

**Oration by Jack O'Connor, General President, at the funeral of
Comrade Kevin McMahon on 20th January 2016**

Comrades and Friends

We are assembled here today with Marian, Cian and Catherine to pay our last respects to the memory of our dear Comrade and Friend, Kevin McMahon – to celebrate his life, to acknowledge his extensive achievements and to dwell on the benefit of our acquaintance with him.

Kevin was born on the 18th April 1948, the second of three children to John Tom and Iris McMahon who were both members of the Communist Party of Great Britain. His father John Tom had served in the British Army during the Second World War and suffered great privation as a prisoner under the Nazis for about three years, after he had been captured during fighting in Sicily.

For the first few years of Kevin's life, the family lived in Bethnal Green in London and then moved back to Ireland to live at 2 Killester Park in the north-side of Dublin.

Kevin's older sister Patricia sadly passed away some years ago but a brief discussion with Catherine, who was twelve years his junior, revealed to me that from the earliest age Kevin was already displaying the awesome strength of character that would define his personality throughout his life. Two aspects predominate. While he was still a boy, he drove himself to optimise his potential in every task he took on. When he joined the Judo club he ultimately achieved the black belt, persevering over a number of years to do so. When he went to learn swimming, he ultimately, through similar perseverance, ended up becoming a lifeguard. Catherine's recollection of him from the earliest age is of an endlessly voracious reader, devouring books on all kinds of subjects.

The other aspect was his unremitting kindness, his empathy with those less fortunate than himself, his abhorrence of injustice and his determination to assist others.

Kevin's Mother had hoped he would go on to further education placing him in a good second level school. But John Tom, who followed the Painting and Decorating trade as a skilled craftsman, took him out to serve an apprenticeship with him.

Before long Kevin was to acquire his Parents' interest in socialist politics and Trade Union affairs and he became an active member of the then Amalgamated Society of Painters and Decorators. During his teenage years he was also to become active in Na Fianna Eireann, already displaying his readiness to surrender his life, if necessary, in the battle against injustice and the struggle for a better world.

About 1968 he became disillusioned with them and opted instead to join the Communist Party of Ireland which was then becoming a significant force on the Left. Before long it was clear to his comrades in the Party that he was a person of special ability, talent and commitment. He went on to become Education Officer for the Party nationally and to play a pivotal role in the development of the Dublin North East Branch, participating in the endless cycle of activity that characterised the life of a revolutionary activist in what was then a still deeply conservative society.

Around the beginning of 1976 he obtained employment on the development of the second Poolbeg Generator. Within weeks he was to emerge as the Site Convenor for all the Craft Unions and along with Paddy Coughlan of the INPDTU, also a Party member, he was to play the pivotal role in the battle to enhance working conditions. On the 2nd February 1977 all twenty-two painters on the site were summarily dismissed. A strike was immediately embarked upon and an all-out picket was granted by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. They were enjoined by the High Court but Kevin and his comrades defied it. The strike resulted in victory after eight weeks with the reinstatement of all twenty-two of the men. They actually made history because it was the first time that building workers were to defy a High Court injunction in an Industrial dispute. It is acknowledged today by those who are closely involved that this victory was attributable to the leadership of Comrade Kevin McMahon.

He entered into employment as an Assistant Branch Secretary with the Workers' Union of Ireland on Mayday 1979. He was based in Tullamore with responsibility for membership in Bord na Mona. Following a merger with the Federation of Rural Workers, which resulted in a significant increase in the membership in the Company Kevin quickly won promotion to the position of Branch Secretary before the end of 1980.

He was to go on over subsequent years to become Secretary of the Bord na Mona Group of Unions. In that role he committed almost two decades of his life to the battle to save the Company from liquidation as a result of economic difficulties. Survival entailed dramatically downsizing the workforce, while maintaining levels of output and diversifying radically into a whole new range of commercial activities. It involved bitter battles over redundancies, pay restructuring, work practice changes and all that goes with it. It was all fought out in the cauldron of competing Trade Union and political interests in the Company that dominated the economy of the midland counties. Throughout it all Kevin McMahon was the pivotal player on the Trade Union side. He was able to build solid relationships with Officials of other Unions, like the late Tommy Whyte of the TEEU and Ben Kearney of the then ATGWU. He was also able to build principled relationships with key players on the Management side and to retain, notwithstanding all the controversy and all the difficulties, the allegiance of the members who provided leadership in the multiplicity of Company workplaces. It is no overstatement to say that the Company's survival providing reasonable employment for upwards of 2,000 workers to this day and supporting countless many others, is ultimately attributable to the vision, determination and endless courage he displayed throughout those years.

One evening in 1983 and following a meeting of the Tullamore Trades Council he was introduced to Marian Coakley of Shannonbridge in the Phoenix Arms Hotel by appropriately enough Seamus Dooley of the National Union of Journalists. I don't know if it was love at first sight but Marian and Kevin were to become inseparable partners for almost thirty-three years until tragedy struck last Friday evening at the top of beautiful snow covered Lugnaquilla. Marian's light-hearted, outgoing, jovial, bubbly personality presented a remarkable counter to Kevin's intensely pensive and deliberate demeanour. They were married in 1987. The wedding was gate-crashed by Alan Dukes, later to become leader of Fine Gael who was canvassing in a General Election – a fact that Kevin viewed very, very dimly indeed. Cian, whose subsequent political orientation and academic achievements, rendered Kevin so proud, was born in August of 1988.

Despite the scale of his responsibilities and the intensity of the challenge he faced in Bord na Mona throughout the 1980s and 90s, Kevin still found time to revitalise the Tullamore Council of Trade Unions, taking on the time consuming position of Secretary.

In that capacity he was to play a pivotal role in support of the workers employed by Condron Concrete who had become members of the then ITGWU and were struggling to win recognition. The dispute ran for several months and is recorded as one of the bitterest Industrial battles that ever unfolded on this Island. During it, Kevin was central to the organisation in Tullamore of one of the biggest Trade Union rallies that ever took place in the midlands. He also found time to work with the Labour Party supporting the Campaigns of Cllr, Senator and later Dáil Deputy Pat Gallagher.

In 1998 with the future of Bord na Mona and the jobs it provided secure, Kevin sought new challenges. He found them in the Security Industry where working conditions and Trade Union organisation had been devastated due to a High Court Decision, striking out the Registered Employment Agreement a number of years earlier. Kevin was instrumental in persuading the Officers of the Union to promote the establishment of a new Branch, based in Liberty Hall, dedicated exclusively to the task of reorganisation and regaining lost ground on pay and working conditions. Kevin embarked upon it with all the determination, enthusiasm, energy and strategic focus that characterised him throughout his life.

Over the ensuing twelve years he was to win the allegiance of workers and the respect of the major employers. He was instrumental in promoting a joint initiative with the better employers to persuade the then Government to secure the establishment of the National Security Authority and the development of statutory minimum standards. These in turn exposed the inadequacies of cowboy operators and ultimately led to the re-establishment of statutory national minimum standards for pay and conditions of employment -this time through a Joint Labour Committee Process. By the time he retired in April 2010 Trade Union organisation had been re-established in the Industry with enviable levels of density of the order of 52% and a whole plethora of nationally agreed pay and conditions of employment.

Whereas I have known Kevin since 1979 I became well acquainted with him following my appointment as Regional Secretary for the midlands following the establishment of SIPTU at the beginning of 1990 and based in Tullamore. Kevin had competed for the position and quite legitimately aspired to it. He could have greeted my arrival with sullen resentment.

He did nothing of the kind. From the moment I arrived he extended the warm hand of comradely friendship to me, helping, advising and assisting throughout the eight years we worked together in that office. Marian too, extended warmth, kindness and assistance and more than once opened her house to the small staff of the Tullamore Office to repair after Christmas parties and other such events.

Comrade Kevin McMahon was one of the best Trade Union Officials I have ever met in my forty-two years of activity. He was also one of the best human beings. Time does not permit me to summarise the uniqueness of the characteristics of his personality so I have dwelt instead on the enormity of his accomplishments on behalf of the people whose interests were entrusted to him.

However, I should add that whereas he drifted from the Communist Party he always remained loyal to the aspiration of the egalitarian, collective commonwealth and they still consider him a comrade. That fact is evidenced by the presence here today of the Party General Secretary, Eugene McCartan. He pushed himself to the limit in every way, in physical activity and academic achievement. Between 1994 and 1998 he studied law, obtaining an honours degree from the University of London. He also learned to speak, read and write Russian fluently.

As Kevin Gavin, the former HR Manager in Bord na Mona, said to me in their house last night, "his word was his absolute bond – he didn't give it lightly because he knew when giving it that he would go to the ends of the earth to honour it". Despite the fact that he knew more about making noise and organising protests and conducting pickets than most of us, whenever he had to choose between making noise and making a difference for working people and their families, he always and unequivocally chose the hard and difficult road to make a difference – and what a difference he made to the lives of so many, many people.

On behalf of the National Executive Council of the Union and all of us who are involved in SIPTU and all who benefited by his life, I want to extend our deepest sympathy to Marian, Cian, Catherine and the extended family. We are all diminished by his passing but our lives have been exalted by the benefit of having lived along with him.

Salute Comrade Kevin McMahon!

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