INDUSTRIAL CO-OPERATIVE PRODUCTION IN IRELAND: by D. COFFEY.

AFTER I had rashly undertaken to write on industrial co-operative production in Ireland I began to wonder why the SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW should have thought the subject worthy of an article. The Irish agricultural co-operative movement is rightly regarded as of importance, but the extent and development of co-operative industry in Ireland is so small and of such recent date and is confined to so limited a field that there is not much to say about it.

THERE are only two forms working at present, one the Irish Co-operative Clothing Manufacturing Society Ltd. and the other two Building Guilds, of which one is in Dublin and the other in Waterford.

THIS will doubtless seem curious to those who know of Ireland as a pioneer country in co-operation and who remember that the only one of the early nineteenth century experiments in founding a co-operative community that shewed any signs of success, Ralahine, was Irish. But conditions at Ralahine were such as to make that example no guide to the future. The Ralahine experiment was undoubtedly an attempt to found such a self-governing and self-supporting community, as Fourier and Robert Owen had envisaged, and the fact that it failed through external causes and not from any inherent defect makes it noteworthy in the catalogues of attempts that failed to found a co-operative community. But it must be remembered that Ralahine though in theory co-operative was in practice a benevolent despotism which its promoters intended to turn into a co-operative community. It did not last long enough to shew whether there was any real prospect of success, and the accounts we have of its working were written by ardent partisans.

THE one other example on which it is well to touch is the Templecrone Co-operative Society in Donegal. This society has been admirably described by Mr. George Russell (A.E.) in a pamphlet published by the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, and shews that much can be done to foster local industries through agricultural co-operative societies. The Templecrone Society was originally an ordinary co-operative store founded in a very poor part of Co. Donegal. The inhabitants of the district were accustomed to eke out a bare livelihood by knitting stockings for Derry merchants at sweated wages. Mr. Patrick Golligher, to whom the Store owed its existence, saw that he could introduce vastly improved conditions by setting up a knitting industry connected with the Store. He was most successful and now employs over one hundred girls at good wages. The industry, however, is only co-operative in that it is owned by the co-operative society.

It cannot be said to differ essentially from the manufacturing departments of the English Co-operative Societies except that its trade is chiefly an export trade. The workers as such have no control of the business though they may be members of the Society in the ordinary way. There have been few attempts to imitate Golligher's work in other parts of the country, and such attempts as these have been are not of much importance.

THE only real efforts to create a co-operative industry as distinct from agricultural co-operative societies are the two mentioned at the beginning of this article. They are both in their infancy. The Building Guilds are only a little over a year old and are run on what is known as the Glasgow model. The Guilds have no members except one delegate each from the trade unions connected with the building trade. Each union appoints one man to hold a share for a year, but may recall him at any time and appoint another to take his place. In this case the original member must transfer his share to the incoming member. To ensure this, each member must deposit a signed open transfer with the union which elected him. The Board of Directors consists of the whole society.

THE actual working of the Guild is not co-operative. The Board of Directors appoints a Clerk of Works, who is in full charge of the particular job for which he is appointed. He engages men and supervises them. The only condition imposed on him is that the men employed must be members of the unions forming the Guild. So far only three contracts have been undertaken by the Dublin Guild, one for Irish Transport Workers' Union, and two for the Dublin Corporation. On the Corporation contracts the arrangement is that the Corporation when the contract is made appoints its own Clerk of Works, who pays the men weekly on the pay sheet provided by the Guild Clerk of Works. The Corporation pays for the materials as supplied and lends some machinery. The Guild supplies the rest of the machinery. If any saving is made on the work 50 per cent. goes to the Corporation and 50 per cent. to the Guild. In their first contract for the Corporation the Guild made £3,000 profit, which is placed to the credit of the reserve fund. It is intended to use the reserves for buying plant. The second Corporation contract is in course of completion and over 100 men are now employed. It is a third share of a housing scheme, of which the other shares are being undertaken by a private firm and by direct labour from the Corporation's workshop.

THE workers have no control over the organisation except the indirect control given by their votes in their respective unions. It is thus evident that the scheme is not co-operative in the strict sense of the term, though it contains the elements of the co-operative idea. It is early to pronounce on it, but so far it shews every sign of future success.

There is a somewhat similar form of co-operative society organised by the printing trades' union in Milan, which has done very well. THE second branch of development, the Co-operative Clothing Manufacturing Society Ltd., is a little older than the Building Guilds, and is a genuine co-operative productive society. It was founded in September, 1919, by a group of trade unionists and co-operators who wished to improve labour conditions in Dublin and to spread the practice of co-operative industry. The founders of the Clothing Society were in close touch with the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, so that they had the benefit of advice from men experienced in the agricultural movement. The Chairman of the Clothing Society is an official of the Irish Agricultural Wholesale Society. The fantastic price to which clothes went in 1919 and 1920 made a clothing manufacturing society a particularly favourable ground for a beginning.

THE first premises leased by the society was a stable in a back lane called the North Lotts, near the centre of Dublin. Instant success attended the founding of the Society. In October they did £291 worth of business, six months later, March, 1920, they did £2,622 worth, and though there was a slight falling off in April, in May they increased to £2,835, and in June to £3,443. In June, 1921, the sales reached £7,800, and in December £10,018. The total trade turnover for 1921 was £103,816. The share capital was very small and chiefly subscribed by persons interested in the co-operative movement in general, and anxious to see whether it was possible to run a co-operative productive enterprise in Ireland. In December, 1919, the total share capital was £487. The fact that shareholders are given a discount on their purchases induced many people to buy shares, and the rapid increase in its turnover created a certain confidence in the future of the Society. The original premises were soon found to be too small for the number of workers employed, and large new premises were erected in Abbey Street on the site of some buildings which had been burnt in 1916. Further premises were taken in Parnell Square, so that now the Society has fairly good workrooms though they are scattered in an unsatisfactory way about the town. All this expansion needed much new capital, but for the reasons already given this was comparatively easy to find. By December, 1921, the paid-up share capital had risen to £19,642, and loan deposits to £3,693, and by June of this year to £22,414 and £4,361 respectively. **THOUGH** every effort is made to induce the workers in the Society to buy shares, so far, as in most co-operative productive societies throughout the world, only a proportion of the workers have invested their own money, and their shareholding is a very small part of the total capital, and is chiefly formed of shares acquired compulsorily. Of the £22,414 share capital in the Clothing Society £22,107 is held by non-workers in the society and only £307 by workers. Including the

office staff there are 303 persons employed by the Society, so that the workers' shareholding is just £1 per head. It must be remembered, however, that the greater part of the ready-made clothing trade is done by women, and that for various reasons women tend to remain in employment for a shorter time than men. In order to ensure that the workers do have some shares in the business, 5 per cent. of their wages is credited to them in the form of shares, so that they are all shareholders or becoming shareholders, and the amount of their holdings increases with the length of their employment.

DESPITE the small amount of capital held by the workers the management of the Society is largely in their hands. There are workers' committees in the different branches of the business, which, the Managing Committee says, have proved of much help to it in the smooth working of the Society. The Committee of Management is formed of four representatives of the workers and three of the outside shareholders. The conditions of employment are good. The working week is 44 hours, with a week's holiday in the year and all bank holidays paid for. Further, full wages have so far been paid in all cases of illness. The wages are at least as high, and in some cases higher, than the best wages paid by private firms for similar work. In the year 1920 the sales amounted to £34,706, and shewed a net profit of £867, which, when the initial losses had been written off, came to £565. Of this £93 was paid as 5 per cent. interest on capital, £100 to an education fund for the workers, £100 to a thrift and sickness fund, £200 in loans shares to the workers, and £72 to reserve. It is thus seen that £400 out of the £565 profit was given to the workers in one form or another.

THE next year's business was much larger but there were also far heavier expenses, so that the balance sheet was not so satisfactory. The sales came to £105,816 and the profit on the trading account to £1,000, but the share capital had increased to £19,463 and the value of the premises to £13,515. When £3,000 was set aside for depreciation a debit balance of £2,000 was left. The premises of the Society were much undervalued and a well-reputed firm of estate agents increased the valuation by no less than £7,000, which left a credit on the balance sheet of £5,000. Though there is little doubt that the premises are still valued on a conservative basis, house property is such an uncertain quantity in Dublin now, that it cannot be regarded as an easily realisable asset. Still the Society's premises are in one of the best business streets in the city so that it is likely they will appreciate rather than depreciate. A branch has been opened in Bagenalstown, and it is intended to open other branches in course of time.

THE Society has flourished and expanded so rapidly that there is a possibility that it may become too ambitious and try to increase too

last. This is often the fate of successful enterprises, and there is a special risk in the case of the Clothing Society. Irishmen are very conscious of the fact that their industries have been artificially repressed and are anxious to do all that they can to increase them. This has led to a sort of unofficial protection whereby a large section of the community refuses to buy foreign-made goods when Irish-made goods are procurable. The Co-operative Clothing Society has always kept the national aim before it and all the cloth used is of Irish manufacture. This, combined with the desire to spread the co-operative idea, has led some of those concerned with the society to consider setting up woollen mills and eventually dealing with the agricultural co-operative societies for wool, since some of them sell wool on behalf of their members. This is a very ambitious scheme and, though it is much to be hoped that at some future date it will be realised—and there is no theoretical reason why it should not succeed—the Clothing Society has hardly reached the stage at which it is safe to launch out into such ambitious and costly schemes. It would be preferable for the present to see similar societies for the production of other classes of goods arising—for instance, a society of bootmakers or a co-operative motor repair shop.

THE Clothing Society caters mainly for the ready-made trade, but there is also a department for making clothes to measure. It has secured some big contracts for making uniforms for the army, which will be a great help to it and will ensure that the year 1922 will shew a big turnover. As a further way of increasing their business the Clothing Society has issued a leaflet recommending workmen to start clothing clubs through which they are able to get credit from the Society. and pay for them by instalments. This should prove a help both to the Society and to the workers.

THIS short sketch of the Building Guilds and of the Irish Co-operative Clothing Manufacturing Society shews that Ireland is very backward in the field of co-operative industry. The present is not a time when it is possible to do constructive work, and until the existing ferment has subsided it is hardly even desirable that new experiments should be made. If, however, the Building Guilds and the Clothing Society are able to weather the storm—and there is no reason to suppose that they will not be able—we can look forward with some hope to a big increase in the co-operative activities of Ireland when peace has been finally restored.

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