

Trade Unions and Progress for LGBT People : A Personal History by Kieran Rose (Forsa Trade Union, May 2024)

Review by Seamus Dooley, Assistant General Secretary National Union of Journalists

Kieran Rose is a significant chronicler of the campaign for LGBT+ RIGHT in Ireland.

A trade unionist, town planner, human rights activist and a champion of the campaigns for the decriminalisation of homosexuality, civil partnership and marriage equality Rose has meticulously preserved and archived records and photographs of his involvement in some of the most significant social movements in Ireland spanning almost 50 years.

His website, Kieranrose.ie¹ is a valuable resource and a testimony to his commitment to social history.

In publishing *Trade Unions and Progress for LGBT People: A Personal History*², Kieran Rose has done a service to labour history, not least by highlighting the oft neglected role of the labour movement in the slow, difficult and often painful march toward equality.

The booklet is literally Rose tinted and the author does not claim to offer anything other than a personal perspective. The personal is political and Rose has always been an astute participant in and observer of political campaigns.

Rose traces his own evolution from the early days of the Cork Gay Collective in the 1980s to his leadership of the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network and his high profile involvement in the Yes Equality campaign.

It was through the Cork Gay Collective in the 1980s that Rose led the successful efforts to get the Irish Trade Union Movement to support gay rights, utilising links with Cork Council of Trade Unions

The opening picture features Laurie Steele of the Collective standing on the steps of Cork City Hall during the ICTU Biennial Delegate Conference in 1981 with a poster “Gay Rights, Workers Rights”, not a revolutionary concept but a message which made many delegates uncomfortable at a time when homosexuality was still a crime in Ireland.

In the same year the first National Gay Conference was held in Cork and, as Rose notes, featured a trade union workshop chaired by him. Among the motions passed was one condemning the failure of the Irish Federation of University Teachers for not sending a motion on LGBT workers which has been successfully proposed by David Norris for inclusion in the ICTU BDC conference agenda.

Rose acknowledges the support he received from his own union, through the Cork branch of LGPS.

He writes: In 1992 the Cork branch of LGPSU adopted a motion proposed by myself and Tricia Tracey calling for gay law reform and amendments to the Unfair Dismissals Act, the

¹ [Kieran Rose](http://KieranRose)

² *Trade Unions and Progress for LGBT People: A Personal History*, 2024, published by Kieran Rose and sponsored by Forsa www.kieranrose.ie

Employment Equality Act and legislation dealing with the employment of civil servants, the armed forces and Gardai to prevent discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation". Rose notes that it was the first time he had spoken at a trade union meeting and was accompanied by Collective members for morale support.

The motion was subsequently adopted at the LGPSU annual conference in May 1982 despite, according to Rose, the declaration of one delegate who proclaimed, "If Cork have a problem with homosexuality then let them go away and solve the problem quietly."

The delegate, Mr Henn, missed the point. Cork had no problem with homosexuality or homosexuals and Rose, with no false Munster modesty, strongly emphasised the role of Corkonians in the development of the Irish gay rights movement.

"It is 40 years ago this year that the Cork Gay Collective was set up. We had huge ambitions and determination to achieve great progress as soon as possible. We organised the first national Gay Conference in Cork at Connolly Hall which really set the agenda for years to come. It was also a time of political ferment and optimism generally," Kieran recalls.³

The booklet is richly illustrated with photographs from the Collective's archive and the author's own archive.

The photographs re-enforce the personal nature of the publication, which traces the author's path from his first trade union branch meeting to his pivotal role in the foundation of the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network. He is however careful to acknowledge the achievements and contributions of others, such as Sylvia Meehan and John Mitchell, General Secretary of IDATU, now Mandate.

He is somewhat reticent about the struggles faced by trade unionists in putting the issue of gay rights, including decriminalisations, on the agenda at a national level. Referring only obliquely to "sparky" correspondence between Mitchell and the former General Secretary of the ICTU, Donal Nevin, like many of his generation a progressive but socially conservative trade union leader who refused to see the relevance of gay rights to the work of the ICTU.

The study of labour history would benefit from less reticence from Rose, who has a tendency to accentuate the positive.

That positivity is rooted in the success of campaigns on employment rights including his role in securing an amendment to the Unfair Dismissals Act in 1993 to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation, the introduction of the Employment Equality Act 1998, and more recently his contribution to the introduction of the Civil Partnership Act in 2010, later paving the way for Marriage Equality in 2015.

³ www.kieranrose.ie

The book does not detail in any detail the significant role of the labour movement in the Marriage Equality campaign, a task other may take up.

Through personal recollections, photographs, press cuttings and illustrations Kieran Rose has managed to convey a sense of the work undertaken by trade unions as well as providing an insight into his own contribution across many spheres.

It would be easy to forget just how much courage it took to move that motion at his first trade union conference. The trade union movement was not always welcoming of initiatives which disturbed the status quo but Rose reminds us of the power of persistence, building alliances and strategic campaigning.

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