

## Mike Quill - *Irish Rebel, Irish Patriot and Leader of the Pack*

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



A fearless organizer, a humanitarian, a man whose wit, charm, personality, passion and commitment created one dynamic leader. He was none other than Michael Joseph Quill, founding father of the Transport Workers Union of America (TWU). An Irishman to the core, Mike Quill was born in Kilgarvan, Co. Kerry, Ireland on September 18, 1905. He was raised in turbulent times, fought the Black and Tans, gone against the Treaty and fought the Free State Army during the Irish Civil War. And when he came to New York, fought the thugs the transit bosses used to terrorize subway workers to keep them in their place. He was a born leader staging his first sit-in strike as a young man at the Kenmore saw mill. Quill was blacklisted as both a defeated Republican fighter and a sacked industrial activist. Penniless, he headed for America.

Life for Quill and transport workers would soon be changed forever. Quill found work on the independent subway line in New York City among thousands of immigrant Irishmen. Together they endured appalling working conditions, long hours and low pay. He held various other jobs until becoming a change maker on the Interborough Rapid Transit, the IRT. The IRT times were tough and the 12-hour seven-day work week was all too common. The IRT was becoming a haven for the diaspora of Irishmen who were on the wrong side of the Irish Civil War. Why were there so many Irish working in the subways? Because they spoke English. They could read, write, make change and communicate with the riding public. Quill states *"Negro workers could only get jobs as porters. They were subjected to treatment that makes Little Rock and Birmingham seem liberal and respectable by comparison. I saw Catholic ticket agents fired by Catholic bosses for going to Mass early in the morning while the porter covered the booth for half an hour. Protestant bosses fired Protestant workers for similar crimes - going to church. The Jewish workers had no trouble with the subway bosses - Jews were denied employment in the transit lines."*



As a new IRT employee, Quill worked almost all the change booths in the system and while he did so began to organize the workforce. Quill would set up his signature soap box at lunch hour while management were in the workshops. It was these daily shop gate meetings which helped make him a popular figure on the transit property.

Quill states *"We were no experts in the field of labor organization, but we had something in common with our fellow workers. We were all poor, we were overworked, we were all victims of the 84-hour workweek. In fact, we were all so low down on the economic and social ladder that we had nowhere to go but up."*

Quill's greatest inspiration was James Connolly, leader of the Transport Workers Union in Dublin who was executed by the British for his part in the 1916 Rising. Quill studied Connolly's basic theories. Years later when he was President of the TWU he had only two pictures on the wall in his office – Abraham Lincoln and James Connolly.

Quill's efforts paid off as the Transport Workers Union held its first meeting in April 1934. No one was lukewarm to Mike Quill - workers loved him, management hated and feared him. Like him or not, no one could dispute his ability to organize. Beginning with just 400 members, Quill fought successfully to organize and represent all 14,000 employed by the IRT. In the next largest subway, the Brooklyn Manhattan Transit (BMT line) a successful sit-down strike in 1937 led to more victories and brought the total union membership to 45,000. By now, Quill's political influence was also taking shape. Fully aware of the power of both organizing and politics, Quill was elected to the New York City Council in 1937. Word of Quill's organizing success quickly spread and in the mid to late 40s membership was extended to airline, utility and railroad workers. From the earliest days of the Union, Quill insisted that TWU stand up for all workers regardless of race, color, or creed and he himself led the way.

Quill once stated *"Most of my life I've been called a lunatic because I believed I'm my brothers' keeper. I organize poor and exploited workers. I fight for civil rights of minorities and I believe in peace. This is my religion."*

He was an unequivocal, relentless foe of all forms of anti-Semitism and relentlessly fought against racial prejudice. He staged rallies against anti-Semitism and faced down racism whenever it raised its ugly head especially among his own members. His commitment to fight racism was evident time and time again and led to a friendship with Martin Luther King Jr. early in King's crusade for racial equality.

Despite all his success Quill is probably best remembered for his role in the citywide transit strike back in 1966. A strike that brought New York City's transit system to a grinding halt. Mayor-elect Lindsay did not want to negotiate with Quill until he was sworn in as mayor. Quill came out swinging at Mayor Lindsay when he was sworn in as mayor on January 1, 1966. Quill cited Lindsay's "abysmal lack of knowledge of the fundamentals of labor relations." He torn into Lindsay as "a pipsqueak, a juvenile" and he found his intellect lacking: Quill said, "we explored his mind yesterday and found nothing there." And, of course, in that thick Kerry brogue he expertly mispronounced the mayor's name as "Linsley." By a judge's injunction the strike was ordered to end but an ailing Mike Quill was steadfast.

In Quill's own words *"The judge can drop dead in his black robes and I don't care if I rot in jail. I will not call off the strike."*

Quill and seven other union leaders were arrested for refusing to obey the judge's order. In jail, Quill's condition worsened. He was sent to the hospital and remained there under arrest. At the time the settlement was reached on January 13, 1966 it was a tremendous victory. The package was worth over \$60 million and included raises which would increase wages from \$3.18 to \$4.14 an hour and included another paid holiday, increased pension benefits and other gains. Quill was finally released three weeks after his arrest. He spoke at a press conference that day and paid tribute to the thousands of TWU members that night. It would be his last address.

On January 28, 1966, Michael Joseph Quill died. Mike Quill did not hesitate or equivocate. He died as he lived, for what he believed in. In some respects, he left the way his hero, James Connolly, had gone out - with defiance and bravado. Fighting the good fight for TWU and its members. On occasion of Quill's death one speaker paid tribute to him. The speaker was none other than Martin Luther King Jr.

*"Mike Quill was a fighter for decent things in life - Irish Independence, labor organization, and racial equality. He spent his life ripping the chains of bondage off his fellow man. This is a man the ages will remember."*