

Honouring an heroic history

PAULINE FRASER on the memorial ceremony for brigadier George Brown.

ON June 27 and 28, the village of Inistioge, County Kilkenny, paid homage to one of its sons, George Brown, who volunteered to fight for democracy and freedom in Spain.

George was born in the village on November 5 1906 and killed by a fascist bullet while lying wounded by the roadside near the battlefield at Brunete on July 7 1937.

His parents had moved to Manchester to find work and it was the experience of life in that city, where George was in and out of work "at the convenience of employers," as historian Ciaran Crossey puts it, that led to him becoming a working class activist and joining the Communist Party during the general strike of 1926.

He became Manchester organiser of the party and was elected to the executive committee in 1935.

His widow Evelyn Taylor, in a letter to the Daily Worker after his death, wrote: "His whole life was devoted to the working class struggle and to the Communist Party, which he firmly believed was the only party that could lead the workers to socialism.

"He went to Spain because he knew that, if we allowed fascism to conquer in Spain, very soon we should be having to face the guns of fascism in England."

In 1938, Jack Jones married Evelyn and they shared 60 years of love and common struggle together until her death in 1998.

The weekend's events were organised by a committee of 11, headed by chairman Paddy Murphy.

A presentation was made by Andy McGuinness of the Services Industrial Professional & Technical Union (SIPTU) in recognition of Paddy's life-long activist service in the federation of rural workers compo-

ment of the union.

Sean Walsh summed up the committee's aims thus. "To make George Brown and what he represented widely known in the area, place him in his proper historical context and, through that, the role of the International Brigaders and their contribution to history." It now plans to organise an annual George Brown memorial lecture.

Jack, who is life president of the International Brigade Memorial Trust (IBMT), former general secretary of the TGWU and founder of the National Pensioners Convention, spoke of how loved and respected George had been and how powerfully his cherished memory had lived on in his and Evelyn's home.

Officially opening the weekend's proceedings, brigadier Bob Doyle said: "As the last Irish soldier of the International Brigades, I am honoured to open this commemoration in his native county.

"The fight today is as vital as it was in Spain, but remember we are fighting for an idea and, though we must at times defend ourselves, guns cannot impose an idea. The four weapons of victory today are education, organisation, civil disobedience and unity."

Jack proposed a vote of thanks to Manus O'Riordan, SIPTU head of research and executive member for Ireland of the IBMT, who delivered the first George Brown Memorial Lecture on Friday evening, and he stressed the importance of organising as George Brown himself had done, emphasising the lessons of working class unity in the 1930s which now needed to be learned once more for the struggles ahead.

Events continued on Saturday morning with a lecture by Harry Owens. He gave such a powerful and vivid nar-

rative of so many aspects of the civil war that the Inistioge audience gave him a prolonged standing ovation.

Following the presentation of George Brown commemorative plaques to SIPTU president Jack O'Connor, Bob Doyle, Jack Jones and George's cousins Eily O'Brien and Mary Doolin, the commemoration moved to the adjoining graveyard for the unveiling of the memorial plaque.

IBMT executive members Hilary Jones, Marlene Sidaway, Manus O'Riordan and I carried the memorial banners of both the British Battalion and the Connolly Column, 15 Brigada Internacional, while two local brass bands came together to play County Kilkenny anthem The Rose of Mooncoin, Jarama and The Internationale.

At Woodstock Gardens, Jack planted a tree on behalf of his and Evelyn's family. This ceremony was presided over by Sean Kelly of Unite, who had worked tirelessly as the commemoration project co-ordinator.

In the nearby olive grove memorial to Kilkenny's International Brigaders, Inistioge's Hatchery Folk Group provided a musical tribute, which included Christy Moore's song Viva la Quince Brigada!, sung with two additional verses in memory of George. Brenda O'Riordan gave a recital on the Irish harp, which included Marbhna Luimnighe (Limerick's Lamentation).

On their return to Inistioge, the brass band again played The Internationale, the anthem with which Connolly Column commander Frank Ryan had rallied the International Brigades at the Battle of Jarama.

"Then comrades come rally, And the last fight let us face. The Internationale Unites the human race!"

of agency and temporary workers, hours and holidays — in fact, all issues relating to workplace practices — are best done through free and effective trade union bargaining, rather than limited legislation.

And, for that bargaining to be effective, legislation should be introduced to ensure that trade unions have the rights and freedoms enshrined in international law, provided for in many European constitutions but denied to British workers for far too long.

Unfortunately, popular calls for a Trade Union Rights and Freedoms Bill have not reached the Warwick agenda, although aspects of the proposed Bill are included in the core amendments.

Ensuring that those amendments remain at the centre of negotiations with government and are not sacrificed in the face of hostile media reports about returning to the 1970s will be a crucial test of trade union determination.

Other amendments submitted by unions but not listed as core include extending statutory recognition procedures to small employers, restricting the use of agency workers during industrial action and the introduction of a fair-wages clause into all procurement contracts.

If these demands were won and unions, once again, were allowed the freedom to defend the interests of their members, we would begin the task of winning back the confidence of workers and the support of voters. Both are sorely needed.

● *Carolyn Jones is director of the Institute of Employment Rights and can be contacted on cad@ier.org.uk*