 hours, four days a week. Usually, line managers divided the items to pick between ‘good’, easy to pick and light, and ‘bad’, heavy and more difficult to manipulate. The DTMs tended to get the ‘good’ items. While DTMs were asked for a productivity rate of 90 products per hour, agency workers had to do 120 products. In relation to breaks, DTMs could take up to 2 hours of their 10-hour shift; agency workers, 1 hour during their 12-hour shift. Agency workers did not get either, no matter how many years they had worked for Musgrave, Christmas bonuses, right to paternity or maternity leaves; and could not use the Social Club. The report concluded:

By putting SIPTU members in a privileged position (which is only a degree better than agency workers) Musgrave and the agencies have divided the work force by generating a sense of superiority towards and disdain for their fellow workers from the agencies amongst DTMs. Line managers are careful to develop and widen these divisions by favouring DTMs with better item orders and better working conditions to the detriment of the health, safety and well being of agency workers... Agency workers are paid less, are subject to cruel, humiliating and degrading treatment and exploitation and are denied their basic rights.

The discrimination against a group of workers, mostly Polish and agency workers, led to a short *wildcat* strike of the agency workers, seconded by the Irish workers (the DTMs) on the 26 April 2007, at 7pm.²¹³

Perhaps Musgrave applied the *Business in the Community* ‘voluntary Code of

²¹¹ http://www.bitc.org.uk/resources/case_studies/musgrave_retail.html

²¹² <http://pl.indymedia.org/media/2007/05//28583.pdf>

²¹³ Radoslaw Sawicki, Polish branch of the Independent Workers Union, tells the story of this strike (<http://www.indymedia.ie/article/82223>).

Practice' in the North while they did not apply it in the South, or perhaps Musgrave's discriminating and lean work practices went unnoticed. In fact, of the nine points that *Business in the Community* placed in their website to support the concession of the award, only one clearly refers to labour relations.²¹⁴ It states that 72 percent of 'employees' recommended Musgrave NI as a good place to work. But, as we have seen in the previous chapter, GAMA workers before they went on strike also had said to labour inspectors that they had no complaints. The quote above also shows two things. On the one hand, migrant and Irish workers, although organised in different segments and with different labour standards and wages, joined in collective action bypassing legal channels and union structures (wildcat strike). The Irish workers, although much better placed, felt that future company's re-structurations were going to affect them negatively. On the other hand, labour standards and labour legislation cannot be implemented in a context of market competition unless workers are organised.

During the one-day conference in Castleblaney, a man from the audience asked whether the voluntary Code of Practice could be applied to small companies and whether these companies could afford complying with the law. Joe Heron answered that not complying with the law could have serious consequences for small companies. Employers would be held responsible for any abuse or discrimination at work. Yet, around two years after Joe Heron said those words, the National Employment Rights Authority (NERA) released the figures with the number of labour inspections and prosecutions carried out in the Republic of Ireland in 2006 and 2007: 3,944 inspections, 296 cases breaches of the law, only one prosecution (see previous chapter).

Some MRCI staff attended the conference with the idea of meeting key people who could put them in touch with mushroom workers in Co Monaghan in order to organise a meeting with mushroom workers in two-weeks time. Gerard Callan, community outreach worker for Monaghan County Partnership and chief organiser of the event, was one of the few people at the conference, apart from me, who had been in touch with mushroom workers. He had already organised three meetings in County Monaghan with migrant workers between November 2004 and March 2005: Carrickmacross (23/11/04), Monaghan (03/02/05), and Clones (15/03/05). Gerard Callan wrote a report on these meetings.²¹⁵

One of the most important concerns raised in the document was the increasing number of migrant workers arriving in Ireland and 'recent debates' centred on their

²¹⁴ http://www.bitc.org.uk/resources/case_studies/musgrave_retail.html

²¹⁵ http://www.monaghanpartnership.com/dloads/Migrant_Workers_in_Co_Monaghan.pdf

exploitation rather than on their contribution to society. As a ‘clear example of exploitation’, the report mentioned the case of a Ukrainian woman who had both legs amputated in Northern Ireland.²¹⁶ Therefore, the document went on, migrant workers had become a target group of the County Partnership. The stated role of those meetings was to hear from them what their real concerns were rather than the ‘perceived’ needs by the authorities. But to do what?

The meetings consisted in giving information about Rights and Entitlements and a discussion afterwards with migrant workers in order to outline positive experiences, negative ones, and identify current needs. At the meeting in Monaghan a number of workers (mushroom pickers) brought up the issue of ‘exploitation’ at work. They said that they were continually working 12-15 hours. One worker said that they felt like slaves and that employers used the language barrier to exploit them: ‘The common perception was that some employers were using the work permit as a means of exploiting people ... A number of workers were unable to take any sick leave for fear and the threat of losing their job. *Quite simply, they were unaware of their entitlements.*’ (My emphasis). The main conclusion of the report was that migrant workers needed more information on employment rights. It recommended to County Monaghan Partnership to forward a letter to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment in order to inform them of the questions that workers had raised. The report did not address employees’ fear, and there was no suggestion of informing ICTU, which is one of the social partners.

On 29th September 2006, Monaghan County Partnership, decided to start implementing the roadmap designed after the three meetings with migrant workers in 2004-2005 and the one-day conference in December 2005. The County Partnership called a number of community groups, and MRCI to a meeting of the Monaghan Multicultural Network (newly created) at the Partnership’s headquarters in Castleblaney, Monaghan, and presented a draft for discussion entitled, ‘Good Practice guide for Employers in Co. Monaghan: Employing Foreign Nationals (‘Protecting your Workers: Protecting yourself’)’. The idea was to get an input from different community groups and NGOs working in County Monaghan. But the County Partnership was to submit the

²¹⁶ The relationship between this case and economic exploitation is not direct, but there is a link. More important is how it relates economic exploitation to the living conditions of migrant workers. The media covered this case and it had an impact on social consciousness, the debate on migration, and the government’s decision of not giving social welfare cover to citizens from new EU member states. This woman was laid off in the meat factory where she worked and became homeless (<http://www.independent.ie/national-news/woman-living-rough-has-legs-amputated-277947.html>).

document only to employers.

This was the second meeting. Only local groups attended the first meeting, which according to the minutes was mainly about foreigners' driving license offences. Five members from MWSG attended the second meeting. Gerard Callan was the chairperson. We got a copy of the draft, and went through the sheets. In one page, there was a list with the obligations of employers, informing them about the rights of their employees. Another sheet recommended an induction programme for 'foreign nationals' to integrate them in the company. Most of the ideas came from the talk on best practices: site tour, opening a bank account, local amenities, etc. The draft included a list of incentives for employers to go ahead with good practices in Castleblaney: 'Remember due diligence, the more of an effort you can display, the better for your business', and 'Remember, you are responsible. – Include Racism in your disciplinary procedures.' (Fieldwork notes)

I suggested that union-friendly employers should be one of the points of the guide and an essential part of *best practices*. A man from the Monaghan Community Network then asked whether mushroom farms were profitable, what would happen if mushroom pickers were too slow, and whether it would be fair to demand growers to pay the minimum wage given his assumptions. To my knowledge the document was never published, and I did not get to know whether the Multicultural Network held further meetings.

Some days later, on October the 4th, Cavan County Development Board launched a report on Migrants' Lives in County Cavan at a hotel just outside Cavan town. Four members of MWSG attended it. This was a big gig. Damien O'Reilly, an RTÉ presenter born in Cavan, acted as facilitator. Apart from the members of MWSG, there were three migrant workers, invited by the organisers, who were there to briefly tell about their labour and social experiences in Cavan. There was a large audience of over 150 people mainly from the institutional networks of civil servants and community workers. Joe Heron was again one of the speakers. He said again that the incentives to comply with good labour standards and dealing properly with a multicultural workforce consisted in the higher productivity and efficiency that workers could achieve. He recognised, in reply to a question that I made, that the enforcement of labour law in the private sector, particularly in small firms, was a big problem. It had been discussed in Social Partnership negotiations, and something would have to be worked on, he said.

The one-day conference in Castleblaney (as well as the meeting in Cavan), therefore, was a part of an institutional framework that involved the social partners in the context of labour migration into Ireland and economic exploitation of migrant workers. From

the point of view of migrants' workers own empowerment at the workplace and in society, little could be expected. A participant in this meeting, a member of a community group, told me that the county partnership organisers did not want to know anything about trade unions and that their goals amounted to little more than charity.

The day of the conference in Castleblaney, a MRCI representative talked to Gerard Callan about organising a meeting with mushroom workers in order to learn about their working conditions, and to work on some solutions. Gerard initially agreed with the idea. After consulting with his superior, he came back and said that employers should be invited to the meeting too. After that reply, the MRCI representative brushed him off with a 'we'll be in touch', but she had already decided that it was better not to involve the County Partnership in the organisation of meetings with mushroom workers. In her opinion, workers, particularly agricultural workers, would not voice their concerns in front of their bosses and might not even trust the organisers.

There was also another observer from the mushroom industry, employed by Commercial Mushroom Producers, who had attended it to make some contacts, but on behalf of the employers. I ran into him at the registration desk. He was there only to talk to Sean Murray, Principal Officer in the Economic Migration Unit of the DETE, about the new modifications introduced in the work-permit system. DETE did not allow mushroom farmers to get any more workers on work permits. This adviser wanted to have a word with Mr Murray because CMP was still very interested in getting Thai workers. His argument was that Eastern European workers could move between jobs, since they did not need work permits, and that they were leaving the mushroom farms as soon as they found new jobs. But DETE was not keen on giving new work permits because mushroom growers might be using them to get workers who would not complain if they got pay rates below the minimum wage.

Prelude to the Mushroom Workers Support Group

In the second part of this chapter, I will deal with the steps that led to the constitution of the Mushroom Workers Support Group (MWSG) in August 2006, after MRCI hired a full-time trilingual (English, Russian and Latvian) community worker, and called for a meeting of contacts. Between December 2005 and April 2006, there were a number of meetings with representatives of SIPTU and IWU, followed by three open (Monaghan town) and one closed (Carrickmacross) meetings with mushroom workers. They were a prelude to MWSG, before the community worker started her job with MRCI, but these meetings put MRCI in touch with a number of workers and helped this organisation to

tease out the strategy that MWSG followed later.

The period covered in this section coincides with the negotiations between government, unions and employers for a new partnership deal (*Towards 2016*), when SIPTU decided to enter the mushroom industry. It constitutes more an ethnography of workers' organisers than workers, and also tells about the changing relationship between MRCI and SIPTU from the point-of-view of a participant observer in MRCI's mushroom industry campaign. The next chapter will include the point-of-view of the workers. During the period covered in this section neither MRCI nor SIPTU had any workers organised on mushroom farms and no input came from below. MRCI aimed at a partnership with SIPTU, while the union refused to establish it. So, a co-operation between MRCI and SIPTU, like in the case of domestic workers, did not take place. Some co-operation, nevertheless, took place at the level of information sharing and day-to-day work, particularly in County Cavan at the initiative of SIPTU organisers on the ground. Although the events described in this chapter had implications for thousands of individuals only a small number of individuals played a role in them.

Outlining a strategy

I had informed MRCI in a meeting held in MRCI's headquarters on the 9th of December 2005 that employers were trying to replace Eastern Europeans by bringing Thai and Chinese workers on work permits. That very same day a large demonstration took place in Dublin against the displacement and replacement of the staff of Irish Ferries by foreign workers on lower wages and labour standards. It was interesting to see that the protest never took a nationalist or exclusionary dimension. I got to know in March 2005 that CMP had the green light from DETE to bring mushroom pickers on work permits from Thailand and China, but the GAMA scandal probably had made DETE revoke that permission. In the context of the Irish Ferries affair and discussions towards a new partnership deal, it was unlikely that the government would allow mushroom growers to replace their workforce with 'cheaper' workers. Therefore, the best guarantee was to bring the issue to public knowledge.

MRCI agreed that there had been a good number of articles about exploitation of migrant workers in the media during 2005, and that probably made the minister of DETE back off. Nevertheless they decided to talk with someone in DETE about it in order to put pressure on them and let them know that there were people on the side of the workers. MRCI also passed that information to SIPTU, which the union used during their campaign in the mushroom industry to put pressure on the government and the

employers. That pressure made the concession of work permits to growers unlikely and gave more legitimacy and strength to the campaigns of MRCI and SIPTU in the mushroom industry. MRCI staff also wondered why DETE was so lenient with mushroom growers (there were neither inspections nor prosecutions) when it was obvious that they were not complying with the JLC for agricultural workers.

After the meeting, I was brought for lunch to a place in Parnell Street. From there we could see a growing crowd assembling for the demonstration, but the mind of the MRCI community worker in charge of the mushroom industry project was on the national campaign that had to be organised. She spoke about the struggles of farm workers in the US, particularly a case involving Immokalee tomato pickers in Florida. She said that the workers decided to ask the company that bought the tomatoes, bypassing the growers, for an increase of the prices paid to growers, demanding that the increase be allocated to pickers. It took them a long time and hard campaigning, she went on, but they got it in the end. For her, that was the way to go in the mushroom industry.

Key people's meeting

The first meeting with 'key people' and 'potential allies' took place on the 12th of December in the offices that Independent Workers' Union (IWU) shared with the Ex-prisoners' Assistance Committee (EXPAC) in Monaghan.²¹⁷ EXPAC had already cooperated in the elaboration of a report on migrant workers early in 2005 (Conroy *et al.*, no date). A Lithuanian employee working for an employment agency in Monaghan had helped them to find migrant workers (see chapter 4). EXPAC and IWU did not have any contact with migrant workers, but were interested in taking part in a campaign to organise them. As Declan, EXPAC staff, put it, 'we have a deep concern about migrant issues, and low-paid workers, because they are a group as vulnerable as former prisoners.' Another 'key' institution was the Citizen Information Centre (CIC) in Monaghan town. A CIC representative spoke at the meeting of the 'numerous complains' that they were getting from farm-workers, particularly mushroom pickers.

The MRCI representative explained that MRCI intended to create a farm workers support group to provide a forum where workers could express how they felt, take up their cases, work on changing policies, and get help to communicate with employers. She also insisted that the group should be what the workers wanted it to be. The

²¹⁷ IWU was set up in 2003 in Cork after a split from ATGWU. It had around 1,500 members in 2006 according to some union sources. IWU was not affiliated to ICTU and opposes Social Partnership. EXPAC was set up in the mid 1990s to help the prisoners that were being released as a part of the peace process in the North of Ireland (fieldwork notes).

organisers or facilitators from MRCI, CIC, or IWU, therefore, would have to work towards the forum and provide help to the workers. For CIC their function was to provide information about rights and entitlements. They could also direct people to the institutions that could help workers solve their problems. They were not afraid to speak out if there were cases of abuses, but what they could not do was to advocate for their rights or help them to organise to bring about policy changes. Organising was not part of their agenda, but they could point out that law enforcement was very difficult to achieve since the number of inspectors was very small. For them part of the problem was that a large number of employers did not know the law. CIC-Monaghan sent a representative to the first meeting with mushroom workers in February 2006 to talk about rights and entitlements; the same person that had talked about the same issues at the meetings organised by the County Partnership between 2004 and 2005. That was their only involvement in the campaign.

Next we discussed how to organise a meeting with mushroom workers, but the MRCI representative spent some time talking about organising a national campaign, arguing that if we targeted a big retailer about the underpayment and mistreatment of workers on farms they should feel compelled to take some actions with their suppliers in order to save their faces. There was some truth in that point. Tesco, for example, was a member of Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) in the UK and endorsed together with Wal-Mart, Carrefour and Metro an initiative to promote 'good working conditions' among suppliers (*Financial Times*, 23/1/2007). So, a campaign against sweatshop conditions on Irish mushroom farms could embarrass them. To me, however, it made little sense to talk about a campaign of that kind before having even made contact with mushroom workers. The disclosure of an abusive and illegal use of chemicals in Shannonside Mushrooms, a farm in Carrick-on-Shannon (see chapter 4fn), for example, was possible because the workers already in touch with SIPTU stepped forward. Therefore, it was necessary, in my opinion, to build first a network of contacts.

In relation to organising, two possible strategies were discussed. The MRCI representative said that it was reasonable to fear foremen and that rather than to call for an open meeting it was better to meet workers in their houses. That meant that the priority should be to target individual farms. But the MRCI representative also considered organising an open meeting. I supported the second option because I considered that it was the best way to start the campaign. I had worked on a farm and I knew that it was nearly impossible to get into a farm, or wait for the workers at the gate to talk to them. Growers were very vigilant particularly since the media started to

disclose abuses to workers on mushroom farms. Later in the year, around August 2006, the community worker that MRCI hired for the mushroom campaign told me that there was no point in going to the farms because the boss would see you. Talking in the canteen, if there was that chance, was a risk since anyone could go with the gossip to the boss. I did not rule out, however, going to the farms. My point was not to start in that way. I said that we had better try to make contact first with some workers and then create a network before targeting particular farms. In my opinion, we should not fear foremen because in the first meeting our work would be about giving information and identifying those we could start working with. In any event we had to take some risks. In the end we decided to go for an open meeting to be advertised in Monaghan town with leaflets in the four Eastern-European food shops, post office, library and shopping centres. The poster would be only in Russian, which was the common language on all the farms I knew in County Monaghan.

After the details had been discussed, it fell to MRCI, or rather its representative unilaterally assumed that responsibility from the very beginning, to contact the ‘key people’, ‘potential allies’, who would be present at the meeting. There was no sharing of tasks. She spoke to SIPTU representatives in their headquarters in Dublin and they decided to get involved in the first open meeting with mushroom workers in Monaghan town. According to MRCI, SIPTU wanted to get involved at a national level on migrant issues in general and mushroom workers in particular, probably because they were in negotiations with the government and employers for a new partnership agreement, and they needed some evidence of flagrant exploitation in order to put some extra pressure on the government and the employers to get a better partnership deal. A national campaign would be more successful with SIPTU in order to reach the media, the general public, and the government. But MRCI needed to offer SIPTU in exchange something solid, workers and some facts on workers’ exploitation, something that SIPTU did not have in spite of the Kilnaleck case.

February 2006: the first two meetings with mushroom workers

The first open meeting took place on Friday, 3rd of February 2006, in a community centre in Monaghan town. CIC sent the man who had made the presentations about workers’ rights and entitlements at the three talks that the County Partnership had organised between 2005 and 2006. SIPTU sent the local branch secretaries of Monaghan and Cavan. IWU also sent a representative.

I helped to put up posters. We also stuck flyers on the window screens of all cars

with Eastern registration plates that we came across, particularly in the car-park of the German retailer LIDL, popular among migrant workers. The week before the meeting I had suggested about producing a newsletter for the meeting, and I offered to work on it. At first, the MRCI representative rejected the idea arguing that it could be a way to control workers and not letting them decide what they wanted to do. In the end I convinced her by saying that a newsletter was an excellent organising tool to connect disperse groups of workers, to inform them about their rights and entitlements, and what to do if they felt mistreated or underpaid. More importantly, when workers started to enter the organisation they should take control of the publication, or at least get involved as soon as possible. A couple of days later she told me that the newsletter was ready. The plan was that I was going to write some of the sections, but she took full control of it, and from then on did it all by herself.

MRCI had already got in touch with the guest speakers and set up the agenda for the first meeting. I made the point that we should get the contact numbers of the workers interested in further meetings or in joining the MWSG. Other than that, the meeting just aimed at giving information about rights and entitlements and listening to workers' concerns. We had in mind to organise workers, as a union would do. Eight mushroom pickers made it to that first meeting. Two came from Carrickmacross, four from Castleblaney, and the other two from Monaghan. They had seen the posters at the ethnic food shops. We sat in a circle and MRCI chaired the meeting, asking everyone to introduce themselves. Then the representative from CIC talked about workers' rights for over an hour, slowed down by simultaneous translation. Next, representatives from SIPTU and IWU spoke about the role of unions and how they could help workers. Finally the chairperson asked the eight workers about their concerns. There were some comments about pay slips, maternity leaves, but that was it. No anger except from a former picker whose sister was at the meeting and still working as a picker. After leaving their contact numbers they all left.

We immediately began to plan the next meeting for the 17th February, a very short gap between both meetings. While the first meeting gave information about rights and entitlements, the second meeting intended to focus on workers' concerns and how to handle them, with no more presentations. It was a mere extension of the second part of the first meeting. I argued that we should get to the point this time. I said,

People are going to get tired. They come to the meetings to see how they can get help to solve their problems, but to change things we need to start organising people, and also getting accurate information about wages, working, and living conditions. We have to be clear about that.

The MRCI representative, however, thought that it was too soon. In her opinion, we had to ask workers what was important for them. The MRCI representative seemed to agree with my approach but not with my timing. In a way she was right. To start organising we needed an organiser with a minimum of experience and the language skills we did not have. Without fluency in Russian it was impossible to start organising. Resources were not there yet. But she did not spell it out in that way and it will become clear that, some time later, after MRCI recruited a full-time social worker in June 2006, she still tried to slow down the formal constitution of the group and members taking responsibilities. On the other hand, as we will see in the following chapter, organising became increasingly relegated to a secondary and rhetoric goal, as members did not take a leading role and casework turned into the main focus.

Only four workers, who had also been at the first meeting, attended the second meeting. They were the two sisters living in Monaghan town, one of them, Emilija, former mushroom picker and working in Tesco, and Grazyna and Niele, two friends who picked mushrooms in *Cornalaragh Mushrooms*, a farm in Carrickmacross. Union officials outnumbered them. SIPTU sent four of them: one from Monaghan, two from Cavan, and one from Donegal. That was an indication of the interest that SIPTU was taking in the mushroom industry. IWU was also represented. The trade union officials only spoke to comment in relation to the concerns that workers were raising on rights and entitlements. When the four workers finished, the MRCI representative asked what kind of message we should convey to make workers come along. Emilija said,

I have made phone calls to other people but they didn't come along because some of them are working and afraid to lose their jobs. Others are working illegally. The boss doesn't pay taxes for them, but they are legally in the country. People are very unhappy, but they are afraid to complain because the farm could close and they would lose their jobs. So, they keep working without complaining. They only complain to each other. And, they don't know English and don't have information.

Emilija meant that bosses were telling workers that farm inspections could close farms down if irregularities were found. They also argued that supermarkets paid very little for mushrooms, and the price of inputs like compost, oil and electricity kept going up. So, they were paying as much as they could to workers. Some of them even argued that workers were getting more money than growers. So, some workers concluded that if they wanted to keep their jobs it was better to keep their mouths shut.

For the MRCI representative, there was not a quick solution: 'If there were a quick solution, somebody would have found it out by now. But we also need to know more about what's going on the farms to know what to do; we needed specific information

about working conditions and wages'. The SIPTU's branch secretary in County Cavan said that individually [rather than collectively] workers could contact labour inspectors. IWU immediately argued that workers could do something individually, but to a very limited extent; workers needed a united [collective] response. The problem was how to get the confidence to do it. There were here different unions' outlooks – the servicing union and the fighting union. At a broader level, while SIPTU believed in Social Partnership, IWU was against it.

Emilija's sister was still working on a mushroom farm under hard and illegal conditions. Grazyna and Niele (from a farm in Carrickmacross), instead, seemed to be getting the minimum wage and did not do any overtime. Their main complaints were about holiday time and holiday pay, and the different treatment and working conditions in relation to the two Irish pickers still working on the farm. At the meeting no decision was made on how to solve those problems. In that sense the meeting achieved nothing. The MRCI representative asked Emilija at the end of the meeting whether she was willing to work with us in organising the MWSG. She had shown leadership skills. On her initiative, she had phoned other mushroom workers to bring them to the meeting, her English was excellent, and she seemed to have charisma and energy. In the following weeks the MRCI representative phoned her several times to meet up with her, but she always declined adducing family reasons.

The IWU representative came up with a good idea in the aftermath of the second meeting. He suggested creating a community group that could be based in EXPACT and IWU offices, something that could be called the 'Baltic Community'. The idea was to get funding under that cover and employ someone like Emilija. This centre would be a clinic for migrant workers but also would help to organise them in all economic sectors, not just in the mushroom industry, but the project did not materialise. Such a worker centre would have given this union a link with migrant workers in the area –in Dublin IWU had already a Polish branch and a Polish organiser – and given IWU a lead in organising migrant workers in Monaghan. But in the end it was not pursued. Perhaps IWU expected that cooperation with MRCI could have similar effects, so it was not a good idea to duplicate efforts. When SIPTU turned its back on MRCI and MRCI got a community organiser, this organiser moved to IWU offices. But IWU did not profit from that deal, as it did not become involved, except in a single case, as we will see.

Choosing allies

From the beginning MRCI looked at SIPTU as the best potential ally in order to

organise a national campaign against mistreatment and underpayment on mushroom farming, what was termed as ‘exploitation and displacement’ and the ‘race to the bottom’ in SIPTU’s quarters. It was a logical option. While SIPTU was the largest union in Ireland, IWU was a new and very small union. There was also the precedent of a close cooperation with SIPTU in the case of the Domestic Workers campaign. Yet, MRCI kept in touch with IWU because it was its strategy to involve anyone who could help in organising mushroom workers and a national campaign. On the other hand, they could use IWU’s office in Monaghan town.

In the weeks that followed the second meeting with mushroom pickers, we agreed that from then on we had to focus on organising those who we already were in touch with, working with them in a more informal way, in person, and visiting them in their homes. In County Monaghan, we had four contacts. There was the possibility of working with some of the workers who walked out of their jobs in Kilnaleck in mid January, and MRCI had contacts with some workers in Port Laoise and the batch from County Mayo. Towards the end of February a group of Thai workers in Tipperary contacted MRCI (three or four women and one man; the women pickers, the man a general operator). In MRCI’s opinion, the first thing to do was to identify leaders among them and recruit some organisers who would visit other workers in their homes and workplaces. That work did not get started until MRCI hired a full-time community worker for the mushroom campaign.

MRCI had internally decided to organise a group and build the membership during the next 6 to 9 months, including hiring an organiser fluent in Russian. SIPTU had supposedly given its full support, which implied that the members of the mushroom workers support group would become members of SIPTU. If there was going to be a national campaign, MRCI argued, it had to be with SIPTU. ‘SIPTU needs us, and we need SIPTU’, the MRCI representative used to say. She and I agreed that SIPTU’s interest in ‘organising’ had more to do with making noise since they were negotiating a new national partnership agreement with government and employers, but that they were not going to be organising on the ground. She used to say, ‘It’s going to be us doing most of the [organising] work. But, we can help SIPTU change’. She argued that migrant groups in New York State such as CATA (*El Comité de Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agrícolas* or The Farmworker Support Committee) and CITA (*Centro Independiente de Trabajadores Agrícolas* or Independent Agricultural Workers’ Center) had pushed the AFL-CIO into organising.

Third and fourth meetings: problem-solving rather than organising

In the meantime, MRCI had been preparing the third meeting with mushroom pickers. This time we would go to a pub. From MRCI headquarters in Dublin a Lithuanian employee rang the few contacts we had made so far in County Monaghan. Emilija, Grazyna and Niele (the last two from Carrickmacross) were expected to bring some other people. Representatives from SIPTU or IWU were not invited to this meeting. This time the idea was to talk to the workers in a more informal and private way.

MRCI's plan for this meeting consisted in looking at the different options available to workers to solve their grievances. It was a problem-solving meeting. I did not oppose that plan but I said that it was high time to suggest creating a group. 'We cannot waste anymore time', I said, 'we have to invite them to join the group and eventually elect a chairperson and so on. We can also talk about the different options available to solve their specific problems on their farms. But we must link it to building an organisation. And, only then we can think about a national campaign to target retailers.' The MRCI representative instead argued with more renewed conviction,

I'm thinking more and more about targeting the retailers. That is the best way to change working conditions on farms. We should get them to sign a contract that respects fair labour standards and guarantees that an increase in the price for consumers will go to the workers.

Again that was the model from Immokalee workers in Florida, only that such a campaign in Ireland, without basis on the farms, did not require workers' input even if turned out to be successful. Differences in our approaches were coming up to surface. On the other hand, this immediate problem-solving strategy made some sense. Without having done anything to show that 'we' could help workers, we could have little or no appeal to mushroom workers. But that was more the role of MRCI.

The day of the meeting, a 3rd of March cold and dark, Emilija did not appear. In the parking lot of the community centre, we waited in the car with the heating on. A few minutes before eight, Grazyna and Niele arrived in a Volkswagen Polo with a Lithuanian number plate. 'It is remarkable', I said, 'those two pickers have driven three times from Carrickmacross to attend the meetings.' Niele had arrived in Ireland with her boyfriend in that car, the whole way from Lithuania. Grazyna was married and had a five-year old daughter, which she had brought to the first two meetings. We went to a pub for something to eat. They said that it was handy for them to come to the meetings because on the way they stopped to shop in the Lidl in Castleblaney and in Raduga, the Russian shop in Monaghan. We talked about their working conditions without the help

of any translator. The MRCI representative did not propose the idea of creating a group, instead she arranged a further meeting to talk about ‘the different options available’ to solve their problems. The achievement of the day was that the next meeting was going to take place in the home of Grazyna, in Carrickmacross, and they would try and bring more workers from their farm and another nearby farm. This time we could have the chance of targeting a workplace.

The meeting took place on the 24th March 2006. MRCI had been in touch with Grazyna before the meeting and we knew that the no other women would attend. The group at the meeting, however, ended up being larger than we had expected. With Grazyna and Niele there were Galina, another Lithuanian who worked with them; Petras and Adomas, husbands of Galina and Niele; and Dimitri, Galina’s son. A MRCI staff did the translations. Before the end of the year Grazyna, Adomas, Galina and Petras became members of MWSG and, later, founding members of AgWA. Their farm, *Cornalaragh Mushrooms*, had a total of 16 pickers: 10 Ukrainians, 4 Lithuanians and 2 Irish. The Irish workers were not contacted. One of the Lithuanians refused to go to the meeting to ‘avoid troubles’. In relation to the Ukrainian women, ‘there was nothing to do’, they said, ‘the Ukrainians would tell the boss everything about the meeting with MRCI just to improve their chances to keep their jobs’. After the first meeting in Monaghan, Grazyna and Niele had informed the rest of their co-workers, but ‘all went very quiet’ and since then the Ukrainians were not friendly with them. According to Petras –a fluent speaker in Lithuanian, Russian, Polish and English– ‘before, we all were in the Soviet Union, but now the Lithuanians are European, and the Ukrainians in Ireland have fewer rights. We were like brothers and now this. So, we are not that friendly now.’

On a nearby farm owned by Brendan Connolly, the boss’s brother (Peter), there were 20 pickers, all Lithuanian women, and they could not be convinced to go to the meeting either. Petras once more explained that they were mostly mature women from rural areas who had left their children at home, and could not speak English. They were very afraid to lose their jobs and not being able to find other ones. Grazyna completed the story:

They went to the boss to complain, all together, three or four days ago. They asked the boss [Brendan] for money for holiday pay and for the extra work of moving boxes from the [picking] beds to the [mushroom house entry]. But he told them ‘if you don’t like you can leave’. Now they are afraid and don’t want to ask again.

It looked though that there were grounds to contact them and offer them help. Petras tried to explain why those women were so afraid.

Workers feel that employers don't want to hear about rights. In general, the relations between employers and employees are good once employees don't speak about money [and don't complain].

This was just one example of what difficulties any organising campaign in the mushroom industry was likely to encounter. Lithuanians, although EU citizens, looked very difficult to organise; Ukrainians, hopeless. Both were afraid to lose their jobs, and not be able to find any alternative job, but Ukrainians were on top of that afraid of losing their right to work. For them there was no option of changing jobs, and labour was not short in supply.

MRCI was also interested in hearing about the immediate issues, casework type, that were important for the workers and that MRCI could help to solve. They mentioned, in that order, holiday pay, overtime, Sunday and bank-holiday-premium, and went into more specific complaints. The piece-rate system (except for Niele, who was still under training and was paid time wages) meant that they did not get paid for their work when there was a bad crop and pickers had to pick mushrooms just to throw them away. But perhaps what annoyed them most was the discrimination that they suffered in relation to the two Irish pickers, who got time wages plus a bonus, and did not have to work weekends or bank holidays. For MRCI this was a clear case of discrimination. The MRCI representative said slowly to allow the translator to put it in Russian:

All you want to get is what you are entitled to. The only one who is on the wrong side is your employer. When you get all your entitlements, you don't have to stop there. If you want to improve other things above your minimum entitlements you have the right to do it. We'll do that in the future.

At this point, she proceeded with her facilitation plan by laying out the different options to handle the workers' concerns. The first option consisted in workers talking to the boss by themselves. The group listened to her but nobody blinked an eye. We had already heard the story about the women who went and talked to Brendan Connolly, the boss. As a second option MRCI could negotiate with the boss on behalf of the workers with MRCI as their representative. She paused and left time for the translation to settle in, but there was not any response to this option either.²¹⁸ The third option consisted in lodging an anonymous claim with the labour inspectorate. The problem was that it took a long time for the labour inspectors to go through it. Nevertheless it put some pressure on the employer, as he knew that he would be investigated and might take any complaints more seriously, whether coming from the workers directly or from an external representative.

²¹⁸ In the end that was what MRCI ended up doing after the group was set up, from August on.

Petras spoke about a farm, which he did not name, that had gone through a labour inspection before: ‘The employer had prepared everything [cooked the books] for that visit and got away without any fine. Why that was the case?’ Petras asked. Rather than offering an explanation, the representative from MRCI proceeded with her last option – the Labour Commissioner. The cases were normally seen quickly and the two parties had to meet, but this typically happened when a worker had been fired. This implied that workers or their representatives had talked with the employer before going to the Labour Commission. Again we witnessed the same motionless and expecting faces that we had seen before. I suggested that joining a trade union was another option. Unions, for example, could go to the Labour Commissioner to deal with workers’ grievances. An NGO could not represent workers in that way while workers were still in employment. For the first time there was a positive reaction. They quickly manifested their wish to join a trade union in the belief that unions had the power to guarantee full rights and entitlement to workers. Grazyna and Niele, we must remember, had listened to the representatives of IWU and SIPTU in the first two meetings in February, when the unions had introduced themselves as the workers’ problem-solving institutions.

The MRCI representative gave them two options: ‘a small but active union’, IWU, or ‘a big but sometimes not very efficient union’, SIPTU. She pointed at the table in front of us and said that SIPTU was the table. Then she pointed at a mug on the table and said that it was IWU. Put it like that there was no doubt that they would go for SIPTU, the table. Petras and Adomas knew SIPTU’s office in Maynooth. We advised contacting SIPTU’s organising unit. We had the hope that the organising unit would take charge of SIPTU’s campaign. Later, the way in which SIPTU dealt with these workers disappointed us, although it did not come as a big surprise.

SIPTU launches its campaign

Previous encounters between representatives of MRCI and SIPTU indicated the likelihood of partnership between these two organisations but the article in the *Irish Independent* on Saturday the 25th of March, which announced that SIPTU was launching a campaign to clean up the mushroom industry (see previous chapter), took MRCI by surprise. MRCI admitted that it was good that they were going to do something but ‘it would be nice to include us’, a MRCI representative said after recalling how MRCI had been so generous and open with SIPTU giving information about the mushroom industry.

All plans for a national campaign with SIPTU were dropped for the time being.

MRCI new strategy was to ‘hit the road and start going to farms to contact workers and inform them of the Support Group’. Organising was again the chief task for MRCI, and cooperation with IWU was open again. On the 6th of May, EXPAC held its annual conference at the Hillgrove Hotel in Monaghan town and a MRCI representative was invited to address the participants at the end of it on the topic of migrant workers. IWU’s idea was to propose the creation of a migrant centre in Monaghan but the ‘EU Programme for Peace & Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland (2000-2006)’ had awarded MRCI with €85,000 for its work with mushroom workers.²¹⁹ Part of that money (€32,000 to 35,000)²²⁰ would be used to hire a bilingual ‘development worker’, who would work more like an organiser, for a one-year period.

This new organiser would be located in EXPAC offices and would refer mushroom workers to IWU, although IWU did not mind if some were referred to SIPTU. In the end, it did not happen that way, and the core group of MWSG became SIPTU members, as we will see in the next chapter. The first workers in joining IWU were Grazyna, Niele and Galina, from Carrickmacross. That was in June. SIPTU never got in touch with them. IWU, with the assistance of MRCI, took up their case. That was a little step full of significance, as it became the first case of mushroom pickers claiming money, following a legal process through the Labour Commissioner, and affiliated to a trade union while still in employment. Before there have been a few cases (i.e. Belmullet, Port-Laoise, Kilnaleck) of groups of workers who had taken up cases after being sacked or leaving their jobs. This time SIPTU’s media and lobbying campaign made the difference. CMP and the Employers Committee were demanding growers not to give any unnecessary excuses to SIPTU or MRCI to feed the media with more cases of migrant workers being underpaid or mistreated.

As we have seen, Peter Connolly got substantial grant aid from DAF under the ‘Capital Investment Scheme for marketing and processing’, but we did not know how much he got under the ‘Capital Investment Grants for the Development of the Horticulture Industry’. In 2006, DAF awarded €2.155 m to 34 mushroom enterprises²²¹, but DAF did not disclose the names of those who got the grants, not even when MRCI applied under the freedom of information act. So, MRCI could not point out who was exploiting workers and getting grant aid. Mr Connolly opted for facing the union, and later the Labour Commissioner, over unpaid wages, but did not, or could not, get rid of the workers immediately. Nevertheless, as a pressure strategy, the grower called to his

²¹⁹ MRCI, Evaluation report (10/9/2007)

²²⁰ MRCI e-bulletin, May 2006

²²¹ <http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/press/pressreleases/2006/april/title,13170,en.html>

office the two pickers demanding unpaid wages to tell them that he knew they were in a trade union, but he did nothing other than offering them a written contract. In the end, however, he managed to push these two workers out of their jobs. The Lithuanians started to get fewer hours and got their working week reduced to three working days. The boss awarded the Ukrainians with more hours for their 'loyalty'. A couple of months later Grazyna left the farm after getting a job elsewhere. It took Niele longer to find an alternative job. Mr Connolly, in the end, got rid of the Lithuanians.

This case had more to do with casework than with union organising, although it was the first time that migrant mushroom workers, while in employment, had challenged a grower through a trade union. Yet, a union branch was not organised in the workplace, and workers did not take control of their own struggle; rather, it was waged on their behalf.

MRCI recruits a 'development worker': the MWSG starts functioning

In May 2006 MRCI was looking for candidates fluent in Russian and in either Latvian or Lithuanian for the position of 'community worker' (the official term used by MRCI. In the funding application form they used the term 'development worker') and thinking of the coming strategy that MRCI would adopt in the mushroom campaign. The first task would consist of getting a list of farms, their location and output, and growers' names. Finding out about working conditions would be next. The work at ground level was going to fall on the community worker. A representative from MRCI would be the team leader and project coordinator. MRCI was convinced that SIPTU, with its method, could not 'clean up' the mushroom industry, although MRCI initially also had been thinking of a national campaign without having any workers organised. Their opinion was that SIPTU would not be able to do any groundwork. Only following MRCI's method, with a good bilingual organiser, even a small migrants' group could do a lot. Working towards better working conditions in the mushroom industry was not the final goal. The goal was social change at a broader level.

MRCI and IWU met with the three pickers in Carrickmacross at the end of May. In the end, IWU only worked with those three workers until they left the farm for jobs elsewhere. On one occasion, these workers brought eight applications of workers from a food factory disappointed with their SIPTU membership. IWU tried to meet them once but there was a misunderstanding and the meeting did not take place. The lack of an interpreter caused the misunderstanding. IWU had not the resources to organise migrant workers in the area, not without the assistance of MRCI, and if it all was reduced to

casework MRCI had no need of IWU. In the second half of 2006 day-to-day informal cooperation with SIPTU in Cavan yielded better results. Out of the core group of 18 MWSG members in 2007, 12 were SIPTU members in Cavan, and IWU did not make any more gains. The interviews to select a community worker for the MWSG took place on the 20th of June. They went for a Latvian woman who had worked for three years on a mushroom farm in Cavan. Her last job had been in a factory in where she had been a shop steward for SIPTU.

She started in mid July with a list with contact names and phone numbers that she got from MRCI. It was the same list of seven mobile phone numbers that we got in the first meeting with mushroom workers at the community centre in February. She also had some numbers from Tipperary and the number of a picker from the farm where I had worked, who had met her in the house of a Latvian friend in Monaghan. Her plan was to ring and interview them, one by one, in their homes. That was the way to get more contact numbers, identify problems on each farm, leaders, workers' conditions, etc. For the moment, they were not thinking of going public. Yet, SIPTU-Cavan promised to pass her all the phone numbers that they already had. It was her and not SIPTU organising unit who in the future would be in touch with those workers, and some of them became members of MWSG. In turn, the group of workers that she knew from her former farm in Cavan became members of SIPTU. After a month I visited her in Monaghan. The following description is from my fieldwork diary:

She has the SIPTU planning chart displayed in front of her, on the wall, with names of farms and workers' contact names written on it. In Monaghan she only has a girl in Paul's farm and two in Charlie's farm. The rest of the farms are in Cavan, four maybe. There is a long list of names from the farm where she used to work. Her sister still works there. There are also three pictures, one of them taken in Grazyna's house. Galina has also joined in the claim for back wages. In the second picture there are Thai pickers from a farm in Tipperary. In the third picture there is a large group of women from her former farm.

She finds it very difficult to make contact with pickers; it's going very slow at the moment. She met Bess [an Irish picker] to get phone numbers but Bess said that people were scared and didn't want to talk. She said the same to me when I asked her to put me in touch with former Irish pickers.

I got fresh news about the meeting in Cavan. Around 15 pickers attended. They talked for three hours about working conditions, things they know well, but no resolution was taken. This was just a meeting to gain trust. They'll meet again.

She had been able to expand the network of contacts and organise a meeting of 15 (ten of them former mushroom workers)²²² who knew that the purpose was to form a

²²² The *Final Report* (MRCI 2007) gives 18 in attendance.

mushroom workers group. There was an incident. A woman from Latvia, to whom I have referred as the woman from Portlaoise – the same woman who a MRCI staff had described as the most militant mushroom worker that MRCI was in touch with – had behaved in a very disruptive way, according to a MRCI representative. The story went that this woman once even shifted to Latvian, not respecting the rule of talking only Russian, and she had criticised MRCI for not being helpful. So it was decided that it was better not to invite her to any more meetings. Later, on the 18th September, after the second meeting, a MRCI representative said that the second meeting of the group had been quite successful, more so because the woman from Portlaoise could not attend (it was claimed that the woman was sick). Therefore, ‘people felt freer to speak’. The first time she had been condescending towards others at the meeting, according to a MRCI staff, saying them things like, “you don’t read the papers, how do you know what you say is true?” She did not attend any more meetings. I never got to know her version, but I was not comfortable with her being excluded.

Different approaches but similar issues

To start with, there are striking differences in the way in which SIPTU and MRCI approached their campaigns in the mushroom industry. MRCI set up the MWSG in order to give a platform for workers to articulate their demands. How successful the attempt was is a different matter. By contrast, SIPTU did not create any such outlets where workers could come together and share their experiences and ideas. SIPTU did not allocate resources such as a bilingual fulltime organiser. Yet, MRCI with fewer resources was able to make use of the services of an interpreter in all the meetings that preceded the constitution of MWSG as a working group, and managed to get funding to hire a full-time bilingual community worker for one year. SIPTU employed most of its efforts and resources in negotiating with employers and the state over the implementation of labour standards, and the opening of farms to unions in the context of the re-negotiation of Social Partnership. SIPTU did well according to partnership standards at these negotiations but not at organising. Its bureaucratic structure, overdeveloped during twenty years of national partnership deals was little suitable for organising from scratch workers in low-paid jobs. Fundamentally, agriculture was never an easy sector to organise. The cost of organising these workers, according to a union official, outweighed its benefits, and resources were scarce. Migrant workers were much easier to recruit, in higher numbers, in larger companies in other sectors of the economy, particularly where the union already had branches (fieldwork notes). But MRCI with a

recently hired staff, not a bureaucracy yet, and by hiring vocational community workers had a tactical flexibility and creativity, which SIPTU lacked. They also were able to start the real organising of workers even with the scarce resources that they had. SIPTU never had an official doing ground work. SIPTU did not even try top-down organising. For me, it remains a mystery why they did not even try that, or whether it was considered. The Aircoach campaign shows that there were some organisers in SIPTU able for that job, but the campaign in the mushroom industry relied only on casework local officials, without a single real organiser taking a leading role as in Aircoach.

MRCI, lacking the type of resources that SIPTU had to put pressure on employers, government or retailers, was forced to work on the ground. They also tried to work as closely as possible with SIPTU in order to palliate those deficiencies. Yet, the union preferred to go on its own in spite of statements that seemed to indicate the opposite, and in spite of the positive outcomes that a partnership with MRCI could have brought about. The campaign of MRCI, on the other hand, was starting to show some worrying signs that initially could be attributed to its the lead organiser, that is, to a single person, and therefore would not constitute a structural issue.

The lead organiser did not rise from the ranks of the workers either, rather joined in their struggle from the outside. But there is nothing inherently wrong in that. The strategy during the first half of 2006 consisted in taking, in an adverse context, the first steps to create a space where workers could collectively decide how to pursue their concerns. The lead organiser saw herself just as a facilitator of workers' agency. There was the question, however, of the tight personal control that she exerted during the setting up of the group, consulting but not allowing anyone to take responsibilities. A second issue was the plan to organise a national campaign, her plan, which had little to do with the plan to create a group for workers to take their own decisions, although the idea of a campaign in itself was good. Can we attribute this particular style of leadership to individual traits?

MRCI put means and expertise at workers' service to accomplish those tasks. The initiative to constitute a support group, however, did not come from workers. It did not emerge organically. Some workers had approached MRCI looking for legal aid, not trying to create a union, and they got it on a casework basis. Actually, most of staff in MRCI were caseworkers. The tight personal control that the lead organiser had over the project was in a way a reflection of MRCI control of it through her. During the whole period of the existence of MWSG, non-elected MRCI community workers and members of the board of directors led the group and established its priorities. The lead organiser

was only accountable to MRCI's board of directors, but more directly to MRCI's director. The means and resources to run the MWSG, on the other hand, were fully controlled, as we will see in the next chapter, by MRCI.

Therefore, there are structural issues to consider, which indicate that MRCI's agenda did not merely consist in mediating the agency of mushroom workers and making possible their own empowerment. As Mosse (2006: 939) indicates, 'development interventions are driven by the exigencies of organisations and the need to maintain relationships rather than by policy.'

The constitution of a migrant-led group to empower migrant mushroom workers was the chief stated goal of MRCI, but what triggered MRCI's intervention in the mushroom industry was a genuine general concern about migrant workers' rights and entitlements (on which MRCI had been working since this NGO was established in Ireland). This means that their former goal ('popular power') could be, as it was, subordinated to their latter goal (institutional efficiency and institutional success). The next chapter will focus on the question that following Hyman (1975) I have previously dealt with as 'popular power', as *opposed* to the interest of institutions.

8. A migrant-led group?

The MWSG operated between August 2006 and August 2007, when it was renamed Agricultural Workers Association (AgWA). A Latvian native speaker was hired as a full-time community worker, making it possible to organise house meetings and arrange casework with contacts. Her contract, which was meant to last just one year, was extended with the approval of the project funders until September 2007. MRCI's Final Evaluation Report (FER) 'Promoting and Supporting Migrant Mushroom Workers' Rights' (MRCI 2007) summarised the work accomplished by the MWSG during the duration of the grant given by Border Action through the *EU Programme for Peace & Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland, 2000-2006* (Peace II in brief).

The FER represented an honest exposition from the point of view of MRCI of the work accomplished by the MWSG. As the FER states, it analyses the success of the project 'in terms of the objectives that the project has been designed to achieve ... under [the measures] of Peace II Programme, Inclusion, Integration and Reconciliation'. MRCI could truly be proud of the achievements of the 'MWSG project', as it is called in the FER. However, 'a story has always two sides'. This chapter deals with the contradictions in the *community development approach* that MRCI tried to implement in its mushroom campaign. It draws on the reports that this NGO prepared during the period of existence of the MWSG, particularly the *Final Evaluation Report* (FER) and my fieldwork notes. The FER showed the face that MRCI wished to project publicly.

Particularly, the FER was offered as a confirmation of the correctness of MRCI's *community development approach*. In this chapter I try to show the gaps between the stated goals of the MWSG and its praxis during the period of existence of MWSG.

Contradictions in social and labour movements are inevitable, particularly as they operate in a hostile environment and against the current, for they fight against hegemonic forces in the fields of practice but also ideas. What matters is how contradictions are acknowledged, analysed and solved. What matters for this dissertation is what they tell about the relationship between institutions (i.e. MRCI and MWSG) and their members. MRCI claimed that the MWSG was a migrant-led group. This claim is the central topic of this chapter. But, before going into the internal life of the MWSG, I will have a look at 'the internal life of workers centers', which is also one of the titles of Janice Fine's survey (2006) on worker centres in the US. I have already commented on how important this work has been for MRCI's staff.

'The internal life of Workers Centers': developing leaders

Improving the working and living conditions as well as the incomes of migrant workers, to empower them, and work towards social change constitute the most important goals of worker centres in the US. They attempt all that through campaigning and lobbying for policy changes by establishing alliances with other worker centres and unions. Yet, the goals that worker centres pursue must be achieved with the active participation and leadership of migrant workers themselves. Therefore, one central aspect in the internal work of WCs in the US, according to Fine's survey, is to identify and develop activists and leaders from their ranks.

In the US, as in Ireland, there are state institutions and NGOs working on behalf of migrant workers. Conferences with the participation of academics, state officials, and community workers deal with the problems faced by the low-paid, particularly migrant workers and blacks. However, only WCs allow them to speak for themselves, be heard and make their own decisions. Leaders, Fine argues, emerge organically in the course of struggles over wages or rights (Fine 2006: 231, 249). Without these struggles there could not exist proper worker centres nor could migrant workers leaders emerge from the ranks of the low-paid; rather, there would just be NGOs servicing migrant workers. WCs focus on putting structures in place to identify, orient and develop leaders. That is actually more important, Fine argues, than winning particular campaigns, which are also part of the learning process, because the long-term goal is social change (2006: 231-232):

Since the organizations are striving for systematic change in American life, and they know this is a long-term proposition, they view the work of consciousness-raising and developing leaders as the most essential parts of what they do.

Core leaders, who tend to average 16 to 25 per cent, are defined as those directly participating 'in the ongoing life of the organization via boards and committees'. But participation at all levels tends to be wider, 75 to 100 activists per centre (2006: 249). As a part of the programme to develop leaders, WC activists are trained to speak to the media, to public officials, and to employers; to make decisions in terms of budgeting; to 'bring out lessons about power and politics'; to recruit other workers; to develop and implement campaigns; and to 'create a culture of democratic governance and decision-making' (2006: 202). Leadership development is about thinking critically and raising consciousness. Very influential has been Paolo Friere and his theories on 'popular education'. WC leaders would put it in plain words – activists learn to differentiate between 'what is "on the books" and what is actually enforced' (2006: 207).

Other aspects of the internal lives of worker centres are membership and budgets. Both are means to an end. Membership, for example, tends to be very reduced if we compare it to that of trade unions. But for WCs activists, membership size does not seem to be a measure of their strength. For Fine that is because except in a few cases WCs are not market institutions as unions are, but rather we should think about them more as social movements that came out of service-providing NGOs (see 2006: 209-210). This is the clearest distinction that Fine makes between trade unions and worker centres. As a consequence, they cannot collect members' dues from pay slips, as unions do, because they are not involved in collective bargaining. Members dues actually represent an average of 2 percent of worker centres' incomes as opposed to 61 percent from foundations, 21 percent from government, and 16 percent from earned incomes and fund-raising (2006: 254). The implications are that worker centres heavily depend on outside funds, and are at pains to demonstrate that they have grown from a strong demand on the part of the community (2006: 232-3).

Fine's overall assessment is that most of the worker centres surveyed had a very healthy leadership and volunteers base (2006: 232). Fine, however, carried out extensive rather than intensive surveys and was not a participant observer either. Hence, we do not learn about internal conflicts and contradictions that we can assume existed. That is the goal of this chapter, and to that we turn now.

'Promoting and Supporting Mushroom Workers' Rights'

The MWSG project, as it was stated in the FER, focussed on Cavan and Monaghan, the

counties with the highest concentration of mushroom farms in Ireland. The main goal was to establish ‘an independent Mushroom Workers Association that will advocate for and support mushroom workers to address issues of equality, integration and social exclusion.’ Two of the five key objectives were ‘to actively engage migrant workers in the development of the organisation’ and ‘facilitate a group of workers to engage in a leadership and social analysis programme.’

The most impressive part of the FER shows the positive impact that the work of the MWSG had on the lives of hundreds of mushroom workers and in promoting ‘good employment practices’ in the mushroom industry. According to the FER, MWSG staff (the part-time coordinator and the development worker) reached out to 441 mushroom workers in 49 house meetings, with an average attendance of nine workers, and conducted 419 encounters with individuals.²²³ The group was also represented in 185 meetings with 63 different organisations and institutions. MWSG also affiliated to 17 of them. The organisations included local groups, associations, union branches, and local state institutions in Cavan and Monaghan; also national bodies such as the Labour Inspectorate, the Equality Authority, the National Employment Rights Authority, the Mushroom Employers Committee, and migrant associations.

The FER mentions that MRCI had directly helped around 40 workers to recover over €200,000 in back wages by July 2007 as result of negotiations with employers, cases referred to the Labour Inspectorate, and formal complaints to the Labour Rights Commissioner. The FER does not mention whether the unions IWU or SIPTU had any role in recovering back wages in any of the 40 cases. As I explain in chapter 7, for example, IWU took up the case of three members of the MWSG in Carrickmacross. According to the FER, 13 members of the core group of MWSG were members of SIPTU and 2 of IWU. Those members of SIPTU lived in Co. Cavan, where a close cooperation between MRCI and SIPTU took place. The FER, for instance, says that SIPTU began to accept cases of referrals from the MWSG in September 2006. The FER raises to a total of 420 the number of mushroom workers that the MWSG assisted in ‘securing rights and entitlements, access to services and supports ranging from social welfare to securing back wages in their workplace.’

In June 2006 the MWSG carried out a survey of 5 farms in Counties Monaghan and Cavan, showing that none of them provided workers with written contracts, paid the minimum wage, or gave Sunday or Bank holiday pay. Only two of the farms offered

²²³ House meetings were an important part in the successful strategy of MWSG in making contact and being able to help so many workers.

days off to the workers. By July 2007 the five farms provided workers with Sunday pay, Bank holiday pay, and days off. Three farms provided workers with written contracts, and two paid the minimum wage. For MRCI this was a good example of the positive impact of the work of the MWSG, or as the FER states, ‘during the year of MWSG’s existence’. During a Focus Group between mushroom workers and the external evaluator of the FER (8th July 2007) it is stated that ‘Because of the group, on many farms workers are getting the minimum wage, Sunday pay, Bank holiday pay, annual leave pay, pay slips, contracts and there is a proper system of keeping track of hours worked (clock cards)’.

The role that MRCI played in recovering back wages, however, is much easier to assess than its role in improving labour standards and rights as well as entitlements on mushroom farms. Chapter 6 shows that SIPTU played a fundamental role in improving working conditions and wages on mushroom farms, chiefly because of SIPTU’s pressure campaign on the government during the negotiations for a new partnership deal and in the context of the Irish Ferries affairs and the GAMA scandal. SIPTU, as the largest trade union in Ireland, had the resources and the muscle to compel the government to increase the number of labour inspectors and also to be the force behind the 50 labour inspections carried out in late 2006, which the FER also mentions. SIPTU did not organise mushroom workers as they promised due to shortcomings that I analyse in chapter 6, but its input could only make the work and the pressure of MRCI much more effective than it otherwise would have been. Nevertheless, it is almost certain that MRCI referred many more cases to the labour inspectorate than SIPTU ever did. This was due to the fact that SIPTU had a much more limited contact with mushroom workers. On the other hand, although the framework set up by SIPTU and state agencies made possible the achievements that MRCI claims, it was the sustained ground-work carried by mainly two community workers (one full time, the other part time), with occasional support from SIPTU, that made it possible to take advantage of that framework. In that way MRCI can claim the biggest share of individual gains by mushroom workers. Overall, the impact of MRCI’s work in terms of back wages being recovered and the enforcement of rights and entitlements was truly impressive.

Workers’ Participation, Control, and self-development

Another positive achievement of the MWSG was its impact on the lives of mushroom workers in terms of personal development and empowerment. According to the FER, within the first three months (from July 06), 50 workers from 12 different farms and 8

nationalities were in touch with the MWSG. By June 2007 the figure had grown to over 100 workers from 23 farms. However, only a core group of ‘migrant leaders’ from Cavan and Monaghan regularly met as a part of the MWSG. The house meetings dealt mainly with workers’ concerns such as recovery of unpaid wages and promoting compliance regarding employees’ rights. These workers cannot be considered as members of the group as they were not active participants. The core group was, therefore, made up of those who had been helped by the MRCI and had answered its call to form the MWSG. The high number of workers that MRCI had helped could be considered as potential group members.

The FER speaks of an initial core group of 18 women, the same number given for the core group between July 2006 and July 2007: 6 Lithuanians, 9 Latvians, 1 Belarusian, 1 Russian, and 1 Ukrainian. According to my fieldwork notes, these meetings took place roughly once a month and the numbers attending would vary between 9 and 14. In relation to the gender composition of the group the FER emphasises that the core group was made up of women working on mushroom farms. That is, mushroom workers were subject to a double discrimination as migrant workers and as women. The statement is truer in relation to the first meeting in August 2006, which was attended by women only. But in fact, most of the members were former farm workers and included three men, two of whom had never worked on a mushroom farm. One of them, Sergei, had worked on a mushroom farm for three years and started to attend the meetings travelling the whole way from Tipperary. Two of them, Petras and Adomas, were the husbands of two former pickers (Galina and Grazyna) but participated in the meetings. I also attended most of the meetings and made contributions, becoming nominal treasurer of AgWA in November 2007. It is a fact that the majority of group members and the workers that MWSG helped were mostly women, but there were also male general operators. On the other hand, most of the members of the core group were former mushroom workers.²²⁴

The family friendly nature of the group forged stronger ties between group members and offered an opportunity to build ties also with the wider community outside the group. It was part of MRCI’s *community development approach* and MRCI’s vision of Ireland as a place ‘where migrant workers and their families participate fully and equally in an intercultural society’. In fact, 12 core group members joined local

²²⁴ For example, out of 14 members attending a weekend meeting in Country Wicklow in March 2007 to discuss the constitution of an independent group run by the members only 3 were at the time working on mushroom farms, 6 were former mushroom workers, 2 were the husbands of two former pickers. The other 3 were the lead organiser, the translator and me.

community groups. The FER mentions two awareness-raising events that helped to build ties both within the group and between the group and the wider society. The first was the 'Harvesting Justice' event in November 2006. It took place in the Hillgrove Hotel in Monaghan and over 100 people, including 55 mushroom workers (according to FER), attended it. There were also local representatives of Community Groups, a local TD, county councillors, clergy, and unions.

This event also served to publicly launch the group and to give a voice to the problems and concerns of mushroom workers. As the FER says, it attracted major media coverage which 'had a direct impact on generating the level of changes and responses that occurred around the end of 2006'. The actor Martin Sheen, then an undergraduate student in the National University of Ireland, Galway, wrote the foreword of the FER stating that, 'Unscrupulous employers openly take advantage of workers' vulnerability and isolation to avoid paying fair wages and to evade basic health and safety regulations. The kind of treatment of and lack of common decency towards fellow human beings that is being permitted to take place is not only highly immoral but a violation of fundamental human rights.' (MRCI 2006). Three mushroom pickers, members of the core group (Larisa, Grazyna and Laima) addressed the audience in Russian with the assistance of an English translator. One of them is quoted in FER as saying, 'I am glad to see so many Irish there who are willing to listen and care about what is happening to us'.

The second event was the midsummer celebration at the end of June 2007, which took place in Kilnaleck (Co. Cavan), the same place that made it in the news early in 2006 with the worst known case of workers' exploitation on mushroom farms. This celebration coincided with the celebration of the national day in Lithuania, and therefore had a particular significance for many members of the group. The District Community Co-op, the Southwest Cavan Community Development Programme and Cavan Partnership cooperated in the celebration of the event, which was hosted by the local GAA. Over 200 people attended. On this occasion some members of the group had an active role in the organisation of the event. Three group members lived in Kilnaleck and were also members of the District Community Co-op. During the Focus Group with the External Evaluator one of the group members said,

The June event was fun day out with our families and friends, a day that all of us enjoyed very much. We showed Irish people our traditions and shared food with them and everyone at the event was like one community.

The FER also describes some of the achievements of the group in terms of workers'

empowerment as a learning process, in terms of understanding how to influence Irish decision-making structures, anti-racism and equality issues as well as organising and running campaigns. The group offered English classes for members, hiring language tutors for one-to-one sessions. The goal of that learning process was the development of a core group of leaders who could run their own group. According to the FER, 12 members followed Group Development Sessions totalling 34 hours, 3 hours of engaging with structures, and 12 hours of Social Analysis and Development of a strategic plan. As a part of the training programme, but also a ‘proof’ of the extent to which migrants led the group, members also took part in meetings with organisations at a local level. During some of the meetings, the MRCI lead organiser would tell the members that she was going to meet this or that organisation, and asked for volunteers to go along.

The FER contains two interviews with mushroom workers to assess from the point of view of the workers the impact that the MWSG had on the lives of migrant workers. These interviews illustrate the points made in the FER. Ajne, a 33-year-old Latvian woman who got in touch with the MWSG thanks to an add in a Latvian paper in Ireland (*Sveiks*), said:

I decided to join this group because I saw it as opportunity to learn more about my rights and meet women who are mushroom pickers the same as myself in Ireland ... When I joined the group after a short period of time I was asking for proper pay per hour and Sunday pay at the farm where I was working. When you know your rights that knowledge makes you powerful and that encourages me to still be part of the group. I would like to see conditions changing for all the mushroom pickers and I believe that the MWSG can make that change... For the 3years I worked on farm I would get wages from 600-800€ a month now pickers get paid per hour and get from 1300-1500€ a month. Working hours are much shorter now and no one is asked to work 20 hours non-stop as I was. Workers get Sunday pay and bank holiday pay. Pickers who went to our employer’s new farm are very impressed with their wages and it’s only fair that they get paid what they are entitle to. I couldn’t compare the conditions and pay with those 3years ago when I was working as mushroom picker... Since I joined the group I got new friends who have the same experience in Ireland as I did ... The group gives me the life to enjoy and not just be the migrant worker who gets up for work and goes to bed to be fit for next day’s work, there is more to life now for me than just work.

Basa, 36, Lithuanian, told a similar story:

Meeting with other members and hearing their stories makes you angry and you want to fight for their fair treatment and pay as well. With MWSG we are in safe hands and we can’t be taken for fools any more. After being a member of the group for one year I know my rights and entitlements. I applied for Child Benefit only now as I didn’t know I was entitled to it. I got my medical card as I didn’t know that on low income I can get medical care for free ... The biggest improvement on our farm I see the change in attitude towards the workers. We got threatened before that we can be fired any day of the week for whatever reason that we weren’t allowed to be sick at

any time. If we asked for day off we needed to report why we need that day off. Now we get minimum wage, Sunday pay, Bank holiday pay, holiday entitlements, pay slips and we have contracts now. Where before we didn't have any of it we got paid by how much we pick every day the same. Holiday entitlement was based on what the employer considered as proper to pay you and we didn't have pay slips or contracts... And as the group will keep working together there would be more changes on other farms as well... I had the opportunity to take English classes thanks to MWSG ... I have many new friends who are members of the group ... I would like some time to get a weekend away with the group again just to spend some time with them doing some activities and get the sense of the group and build closer friendships with others.

These two workers had experienced a positive impact on their lives in terms of rights and entitlements but also at the level of personal development and empowerment. As the first worker said, 'The group gives me the life to enjoy and not just be the migrant worker who gets up for work and goes to bed to be fit for next day's work.' The second worker refers to a recovered dignity: 'we can't be taken for fools any more.' This improved self-confidence that the group gave to some mushroom workers was a significant achievement. Fear of their bosses constituted an important obstacle to organising, let alone to come forward to denounce underpayment and mistreatment. The MWSG allowed mushroom workers to take the first steps to overcome these fears.

The most important aspect of the FER from the point of view of this chapter is the extent to which the MWSG was a migrant-led group, in which members owned the group and established its priorities and goals. The FER actually states that, 'The Mushroom Workers Support Group ... used a community development approach to ensure migrants determine the direction and focus of the work, *indicating true ownership.*' (My Italics)

MWSG: A migrant led group?

Throughout the FER, the members of the group who attended the monthly meetings are referred to as 'the core group of leaders'. One of the most relevant aims of the MWSG was identifying and training a group of leaders that would take control, run the MWSG, and engage in collective action. The method followed –*community development approach*– 'ensured that migrant workers led and participated in the process of group development, assumed ownership of outcomes and genuinely decided on the future of the project.' The outcome of the project was AgWA, which was meant to count on a board of directors composed of over 50 percent of current and former agricultural workers. This was given as evidence 'of the extent to which the organisation is migrant-led.' The members of the group also decided the strategic plan, draft form, for the first

three years of AgWA. 'As a result of the MWSG there is now a strong organisation of agricultural workers whose leaders have emerged from within the project', the FER says.

According to the FER, we can think of the period of existence of MWSG, then, as a migrant leaders' school that eventually led to a migrant workers' led group, but also as a migrant-led process from the beginning. The FER differentiates between three phases of group development. Initially there was an 'informal' phase in which members shared stories and provided information to both the group coordinator (the lead organiser) and the full-time community worker. So, building relationships and trust was the goal of this first phase. The second phase consisted of 'needs assessment' and developing an understanding that allowed members to discuss actions and solutions to the problems faced by mushroom workers. They had to identify priorities and start making collective decisions. The final outcome of group development, of the core group, led to the constitution of AgWA as a migrant-led organisation that aimed at including all agricultural workers in Ireland.

Members were tutored, or rather 'mothered' along that process that led to the creation of AgWA. At a weekend meeting in Co. Wicklow (16th-18th March 2007), to discuss the setting up of AgWA, the MRCI lead organiser expressed that idea by saying in relation to the MWSG, 'I'm not anyone's mother, but it is like that now. It is positive but also negative'. The FER indicates that the staff working on the project consisted of a full-time Development Worker, hired before there were any members in the group, and a part-time MRCI co-ordinator (the lead organiser). The MRCI Director, in turn, advised and supervised the work. The MRCI lead organiser as co-ordinator and team leader decided on day-to-day issues and ultimately ran the project with the MRCI director, who in turn was accountable to a non-elected MRCI board of directors. The Development (or Community) Worker did all the groundwork, but she was a foot soldier who carried out MRCI instructions. That is, the MWSG was an MRCI-led project. In fact, MWSG members had no say regarding the allocation of the budget of the group nor were notified as to how the money was spent. It is also interesting to note how the MWSG came about. It was not a group created by migrant workers but on behalf of migrant workers. The agency came from above as the FER let us know:

The MWSG came about as a direct result of a growing concern for the safety, wellbeing and integration of vulnerable migrant mushroom workers, mainly women, living and working in the region. Prior to June 2006, MRCI was aware of and documented a growing number of cases and reports of gross physical isolation with little interaction and engagement with the community. MRCI was acutely aware of

the difficulties for mushroom workers in accessing formal support structures. Mushroom workers often lived in fear of losing their jobs if they sought improvements in living or working conditions.

That is, the MWSG did not emerge organically. Rather it was established as a result of the humanitarian concerns of MRCI for the working and living conditions of women in the mushroom industry. But MRCI had as a goal 'to bring vulnerable mushroom workers together and to facilitate a collective, worker-led response to the exploitation and poor terms and conditions that they were experiencing' (MRC 2007b). Therefore, the priorities and goals of the group were established long before it had any members. As we have seen, this has been the case of most WCs. The questions in assessing the process of taking control of the group are whether members had any input in establishing new priorities and goals during the duration of the project, whether they started to assume responsibilities, and whether AgWA constituted the end of that process.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, this work was a continuation of the work already initiated with the Domestic Workers Support Group. Later MRCI constituted the Restaurant Workers Support Group on the model of the MWSG. There is nothing necessarily wrong with a group of mushroom workers, a core group of them, being tutored and trained to become leaders and take control of the group. The MRCI lead organiser's idea from the beginning consisted in mediating the agency of mushroom workers, acting as a facilitator. The problem is that it did not turn out that way. More time and energy were dedicated to casework than to anything else as indicated by the amount of back wages recovered and the lobbying on behalf of mushroom workers, a typical function of MRCI. In what follows, I will assess the development of the project from September 2006 to October 2007 from the point of view of the role that group members played in it.

Deciding on priorities

The first two meetings of the MWSG in August and September 2006 dealt with mushroom workers' concerns. There was workers' input for the first time, a full-time community worker and native speaker, and a structure in place to address workers' concerns. At the first meeting the MRCI lead organiser asked each one of those attending what were the three most important issues on mushroom farms that the MWSG should deal with. At the second meeting, she drew a list of ten major concerns and asked the 12 workers at the meeting (8 women and 4 men) to vote for the three most important issues. This was the result:

Concerns	Total votes	First choice votes
Pay: Minimum Wage, Bank holiday and Sunday	11	11
Health and Safety	7	0
Long hours	6	0
No support or info on rights and entitlements	2	1

Other relevant issues which secured few votes were trouble with transportation, bullying, difficulties opening a bank account, isolation from the community, and discrimination in relation to Irish workers (which only could happen on the few farms where there were Irish workers). Overtime rates did not come up, perhaps because the workers were unaware of them or because they assumed they were included within the first category. These were the issues, which, according to the MRCI lead organiser, the group would concentrate on. But the question was how that work would be carried out. The MRCI lead organiser did not lay out the different options available this time as in previous meetings. Therefore there was no discussion as to how to solve problems or who would do it. The options that she offered at the meeting back in April 2006 were all casework types. It was difficult at the time to propose other options, but this time the MWSG had members even if only a handful, a network of contacts of around 50 workers from 12 different farms, and a full-time native organiser.

The national campaign

At the meeting in September 2006, as an option other than casework, the MRCI lead organiser went back to her old idea of organising a national campaign. The topic was preceded by a discussion on the industry in general. She spoke about the total number of farms in Ireland, number of workers, marketing groups, producers' organisations (POs), government grant-aid to farms, and the share of farmers and pickers in the final price that a customer would pay for mushrooms in a supermarket (out of €2 a farmer would get €0.80 and a picker €0.15).²²⁵ I helped her on the spot with some of the figures. She proposed that, given that supermarkets were pocketing around 50 percent of the price paid by the consumer, the group should put pressure on the supermarkets. To allow

²²⁵ The labour cost for the farmer, including PRSI etc., should be €0.20 per pound, but many farmers were not complying with labour costs derivatives. The figures were averages for 2006. Diana, one of the workers who had been employed in Kilnaleck said that they only had been getting €0.10 per pound (in fact €0.11), and that the grower was not paying PRSI either.

group members to decide the course of action, she drew a diagram showing where growers' money came from: supermarkets (she did not mention marketing groups), government and banks. She could have included POs as well. Then she asked people what could be done or how we could work on improving 'our' conditions, that is, where we should apply pressure. She had indicated supermarkets, but group members unanimously pointed at the government: *we should go and ask the government to guarantee rights and entitlements since that is the law and the state has to enforce it.* That was what members wanted to do.

They were not aware that both SIPTU and MRCI had been meeting DETE representatives, but their proposal of targeting the government made sense. Between October and November 2006 there were around 50 labour inspections on mushroom farms, which led to some improvements. However, as some group members including Petras were well aware, these labour inspections did not work (see chapters 6 and 7). Group members, nevertheless, asked rhetorically why the government, well aware of workers' 'exploitation' on mushroom farms, did nothing.²²⁶ MRCI's director had asked me the same question back in December 2005. They had a point. The government had to be more responsive to pressure based on moral as well as legal concerns (see below). In the context of negotiations towards a new partnership deal, SIPTU managed to get an undertaking from the government to increase the number of labour inspectors and to create a new state agency to deal with enforcement. They also managed to secure union recognition from some large growers, although at a later stage (see chapter 6). Yet, the MRCI lead organiser went back to her national campaign and shifted her attention from the government to the supermarkets since, she again insisted, they were profiting most from mushrooms and also would be in a better position to put real pressure on growers.²²⁷ She suggested that the group should meet with the director of TESCO in Ireland, it being the largest supermarket chain in the British Isles. Everyone agreed without any debate despite having decided to put pressure on the government just a moment before, an option that was not discussed. Most of them raised their hands when the MRCI lead organiser asked if they would attend the meeting with TESCO. But she then asked what the group should do if TESCO's director in Ireland does not want to meet, 'would we organise pickets outside TESCO?' There was general agreement at the suggestion. A couple of workers also suggested go public if TESCO refused to meet. The MRCI lead organiser added that it could damage TESCO's image and they would

²²⁶ Later, they asked how it was possible that the unions were not doing anything either, if they knew. They were trying, but at the top, out of workers' field of vision.

²²⁷ That type of campaigning had been more recurrent in the US.

not like that. ‘What should we ask at the meeting?’ She said. ‘Tesco should inspect the farms and ask the workers’, some suggested. It made sense. While working on farms they had seen inspections once a year, which farmers had to pass to be able to market the produce. But others disagreed because workers would be afraid to say anything negative about the grower or the farm during such inspections. I explained that the inspections were not concerned with labour standards, so the point would be that inspections included labour standards. But that was a war that the MWSG could not wage on its own. It was the task of the union movement at European level, since quality standards such as EUREP-GAP had an EU dimension. TESCO also had its own quality standards for suppliers and the same demand could be made of them. The MRCI lead organiser concluded the discussion by saying that she would go and talk to TESCO and brief the group later.

In the next group meeting (22nd October) the lead organiser announced that had spoken with Ethical Trade Initiative (ETI), which had agreed to organise a meeting with supermarkets to discuss the issue of fair labour standards.²²⁸ She asked for volunteers to go to Britain. What struck me immediately was that she did not mention anything about meeting with the head of TESCO in Ireland. No one actually reminded her that we all had agreed to follow this course of action in the previous meeting. The lead organiser could have explained that it was better to meet with ETI and all the supermarkets, but she never gave any explanation.

The meeting with ETI and the supermarkets was scheduled for the 7th December 2006 in London. Larisa volunteered, at the lead organiser’s suggestion, to go but in the end she could not get a visa in time (she was from Ukraine). A journalist from Ireland wanted to attend but the representatives from the supermarkets would not allow it. Representatives from the Mushroom Employers’ Committee went to the meeting. According to the lead organiser, growers spoke about negotiations with SIPTU and how they were trying to improve conditions on mushroom farms, but they insisted they needed time to do it. Supermarkets, on the other hand, were willing to put pressure on growers to comply: ‘the supermarket representatives expressed their concern and agreed to contact the suppliers of their mushrooms in Ireland and start a process to ensure that workers are treated fairly and according to the law in Ireland’ (Mushroom Workers’ Newsletter, 4, June-Mar 2007). With these good wishes some steam was released, and that was the end of the ‘national campaign’. The lead organiser did not mention the

²²⁸ According to the Mushroom Newsletter (4, June-Mar 2007), Tesco, ASDA, Marks and Spencer and Sainsbury were part of ETI.

campaign again.

As there was no mention at all about how or when the supermarkets were going to ‘start a process to ensure that workers are treated fairly’, or by which mechanisms this process would be made accountable, MRCI just presented ‘good’ wishes from supermarkets as an achievement. The meeting put pressure on Marketing Groups such as Monaghan Mushrooms and some of the Producers’ Organisations such as CMP. SIPTU also sent representatives to the meeting with ETI, and was already negotiating with the Mushroom Growers’ Committee a new JLC for the mushroom industry. As we have seen, SIPTU claimed the credit for that meeting. Yet, MRCI presented the meeting as an international impact of the work of the MWSG. Since there was no follow-up, it is impossible to say whether supermarkets did anything. But the combined pressure of SIPTU, MRCI, government and ETI had an effect on growers. The lead organiser believed before even the meeting with ETI that this institution had put some pressure on mushroom growers and forced them into a deal with SIPTU. A month before the meeting took place she let me know that Ronnie Wilson, president and main shareholder of Monaghan Mushrooms, and Vincent Turley, his human resources manager, had gone to Migrant Rights Centre head quarters in Dublin. There they asked MRCI to stop leaking stories of mistreatment and low pay to the media for a while, as we have seen.

The supermarkets campaign was not migrant-led. Given the choice, MWSG members preferred to put pressure on the government, but there was not even a discussion on that issue. When asked to take part in collective action to put pressure on TESCO they agreed. The lead organiser on the other hand followed a plan she had formulated back in December 2005 and MWSG members let her do it. She initially suggested a course of collective action but changed her mind, and the decision agreed, without consulting with the group or even explaining why there had been a change. In the end, the campaign died out as it was reduced to a top-level one-off meeting that did not involve any type of members’ input. On one hand, it was another way to put pressure on the whole mushroom industry (i.e. growers, supermarkets) and the government. On the other hand, it did not involve members’ participation and could potentially lead to members feeling alienated.

Collective action

The ‘national campaign’ was not the only instance in which organised collective action was not carried out or turned into a business handled exclusively by the lead organiser. At a meeting in September 2006, she came up with the idea of organizing a party for

group members and relatives, and open to guests. She asked whether members preferred to have the 'party' in a hotel or, more privately, in a house. Everyone was in favour of organising a party in a house or in a community centre bringing their own food, drinks and having a dance, something they would organise by themselves. The plan was for the party to be held in November.

At the following meeting, 22nd October, the lead organiser came up with a different plan. The party would take place in the Four Seasons Hotel in Monaghan town (in the end it took place in the Hillgrove Hotel, the second hotel of Monaghan town) on the 26th November and the group would launch a report that the community worker and the lead organiser had compiled based on the information that the community worker was collecting through her daily work and selected interviews. The lead organiser said that in the document 'the group' would suggest changes. The idea was good but it had not been discussed before. Moreover, we had agreed on a different plan. The proper thing would have been to suggest the idea and to discuss it, to see whether a majority preferred it, but the lead organiser was already working on the launch at the hotel. No one said anything and she proceeded with her plan. The party would be a major event with three music bands, one Irish, one Lithuanian, and one Latvian (which was eventually reduced to two), together with sandwiches and a bar. The media would be invited to attend the launch, as well as representatives from different institutions, which the lead organiser had already started to invite (see below). Galina asked if they could bring drinks as it was a Russian tradition, but the lead organiser replied that it was not possible. Interestingly a man from Lithuania, who did not show up after that meeting, challenged Galina saying that they were not in the Soviet Union now but in Ireland. Galina was a Lithuanian citizen but of Russian origin. She arrived in Lithuania as a young woman because her father was an army officer stationed there after spending a number of years in Algeria as a military adviser. The lead organiser insisted, though, that everyone had to bring along as many people as possible. This was one of the few occasions in which the network of MWSG contacts was mobilised.

On the 31st of October 2006, the lead organiser told me that she was inviting all the potential 'allies', as she called them, trade unions officials (from SIPTU and TGWU in the North), institutions such as CIC, Community networks, and the media. The coverage the group had received during the previous week had been great in her opinion. In order to link up with the 'national campaign' the supermarkets would be invited too but not the growers or their associations. Martin Sheen, the US actor known for his support of agricultural workers in the US and studying at the time for a degree in Galway, might be

at the event too. In the end, he could only write the foreword to the 'Needs Assessment Report', which in itself was a very important achievement for the campaign in the mushroom industry. This launching was then meant to turn the MWSG into a 'high profile' project.²²⁹ At the launch of the report, three group members (Larisa, Laima and Grazyna) made individual presentations in Russian about their experiences as mushroom workers, but it was Larisa who went further and improvised a speech in which she made an appeal to mushroom workers, to unions and Irish citizens in general to support the case of mushroom workers and the MWSG. She also showed great skill as a public speaker.

In the first half of 2007, there was some discussion on collective action to put pressure on the government and some employers. The lead organiser used to phone employers to solve any grievances that arose on mushroom farms before going to the labour inspectors or the Labour Commissioner. If that did not work, she could contact SIPTU or the Employers' Committee to put extra pressure on the offending employer. As we have seen in previous chapters, anti-union feelings ran high among mushroom growers. Workers were subjected to verbal abuse on mushroom farms if the grower suspected that they had been in touch with a trade union. A couple of times, though, we discussed in the group the possibility of collective action and going to the media. The first time such a discussion took place was in relation to the 'national campaign', and we have seen that everyone was enthusiastic about it, but the lead organiser did not follow up the decision taken. She did not mention it anymore and no one complained about this. On two more occasions, collective action was proposed although it did not raise the same interest as the first time. And again, it did not take place.

On a meeting held on the 1st of April 2007, two pickers (Kofryna and Vladislava) from a farm in Swanlinbar, County Cavan, joined us. Kofryna was known to the group and should have joined us for the meeting in Co. Wicklow. Lena, a group member remembered Kofryna as the most forthcoming of all workers on the farm. She used to tell the rest of the workers that their wages were too low. Around October 2006, she came across an MRCI booklet on workers' rights in a Lithuanian shop and phoned MRCI. She told only to a handful of her co-workers and in November four of them held an off-farm house meeting with MRCI. They were afraid to tell to the rest of workers on

²²⁹ An Area Development Management official defined in this way the Ballyfermot equine project in Dublin (Saris *et al.* 2002: 187): 'Lots of publications about the work they've done, high-profile launches of the evaluations of the work they've done, things like that.'

the farm, and were particularly afraid that their Lithuanian supervisor would find out. At that meeting they also completed SIPTU membership forms.

A week after the meeting, Danny Malanaphy, the employer, received a letter from SIPTU-Cavan. According to Lena, he 'went crazy' and went out of his way to find out who had contacted the union. He first asked Kofryna because 'she always wants to know (about her rights)'. One of the workers at the meeting, Madina, perhaps because she was fed up and was planning to leave the farm, came forward and said to the boss and the supervisor, 'I know my rights, it was me who contacted the union'. That day she left her job. However, the boss got a second letter after Madina left and knew that someone else had talked to the union. The boss shouted at Lena, 'you called them!' He knew that Lena was the most fluent with English. For weeks afterwards he would stop by Lena, and harass her, 'bitch, bitch, you stupid!'. The supervisor and the boss began complaining that Lena was too slow and made too many mistakes. This despite the fact that for months she had the highest picking rate on the farm. He also put Kofryna through the same abuse and bullying. Kofryna commented that Malanaphy appeared mentally unstable and shouted constantly, 'this is my country and my rules!' Occasionally he gave them less work by giving extra days off. In the end, Lena's husband asked her to leave her job, motivated by concerns regarding the use of chemicals on the farm.

Kofryna kept working and openly joined SIPTU in March 2007 during the union's recruitment campaign, but only Vladislava joined with her. The others were afraid to even talk to Kofryna. Joining SIPTU, on the other hand, had done nothing for these two workers. Many voiced anti-SIPTU feelings during the meeting, 'why can't SIPTU do anything? Why can't SIPTU talk to the employer and solve the problem? Why should people join SIPTU if they can't see any results?' The lead organiser asked what they thought SIPTU could do, a picket line perhaps? Petras suggested that the MWSG talk to the employer and if he refused to comply with labour laws then they should go to the newspapers. Galina said that they could go to the local community and to the churches. They (Galina and Petras) were going to be evicted of their house in Carrickmacross and thanks to the 'community group' of the church they had been allowed to stay. Galina and Larisa strongly opposed asking SIPTU to persuade the rest of the workers on the farm to join SIPTU because 'the union should show it could do something for them first'. Kofryna said that 3 or 4 workers would join SIPTU if they were not so afraid of the boss but no one argued in favour of organizing another meeting with the union, though the lead organiser and I argued that the more workers that joined SIPTU the

easier it would be to win the case. In the end, we agreed that we should put pressure on SIPTU to act and organize a protest outside the farm as MWSG. The lead organiser agreed. The plan was that she would ask SIPTU to talk to the employer immediately. Then SIPTU and the MWSG should also get in touch with the Mushroom Growers' Committee and ask them to talk to Danny Malanaphy, unless they wanted some more bad publicity from the media. Yet, the lead organiser insisted that before going public she would talk to the Growers' Committee.

Some weeks after the meeting, I talked to the lead organiser and she told me that there would be no picketing outside the farm because Kofryna preferred not to take any action. Instead, the lead organiser mentioned that the group was planning a protest outside CMP headquarters in Monaghan, although such a decision had not been taken at a meeting. I told her that the new headquarters were outside the town. At the following meeting, on the 29th April, the lead organiser did not mention anything regarding the outcome of her discussions with the Growers' Committee, SIPTU or Kofryna's employer. No one asked about it either. She merely stated that Kofryna had decided not to confront the employer now. Some weeks later Lena told me that she could not understand why Kofryna did not want to go ahead with the planned action.

The possibility of more collective action came up at the meeting of the 29th April 2007. The lead organiser had written twice to Brendan Smith, Junior Minister for Food and Horticulture at his office in Cavan town in relation to mistreatment and underpayment of employees on Mushroom farms. As I have explained in chapter 5, DAF had given a total of €5.011m to 190 mushroom growers between 2001 and 2006 under the 'grant aid scheme for the development of commercial horticulture'.²³⁰ It was shameful in MRCI's opinion that individual growers got so much grant aid without DAF demanding and ensuring that those growers in receipt of grant aid were complying.²³¹ The minister replied that those growers not complying would not get grant aid and that they would be reported by the labour inspectors. The problem was that labour inspectors had assured MRCI that there was no communication between them and DAF.²³² So, the minister was covering up for the growers. MRCI then applied under the Freedom of Information Act for the names of the growers who received grant aid, but DAF dismissed that demand citing confidentiality. Clearly, DAF was protecting mushroom growers who were not complying. Junior minister Brendan Smith was based

²³⁰ Parliamentary Question No. 80 (6 Nov 2007) by Labour TD Sean Sherlock

²³¹ This figure does not include EU funding through POs or grant aid for the marketing scheme.

²³² NERA was set up to link the work of different departments and state agencies in order to better enforce labour standards.

in Cavan, and had to answer to voters who were mainly farmers. Also, Brendan Smith had declined to meet MRCI.

Therefore, the lead organiser proposed on the 29th April 2007 organising a protest in front of Brendan Smith's office in Cavan to highlight these issues. It took some time to get the support of a majority of the members attending the meeting to organise a protest. At first members had doubts, not necessarily because they did not agree with such action but because they were tired of being asked to organize collective action only to have such action cancelled later. The discussion started with the case of Raina, a contact on a farm in Tipperary. Raina and other workers had taken their case to the labour inspectors. After the inspection, her boss discovered that she had been one of the workers who had contacted the labour inspectors. He subsequently fired her on the grounds of aggressive behavior towards another worker, a charge that Raina denied. He did not bother to fire anyone else because he needed, in the lead organiser's opinion, only one exemplary scapegoat. At the time of the meeting, Raina had filed a claim for unfair dismissal. The lead organiser had contacted the Mushroom Employers' Committee about this case, but to no avail. Therefore she expressed her anger during the meeting and suggested that we should go public by holding a public event: 'We'll get [Raina's] money back but this is an opportunity to bring it out to the public', she said, 'SIPTU is still negotiating [the new JLC with the employers] but we need to go public.' She suggested demonstrating in front of the minister's office in Cavan. The lead organiser also told us that Raina was willing to talk about her case to the media. Larisa and Velna said that Raina's boss could fire other people on the farm if we went ahead with this action. Then Larisa suggested that we should do something bigger like organising a protest in front of the Dáil and maybe do a documentary for television to highlight working conditions on farms. She insisted in doing something immediately and complained that we should have acted before Raina was fired. Lena agreed but suggested to go first to the newspapers and then organize the protest. She also agreed to talk to the media when the lead organiser asked her. Laima and Vladislava also consented to a press release. When the lead organiser then asked whether we should stage a rally in front of Brendan Smith's office everyone said, 'yes, we'll go'. The lead organiser did not consider the protest at the Dáil to be feasible because we needed, in her opinion, many more people. The lead organiser then suggested a protest the following week at lunch-time, 1pm, preceded by an interview on the radio programme 'Morning Ireland'. 'It is the first time we plan to go public', she said. It was an excellent way to highlight the government's complicity with employers, and a topic around which

to organize a campaign and rally support, since it linked with previous SIPTU campaigns against the ‘race to the bottom’. In MRCI’s language, it was an opportunity to highlight structural inequality.

The lead organiser then changed her mind again and over the phone, and without having consulted with members, said to me that a protest was not a good idea due to a shortage of demonstrators. She thought that it was better to wait until after the national election.²³³ At the following meeting in May, I insisted that we had agreed to organize a protest and we had to go ahead with it. The lead organiser again cited both a lack of numbers and the proximity of election as a reason to cancel it. I looked around and I only noticed vacant expressions. After the election, Fianna Fail went into a coalition government with the Green Party, and Trevor Sargeant, former Green Party leader, became Junior Minister for Food and Horticulture. At the group meeting on the 16th September 2007 (the group had become AgWA by then), the lead organiser said that she had written to the new minister seeking a meeting to discuss the issue of the grants given to growers ‘who continue exploiting workers’.²³⁴ The lead organiser expected that he would be more open to the group demands, particularly since he was based in Dublin and not answerable to a farmers’ constituency. On the 14th October, the lead organiser told the group that the minister had phoned her in response to the letter. She said that if he did not meet with the group in the near future, she would put more pressure on him. On the 25th November, we were told that she had met the Minister in Mullingar, giving him a letter from the group asking for a meeting. If there was no meeting by the end of the year AgWA would ‘go public about growers who are exploiting workers and still getting money from Government’ (AgWA minutes, 25 Nov 2007). After that the lead organiser did not raise the issue any more. Yet, AgWA never received the list with the names of farmers in receipt of grant aid. Since NERA had started to operate, labour inspections were taking place and there was a good relationship with labour inspectors. The issue of a protest, we might assume, did not arise again. The group, however, never was given a satisfactory explanation as to why the protest had been cancelled.

The newsletter

In the previous chapter, I explained that I originally had the idea of the newsletter. Between February 2006 and March 2008, the lead organiser produced 6 issues in

²³³ My impression was that perhaps that issue, as well as others, had been discussed at MRCI’s headquarters and the lead organiser change of mind reflected the outcome of that discussion, but it was only a guess. Otherwise, I do not know how to explain these repeated changes of plans.

²³⁴ Source: minutes of AgWA, approved on the 14th October 2007.

different languages such as English, Russian, and Lithuanian. In four pages, A5 format, it basically contained information on rights and entitlements,; main workers' concerns; what to do if 'you' are exploited; group achievements and interviews with mushroom workers or stories by them in which they related how they ended up working in the mushroom industry; their experiences there; and how MRCI and the MWSG had helped them to recover back wages, rights and entitlements, or just to regain their confidence. But group members never had any control over the newsletter. When I proposed the idea of a newsletter back in January 2006, the lead organiser's concern was that the newsletter could be used to tell workers what to do, rather than facilitating their own empowerment and articulating their own voice. Yet, she assumed total editorial control. It was not until the meeting in Wicklow (14-16th March 2007) that I raised the issue of the newsletter in relation to workers taking editorial control. As we were talking about the constitution of an independent group led by the members, I proposed that in the meantime they should start taking control of some of the activities such as the publication of the newsletter. Therefore, I proposed to nominate an editor from the group. The lead organiser said that in the last issue Larisa had written an article, which she presented as an example of members' input, and moved on to another issue. Members never gained editorial control of the newsletter.

First steps towards taken control of the group

At a meeting in January 2007, Larisa made a proposal to organise an independent (from MRCI) mushroom workers group. The lead organiser said that it was a very good idea. Larisa, a woman in her early 40s from the Ukraine came to Ireland to work on the mushroom farm in Belmullet, Co. Mayo, in 2003. By 2007 she was working as a cleaner in Dublin six to seven days a week, most days from 8am to 7pm. The lead organiser took up Larisa's idea at a meeting in February 2007 and proposed to meet for a whole weekend in March, not only to discuss about it but also to cook, eat, and have a good time socialising and partying, to which everyone agreed. The lead organiser for the first time suggested that the group should think about including all agricultural workers and not just mushroom workers. She also proposed to hold the conference in Brittas Bay, Co. Wicklow on the 14-16 March. The venue chosen was a retreat house belonging to the Columban Order.

During the weekend discussions the lead organiser openly asked MWSG members about the future of the group and what they wanted to do with it. Out of a total of 14 in attendance 7 thought that we should create an independent group (from MRCI); the

others assented. 5 were inclined to focus on agricultural workers' rights and 5 on all migrant workers. The lead organiser interjected to say that since the group started in January 2006 they had met only to talk, and MRCI had helped to take up cases, so MRCI had been running the group. She also said, 'I'm not anyone's mother, but it is like that now. It is positive but also negative... [on the other hand] I can't really speak as a migrant worker.' Her admission was very honest and reflected the facts. That is, the MWSG was not a migrant-led group. On the other hand, she also said that her role had been to act as a group facilitator, so MWSG was a migrant-led group. According to the context in which made her statements, the lead organiser seemed to contradictorily believe, both in public and in private, that the MWSG was both a members and non-members-led group. She was, on the other hand, following the roadmap she had designed from the beginning, adapting to circumstances and opportunities as they arose. In that way, she was using the group, contacts and members, as a tool to increase leverage vis-à-vis state, employers and SIPTU. She also believed that she was carrying out members' decisions taken at meetings, and that mushroom workers members' had already established the priorities of the work in the first meetings in August and September 2006. Democracy and members' power were, in a way, sacrificed in favour of efficiency, at least for the time being, and casework was consuming most of her time. It was, I assume, a matter of striking a balance while a core group was trained and the MWSG grew in size. Then, power would be fully handed over to members. Meanwhile MRCI tutored the process.

The debate on the future of the group consisted more of brain storming than reaching agreements and decision-making. We only came out with a mission statement. It was the lead organiser who asked the questions, moved on to new topics and decided how far the debate would lead the group. The longest discussion was about the 'mission' of the group. That was the only solid thing that came out after two days of discussions. During the discussions, there was no consensus as to what types of workers the group should target. The group was divided between focussing on agricultural workers or all migrant workers. Grazyna and her husband Adomas were willing to give effective help and fight for the rights of all migrant workers. Petras spoke of all migrant workers but particularly agricultural workers. Elite agreed with that as well as Velna. Lena in a broader way included all workers and not just migrant ones. Larisa instead preferred to focus on agricultural workers, but for the moment only on migrant mushroom workers because Irish mushroom workers were already protected. But when the lead organiser asked if Irish workers sought help would they give it to them, everybody answered, 'yes'. Laima

also preferred to focus on agriculture because we did not have expertise in other industries, and Galina only on mushrooms for the moment but agriculture in the future. That is, five decided that the focus should be all migrant workers in all economic sectors but without excluding Irish workers. One agreed with that but preferred a particular focus on agricultural workers. Only three decided to focus on mushroom and agricultural workers. The mission statement adopted in the end referred to only agricultural workers as the lead organiser had originally suggested a month earlier.

The lead organiser, after the discussion was over, produced a written statement in which she had affirmed that the group would focus on agricultural workers and no one said anything against it, including me. Why she pushed that idea is more difficult to understand, as she did not explain it. It had been her original idea, which also was based on the division of work already existing in MRCI. She had already started casework with agricultural workers in the horticultural area of North County Dublin. She had also started a Restaurant Workers Support Group in Dublin with migrant restaurant workers who had contacted or called MRCI drop-in centre asking for help. The third group was the Domestic Workers Support Group. She saw the different groups as separate projects. Probably, it was natural to include the new cases from agriculture in the MWSG project, and a group that could include all migrant workers in Ireland might overlap with the two other projects organised by MRCI. Perhaps because MRCI tried to not overlap with trade unions, it was better to focus only on non-traditional unionized sectors where unions were not recruiting.

There was no a clear idea about what would be the main activity of the group. Some spoke of offering help. For some that help consisted of giving information on rights (Regina). For Lena help consisted of protecting the welfare of people; for Larisa, their rights. Adomas said that the group should help workers to fight for their rights too. I said in a general way that the group should ‘defend and advance the interests of the workers as a part of the common struggle of all workers to defend and advance their interests’. In the end, the lead organiser intervened to read what she thought had been the consensus, that the mission statement would be ‘to protect, inform and advise all agricultural workers.’ In the following meeting on the 1st of April, she came up with a more elaborate and expanded mission statement that read to the group members, ‘To improve the living and working conditions for all migrant agricultural workers by working collectively to protect workers’ rights and entitlements. To inform and support and to work for solutions that improve agricultural workers’ lives.’ This formula certainly reflected a consensus regarding which group of workers to target. In any case

only the context, the workers who contacted the group, and the character of the struggles in the future would define how far it was possible to go, and how far workers wanted to go. It was not possible to determine the character of the struggles in advance.

Another important issue was that group members wanted to form an independent member-led group, but were very aware that without funding it would be impossible. Lena, for instance, was thinking of a group with members taking responsibilities in different areas, but also pointed out that the group would need a sponsor. Adomas joined in that concern. Other members asked whether the group would need full-time staff working for it or volunteers. All those questions were left unanswered. No one suggested fund raising or membership fees. The lead organiser did not say whether it would be possible to get another grant since the current one was going to end in July (later extended to September). She used to say, 'there are many questions but few answers' and would leave it at that.

On Sunday morning, before leaving, I confronted the lead organiser in the kitchen about the concerns that I had been having. I asked why we had not created a formal structure and elected some members at least for some responsibilities. She said that we had first to discuss all the details. I replied that we should therefore have at least set a timeframe so people knew how and when the process was going to take place. She simply said that it was a good idea, but the main achievement of the weekend had consisted in getting to know each other.

Just before the following meeting of the MWSG on the 1st of April, I asked her again when she thought the constitution of the group run by members would take place, and she replied that there were more pressing issues to deal with. Nevertheless, she dealt briefly with the topic at the meeting. A group charter would lay out, she said, how to elect people to take positions in the organisation. That seemed to be a direct answer to my queries. She said that we did not need a legally recognised group or structure and a constitution unless we wanted to apply for a grant: 'no constitution, no money', she said. The group had received (through MRCI) €2,000 from Monaghan Partnership, which had to be used before June 2007 on education, including training courses on how to run an organisation. The plan was to do one in mid May and another one in mid June. The lead organiser would do part of the course, and guest experts would cover other parts. In the end we did not do the training course; we rather discussed the constitution of the new group. I explain below the reasons for this change of plans.

At the meeting of the 29th of April, the lead organiser said that we had to work on what to do as a group in the next period, but 'we need resources to make it work. Who

will provide the funding we need?’ She asked rhetorically, ‘there is a lot of work between now and September [applying for grants]. This is building the foundations... There is no other migrant organisation in Ireland trying to improve the conditions of migrants. Most won’t believe this will work. But it is possible.’

She emphasised the social aspect of the weekend meeting and everyone getting to know each other. She did not mention anything about constituting an independent group or a timeframe to do so. She said that much had been accomplished but there were more questions than answers. Issues like forming an independent group and ways to secure funding would have to be discussed in the future. The important thing was that the group came out with a mission statement. I wrote after that meeting in my fieldwork diary,

At that very moment I looked into people’s faces and I saw no emotions, no interest. I wondered what made them go every month to the meetings, sit and listen to [the lead organiser’s] comments on the casework that she (MWSG in her words) was doing. They are asked for their opinions, but she only takes on board those that she agrees with or MRCI would agree with.

I was divided between my roles as a researcher and as an activist, and I did not publicly challenge her. What did other members think? The week after the meeting of the 29th April, I arranged to spend a weekend with one of the members of the group. I wanted to know more about their stories working on farms, but also their opinions about the group by talking to them individually and in their homes.

The members’ voice

It is interesting to notice that the assistant organiser was Latvian and that during the weekend in Wicklow she had sat with the Latvians. Nothing wrong with that, but I had also noticed that the Latvians had been very quiet. Talking to the Lithuanians, for example, I thought I could get a more open appraisal of the group, while the Latvians might feel a sense of loyalty towards the group because of their closer relation to one of the organisers. During a weekend spent in Petrova’s house, I learnt that she had arrived to conclusions similar to mine, as did the rest of the Lithuanians.²³⁵ She said that some had stopped going to the meetings (actually the numbers had gone down to 10 or 11 and later to 9) and others such as Nonna and Pavla were going to do it because all we did was talk, always repeating the same issues without going anywhere. ‘We all had decided to create a group in Wicklow’, she argued, ‘why then hadn’t it happened?’ She

²³⁵ I have changed again the names of the MWSG members in this section to avoid their identification.

mentioned also the last attempt to organise a protest in Cavan and how, after all agreeing with it, it had not taken place. They had been waiting to be called for the protest. ‘Why we have to go to the meetings?’ Some time later (October 2008), when the group had stopped all activity, Oxana expressed the same idea and said that, ‘after all that [the lead organiser] has promised, she hasn’t done anything’. But doubts ran deeper than that. They knew that the group was getting money, but no one had a say in how the money was allocated. It was MRCI’s money. Some had started thinking that the lead organiser was interested in creating an independent group because it was the only way to get funding. On the other hand, some group members had hoped to work for the group. Towards the end of the year, the group discussed a strategic plan and the lead organiser proposed 5 paid positions.

I suggested to Petrova that I could talk to the lead organiser and tell her most of what she had told me to see if there was any way to reverse the situation. However, I also said that the best way to do it was at the meetings with everyone present. That was on the 5th of May. Three days later I had a long conversation (around two hours) with the lead organiser on the phone. I told her that I had talked to three group members, whose names I preferred not to reveal. They had expressed dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the group. The main point I made was that some group members thought that the process of creating the group was too slow and that some were thinking of dropping out. They also complained about a lack of action, no agenda provided before the meetings, and not following through with decisions taken in the previous meetings. For example, they did not know what had happened with the agreement over the protest in Cavan. They had been waiting to be called. ‘People want to be more involved in the organisation of events’, I said.

To start with, noticing the excited tone of my voice, she told me that she was happy I was telling her all this. But she then went on to recount all the work that MRCI was doing (see above). She said that they had helped many of them to get jobs and that they had achieved so much in so little time because ‘there was a group’. So they could go to the media, talk to supermarkets, labour inspectors, etc. Without a group, she said, they would not have been able to do any of that. It was normal on the other hand, she said, that people come and go and that some drop out of the group. I replied that all that she said was true, but people still wanted to get involved, take their own decisions and follow them up.

‘They don’t want to go to the meetings just to hear about problems they have, they want to do something about it by getting involved and having control over the group’, I

said.

‘I’m only facilitating the group’, she said, ‘they are going ahead in creating the group, but it takes some time. I always ask people what they want to do, but since Wicklow there are too many questions that must be answered.’

‘Ok’, I said, ‘but people need to know how long it will take to get more involved in the process. For example, they wanted to create a group run by them during the weekend in Wicklow and still they are going through the same discussions two months later. They just don’t know what’s going on.’

She rejected the notion that people were not getting involved. She had asked some of them to be present at the meeting with the supermarkets, and also had asked Kofryna and two others to be present at the next meeting of the new JLC for agricultural workers. I tried to argue that it was her asking people to go to these meeting and not them deciding to, or being involved in any decision making. I proposed to deal with those questions at the next meeting and also that at least while the group was formally constituted there should be an elected committee of two or three members that would be consulted and in contact with MRCI between meetings (rank-and-file representation committee). The issue was to allow group members to start taking responsibilities. I did not know the effect that the conversation had on her until the 12th of May when we met in Cavan for what we supposed was going to be a training course. Instead we discussed the preambles to the constitution of AgWA.

A new turn? May to October 2007

The course that we were meant to do on the weekend of the 12-13th of May 2007 on how to run an organisation turned into something slightly different when the lead organiser opened the meeting by saying that we would talk about how to create an organisation. She added that in order to get funding [from a sponsor] the group had to be independent and that so far we had obtained funding through MRCI. Yet, MRCI would still continue providing assistance. The first thing was to create a board of directors, made up of volunteers who would only have expenses covered. The board, according to the constitution of a non-profit organisation, could hire staff, as MRCI did, but board members could not be hired unless they resigned. The two organisers from MRCI could continue as members of the board of directors but would be working for MRCI. AgWA’s board of directors would be able to hire staff when there was funding for it. In relation to the future, the group would have to grow in members, improve the newsletter, get people to join unions and elect shop stewards on farms, demand that

SIPTU act, get members involved, and organise social events and services such as English classes. So far, the two organisers from MRCI had been doing most of the day-to-day work, but the group had to start taking decisions because ‘no one knows better what the organisation should be doing for you’ than migrants themselves.

The next meeting was set for the 16th June to discuss a strategic plan. The minutes for that meeting indicated that the group should ‘put pressure on trade unions, labour inspectors, supermarkets and the Minister of Agriculture to make sure that employers are complying with the law and workers get fair pay and entitlements.’ To carry out that work the group would need one national organiser, 4 regional part-time workers, a national committee and 4 regional committees. On the meeting of the 15th of July, we reached an agreement (which I proposed) that the majority of members of the board of directors had to be current or former agricultural workers. The lead organiser promised to bring a document to the next meeting with the roles and responsibilities of directors at members’ suggestion. At the meeting on the 16th September, with a total attendance of 9, we got a copy of the constitution of AgWA dated 27th August. Next there was a discussion on the strategic plan. The lead organiser proposed dividing Ireland into four areas and hiring a community worker for each one because distance made travelling from one region to another difficult. There would also be a general coordinator who would answer to the board.

Only 8 members had so far signed up for the board. In the draft of the Strategic Plan, dated December 2007, there were 14 board members, including me (treasurer), Šarlote (Secretary), Larisa (Chairperson) and Regina (Vice-Chairperson). The lead organiser said that there was a potential membership of 13,000, which was the number of agricultural workers in the Republic (CSO). ‘We need more than 8 people’, she said, ‘people only need to be invited to join the board’. Formally, we had set up a group but little had changed. It was the lead organiser again proposing and everyone accepting, although we seemed to be in the process of members taking control of the group. At the meeting of the 16th September, the lead organiser presented a proposal on the work that AgWA had to do. One of the points consisted of organising ‘a large membership of agricultural workers, [building] an ongoing organisation and leadership capable of taking action and carrying out our goals.’ But so far the only steps had consisted of the lead organiser picking members to attend meetings and her proposing goals and informing in detail about the lobbying and casework (‘that sometimes people don’t notice’). The goal of hiring 5 community workers or organisers seemed too big for an organisation of only 8 members so far. Formally AgWA was on the way to be an

independent organisation. We were getting regular minutes of the meetings since June 2007, but little more than that. In the meantime, attendance at meetings had declined and an obvious boredom was reflected at the meetings.

After the meeting of the 14th October membership cards were sent to potential members and 20 were returned by the 25th November. The board voted, after a discussion, a €25 annual membership voluntary fee. The lead organiser proposed Larisa as Chairperson, Regina as Vice-Chair, and me (not present) as a treasurer. All voted in favour. At the meeting of February 2008, she said that there was no funding yet. AgWA would start organising regional meetings too and board meetings would become less frequent. The next meeting of the board of directors was planned for the 25th May 2008. The assistant organiser, after the Peace II grant finished, started to work directly for MRCI until she got a job in the SIPTU organising unit in summer 2008. In October 2008 I met Larisa and Aglaya. Larisa was particularly angry with the lead organiser. She thought that she had used them and then moved on. As a chairperson she never took any decision or held any responsibility either. She said that other group members were also angry. But there had not been opposition to the lead organiser because they knew that MRCI had all the resources and they had none.

The strategic plan that the lead organiser elaborated in December 2007 estimated a budget of €166,140 for 2008 that would increase to €297,770 by 2010, to be spent mainly on wages. All that money would come from external sources; fundraising was the only internal source of funding considered. But board members, all members of AgWA in fact, amounted to only 14 by December 2007, and none of them were involved in any work within the group. The MWSG, a project of MRCI, carried out excellent work helping mushroom workers, but, lacking a membership base, it relied on external funds. The project of hiring 5 regional community workers and a coordinator (and even an administrator) to assist agricultural workers was a luxury that donors were unlikely to fund. MRCI was actually doing that work for all migrant workers in Ireland. When the Peace II grant finished AgWA became a luxury for MRCI. It was strange that the lead organiser proposed such a big plan with such a huge budget when the group was winding down.

The existence of a core group (the members of the MWSG), as the lead organiser said, constituted the reason why MRCI had been able to speak on behalf of mushroom workers. In the end, that was the only role of MWSG members. MRCI, on the other hand, did excellent work by helping over 400 mushroom workers. For MRCI that fact justified the time and energies spent on the campaign. The lead organiser moved on to

other projects. The MWSG was never a migrant-led group and that in the end made the project fail.

Leadership and control

The main question in this chapter was whether the MWSG was a migrant-led group, or in the process of becoming one. The formal constitution of AgWA represented a step towards that direction, which paradoxically took place when the group was winding down. There was a gap between theory and practice, between aspirations and reality, which led to the collapse of AgWA in a matter of months. Left on its own, the group could not survive. Why did it happen that way? What was the role of the lead organiser's style of leadership?

Her influence over the group had a lot of bearing on the direction the group took, but she did not work in a vacuum. To start with, casework was her primary job. When MRCI tried to organise workers, it was in a voluntaristic fashion. Organising did not emerge organically. From the beginning the lead organiser took control of all aspects of the work of the MWSG. Members also let her act in the way she did, and perhaps were compensated in recovering back-pay, English language classes, and a social life. But members also wanted and were promised control over the group. However, membership was always reduced, members isolated from each other, scattered throughout Cavan and Monaghan, and most could not speak English. These barriers, even when partly overcome by the use of a translator, favoured a tendency to centralise all decision making in the hands of the lead organiser. In addition, members came from farms where voicing complaints had been an *unwise* move. Criticism of the way in which the group was run, similarly, did not take place in meetings; it was found in more private realms, as 'hidden transcripts'. In between meetings most of the members were scattered in different towns. Some small groups in twos or in threes lived together or nearby. There were contacts by mobile phone too. The first critique that I knew of developed among a small group of Lithuanians living close to each other, but it never went beyond that sphere. The most militant of the oppositional members was living on her own and was not in touch with the rest. In these circumstances it was difficult to articulate an opposition within the group to challenge the MRCI leadership. When there were chances to articulate an opposition, it was too late. Participation had declined and MRCI seemed to have abandoned the project since it believed that the worst aspects of 'exploitation' in the industry had been 'cleaned up'. An important reason to not articulate an internal opposition, however, was that MRCI had control of all means.

Fundamentally, a core group of leaders did not emerge organically in the course of workers' struggles. It is true that they joined the group meetings because of conflicts at work. This and their discussions at meetings had radicalised them. But radicalisation did not take place through collective struggles. The only instance of collective conflict was the Kilnaleck case, but when workers knocked on SIPTU's door they only received assistance on an individual casework basis. The type of unionism that they found was not conducive to rank-and-file unionism. Something similar happened with the MWSG. There were several attempts to organise collective actions during the initial period of the MWSG, but in the end these did not materialise. Meetings were reduced to the lead organiser asking members their opinions. In these circumstances, she did not have any pressure from below. It could be argued that given the reduced number of workers attending the meetings, and that a core group of leaders had to be created, the lead organiser had to act on their behalf in order to deal with workers' concerns, which also meant that she had to rely on casework rather than on collective action. On top of that, group membership was never formal during the period of existence of the MWSG. I have used the word 'members' to define those who attended the meetings, but it would be more proper to call them 'contacts', workers who were invited to take part in the meetings and help the lead organiser to decide on the priorities of her work. MRCI had assumed the role of empowering these workers but it was not self-empowerment.

At the end of the last chapter, I suggested that the tight personal control that the lead organiser had over the MWSG was a reflection of MRCI control of it through her. I said that non-elected MRCI community workers and the MRCI board of directors ran MWSG, a MRCI project. Nevertheless, it would have been possible to encourage members to take responsibilities from the beginning and control their own organisation, which is what they wanted to do. Centralising and bureaucratic tendencies must be explained by the lack of pressure from below, from the workers. On the other hand, those tendencies were reinforced by MRCI's particular type of leadership. It is possible that had there been pressure from below from the onset the lead organiser would have played a very different role. In many aspects, particularly in casework and networking, her output was truly impressive.

Members' ownership

The most rank-and-file methods followed by some unions, as shown in chapter 5, can be used here to compare MRCI's 'organising' campaign in the mushroom industry with member-owned union-building struggles. The *ten tactics that work* put forward by

Bronfenbrenner (chapter 6) can be summed up in one single point: members' ownership. We have seen that it was one of the most important points in MRCI's campaign, but one which was never achieved. So, it is not enough to make a declaration of good intentions; we have to pay attention to how tactics are applied. If methods and ends do not match, rather diverge, then we have a contradiction. In a more specific way, members' ownership is mostly materialised in the most important of the ten tactics: the rank-and-file organising committee, which needs to be created from the bottom but it might not arise spontaneously. Rick Fantasia (1988: chapter 4) describes a union recognition campaign led by female workers in a hospital in Springfield, Vermont (USA). These workers did not have previous experiences with trade unions. An initial group of seven workers contacted the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees after reading about it in a nursing magazine report on a nurses' strike, and met Richard Sanders, union organiser, who, after making them aware that management would wage a vigorous campaign against union recognition, added that a union was not simply a grievance machinery but a democratic organisation of workers to contest for power in the work place. The task was to build first of all a core group of leaders, an organising committee made of militant workers committed to union building by convincing fellow workers 'of the power of collective interest and organization'. Those core leaders, on the other hand, did not have to be educated before they started acting as an organising committee; 'leadership ability is forged largely in the work of the committee, with the union drive becoming a critical training ground for activists.' And Fantasia goes on, 'One key role of the union organizer is to identify potential members of the committee and to cultivate certain leadership qualities... the union organizer is essential in building the committee and giving it direction and guidance.' Clawson (2003: 10) also describes another campaign with Richard Sanders as the union organiser, in this case in Rhode Island Hospital (NY), and the 'union building' approach aimed at empowering workers:

According to Sanders, 'More than anything else, a good organizer is a teacher. We are not leaders –though too many organizers fall into the trap and are, indeed, trained to think of themselves and act like the leader of the workers'... [The organizer] brings out the best in workers, helps develop their talents and capacities, and makes it possible to forge ... solidarity.

Workers' leadership, like solidarity, therefore, is developed during the course of struggles and collective actions, in the process of doing, and guided by the union

organiser, who helps them along the way.²³⁶ Workers start then taking decisions, responsibilities and ownership from the beginning. As Clawson (203: 10) also argues, organising is really effective when workers, rather than union-paid staff, do the union building. It might be a small detail but one that makes a big difference. In the MWSG, participants were not guided and educated in the process of them building the group, because it was MRCI staff that did it on their behalf. The lead organiser fell into the trap, as Sanders argues, of acting as the leader of the group. There is another small detail that makes a big difference. The typical case of ‘business union’ organising, according to Clawson (*ibid.*), consists of paid union organisers taking all key decisions and doing the work instead of helping the workers ‘to develop their own power’. That is what SIPTU did during its mushroom industry campaign, although in a shabby way, but that is also what MRCI ended up doing in practice. It is possible they did it in the belief that workers were not able to do it by themselves, but that contributed to create a wall between the union and the NGO as institutions, and the workers, who did not feel they were their organisations. As Clawson (*ibid.*) argues:

Even if workers are mad enough at management that the union wins, workers may not feel that it is their union, many not feel that they have the capacity –or the right– to democratically make decisions about their priorities. Certainly they don’t feel that workers have the power to stand up to management; at best they hope ‘the union’ (meaning paid staff) will do so for them.

This was the case (as illustrated in chapters 5 and 6) of SIPTU, which the workers viewed as an external institution expected to achieve things for them, and even then viewed with distrust. SIPTU’s victories, such as the union recognition campaign, were not viewed as workers’ owned victories. The case of MRCI is similar. We have seen that the MRCI lead organiser had often to remind MWSG members of the achievements of the group in terms of back wages recovered, improved work conditions, personal assistance to workers, etc. She used to call it ‘the invisible work’, which is why it was not often acknowledged, indicating that MRCI was acting in the ‘business union’ tradition in its work with mushroom workers.

Clawson (2003: 14) indicates that unions turn into obstacles, losing their purpose and power, when the leadership acts on behalf of the workers instead of developing and mobilising workers’ solidarity and power, creating a contradiction (see also Tait 2005: 120):

²³⁶ I deal here with organising efforts led by workers but guided by union organisers. There are however multiple cases of workers’ struggles by workers on their own, such as unofficial strikes, which can also face the union leadership as well as the bosses, and may or may not lead to breakaway unions (see Fantasia 1988; Lane *et al.* 1971; Lerner 1961).

Workers need strong organizations but organizations often stifle workers' self-activity; labor needs bottom-up mobilization, but this is often introduced from the top down.

Another point that Clawson (2003: 22) makes in relation to NGOs, but also unions as they also use similar tactics, is that these organisations normally operate through law-suits or media exposure:

While the structural dynamic of unions pushes them to accommodate and win small victories for members [the logic of collective bargaining], the structural dynamic of [new movements] pushes them to generate publicity and tap into emotional issues that get people to respond to direct mail appeals. The constituency of these groups, together with their reliance on foundations and wealthy donors, gives them a strongly middle-class character ... Given the class character of the new movement and the nature of the issues, the day-to-day lives of group members rarely depend on material victories.

MRCI experience at the time of the constitution of the MWSG had consisted of casework, lobbying and media exposure. MRCI's leadership of the MWSG, while attempting to develop a core group of leaders who could run the group, had also come down to the same type of work (i.e. casework, lobbying and media exposure). MRCI was run by a non-elected board of directors and hired staff, a leadership that had not emerged organically during the course of collective action. Donations and grants financed MRCI costs. Lack of participation and group ownership separated workers from MRCI-MWSG, which ended up being viewed as an institution offering legal and personal aid rather than as a movement to empower workers and develop solidarity. It could be argued that it all came down to the lead organiser's leadership shortcomings. But theories that focus on individuals rather on structural issues cannot explain why there seem to be so many organisers of that kind in NGOs and trade unions, although most not as efficient as she was in her job as caseworker and as a community worker.

Part 3: The two political economies

In these concluding remarks, I will give a summary of the main points discussed in this dissertation and bring together the two political economies articulated throughout this work in order to understand the main contradictions dealt with so far between workers and institutions.

In the introduction I spoke of different modes of power that we had to understand if we were to make sense of the agency of individuals and institutions in the mushroom industry. At the upper level we had *structural power: which organises and orchestrates the settings themselves*. It consists of different frameworks, which are the product of the actions of individuals and social groups, and within which struggles between these individuals and groups take place. More specifically, I referred to structural power as the unfolding of the *law of value*, which, following Mandel, rules exchanges between commodities, between capital and labour, the proportion of total social labour allocated to production, average rates of profits and investment flows. The *law of value*, on the other hand, manifests itself only through competition between different capitals and between workers. The political economy of capital emanates from this structuring force. It is the product of the activity of millions of individuals but it is placed above them, and individual capitalists must yield to it in order to survive and thrive. Workers on the other hand enter jobs individually and have to accept conditions they might not agree with in order to make a living. Kautsky's quote about the plight of peasants under capitalism just exemplifies the effect of competition, which is how the logic of the system is expressed throughout the whole economy:

Its participants are whipped on and on until they collapse exhausted – aside from a

small number of especially aggressive and thrusting types who manage to clamber over the bodies of the fallen and join the ranks of the chief whippers, the big capitalists.

Perhaps the quote looks a bit dramatic, but that was the general feeling among growers during the 2000s, and how the burden of competition was passed onto workers. The job control imposed on workers and the tyrannical regime on mushroom farms, however, was an expression of a different kind of power, *tactical power: the power that controls the settings in which people may exhibit their potentialities and interact with others*. The struggle against job control and a particular work regime takes first the form of a struggle against management, as we have seen in the Aircoach organising campaign. But that is a struggle against the medium through which the market forces are imposed and the law of value articulated. That is why there is no end to a struggle waged on the effects rather than on the root causes; there can never be a ‘final’ victory, and yet this is what trade unionism is about and what can lead to a challenge to capitalism, implicit in the political economy of labour in the same way that solidarity grows out of sectionalism (see below).

According to the political economy of capital, everything (as far as employers can go in the face of the union movement and society at large) must be subordinated to the imperatives of competitiveness and productivity; otherwise there cannot be companies and jobs, profits and wages. The minimum wage for employers turns into an unbearable, *unjust and bureaucratically imposed* burden when it hinders competitiveness, which can only be increased through the devaluation of labour either by introducing new technology and reorganising the labour process or by reducing wages and labour standards, or both. The latter combination is the most frequent measure in the times of flexible accumulation (Harvey 1990; Mathur 1998), but in labour-intensive and low-paid sectors, where the sweatshop prospers, there tends to be a reliance on the production of absolute surplus value. The struggle between employers and unions is fundamentally about the value of labour, expressed as the minimum wage and minimum labour standards. The ‘nice’ and ‘good’ employer cannot be competitive and cannot survive in a globalised economy characterised by mobility of capital and labour, and a *global race to the bottom*.

Partnership unionism, however, is based on the belief that the ‘good employer’, who respects the ‘rules of engagement’, can prosper.²³⁷ The first question that comes to mind

²³⁷ Management practices, when they give a competitive edge, tend to be adopted, as new technology is, or else companies fall behind. Then the rate of profits equalizes. The Keynesian

is the level of standards that define a 'good employer'. If, by negotiation and consensus, these are lowered then a 'good employer' could be someone who previously would have been considered a 'bad employer'. Or the same employer can be a 'bad employer' in a country but a 'good employer' in another. In a more relative way, a 'good employer' can be characterised as someone who plays according to the 'rules of engagement' agreed during a certain period. The second question is whether an employer can afford old labour standards in times of crisis, or whether such standards imply a threat to accumulation. This is difficult to discern since employers do not open their (real) books for regular inspections, at least not to unions and workers. We have seen that the mushroom industry as a whole could afford old labour standards. After union recognition was achieved on the most important farms, the industry did not shrink or disappear. The number of farms, however, declined dramatically. Obsolete capital (individual farmers) was eliminated and the remaining farms had to be updated technologically and managerially. SIPTU's recognition campaign during 2006 and 2007 accelerated that process. Historically, capitalists saw the introduction of the 10-hour, or the 8-hour day, or any improvement in wages and working conditions, as threats to their very survival. But the outcome was that the adoption of new technologies was accelerated.²³⁸ At a certain level, however, labour standards and wages can compromise accumulation. In that case, a general devaluation of labour follows if capital is politically stronger; otherwise a revolution can take place.

The Irish mushroom industry could not escape the logic of capitalist development. In the last 40 years it underwent two fundamental structural transformations that must be understood within the foregoing framework. In the 1970s a handful of large tray farms, integrating compost making, growing, and marketing, dominated the Irish mushroom industry. There were small farms at that time, but they only had an accessory role and were not the type of small farms that participated in the creation of the satellite growing system in the 1980s. At the peak of the tray farm system of individualised marketing (1979), five large farms produced 80 percent of total output, or about 1,000 tonnes of mushrooms per annum each. That had been an extraordinary increase since 1965, when seven large farms just averaged under 200t each. However, in 1986 the last three tray farms, belonging to the Drummin Group, closed down. Together, they produced over 4,000t per year and employed 350 workers represented by the Irish Transport and

'good employer' tends to fall behind in relation to employers applying 'neoliberal' strategies even in high capital-intensive sector.

²³⁸ This was the particular case of the lettuce industry in California, where labour scarcity triggered the adoption of harvesting machines (Friedland *et al.* 1981).

General Workers Union (ITWGU). On each farm workers were protected by an Registered Employment Agreement signed on September 1978 which covered general farm workers, lorry drivers, fork-lift drivers, front and loader drivers, line operators, pickers, packers and canteen workers.

Between 1979 and 1986 –a transitional period between two growing systems– all tray farms vanished, giving way to the satellite growing system. The new system was based on small farmers growing mushrooms by means of a labour-intensive production process, with very little capital investment, and using local casual and part-time female pickers not covered by a single piece of legislation. At first it is difficult to understand how the new system could be more competitive and have displaced mechanised tray farms. To start with, production costs were much lower. That was possible because growing, and composting and marketing had been split. Growing, but particularly harvesting, was the most labour-intensive operation. New growers tended to be, in a time of high unemployment, underemployed farmers with a *tiny* plot of land, looking for extra incomes or any income at all. Being their own bosses, in theory, they were ready to put in as many hours, unpaid labour, needed. Extra labour needs were supplemented by the work of casual pickers, which they called ‘help’. That is, labour costs were externalised; unions, got rid of.

The advantage of the new system consisted in the high rate of unpaid labour in growing operations. That labour was available at the time, but the system also needed a new technology to make it possible: the bag growing system developed at the Kinsealy Research Centre (Co. Dublin), a state agency, a capital-saving system that required very little investment, within the reach of virtually anyone with at least one acre of land free to use. As we have seen, capital’s saving technologies constitute a way to counteract the tendency of profits to fall, at least temporarily. The new technology to produce bulk compost was also capital-saving. The tendency towards fragmentation at the farming level in order to devalue labour (even if that suited underemployed farmers), however, was only an expression of a rapid tendency towards centralisation and concentration in compost making and marketing, which is how mushroom groups and the satellite system developed. At the retail end, concentration proceeded at an even more rapid pace as large supermarkets took over wholesalers and greatly expanded the market for mushrooms. The more supermarkets grew, the more concentration, absorptions and mergers took place in composting and marketing. The highest level of concentration and centralisation in the production of input took place, however, in spawn making, which introduced the most capital-intensive technology and therefore presented the highest

level in the productivity of labour.

These changes did not take place in a vacuum, nor did they constitute just an internal development. At a global level the 1980s brought what has been commonly characterised as a new regime of accumulation based on a tendency towards subcontracting, temporary and part-time jobs, and attacks on organised labour. At one end we can find fragmentation, a surge in small businesses and the return of the sweatshop to advanced capitalist countries; at the other end, concentration and centralisation among corporations, as well as an increase in their proportional economic power. Reversing the trend that started in the 1940s and 1950s, profits also increased their share in the total economy in relation to wages since the 1970s. On the shop floor the tendencies to increase the production of absolute surplus value have been characterised as lean production and management through stress (Moody 1997), and had been applied in all economic sectors. However, it has been in labour-intensive sectors that the sweatshop has reappeared since the production of relative surplus value is very limited, too expensive, or not applicable. The return of the sweatshop, domestic industry, sharecropping, etc., does not imply that the tendency towards large-scale production, or economies of scale, has been reversed. The Irish mushroom industry constitutes an example of it. They rather express an attack on organised labour, as we are going to see, taking place with a surge in small-scale production via subcontracting but also, and above all, with the introduction of lean production in manufacturing in order to boost profits.

The separation of growing from compost making and marketing implied an externalisation of labour costs at the same time that control mechanisms were put in place to ensure growers' adherence to mushroom groups' product requirements. As output started to flow to large supermarkets instead of wholesalers towards the end of the 1980s, quality requirements increased. In order to gain contracts with supermarkets, mushroom groups had to offer a steady and reliable supply of mushrooms at a competitive price and prime quality appearance. That meant a tighter control of the labour process on farm on the part of mushroom groups. Supermarkets developed their own quality standards, but the Irish industry, with state assistance, developed its own standards too in order to guarantee contracts with supermarkets by building business trust. Control over farming on the part of off-farm capital started with the production of mushroom strains (spawn) by spawn makers. Particularly, hybrid strains required an exacting labour process: there was only one right way to do it. Then there were standards required by mushroom groups, state agencies and retailers. The

implementation of those standards demanded close supervision, which was costly on large farms. The satellite system eliminated that cost for mushroom groups by passing it on to growers.

It appeared that the system was working well, but supermarkets started to question the reliability of a system based on small contract growers in terms of quality requirements and guaranteeing orders. On the other hand, Polish and Dutch growers started to enter the British market, where most Irish mushrooms were distributed. Polish growers were competitive because wages were lower; Dutch growers with higher wages to pay were more efficient producers in overall costs. They had been able to reduce average cost per kilo thanks to co-operative composting and to increase margins thanks to centralised marketing, but they had also developed a more capital-intensive growing system, based on small and medium farmers, that allowed them to reduce labour costs by increasing the productivity of labour, and made possible a profitable expansion of production. In order to compete, Irish growers had to expand production, but the bag system was too labour intensive for operations other than harvesting and not competitive beyond the farm based on unpaid labour.

The question of unpaid labour is fundamental to understand the generalised mistreatment and underpayment detected on mushroom farms in the mid 2000s. A long and difficult transition started at the end of the 1990s when Irish growers started to expand production. There were transitional forms on the way to adopt the Dutch system (which required a capital investment that many mushroom growers could not afford) such as the block growing system. But the major problem was the availability of cheap and flexible labour. While competitive pressures in the mushroom industry had reduced growers' margins and they were not willing to offer 'proper wages' to full-time mushroom pickers, the Irish economic boom had dried the pool of labour that growers could have attracted, basically because other sectors offered better wages and working conditions. The response was to source labour in other labour markets where it was plentiful and cheap. Work agencies started to offer workers from Eastern Europe and the state facilitated the concession of work permits.

This second transition brought about larger farms, a new growing system (the Dutch shelf system) and a full-time, permanent workforce. At another level, it transformed the contract grower into a capitalist farmer, typically an owner-manager with a supervisory role. The largest mushroom group, Monaghan Mushrooms, entered production and became the largest growing company, completely separating ownership and management. This transition brought about the end of the satellite system as the major

group entered production and the second largest group started to buy in an open market, as did other mushroom groups, in order to fulfil orders at a competitive price.

The second transition had another aspect, as the underpayment and mistreatment of migrant mushroom workers was generalised. Local workers had not been covered by the ERO for agricultural workers for most of the period of the satellite-growing system since their work was considered casual, ‘help’ in the emic growers’ idiom. Therefore sweat labour had existed before the arrival of migrant workers, but while the Irish pickers had been locals with connections to the local society and had a shared culture with growers, who tended to come from the same class, migrant workers were isolated, with little or no knowledge of the legal system, local customs, and were not familiar with Irish labour relations and unions. Their powerlessness plus the competitive pressures that growers faced turned farm management into a tyrannical regime. The official position was that the economy needed migrant workers to do the ill-paid jobs that Irish workers did not want to do, and migrants were delighted because ill-paid jobs still offered them higher absolute incomes than in their countries of origin. As migrant workers did as much overtime as they could and had little social life apart from work, most of their wages were saved with the idea of returning to their countries of origin at a later stage, or to support their families back at home. On the other hand, the work-permit system forced them to stay with the same employer for the duration of the work permit system. This, as well as the secretive way in which growers conducted their businesses, made Irish farms the worst type of sweatshops known in Ireland in contemporary times, compounded by the lack of proper inspections and enforcement on the part of the state.

Unions, on the other hand, did not see migrant workers on work permits as a threat to their members, as there was no competition for jobs and no race to the bottom. However, after May 2004, all that changed. The Irish Ferries and GAMA cases represented signs of what could happen in an open labour market and in a context in which unions’ only aim was to service members rather than organising the unorganised and the weaker sections of the working class. It is not a coincidence that the mushroom sweatshop was only uncovered after May 2004. The transition to a mushroom industry based on capitalist independent growers was accomplished after SIPTU’s union recognition campaign during 2006 and 2007. By the end of 2009 up to 21 farms had signed Regulation Employment Agreements with SIPTU.

Graph: Irish Mushroom Commodity Cycle (1960s-2000s) and transitions between production systems.



Independent Capitalist Growers (1960s-1970s)

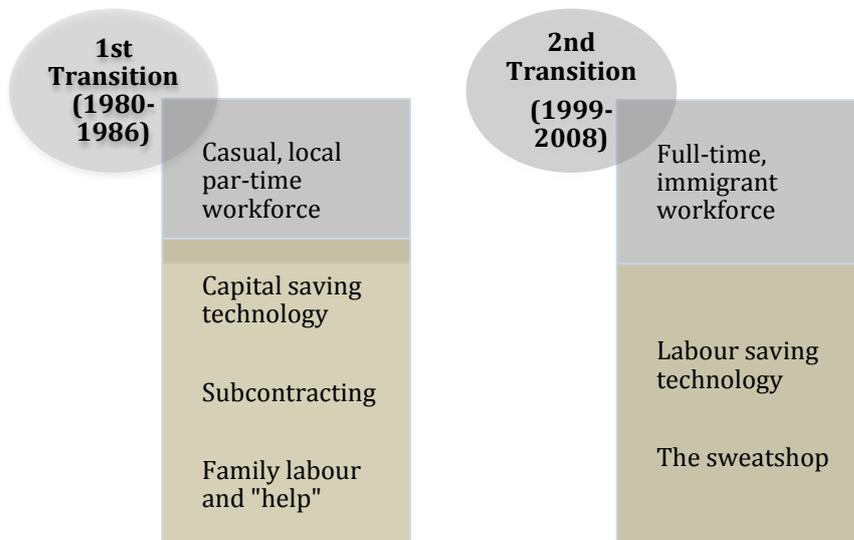
- Large Tray Farm System
- Integrated compost, growing and marketing
- Unionised large workforce
- Capital intensive growing
- Labour intensive harvesting

Satellite System (1980s-1990s)

- Bag growing system
- Growing split from composting and marketing
- Small contract growers / large mushroom groups
- Casual, part-time harvesting workforce; low capital investment
- Unpaid labour; union free

Independent Capitalist Growers (2000s-)

- Dutch Shelf System
- Open market for compost and marketing ; few integrate growing and marketing; one case of vertical integration
- Unionised workforce
- Capital intensive growing; labour intensive harvesting



These developments took place in a local context influenced by shared cultural understandings and patterns of social behaviour, but within the framework of the global logic of accumulation. Before the arrival of migrant workers, growers and pickers came

from similar class backgrounds. There were social values such as ‘help’ or being ‘nice’ rather than ‘greedy’. Growers and pickers during the 1980s and 1990s framed their claims according to those values. Growers tried to conceal the spirit of the incipient capitalist in them by complaining to their pickers that they were not making money and arguing that they were not greedy. But market pressures were leading them to tighter control of the work process, to a higher intensity of work, and to a prolongation of the working day, aims that were greatly advanced when migrant workers started to arrive. The ‘greediness’ of the grower in the eyes of the workers was an expression of the logic of capital and the conflict between the local culture and the political economy of capital. As Marx said:

The capitalist knows that all commodities, however scurvy they may look, or however badly they may smell, are in faith and in truth money, inwardly circumcised Jews, and what is more, a wonderful means whereby out of money to make more money.²³⁹

Labour was such a commodity. There is another interesting aspect in Marx’ quote. There has been a traditional association between usury and the Jews. Marx, according to David Harvey (2010: 91), was trying to say that if that had been the case then capitalists should be viewed in the same light. Growers, accordingly, tried to avoid similar pejorative views. But a cultural change was also taking place. In the public domain the ideology of local capitalism was propagating a different view as we have seen during the development of the 1994 strike. Borrowing popular ideas from the peasant ideology (the small and medium farm) about ‘hard work’, ‘frugality’ (see below), and the farming life, they turned them around to blame trade unions and workers with threatening to destroy the new mushroom industry, the source of livelihood for thousands in the region, with strike action and calling into question its viability by hampering competitiveness and productivity. The parasite, living off the work of others, was not the capitalist but the trade unionist. On the other hand, in a context of inequality of power, the local concept of ‘help’ could only conceal exploitative relations. The need to struggle against diminishing returns made the grower expand production, introduce changes in the work process, become more efficient, change or fall behind. When migrant workers arrived there were no need to hide ‘greediness’ within the farm, but the tyrannical farm regime and gross underpayment had to be kept behind closed doors. After all, there was a social partnership and a minimum wage in Ireland, so it was important to keep up the appearances. Growers insisted on their ideology of hard work

²³⁹ *Capital*, Vol 1, chapter 4 (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch04.htm>)

and the need of working according to the natural cycle of agriculture: ‘once you are in mushrooms, you work to their time’. Commitment was the most important requirement for a good grower, and that was equally demanded from workers, but given the particular circumstances of the mushroom industry that could only lead to tyrannical work regimes. The upward wage pressure caused by the Celtic Tiger was reflected in increases in the minimum wage, and in the tyrannical regime that farms adopted. Between 1981 and 2005 ideal picking rates increased from 25 to 55 pounds per hour, to be achieved by more efficient picking strategies and growing methods, but above all by sheer human speed (absolute surplus value). Migrant workers were seen by employers in general as godsend to restore competitiveness, particularly after May 2004. Workers competing against workers is a fundamental principle for the political economy of capital, perhaps the most important, as the main battles between capital and labour are about the devaluation of labour. The powerlessness of migrant workers on mushroom farms was reflected in their resignation, ‘we could do nothing’, and the fierce competition among them, ‘you can kill for money’. Growers and supervisors tried to magnify ethnic, status, and personal divisions among pickers to increase individualism and rivalry... and higher picking rates; lower piece rates.

The relationship between local culture, dominant and subaltern ideologies, and the political economies of both labour and capital can be better understood by having a look at the work of Dimitra Doukas (2003; 2008). During her fieldwork among working-class whites in the northeastern rustbelt in the US, Doukas found a counter-hegemonic ideology, ‘the gospel of work’, according to which labour instead of capital accounts for the creation of wealth (economic values in capitalism). This ideology traces its origins to the American Revolution (war of independence), abolitionism, the Knights of Labor and the People’s Party of the 1890s and started to be displaced after the 1890s by a new ideology that claimed that capital created wealth and prosperity, ‘the gospel of wealth’, which preceded the economic hegemony of cartels, trusts, and corporations. In an essay entitled ‘the gospel of wealth’, steel magnate Andrew Carnegie argued that *the law of competition* governed social evolution and that was ‘best for the race because it insures the survival of the fittest in every department’ (Doukas *et al.* 2008). This was social Darwinism, quite suited to the political economy of capital for which the fallen bodies of individual capitalists do not count: it is the survival of the class what matters. Social Darwinism was another way to portray, culturally, the logic of capital, expressed through competition.

There were positive working class values such as hard work, frugality, and ‘neighbourliness’; negative values such as social climbing, hoarding, and putting money before people (Doukas *et al.* 2008). These values constituted a counter-hegemonic ideology in the valley where Doukas carried out fieldwork in the 1990s. We can see here that competition is opposed to ‘neighbourliness’, hoarding to sharing, people to money, and profits to work. As we have seen above, however, values such as hard work or frugality in certain circumstances can be mobilised to support the hegemonic ideology. During the 1980s and 1990s, around the Irish mushroom industry, there was a struggle over values. The 1994 strike constituted an occasion to put forward the ideology of local capital, linked to the national and international political economy of capital. The struggle between growers and workers was waged in terms of shared values. Growers had to at least publicly pretend to concur with them. The 1994 strike had a different character as it tried to openly put forward profits before people.

We have seen (chapter 3) how boosting picking rates leads to a fall in piece rates. That is an expression of how harmful competition can be for wage labour as a whole, although individual workers or group of workers might benefit from it, at least temporarily. It is, on the other hand, the exact opposite for capital, which can only benefit from competition between workers. According to Lebowitz (2003: 84):

... only when wage-labourers struggle against competition do they go against the inner laws of capital and manifest the inner laws of wage-labour... The struggle between capital and wage-labour, the essential contradiction, assumes the form on the surface of a struggle between competition and combination.

Workers typically combine by joining trade unions with the aim at taking labour out of competition. We have seen, however, that particularly after 1945 and further after the ‘neoliberal’ revolution in the US and the UK in the 1980s, trade unions in those countries accepted principles of the political economy of capital that work against combination, namely, competition and productivity in the belief that they would contribute to an economic development that was meant to benefit workers too. John Monks, TUC General Secretary in the UK, for example said in the mid 1990s that industrial relations had to move from conflict resolution to consensus building, that the TUC would commit itself to create a ‘world-class Britain’, and that trade unions and employers had common aims and a joint commitment to the success of enterprises (see chapter 5). A document prepared with the adherence of a large number of top union officials in Britain (Taylor 1994: 201), even stated that, ‘Job control hampers an organisation’s ability to meet the challenge of competition through rapid change; it also limits the individual from developing his or her full potential by imposing artificial

restrictions.’ The sole idea of a ‘world-class Britain’ implied British workers competing against workers in other countries, but the TUC went further because it sanctioned British workers competing against British workers. Top union officials in Ireland accepted the same principles when they agreed to Social Partnership, as we have seen. For many of them it was a matter of being pragmatic and leaving ideologies behind, exactly as employers were arguing. But to deny the ideological context in which the interaction takes place does not imply that the context is ideology free. As we have seen, the preconditions to reach a consensus implied an acceptance of the main principles of the political economy of capital. Some leaders, such as Jack O’Connor, more aware of it, argued that within that framework it was possible to advance the interest of labour.²⁴⁰

That logic was put into practice in Monaghan Mushrooms’ main packhouse in Ireland and we have seen that it did not hold true for those workers. It is a single case but it is indicative of what was happening in the whole economy, nationally and internationally. In Ireland capital successfully accomplished through ‘Social Partnership’ (in other countries like the US it was through open confrontation) a devaluation of labour that relied on the introduction of subcontracting, temporary and part-time job, work flexibility, and a higher intensity of work. That is what happened at a local level, on mushroom farms and in Monaghan Mushrooms packhouse, complemented with capital-saving technology. In the whole economy, the feature of late capitalism was the combination of two strategies of absolute and relative surplus value (Harvey 1990; Mathur 1998). Monaghan Mushrooms adhered to the ‘rules of engagement’ up to 2004, when it was strong enough to unilaterally impose, although with union opposition, a new company-workers contract.

Technical innovations give a competitive edge to companies, increasing profits, and sooner or later other companies adopt these and rates of profits are equalised. In the same way, managerial innovations such as subcontracting, temporary and part-time work, etc., tend to be adopted if they give a competitive edge to companies. That is what Monaghan Mushrooms did between 1994 and 2004. The effect on workers’ pay and conditions were devastating. By 2004 pay had been reduced to the minimum wage. Workers lost overtime rates, Saturday allowance, Sunday premium, and shift allowance. The loss was gradual, through negotiation and litigation at the Labour Commissioner and Labour Court. Since 1994 there had been a ‘race to the bottom’, which started with the use of scabs and agency workers, and later by subcontracting and the use of part-

²⁴⁰ This is part of old debate within the labour movement that we can trace back to the debate on revisionism in German Social Democracy at the end to the 1800s (see for instance Bernstein 1961; Luxemburg 1970: 33-90)

time and temporary workers, which apart from devaluing labour led to the destruction of the union branch. That 'race to the bottom' had started, therefore, well before migrant workers arrived in Ireland. The company, however, kept at every turn promising that the final goal was not to undermine workers' incomes but to keep jobs and incomes by improving the competitive position of the company, by linking the interests of workers and the company. However, we can only see when looking at the whole dispute in the span of 10 years that the goal of the company was to devalue labour by any means available, chiefly based on absolute surplus value strategies, and to destroy the union branch. All this was achieved without breaking with Social Partnership and respecting the 'rules of engagement' until 2004, when they did not make sense because the company was strong enough to impose a new company-workers contract unilaterally.

In mushroom farming there was a different situation. The main advantage of the satellite system consisted in lower labour costs. The use of unpaid labour was sanctioned by self-employment and use of 'help'. But competitive pressures during two decades turned farms into enterprises with a permanent, full-time workforce. Unpaid labour carried over from the previous era. This was possible thanks to the use of immigrant labour from Eastern Europe. After May 2004, with trade unions becoming painfully aware of the 'race to the bottom' affecting members, and with the increase in breaching of the 'rules of the engagement', labour standards turned into an important component of Social Partnership negotiations, and in SIPTU's campaign in the mushroom industry. While in Monaghan Mushrooms packhouse the struggle was to bring standards down to the minimum, in farming the move was to bring them up to minimum. Even so, the REAs negotiated by SIPTU and mushroom employers got rid of overtime rates in exchange for union recognition. Both moves, however, shared the common tendency towards the equalisation of the value of labour.

One question that can be asked is whether trade unions and the labour movement have capitulated to the political economy of capital, and whether there is consent to its hegemony on the part of unions and workers. Doukas, for instance, had to deal with the 'turn to the right' that scholars have attributed to the working class in the US and a supposedly widespread 'culture of individualism, upward mobility, and competitive consumption' (2003: 7). Or as Doukas and Durrenberger (2008) ask, does working class experience in the US validate the tenets of middle-class meritocratic individualism? Their conclusion is that the corporate cultural revolution ('gospel of wealth') has not been fully successful. Most workers surveyed by Doukas and Durrenberger did not agree that capital was a natural force and did not agree that rewards of labour should be

naturally distributed to those who control capital rather than to those who work.

I have argued in this dissertation that framing claims in terms of the political economy of capital does not imply consent to it. We cannot just assume, on the other hand, that union leaders arguing in favour of partnership unionism have internalised the political economy of capital and are in fact agents of the bourgeoisie within the labour movement. *The road to hell, however, is paved with good intentions.* What we know about is the consequences of ‘partnership unionism’ for workers and the labour movement, locally, nationally, and internationally. As unions operate in a capitalist context, we can expect different tendencies operating and competing within trade unions, and articulated by different leaders. We must remember that the political economy of labour is implied in the political economy of capital and that workers’ combination and struggles against employers and the pursue of profits emerge spontaneously. As Hyman (1975) argues, solidarity grows out of sectionalism. The economic domination of capital, on the other hand, is clear. Workers historically entered production divided, fragmented, competing amongst each other in the labour market. Their combination takes place in a capitalist context. Bureaucratic and rank-and-file tendencies exist at the same time. One expresses sectional tendencies, servicing, consensus building, representation, reliance on individual settlements and casework; the other, solidarity, direct democracy, activism, and collective action. We have on the one hand the union as an institution; on the other, the union as a movement. Both tendencies, and the different grades in between, reflect the contradiction between the two political economies. If we consider hegemony as a dynamic process and consciousness as forged in the course of struggles, what matters is to understand the context in which struggles take place, the balance of forces, and the direction of the movement.

Partnership, business, and servicing unionism failures are seen in loss of union power, and the transfer of wealth and power to the elites in the last four decades. They might argue that the nature of capitalism has changed, and that the working class has moved to the right, as it has turned affluent. Trade unionists also tend to argue that migrant workers are difficult to organise because of a number of obstacles. Then they propose an organising model to start recruiting and building union power, but the reasons why workers offer resistance to enter unions and become active in them are not analysed and challenged. Lower union density and loss of union power has triggered an organising turn in SIPTU, but one that is meant to be applied from the top. Interestingly, to be successful it needs participation and activism from the bottom. But current union

structures inhibit rank-and-file activism, one in which workers own their own organisations and one in which the main goal is ‘popular power’ rather than bureaucratic efficiency in casework, which has more to do with the political economy of capital. Unions with a more coherent approach to organising such as SEIU have grown thanks to rank-and-file activism, but as this union has grown in members and strength conflicts have arisen between leadership, the institution, and members, the movement. The question whether rank-and-file movements can take institutional shapes to endure over time while preserving movement and democratic features, without adopting bureaucratic tendencies has not been successfully solved in practice yet. One of the reasons is that we live in a time in which the hegemony of capital seems to be impossible to challenge. Broad mass unions of the social movement type tend to arise in the context of labour upsurges. It is then when we can find mass, spontaneous participation from the bottom and when bureaucratic tendencies are pushed back. This is the experience of localised conflicts such as strikes, particularly wildcat and unofficial, and adversarial union building campaigns, which cannot be sustained without active and democratic participation and rank-and-file committees (Tait 2005; Clawson 2003; Moody 2007; Lane *et al.* 1971; Fantasia 1988). In certain situations, localised conflicts can lead to a generalised strike movement of the kind described by Rosa Luxemburg in Russia during the period 1905-1906 in her work ‘The Mass Strike’ (Luxemburg 1970).

SIPTU’s campaign to clean up the mushroom industry must be placed in the context of the Irish Ferries and GAMA affairs, the national campaign against ‘the race to the bottom’, partnership negotiations, as well as the organising turn to reverse falling union density and union power. In the mushroom industry SIPTU’s campaign was from the beginning a media and lobbying campaign to highlight lack of enforcement, which ended up in union recognition agreements negotiated at the top, with a complete lack of workers’ participation. The most efficient and large growers co-operated with the campaign to enforce labour standards on mushroom farms because they also benefited from the clamping down on ‘unfair’ competition, which eliminated obsolete capital and therefore allowed large and efficient growers to take the market share of those, not able to comply, who had to exit the industry. The union could have tried organising from the top, but it was decided not to. No full or part-time organiser was put in charge of the campaign, perhaps because officials believed that organising was not going to work. A brief look at a conference that took place in Lurgan (Northern Ireland) in May 2006 can allow us analyse the differences between different unions’ methods and ideas, and the

nature of trade unionism. In relation to unions and migrant workers, two unions, SIPTU and UNITE, showed different approaches.

Organisers from both unions spoke of their organising methods. The first from UNITE was a fluent Portuguese speaker who organised in the food industry. Her view was that unions were losing power and needed to recruit new layers of workers such as women, migrant workers and the low-paid in the increasingly growing non-unionised economic sectors. She stressed that organisers had to leave their offices, going out to workplaces to identify leaders (which are the best recruiters), and establish links with community networks. She emphasised the necessity to establish personal relations inside and outside of the workplace. This is the approach put forward by unions like the SEIU, as we have seen. The one important feature that the UNITE organiser overlooked was the need to democratise unions. By contrast, the SIPTU organiser, who was a top official, said very little about organising, focussing instead on the lack of legal mechanisms to enforce labour laws. The number of labour inspectors, in his opinion, was insufficient and SIPTU's main demand in renewing the Social Partnership agreement concerned increasing their number. The economy, it was argued, needed migrants but exploitation had to be avoided. He finished by saying that 16,000 migrants had joined SIPTU, and that this union had three non-Irish organisers, two Polish and one Lithuanian.

Here, we find a considerable contrast in methods and approaches. While UNITE might practise external and top-down organising, it does – at least – practise a form of organising. And in Ireland, UNITE was critical of Social Partnership, rejecting the last national wage agreement in November 2008 (*Irish Times*, 18 November 2008). The difference was also ideologically rooted. The two unions align themselves differently in relation to the two main tendencies within the logic of collective bargaining. Trade unions must negotiate with employers, but they do so within the framework of the cycle of reproduction of capital in which the interests of wage-labour and capital can be seen as interlinked and complementary. Therefore, since trade unions primarily engage in collective bargaining over the price of labour-power, they do not challenge this cycle. A basic contradiction between labour and capital, however, also develops from the very same logic of collective bargaining. Capital manifests its inner-logic in the production and realisation of surplus value through the competition of many capitals. In this way, capital reproduces and produces a fragmented working class (Lebowitz 2003: 81-87). The labour movement, on the other hand, in order to successfully carry out its bargaining goals needs the combination of as many segments of the working class as

possible. By trying to establish a monopoly over the commodity labour in order to strengthen its bargaining power, trade unions tend to push wages out of competition, which also means a rejection of the capitalist economic principle of productivity and competitiveness. Collective bargaining therefore challenges the labour market institution. And, there cannot be capitalism without a labour market (Weeks 1981).

While SIPTU represents mainly the first tendency shown above, the union is nevertheless caught in the contradictory logic of collective bargaining. And, as Krings (2006) argues, there were both ideological reasons and self-interest involved in SIPTU's drive to organise migrant workers at a national scale. Because of self-interest in order to keep its bargaining power Ireland's largest union must struggle against the decreasing union density that national Social Partnerships have caused in the social, political and economic context of the last 20 years of industrial relations in Ireland. That means that SIPTU must go out and organise those 'outside of the remit of unions'. The union would have to rely increasingly on members' participation and rank-and-file activism if it wants to be successful.

The lack of engagement with migrant workers, and the top-down approach taken when there is some engagement with them has opened a space for NGOs and worker centres, organisations that do not have the leverage and labour market bargaining power of trade unions but that have tried to organise those outside the remit of trade unions. In the developed capitalist countries this has taken place first of all in the United States. In Ireland, MRCI tried the same approach for the same reasons that worker centres are trying it in the US. Unions do not have structures to deal with temporary and illegal workers. They must be organised on a community basis, rather than on an industry basis. Worker centres practice campaigning and lobbying. They focus on putting pressure on employers, unions, and the state because of their lack of bargaining power. They understand also that the problems of workers in sweatshops, underpayment and mistreatment, are structural and cannot be solved on an individual basis (see Gordon 2005). Their strength lies in democratic leadership and participation, in members who own their organisations.

The MWSG was organised for workers in the mushroom industry, but not as a union. Members were encouraged to join workplace-oriented unions (SIPTU and IWU). The group offered a space for migrants to voice their concerns and look at ways of dealing with them. The MWSG, however, did not achieve its main aim: to create a migrant-led group. That experience could have led to a migrant-led organisation but it started to wind down before it could yield any positive results in that regard. This has already

been analysed in the previous chapter and I do not need to go back to it. What matters to us here is how those failures relate to the collisions between both political economies and the issues addressed so far.

The last two chapters have dealt in a more detailed way with the topic of leadership. There is confusion in much of the literature on labour and social movements on the issue of leadership and bureaucratic tendencies, which many associate with a Leninist conception of leadership in which decision-making is handed to specialist or professionals. However, this handling of decision-making to specialists has more to do with business management practices, the pursuit of technical efficiency, and the political economy of capital. NGOs still have a high dependency on donors and funding from private, semiprivate or public institutions, which means that their viability does not depend on their constituencies. It was easier and less compromising for the MWSG to focus on casework rather than on collective action, but it was also a shortcut to present results. Without struggles to wage, leaders could not emerge organically, cultures of solidarity and consciousness could not develop. The quality of the leadership from MRCI, and its lack of experience, had no doubt an influence on the outcome. Good intentions were not enough. In the end, workers did not challenge a leadership who had promised them ownership of their own organisation because they were very aware that they did not have the economic resources to run it independently, as all the resources came from MRCI.

The political economy of labour followed to its conclusion implies the end of wage labour, to go beyond it, and in that way to end capitalism. That logic is implicit in the practice of unionism. But methods are not neutral. Top-down organising, bureaucratic control from the top, consensus building between capital and labour, and casework instead of collective action do not lead to a challenge of the political economy of capital, which is rather strengthened by those practices. On the other hand, rank-and-file militancy, collective action, members' ownership of their own organisation, and adversarial relations between capital and labour arise spontaneously out of the unequal relations between capital and labour and because, individually, workers cannot advance their interests. In the struggle against capital, workers also find that they have to wage an inner fight against the influence of the hegemonic ideology of capital within their own organisations. This is what I mean by *workers against institutions*.

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The Irish Farmers Journal (IFJ)
The Irish Independent (II)
The Irish Times (IT)
The Mushroom Journal (MJ)
The Mushroom Newsletter (MN)
The Northern Standard (NS)
The Mushroom People (TMP)