

Trade Unions & Hairdressing

CHAPTER 6

Hairdressing is one of those areas of work that have not been noted for trade union organisation. Given this fact it is not particularly surprising that many of the apprentice hairdressers interviewed in the Women's Rights Movement survey said that they had never thought of joining an union because there was none that appeared to cover their area of employment. Despite this an Irish Hairdressers' Union was established in the latter years of the 19th century, and operated in the Republic of Ireland until the mid 1960's. This Union, however, was largely composed of male hairdressers and saw itself in terms of a craft union. The Irish Hairdressers' Union was later to merge with the A.T. & G.W.U. in Dublin and the latter took over the role of organising hairdressers in that region.

Many members of the original Irish Hairdressers' Union have strong criticisms of the current state of their industry - and, indeed, of the treatment of apprentices. It was pointed out that there is no accepted standard of training laid down, and that even after serving their four years of apprenticeship, apprentices are not necessarily adequately trained. It was also suggested that many apprentices are actually exploited by hairdressing salons. One aspect of this exploitation commonly takes the form of the dismissal of second year apprentices when their rates of pay are due to increase under the terms of the Labour Court agreement. Such apprentices, if dismissed, are not entitled to apply for redundancy payments. While the A.T. & G.W.U. have taken over the work of unionising hairdressers in the Co. Dublin area, the I.T. & G.W.U. have undertaken the same task around the Cork city and county. Union organisers constantly make the point that it is difficult to establish an effective union organisation among a workforce which is predominantly young and female. Union officials referred to the rapid turnover of staff in salons, and to the large number of part-time workers. Such a situation makes it very time-consuming for unions to develop a strong workplace presence, and even harder to establish and train reliable shop stewards and staff representatives. Added to this is the sheer expense for trade unions to