

# **IRELAND: The Socialist Answer**



**With contributions from Sinn Fein, Tony Benn, Geoff Bell, Stan Crooke, Patrick Murphy and John O'Mahony.**

**A Workers' Ireland pamphlet. £1.**

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**To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of all past dissension, and to substitute the common name of Irishmen in place of the denominations Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter...**

*Wolfe Tone.*

**In so far as national peace is in any way possible in a capitalist society based on exploitation, profit-making and strife it is attainable only under a consistently and thoroughly democratic republican system of government...the constitution of which contains a fundamental law that prohibits any privileges whatsoever to any one nation and any encroachment whatsoever upon the rights of a national minority.**

**This particularly calls for wide regional autonomy and fully democratic local government, with the boundaries of the self-governing and autonomous regions determined by the local inhabitants themselves on the basis of their economic and social conditions, national make-up of the population, etc.**

*1913 Resolution of the Bolshevik Party Central Committee.*

**There is not, nor can there be, such a thing as a 'negative' Socialist slogan that serves only to 'sharpen proletarian consciousness against imperialism' without at the same time offering a positive answer to the question of *how* (Marxists) will solve the problem when (they) assume power. A 'negative' slogan unconnected with a definite positive solution will not 'sharpen' but dull consciousness, for such a slogan is a hollow phrase, mere shouting, meaningless declamation.**

*Lenin.*

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**Workers' Ireland I**

## IRELAND: The Socialist Answer

For too long there has been almost no real discussion on the British or Irish left about the impasse in Northern Ireland. Each group has its slogans, but there is almost no common ground even on the basic facts of the situation. Those on the left who support the Catholic revolt, and those who do not, might as well be talking about two different places.

We support the Catholic revolt; but we are also concerned for the Protestant workers and their rights. We have our own ideas about a way forward; and we also want to open dialogue and debate on the left where at present there is no communication at all.

That is why we have produced this pamphlet and other *Workers' Ireland* publications. This pamphlet is produced by supporters of *Socialist Organiser* and *Workers' Liberty*, but we hope in future to draw in a wider range of contributors. Send articles of controversy, criticism or comment to *Workers' Ireland*, PO Box 823, London SE15 4NA.



Protest as Army and RUC allow Orange march through Catholic area.  
Photo: John Arthur (Reflex)

## Ireland: the socialist answer

**F**rom the mid-1960s a sizeable minority of the people of the USA turned against the war

their government was waging in Vietnam. They marched, demonstrated and lobbied to force their government to stop the war.

This active opposition of a section of their own people was a major factor in making the Indochina war unwinnable for the mighty US government.

Since about 1972 opinion polls have more or less consistently shown that half or more than half the people of Britain do not want Britain to continue to rule Northern

Ireland, do not want the British troops there, and therefore do not want Britain to continue to spend British money and lives fighting the IRA. Influential newspapers like the *Daily Mirror* have favoured Troops Out for fifteen years or more.

Yet this vast swathe of British public opinion has had almost no influence on British government policy. Why? Many of those who want British troops out have a narrow-minded British nationalist attitude: 'let the mad Irish kill each

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other'. The effect of this on British policy is to license any brutality of policy, attitude and utterance the government chooses to indulge in. And that is the only influence that the segment of British public opinion which favours troops out has had on British government policy.

Troops out sentiment is overwhelmingly passive and cynical. No powerful movement exists to mobilise and agitate on the question. For nearly two decades the organised 'troops out' movement has consisted of tiny groups of left-wingers, mostly sympathisers of the Irish Republican movement. Many of these 'troops out' activists are moved to activity by seeing the Republican movement and the struggle of the Catholics in Northern Ireland as playing a role in some preconceived scenario of 'world revolution' or 'permanent revolution' — a vision which cannot possibly broaden forces.

'Time To Go' has achieved a bigger involvement of activists than any similar initiative for some time partly because it talks of more than troops out, and through the voice of Clare Short MP it links troops out inextricably with a political settlement.

Now conscription in the USA made the Indochina war a big part of the lives of a generation, while there is no conscription in Britain. The casualty levels in Northern Ireland are far lower than the rates of death through violent crime in many American cities, and qualitatively below the levels suffered by the US soldiers in Vietnam. That is one reason why the public opinion for troops out has little bite in British politics. But it explains only part of the arresting contrast with the USA.

Much more central is the fact that the troops out majority in opinion polls is made up of people with vastly different attitudes, from Britain-first reactionaries to those who believe that the IRA is leading the Irish socialist revolution and vehemently support it for that reason. The troops out current is not so much a current as an arithmetic sum of people who agree only negatively — against British troops remaining — but disagree entirely on positive answers.

For Vietnam the negative opposi-

tion to US troops remaining clearly implied a positive solution, whether you accepted it reluctantly or welcomed it enthusiastically — let the Vietnamese nationalists take over. Northern Ireland is far more complex.

The history of the relations between the two islands of Britain and Ireland is that of England as predator for centuries, and Ireland as prey. It is a history of British ruling-class oppression and exploitation, and of repeated Irish risings for freedom. But it is also a history shaped and marked by the interpenetration of the peoples of the two islands over the centuries.

Today Ireland is divided between two peoples of different and conflicting identities and allegiances. In the north-east of the island the majority is, and for centuries has been, the people who used to be called (by James Connolly, too) Ulster Scots.

Yes, the existing partition of Ireland is a brutal outrage against the majority of the people of Ireland, a botched, clumsy piece of British imperialist policy. It supposedly set out to give the Protestants of the north-east self-government against the rest of the Irish, but in so doing created a second, artificial, Irish minority, the Six Counties Catholics, who are a bigger proportion of the Six Counties population than the Protestants would be as a proportion of the 32 Counties of all Ireland.

This way of dealing with the conflict between the Irish majority and minority was only possible because of the alliance of the Protestants with the dominant section of the British ruling class in the early part of this century.

The bedrock fact, however, remains: a sizeable minority of the people on the island, the compact majority in the north-east, do not want to be part of a united Ireland under a Catholic majority — and have been willing to fight against being forced into it.

The hundred years since the first Home Rule Bill which Gladstone introduced into the House of Commons at the beginning of 1886 have demonstrated conclusively that the Irish majority's desire for Irish independence and its desire for Irish unity are incompatible. On top of that basic problem, the British rul-

ing class has erected structures such as partition which have made relations between the Catholics and Protestants even more antagonistic and poisonous.

So Britain is both a bully in Ireland, and the ally of a sizeable chunk of the Irish people. British troops out without a political settlement would mean not a united Ireland, nor any solution that would freely be chosen by a majority of either community, but bloody civil war and repartition.

It is such complexities which render the troops out mood in Britain impotent. The mood for troops out can only be a contributory force for a settlement, for peace and democracy, if it is linked to a search for positive solutions and to a discussion of particular proposals.

Yet the lack of positive policy among those advocating troops out is as glaring, as obvious, and as crippling on the left as in the broader population. The simple slogan 'Troops out', with 'now' usually added for emphasis, and perhaps the reassuring footnote that 'Socialism is the only answer', has been the staple of much of the hard left over the last 15 to 20 years.

The left has refused to discuss the real complexities and problems of the British-Irish relationship. That is why the left has made so little headway, has mobilised so scantily, counts for so little, and has failed for 15 years to do anything with a mass vague mood for troops out.

The articles in this pamphlet are selected and adapted from *Socialist Organiser* and *Workers' Liberty* to do two things: to provide facts and analysis about the real situation in Ireland; and to discuss the options and perspectives in that situation. Before the labour movement and the left can help solve the tragic conflict in Ireland, it must sort itself out.

Sean Matgamna

**Workers' Ireland 3**

# Since 1968: what has happened and why

## I. Before 1968: Moves for reform from above and below

**F**or four years or so before 1968 Northern Ireland had been shaken up and destabilised. In October 1968 it blew up.

The British Labour government had been openly putting pressure on the Protestant sectarian regime in Stormont to stop being sectarian, to stop discrimination against Catholics, and to stop repressing them. The British government plainly no longer considered the partition of Ireland to be in Britain's interest.

The prospects ahead were that Britain and Ireland would both soon join the EEC. Relations between Britain and the 26 Counties were better than for many years. In 1965 the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement was signed. The British government had the bones of Sir Roger Casement dug up out of their grave at Pentonville jail, where Casement was buried after they hanged him in 1916, and returned to Ireland with much ceremony, as if symbolically to lay the ghosts of past conflicts. Six County Prime Minister O'Neill visited Dublin and Taoiseach Sean Lemass visited Belfast.

The Southern Irish economy was in its best shape for a quarter century. On the surface it seemed to be a time of amicable reconstruction, readjustment and rational reconstruction. The contradiction that changed these prospects so dramatically lay in Northern Ireland itself, which proved beyond the power of Britain — or of Britain and the Southern Irish bourgeoisie together — to control.

For 30 years Northern Ireland had been ruled as a "Protestant state for Protestant people" (long-time Northern

Ireland Prime Minister Lord Brookeborough). The Catholics were a big and threatening hostile minority of about one in three who had been kept in the Six County state against their will in 1921. Chronic antagonism was therefore built into the Six Counties state. The Protestants repressed the Catholics, organising a special sectarian part-time wing of the police, the B-Specials, to do so.

The built a solid Protestant bloc, involving all classes from slum Protestants to horse Protestants, against the Catholic minority. Partly for political reasons, but also because there was great scarcity and poverty, they systematically discriminated against Catholics.

More Catholics were unemployed than Protestants; run-down areas where unemployment never dropped below the Great Depression level, even during the years of the boom in the '40s, '50s and '60s, tended to be Catholic areas. Politics was largely communal-sectarian politics — Catholic against Protestant. Catholics were cheated of local democracy: the system long discarded in Britain of giving business people one vote for every business premises continued in Northern Ireland where it hit the poorer Catholic community. Areas with big Catholic majorities — Derry City for example — were blatantly gerrymandered to give the Protestant/Unionist minority control of the local council. Because votes went with houses, Catholic housing was among the worst in Western Europe.

There was systematic anti-Catholic discrimination in employment. The Harland and Wolff shipyard, and the big engineering works, employed practically no Catholics. The Sirocco Engineering Works in East Belfast, standing in the Catholic enclave of the Short Strand where there was 70% unemployment, had four Catholics out of 600 workers in the mid-'70s. As a direct consequence of this, the composition of the trade unions was tilted heavily against the Catholics.

The unions remained united on day-to-day trade unionism, on a basis of tacit acceptance of these discriminatory

practices and agreement not to raise political questions concerning the Six Counties' constitution. Trade union unity was unity of the privileged with the oppressed on the terms laid down by the privileged — the status quo in industry and on the Six Counties' constitutional position.

At the top, where prominent people often were leftists or had a left-wing past — like, for example, Betty Sinclair, the Stalinist secretary of the Belfast Trades Council — trade unions and trades councils could sometimes be got to pass 'progressive' or liberal resolutions, but these were not representative of the Orange majority of the Northern Ireland labour movement. Unity in the Northern Ireland trade unions was a fragile thing. The threat of a split on the constitutional questions was always present, staved off by political paralysis and tacit agreement to avoid splitting issues.

The situation was the same with the political labour movement. In the '60s the Northern Ireland Labour Party had a socialist left-wing in Derry and Belfast. But it was a Unionist, that is a fundamentally Protestant, party. Time and again, throughout its history, it had been disrupted by conflicting positions on 'the constitutional question'. Always for the status quo, it attempted to broaden its support, sometimes by playing down its Unionist character, sometimes by trickery. In the '40s for example, the NILP agitated in the Falls Road under the Irish tricolour; in the Shankill under the Union Jack, and in the city centre under the Red Flag! Inevitably this party fell apart, repeatedly.

The Protestant workers were a privileged layer. Their privileges were marginal — but nevertheless big privileges. Leon Trotsky once remarked that the greatest possible privilege is to have a crust of bread when everybody else is starving. To have, as part of the Protestant ruling bloc, a considerably better chance of a job amongst mass unemployment, was no small privilege.

Sectarianism was no surface part of Northern Ireland, but basic to it. It was a society flawed right through along the lines of the Catholic and Protestant communities. In the late '60s and early '70s it split vertically along the lines of the communal divide, not horizontally along the lines of class.

This was the problem for Britain's reforming drive in the mid '60s. The upper-class Orange and Unionist leaders were willing to make timid moves

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Demo in Newry after Bloody Sunday

towards reform; the Protestant working-class ranks became very alarmed that reform would be at their expense. At first this was a slow process. Around 1966, Ian Paisley, the most vocal representative of that alarm, still seemed an archaic crank. But the first killings occurred in 1966, when a Protestant secret army, the UVF, killed a Catholic barman suspected by them of having IRA connections.

But at first, in the mid-'60s, the Protestant backlash was limited, and seemed like it could be easily contained. The Catholic agitation that now got under way, to add pressure from below to the British government's pressure for reform from above, turned the Protestant backlash into a powerful mass movement.

The Catholics began to agitate for 'civil rights' — one man (sic) one job, one man one house, one man one vote. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was formed in 1967. It was a broad coalition led by Republicans who had renounced the gun — at least for the moment — green nationalist politicians, Stalinists, and socialists of various sorts. Inevitably their demands were taken by the Protestants to be demands to divide up the existing jobs and homes.

It is possible that these 'civil rights' demands could have been rendered more palatable to the Protestant workers if expressed in some way as this: create jobs by building more houses, etc. However, it is not at all certain.

The implications of the Catholic movement went way beyond what they demanded. The fundamental civil right the Catholics lacked was the right of self-determination — the fact that they were an artificial minority within an artificial state, carved out against the will of the big majority of the people of Ireland. From that flowed the possibility of discrimination and repression in the Orange sectarian state. It was not just ultra-sensitive Unionist politicians like the Stormont Home Secretary William Craig who saw that the logic of any such mainly-Catholic movement would lead it straight to the question of Northern Ireland's constitutional status. The leaders of the 'Official' Republicans, who were heavily involved in the civil rights agitation, did see it as the first stage in a mass mobilisation that would, when the time was ripe, raise 'the national question'. Protestants tended to see any movement of Catholics as a threat to 'the constitution'.

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### 2. 1968-9: The Northern Ireland state down breaks

This was the background to the events of October 1968. Home Secretary William Craig banned the civil rights demonstration in Derry, and the police enforced the ban by baton charges when it was defied. World TV audiences saw the Republican Labour MP for West Belfast, Gerry Fitt, with blood streaming from a head wound caused by a police baton. Most importantly, people in Britain saw it.

From that moment on, the Protestant-majority Unionist government at Stormont was on the defensive. Northern Ireland was world headline news. The pressure for reform intensified. William Craig was sacked from the Stormont government. The Protestant working class became increasingly alarmed at the prospect of being 'sold out'. The Protestant backlash grew bigger and began to reflect itself inside the ruling Unionist Party.

One of the main Northern Ireland responses to the bloody events in Derry was the creation of a powerful movement of students to agitate for civil rights — People's Democracy (which should not be confused with the present organisation of that name, though the two do have some links). PD was based on Queen's University, Belfast, had initially had many Protestant members. Outrage by police brutality at home, they were influenced by the world-wide student radicalisation of that time, which elsewhere focused on organising protests and solidarity with the Vietnamese against the US Army in Vietnam. Most of the leaders of PD were Marxist socialists.

PD agitated and marched — often very provocatively — for civil rights. The Orange backlash grew. The Unionist Party went into ferment and crisis. Prime Minister Terence O'Neill was a feeble politician nurtured in a political system in which gentry like himself could take the loyalty and deference of the lower orders for granted. He could not cope.

Central to what happened in the next three years was the incapacity of the Unionist upper-class elite to carry the

Protestant masses with them on reform. Every Catholic, or pro-Catholic, action stirred up and agitated the Protestant ranks, feeding the backlash. The elite could control neither the one nor the other, and the system was ground to bits between the two. O'Neill resigned in early 1969, to be replaced by another ex-Army man, his cousin Chichester-Clark.

In January 1969 police rioted in Derry's Bogside, the Catholic slum area built outside the walls of the one-time Protestant city of Londonderry. The Catholics erected barricades to keep them out.

Serious rioting occurred in July. Then in August the upper-class Orange Order, the Apprentice Boys of Derry, staged a provocative march on the walls overlooking the Catholic slums. Bitter clashes occurred, which became full-scale warfare between the police, the sectarian B-Special constables and assorted Paisleyites on the one side, and the Catholics of the Bogside on the other.

Barricades were set up, and the Bogsiders held off the forces of the state using stones and petrol-bombs. Protestant bigots attacked Catholic areas in West Belfast, and the same thing happened there. The Southern Ireland Prime Minister said that the South could not "stand idly by". The Northern Ireland state seemed about to dissolve into sectarian civil war. On August 13th the British Army was moved onto the streets to stop the state falling apart. It quickly took control in Belfast and Derry.

The Catholics welcomed the Army as saviours — but they didn't take their barricades down. The Catholics of Derry and Belfast had seceded from the Northern Ireland state, for the moment. The barricades would stay up, patrolled on the outside by the British Army armed with machine guns and rifles, and on the inside by Catholics agreed with hurleys, until the Catholics agreed to take them down in October.

This was the first crucial turning point. The Northern Ireland state had shown itself to be unreformable. It had been designed to serve the Protestant majority and they had a built-in majority against any change they didn't want. The Labour government had to decide what to do. As well as sending in the army, it sent in a bevy of civil servants to oversee the chief Northern Ireland civil servants, thus seriously curtailing the independence of the Northern Ireland government. That's all the British Labour government did.

Instead of recognising that the system had to be radically dismantled and restructured, it left it essentially in being, tinkering with it. But a process had begun that would end with the abolition of Stormont in March 1972, thus depriving the Protestant majority, whose right to self-determination the Six County state allegedly gives expression to, of the right to exercise that majority in any local political structures.

The events of August-October 1969 set Northern Ireland on a new trajectory, though that was not clear at the

time. The youth in the Catholic areas had been roused up and radicalised, and were deflated and disappointed when the barricades came down in October 1969. The crisis in the Unionist Party continued, under pressure on one side from the British government to reform and on the other from the Protestant population against 'selling them out' to the Catholics or 'Dublin'. Chichester-Clark resigned in 1970, to be replaced by the tougher, less genteel and altogether less effete Brian Faulkner.

### 3. 1969-70: The failure of the socialists, the rise of the Provos

Paradoxically, this period saw the high point of socialism in Northern Ireland. Most of the prominent Catholic activists or representatives were socialists — the exceptions were middle-class civil rights people like John Hume, and even they allied with 'socialists' like Gerry Fitt MP and called the party they set up in 1970 the Social Democratic and Labour Party. (Mainly Catholic, it then included some Protestants, like Ivan Cooper MP.) PD ceased to be an amorphous student movement in late '69 and started agitating for socialism and on social questions. The PD-associated MP for Mid-Ulster, Bernadette Devlin, elected in 1969, was a revolutionary socialist, who worked closely in Britain with groups like IS (SWP) and, briefly, the SLL (WRP). (Today she is hardly distinguishable from a Republican).

All the leading activists in Derry were socialists, with the leading role falling to the Derry Labour Party, led by Eamonn McCann. In Derry almost all the Republicans were socialists, and some were influenced by Trotskyism. Most of these socialists did appeal on a class basis to the Protestant workers, before and after August 1969. Even in its wild and provocative student days, PD appealed to Protestant workers to see that socially they had a common interest with Catholic workers. They all carefully tried to avoid appearing as Catholics or traditional Republicans.

For example, a PD leader, Cyril Toman, who was then a sort of Trotskyist, tried to get a hearing from Protestant workers by flying a Union Jack over his platform! Today Cyril Toman is in Sinn Fein, and in 1983 was one of its Parliamentary candidates.

All the socialists made *Militant*-style denunciations of the idea that there could be a non-socialist united Ireland. Only in a socialist Ireland could the Protestant's legitimate fears that Home Rule would be Rome Rule be allayed. 'Neither Thames nor Tiber', the most Republican of them said, meaning no Irish unification apart from socialism.



They roundly abused the 'Green Tory' Republic and marched across the border waving illegal condoms in the faces of the 26 County police.

By contrast the Republicans were eclipsed. Shamed and split by their inability to defend the Catholic areas in August 1969, they seemed to count for little — and anyway the main body of Republicans were socialists too.

The high point for socialism was the election of June 1970. The Northern Ireland Labour Party refused to endorse Eamonn McCann as a candidate, and he stood with the backing of the Derry and Coleraine Labour Parties. He advocated troops out and socialism, which he defined as nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy. McCann got 8,000 votes.

There were lots of socialists, many of them Trotskyists of one sort or another. The problem was that they were largely confined to the Catholic community. Individual Protestants were socialists, of course. Though the big student Protestant support for civil rights fell away very quickly, some stayed — for example, Ronnie Bunting, son of a prominent associate of Ian Paisley, who joined PD

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and was reputed to be 'Chief of Staff' of the Irish National Liberation Army when he was murdered in 1981. But these were individuals. The Protestant working class remained impervious to appeals.

Sections of it were 'radicalising' and separating off from the traditional Unionist leaders. But they were going to Paisleyism. Their radicalism was diffuse, sectional, fuelled in part by fear of the Catholics in the Six Counties and in a possible united Ireland.

Any class feeling was strictly confined within their communal framework. If they recognised similar people in similar conditions to their own across the communal divide, they did not go on to conclude that there was a common interest. Communalism shaped and limited everything. Northern Ireland's society split vertically along communal lines in 1969 and after; and when the Protestant community split horizontally, it had no significance for class politics — it was an affair internal to the Protestant community. That is the basic tragedy of Northern Ireland politics in the last 15 years: that workers' disillusionment with the Orange bosses served only to build the Paisleyite Democratic Unionist Party.

The Catholics and their representatives — in the first place the socialists — could and did propose working class unity. But they could not impose it on the Protestants, nor even get a dialogue with the Protestants. It is normally thus when an oppressed layer moves, frightening the upper layers.

For example, who can doubt that the US blacks would, given a chance, have chosen unity with the white workers in the '50s and '60s? Unity was not on offer on any terms other than the continued subordination of the blacks. The '60s black revolt, with riots and burning cities, followed, 'alienating' white workers. That was tragic, as were the parallel events and relationships in Northern Ireland. But those are poor Marxists who would (or did) therefore conclude that our job was to tell the oppressed patiently to bear their burden.

Many activists agreed that 'socialism was the only road', but there can be no socialism without the working class — in this case, crucially, the Protestant working class — so that road was not open.

The consequence for the radicalised Catholic youth was isolation from the main body of the working class and working-class movement — and impotence. The ground was prepared for the Provisionals' campaign by the impotence, and by the attempts of the socialists to avoid the national question.

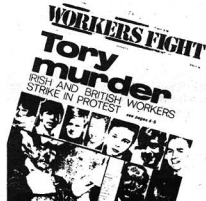
As we saw, all the socialists, including the socialist Republicans, steered clear of the national question or renounced it (some of the Republicans hypocritically, tactically). That left the national question and 'anti-imperialism' entirely in the hands of the Provisional — initially, right-wing — Republicans.

Cyril Toman — the Marxist of '69, waving his Union Jack at Protestant workers so that they would let him talk to them about socialism, who became

the Sinn Fein candidate of '83 — symbolises and sums up this tragic experience.

The Republican movement had come out of World War II, in which it had allied with Germany, pulverised and seemingly defunct. It made a principle of physical force and of boycotting the various parliaments (Dublin, Belfast, London) and apart from that was 'non-political'. In fact it reflected the right-wing cold-war atmosphere of Catholic Ireland in the '40s and '50s. It revived slowly in the post-war period, and in 1956 launched a military campaign of small guerilla actions on the Border. This soon petered out and eventually, in 1962, a formal 'ceasefire' was declared.

Trying to learn from their experience, some of the leading activists turned 'left' and began to talk of using social agitation to gain support for 'the national struggle'. They drew on half-forgotten experiences of left-wing Republicanism in the '30s, when left-moving traditional Republicans met the right-moving Stalinised Communist Party of Ireland, and together they created a sort of populist Republicanism. The immediate task was to win national independence ('the Republic'; for the Stalinists, 'the bourgeois-democratic revolution'); then socialism would come at the next stage.



In the '60s, too, the leftward-moving Republicans met Stalinists and were influenced by them, in the first place by Dr Roy Johnstone, who went onto the Army Council.

One product of the Republicans' turn to social questions was that they became involved in the civil rights movement. They began to disarm the IRA, expelling dissidents, benefitting from the dropping-away of many traditional activists.

The events of August 1969 changed the direction of the IRA too. They were largely irrelevant during the fighting, the 'Chief of Staff' Goulding being reduced to making idle public threats. Militants were told that the problem was that the IRA had lent its guns to the Free Wales Army!

In December 1969 and January 1970 the Republican movement split. The break-aways were traditionalists. Many, like David O'Connell, were veterans of what little action there had been in the '50s. Others, like Joe Cahill — sentenced to death but reprieved because of his age, while 19-year-old Tom Williams was

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hanged, in 1942 — went back even further. They denounced the 'communism' of the mainstream Republicans, though they too called themselves socialists — democratic socialists. The Provisionals' prospects did not seem very bright: for example, J. Bowyer Bell, the author of a learned academic study of the IRA published in 1970, dismissed them as a moribund relic of the past who could not keep up with the development of the mainstream.

In fact the Provos grew with astonishing speed. They recruited rapidly from the disillusioned Catholic youth.

Fianna Fail money helped launch the Provos, but to explain the development of their movement as a result of ruling class divide-and-rule is self-evidently inadequate, and no more than a conspiracy theory of history. As well to explain the Russian Revolution as a German plot because the German general staff allowed Lenin to cross Germany in a sealed train. Fianna Fail wanted to split and stop the left-wing Republican movement. They did not want what the Provos very rapidly became.

Eamonn McCann has described the Provo's appeal like this. Whereas everyone talked about socialism and 'imperialism', but had nothing to suggest doing about it in the circumstances, the Provos could point to the British soldier standing at the local street corner and say: 'There, that's imperialism. Shoot it.'

The determined avoidance of the national question by the left and the official Republicans — who consigned it to the distant future, together with a socialism that had to wait on the Protestant workers — ensured that the national question, which lay at the heart of the subordinate and oppressed position of the Catholics, was raised, when it inevitably forced its way to the front, in the Provos' initially right-wing version. The Provos could, of course, also draw on the Catholic-Republican culture — songs, history, ingrained loyalties — with which the Catholic community was saturated. In late '69 a staunch old-style Republican like ex-internee Sean Keenan seemed a respected anachronism: within a year or 18 months, people like that were the centre of a powerful movement which had taken in many of the radicalised youth eager to 'shoot imperialism'. One consequence of this was that the Provisional Republican movement would itself become radicalised, especially in Belfast and Derry — though its radicalism was within the limits of one community.

## 4. 1970-72: Growth of IRA and UDA. Direct rule

**B**y early 1970 relations between the British Army and the Catholics had deteriorated badly. The sort of reforms the civil rights movement had called for had quickly been rushed through after August 1969. The B-Specials were disbanded, the RUC disarmed. But things had gone too far. These measures — especially the disbandment of the B-Specials — alarmed the Protestants but failed to satisfy the Catholics.

The army was a crude and brutal tool for police work. Balancing between the communities, it inevitably began to reflect the real balance of the Six County state — which favours the Protestants. The election of a Tory government in June 1970 replaced a Labour government which had learned to have some sensitivity towards the feelings of the Catholics with Tories whose parliamentary allies were the Unionists of Northern Ireland.

A major turning-point in Army/Catholic relations came in July 1970. Protestants attacked a Catholic church in the Lower Falls and the Official IRA shot three of them dead. The Army, perhaps to placate Protestant anger and 'keep the balance' then declared a curfew on the Lower Falls and a systematic search of the area for arms. Bloody clashes followed with the Official IRA.

In early 1971 the Provisional IRA killed three British soldiers and things began to move towards a military-style confrontation. But it was still limited. The decisive turn came on August 9 1971, with the introduction of internment. Few IRA men were rounded up, but various political opponents of the Faulkner Stormont government were, like PD leader Michael Farrell. If they had wanted to give the allegiance of the Catholic community to the two IRAs, then Faulkner and Tory Prime Minister Edward Heath could not have made a better job of it. Now it became a full-scale Catholic insurrection, with the Provisional IRA gaining more support. Bombings and killings escalated enormously. So did the Protestant backlash.

The Protestant UDA was founded in late '71 and became a mass movement of

perhaps 50,000 by mid-'72.

This phase ended in March 1972, when the Tory government decided to destroy the 52-year old sectarian structures of Northern Ireland and start again. Stormont was abolished. The IRA had gained a tremendous victory. Everything seemed to be in the melting pot — and it was. Quarter of a million Protestant workers struck in protest.

The Provos' military campaign deepened and widened the gap between Protestants and Catholics. It did not create it. In terms of the basic cause and effect, the Provos and their campaign were a product of the Catholic/Protestant division which had rendered impotent the Catholic radicals in 1969 and afterwards.

Everything was in the melting pot — but only within the given Northern Ireland framework. The Tories acted more vigorously and radically than Labour had, but they were even less inclined than Labour to face the fact that Northern Ireland was a failed entity, in a state of latent or incipient civil war — increasingly ungovernable.

In 1972 Protestant barricades went up throughout Belfast. Catholic barricades had gone up again in Belfast and Derry after 'Bloody Sunday' — January 30, when the British Army shot and killed 14 unarmed Catholics taking part in a banned Republican demonstration in Derry.

## 5. 1973-4: Britain's moves for reform shattered by the Protestants

**B**ritain now moved energetically to re-erect a self-governing system in Northern Ireland, calling on the aid of the Southern Irish government. A series of talks, with Unionist and Catholic politicians and with the Southern Irish government, culminated in the 'Sunningdale Agreement' on a new system in Northern Ireland. The new system would have institutionalised power-sharing in the Six Counties and a loose and rather powerless 'Council of Ireland' would take account of Northern Ireland Catholics' desire for Irish unity. Britain promised a referendum to determine whether the Northern Ireland majority wanted Irish unity. (The referendum was held in March 1973; of course, the majority did not want unity.)

The old Unionist Party, for 50 years Northern Ireland's monolithic ruling party, had broken up in 1972. Now the Unionists fragmented further. The Paisleyites — now very much more than

The Provos declared a ceasefire in mid-'72, and the mighty British government decided to negotiate with them. Republican and Loyalist prisoners were given special political prisoner status. Provisional IRA leaders — among them Gerry Adams, now MP for West Belfast — were flown to London for discussions. Nothing came of it at all. The British were willing to change the way Northern Ireland was run, but not to change Northern Ireland. The armed mass movement of the Protestants paralysed any impulses they may have had to make basic changes. They stuck to their commitment to maintain the Six County state. And that meant balancing between the communities.

This balancing led to a breakdown of the truce with the IRA. Many hundreds of Catholics had been made homeless by sectarian intimidation, but when an attempt was made to re-house them in houses vacated by Protestants the Army intervened with a heavy hand to stop it, and the Provisional IRA went back to the gun. An Official IRA ceasefire in the same period remained in being, and still does.

Northern Ireland had never been closer to open communal civil war than in mid-'72. Civil war didn't come. Instead there occurred a hurricane of sectarian assassinations, mostly of Catholics by Protestants, which continued through to 1974 and beyond. The British government placated the Protestants by forcibly taking down the Catholic barricades in July 1972. Tension eased. The war between the British Army and the Provisional IRA resumed fiercely. IRA bombs continued to blast the centres of Northern Ireland's cities.

a fringe group — and William Craig's 'Vanguard' were marching and drilling and making blood-curdling threats, while some of their followers were slaughtering individual Catholics at random. The Unionists divided into those willing to work the new system Britain wanted and those who were either against it or thought it could not be carried with the Protestant masses. On the Catholic side, the pro-power-sharing SDLP had the electoral support of the mass of Catholics: Sinn Fein was not allowed to stand in the elections for the new Assembly.

On 1 January 1974 the new power-sharing executive came into being. It was a coalition of a Unionist minority, led by Brian Faulkner; the SDLP; and some tiny parties like the non-sectarian liberal Unionists, Alliance, and the no less Unionist Northern Ireland Labour Party. The Paisleyites and other die-hard bigots were ghettoised, accounting for about one-third of the Assembly. They

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### 6. 1974-80: 'Sweating it out'

shouted, rioted and disrupted the work of the Assembly. To no avail. Though the Faulknerites were under tremendous pressure and had broken election pledges against power-sharing, the SDLP-Faulknerite alliance held and began to get a grip on Northern Ireland.

A dramatic shift had occurred, for the stable mainstay of this regime was the SDLP. Britain had shifted its weight heavily onto the middle-class Catholic party. The die-hard Orangemen appeared isolated and impotent. There was reason to think that massive government patronage and a vigorous reform policy — for which Britain had the resources and the will to pay — would gradually rally a sizeable Protestant support around the Faulknerites. The power-sharing executive seemed to have years of life ahead of it. The IRA was still active but it seemed to be in decline.

But now the British class struggle intervened. In February 1974 the British Tory government called an election on the issue, 'Who rules, the unions or the government?', hoping thereby to gain the political and moral authority they needed to defeat the British miners. Heath lost the election. In Northern Ireland what was lost was the entire government strategy.

The Westminster election took the die-hard Orange politicians out of the Stormont ghetto in which they had been confined; it forced Brian Faulkner's party to face the Orange electorate they had tricked in the Northern Ireland election six months before. The result was a catastrophe for power-sharing. Of 12 Northern Ireland Westminster seats, no less than 11 were won by opponents of power-sharing (the other was Gerry Fitt's). The moral authority of the power-sharing executive was undermin-

ed. It staggered on until May 1974, when a majority vote in favour of activating the Council of Ireland provision triggered a powerful general strike.

The Unionists had already used their industrial muscle on a number of occasions. In early 1971 thousands of Harland and Wolff shipyard workers had marched to demand that internment for suspected Republicans be introduced. In March 1972 a quarter of a million struck when Stormont was abolished. (To get an equivalent British figure you would have to multiply by either 60 or 40 — depending on whether you take the strikers as a proportion of the Protestant population or of the whole Six County population — to get 15 or 10 million!)

Now, in May 1974, there was a full-scale general strike. Intimidation by the UDA was used to get it going — but it soon became clear that it had real support. It was a revolutionary general strike — for utterly reactionary objectives. The strikers were against the power-sharing executive and the Council of Ireland and for a restoration of 'majority rule' in the Six Counties — that is, Protestant rule. The official Northern Ireland trade unions attempted to fight the reactionary strike, and, protected by the Army, organised a march back to work. Only a handful of people turned up, taking their lives in their hands to walk behind TUC secretary Len Murray and local trade union leaders. It was a fiasco. Nobody who knew the Northern Ireland labour movement would have expected anything else when the official unions came into conflict with their Protestant rank and file. The British Army was powerless and, maybe, the officers did not want to act against the strike. After two weeks the Faulknerites resigned and the power-sharing executive collapsed.

It was the decisive turning point for the period which opened with the abolition of the old Protestant home rule Parliament in March 1972. The British government had proved unable to face down the Protestants and had allowed its entire strategy of political reconstruction to be shattered. What now?

The Labour government refused to admit that this strategy was in ruins. It announced that there would be new elections for a Northern Ireland assembly. This time its function would be to work out a political system for the province acceptable to both Catholics and Protestants on the basis of some sort of power-sharing.

Elections were duly held, and the Faulknerites, the moderate compromising Unionists willing to work the system Britain wanted, were massacred. There followed a full year of discussion, bargaining, demonstrating, posturing and manoeuvring in the Convention. Spectacular shifts took place, for example when William Craig — the man scapegoated by O'Neill for the batoning of peaceful demonstrators in October 1969, the founder of 'Vanguard' and associate of the Protestant paramilitaries — came out for a variant of power-sharing. He was immediately disowned by his supporters. No deal was possible. The canny politicians who might be willing to try didn't dare — and had they dared then they like Craig would have been repudiated.

The Protestants had won victory in May 1974 — and they wanted victory in the Convention. There was widespread fear in the Catholic community that the Protestant majority would organise some sort of political coup, declaring a new government and set a train of events in motion which would trigger sectarian civil war. For most of 1975 the Provisional IRA observed a ceasefire. Finally, early in 1976, the Convention sent a report to London which demanded majority rule, not power-sharing, and the British government dissolved the Convention.

The British government was stuck with direct rule. The only political struc-

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ture that could be set up in Northern Ireland would correspond with the nature of Northern Ireland — with its in-built artificial Protestant majority. This put Britain in the absurd position of justifying the Northern Ireland entity and Partition in terms of defending the democratic rights of the Protestant majority while it was forced to deny the Protestant majority the exercise of its majority rights in that Northern Ireland unit!

But logic didn't come into it. The British government sought the line of least resistance and after the Orange general strike that meant leaning heavily against the Catholics. The IRA was badly affected by the truces of 1975 — but it was still a force to be reckoned with, and now it began to reorganise.

Britain's policy now was signalled early in 1976 when the Labour minister responsible for Northern Ireland, Roy Mason, announced that from now on, convicted Republican and Loyalist activists would no longer have special status or prison regime that they had had since 1972. This was the 'criminalisation' policy. Inevitably it bore down far more heavily on the Catholics than the Protestants.

At the same time the war against the IRA became an intensive war against the people of the Catholic ghettos of Derry and Belfast. Thousands of Catholic homes were repeatedly searched and wrecked by the British army. Mason's policy was to sit tight, beat down the Catholics, and make neither attempt nor pretence at any new political initiative. Northern Ireland would be forced to 'sweat out' its sickness. For quite a while it seemed to be working. The IRA was in serious decline; the flesh fell off Protestant organisations like the UDA and they shrivelled into not much more than racketeering gangs. Bombings and killings became somewhat less frequent.

When in 1977 an attempt was made by Ian Paisley to get a new Orange general strike over 'security' it flopped. The majority of Protestant workers no longer felt under immediate and intense threat. They didn't respond and since not enough of them could be coerced, the second Orange 'general' strike was a fiasco. It had more to do with jockeying for position among Loyalist politicians than with anything else.

But the convulsions were not over — the processes were just hidden from view. The Provisional IRA reorganised itself on a tighter cell structure and geared itself towards what its strategists talked of as a 20-year war.

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Developments were germinating in the prison camps and jails that would allow the IRA to gain an unprecedented position of political dominance in the Catholic community.

For the Republicans did not accept Mason's criminalisation policy. Those convicted after the new rules came into force in early 1976 refused to comply with prison regulations. They refused to wear prison uniform, wearing blankets instead. Mason's criminalisation policy

opened one of the most terrible battles ever fought for their own dignity and political principles by political prisoners confronting a brutal and soulless prison system designed to degrade and demoralise them. Republican prisoners spent years 'on the blanket'. Some served out entire sentences and were released without ever wearing prison clothes. Slowly support built up outside, but it was never enough to have any effect.



## 7. 1980-85: The hunger strikes of 1980-81 and the Proves' turn to politics

The turning point came with the hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981. The hunger strike of 1980 was called off before anyone died, the Republicans thinking that they had been promised changes. They hadn't. A new hunger strike started in Spring 1981, led by Bobby Sands, officer commanding the Provisional IRA prisoners at Long Kesh. While on hunger strike Sands was elected MP for Fermanagh-S. Tyrone, and it was Bobby Sands MP whom Mrs Thatcher allowed to starve to death in Long Kesh.

World-wide attention was now on Long Kesh. Support for the hunger strikers grew rapidly in the Northern Ireland Catholic community. It was a sign of the times that the SDLP did not dare stand against Sands and, by splitting the Catholic vote, deprived the Provisional IRA of a great propaganda boost. Sands was the first to die and nine others followed him. Like the execution of the 15 captured leaders of the 1916 rising, the slow and terrible deaths of the ten young Republicans in 1981 had a profound effect on Catholic Ireland.

As coffin after coffin came out of the gates of Long Kesh, the Provisionals gained massive support. They easily won the by-election caused by Bobby Sands' death, in mid-1981. On the other side of the Northern Ireland divide, Protestants reacted with great hostility to the giant Catholic funeral marches and to the very

successful propaganda campaign mounted by the Republicans and their supporters. Communal tensions became drum-tight.

The hunger strike ended in defeat. Would the support that the sacrifice of the hunger strikers had won for the Provisional IRA survive the end of the hunger strikes? They had had such support before. They had never been able to consolidate it or put it to any use. By now, however, they had learned some important lessons. Things had changed in the Republican movement.

The right-wing Provisional IRA had been steadily radicalised throughout the 1970s. The working-class Republicans in Belfast and Derry were always more radical than the typical petty-bourgeois. Sinn Féin supporters in the South. Steadily their influence grew. They talked of socialism with some conviction — though, unfortunately, without much clear definition, and, worse, as if it could be an affair of the Catholic community alone. One 'lesson' the left-wing Republicans in the Northern cities learned in the '70s was to give up on the Protestant workers. Side by side with their radicalisation went a more and more clear sectarianism — though in implication rather than intention — towards the Protestants.

Arguably much that they did was always sectarian. But the old guard paid at least lip service to the ideas and goals

of traditional Irish Republicanism, which proudly insisted that the whole people of Ireland were the Irish nation, whatever their origins or creed. The 1972 Provisional IRA policy for a federal Ireland with a nine county Ulster — adopted when it looked like they would soon win — was preposterous in some of its details but it contained the core idea of conciliating the Protestants. The most clear-cut expression of the sectarianism entwined with the radicalisation of the Northern Provisionals was their hostility to 'federalism', which they removed from Sinn Fein's constitution in 1981-2.

The Protestants must either be conciliated, or you try to conquer them: and without federalism and the possibility of autonomy, all that the Provos now offered the Protestants was incorporation as a minority in a heavily Catholic Ireland.

The dilemma of the Provisionals parallels that of the Republican socialists in 1968-70: they are a one-community movement, cut off from the majority of the Northern Ireland working class. They know it is the opposition of the Protestants — and specifically of the Protestant working class — that mainly stands in their way. Whereas the socialists of 1968-70 abjured, ignored or renounced the national question, the Provo radicals start from it and now they have an ill-defined socialism which abjures the majority of the Northern Ireland working class. The Provos of today, like the socialists of 1968-70, are therefore impotent to change Northern

Ireland, or Ireland.

But the Provisionals are a powerful force in the Catholic community. They learned from the hunger strike the value of politics, and have systematically turned to electioneering. Since 1982 they have consolidated a seemingly stable Catholic vote of not too far short of 40%. They define their new strategy as a combination of the ballot box and the gun — 'the Armalite in one hand, a ballot paper in the other'. They aim to make politics, and social agitation, serve the armed struggle. The SDLP was helped mightily by British favour in the early and mid-'70s; it has wasted and cracked in the political wilderness since 1976, shedding its odd socialists and Protestants, to become little more than a green nationalist party.

What is happening politically in the Catholic community now parallels the political polarisation and differentiation that occurred within Unionism at the beginning of the '70s. The Provos' enforced or voluntary abstention from political action slowed down that process in the Catholic community and allowed the SDLP a virtual monopoly of Catholic politics for a time. No more — the weakening of the SDLP, put out to starve in the no-politics wilderness after 1976, and the Provisionals' own turn to politics, has put an end to that. It is unlikely, however, that the Provisionals will politically annihilate the SDLP, and there is probably still much opposition inside the Provisionals to 'politics'.

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### 8. Conclusion

Overall, the results of the years of turmoil are not encouraging from a working-class point of view. A chasm deep and wide divides the Protestant and Catholic workers. Bitterness which will in the best circumstances take a generation or two to heal has built up.

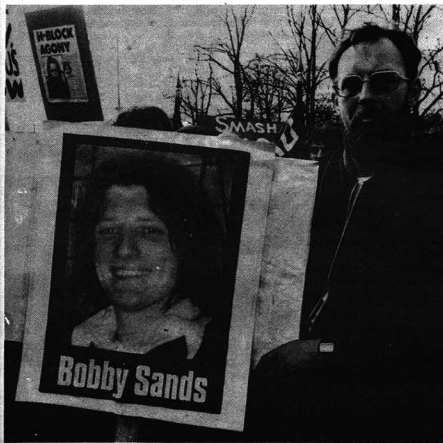
Despite severe crises in the South, since the '60s industry there has grown relatively fast, so that the social contrast between North and South — which at the time of Partition was a stark division between a relatively advanced industrial North and an impoverished mostly agricultural South — is greatly diminished. All this, however, has not generated a common feeling of working-class identity across the communal divide. It would be a miracle if it did.

Northern Ireland continues in a state of latent civil war. The British Army keeps the communities apart, but within a strategic British framework of maintaining the artificial sectarian state which keeps the Catholic-Protestant antagonism at near boiling point. Fundamentally the British Army is not a peace-keeper, but the military scaffolding erected to shore up the Six County state when it began to collapse into sectarian chaos in 1969 — in other words, to shore up the framework for the chronic communal antagonism. It keeps the communities apart by beating down the rebellious Catholics.

Britain's policy of holding the ring in Northern Ireland, tinkering occasionally with the political structures and beating down the Catholics as the staple activity, is stoking the fires of latent civil war. It maintains, just below boiling point, the conditions that could well develop into a Lebanese-style civil war in Northern Ireland, with mass communal slaughter and bloody repartition at the end of it.

The only way out of this situation is to recast the entire framework. The sectarian Northern Ireland state must be replaced by a broader framework within which the Catholic and Protestant communities can learn to live together. The Labour Party should commit itself to abolish the Six County sectarian state and to work for a federal united Ireland that will offer the fullest rights, guarantees and autonomy for the Protestant population that are compatible with the rights of the majority of the Irish people.

**Workers' Ireland II**



# Theses on the Anglo-Irish agreement

## 1. What is the Anglo-Irish agreement?

The Anglo-Irish agreement sets up an inter-governmental conference — backed up by a permanent secretariat stationed in Belfast — between the London and Dublin governments which will jointly run Northern Ireland. The executive power stays exclusively in British hands, but the political control of the executive is normally to reside in the inter-governmental conference.

The Anglo-Irish agreement is an international treaty registered with the UN, according to which the British government obligates itself to run Northern Ireland in agreement with the 26 County government and when disagreements emerge earnestly to seek agreement and a common policy.

Britain declared itself to have to opposition to a united Ireland if the Six County majority wanted it, and promised to legislate for a united Ireland if a Six County majority decided for it; the 26 County government promised to respect the separateness of the Six Counties so long as a majority there wanted to be separate.

It is power-sharing between Dublin and London. Because it proved impossible to establish power-sharing between Northern Ireland political forces in Belfast, the two governments have established a radically new framework over their heads.

If some form of mutually acceptable power-sharing in Belfast is agreed, then most of the powers of the inter-governmental conference will devolve to the Belfast government.

The agreement contrasts with the Sunningdale agreement of 1973 in not being dependent on any local agreement. Sunningdale started with agreement for power-sharing in Belfast, and proposed to build upwards on this towards a Council of Ireland. Hillsborough starts with a Council of Britain and Ireland and wants to build downwards. The Sunningdale agreement was vulnerable to the Orange general strike of 1974 because that strike could bring down the power-sharing executive. No local action in Northern Ireland can bring down Hillsborough, if the nerves of the London and Dublin governments hold.

The Orangists are — from their own point of view — quite right that the

Anglo-Irish agreement marks a big new involvement of the 26 Counties in the administration of Northern Ireland.

## 2. Why the Hillsborough agreement

Northern Ireland broke down as a political entity in August 1969. Catholic revolt against their second-class citizenship and a Protestant backlash against the Catholics led to the British Army being put on the streets to stop sectarian fighting (after over 500 Catholic families had been burned out in Belfast).

That Northern Ireland had indeed broken down was recognised by Britain in March 1972 when the IRA military campaign forced Britain to abolish the Protestant-controlled Belfast home-rule government. Britain attempted radically to restructure Northern Ireland politics by replacing majority — Protestant-sectarian — rule with institutionalised power-sharing.

It won the majority of Catholics to support the power-sharing, but only a minority of Protestants. When an executive based on the Catholic majority and a Protestant minority was nevertheless set up, a powerful Orange general strike brought it down in May 1974.

After that British direct rule became semi-permanent and the chief task Britain set itself was to defeat the insurgent Catholic IRA. But the IRA remained in the field and after ten Republicans died on hunger strike in 1981 the Republican movement achieved a degree of Catholic political support that convinced the rulers of London and Dublin that things were getting out of their control.

The Southern Irish nationalist parties and the Six County constitutional nationalist party, the SDLP — which had been the mainstay of the power-sharing experiment in 1974 — spent a year in the 'New Ireland Forum' discussing constitutional rearrangements in Ireland that would end the IRA's revolt and bring about reconciliation between Catholic and Protestant.

They prepared a number of possible options, all of which were immediately rejected by Mrs Thatcher. One of these options was joint rule in the Six Counties by Dublin and London, London representing the Protestants and Dublin the Catholics. That was rejected in 1984 by Mrs Thatcher.

But after over a year of negotiations, what the London and Dublin governments came up with was a variant of power-sharing — political power-sharing while the executive power remained in British hands. As well as that, it is proposed to create a strong Dublin-Westminster joint parliamentary committee, thus drawing Britain and the 26 Counties closer together than they have been since Southern Ireland seceded

from the UK in 1922. The Anglo-Irish agreement is thus a framework within which British/Irish collaboration can evolve and develop on a closer level than for 65 years — if it holds.

## 3. The Anglo-Irish agreement and a united Ireland

Most of the left, following the Republicans, denounces the Anglo-Irish deal for 'copper-fastening' partition. But this is false. Every 26 County government since 1922 has in fact recognised partition and some have declared that there can be no united Ireland without the consent of a sizeable section of the Six County Protestants.

The Anglo-Irish deal would only copper-fasten partition if there was some way of removing partition that the deal hinders. There is no way to remove partition unless the Northern Ireland majority wants it. To try to conquer the Protestants would not bring Irish unity. Almost certainly it would lead to sectarian civil war and bloody repartition. In fact the alternative to the Anglo Irish agreement was the status quo — i.e. deepening integration with the UK under prolonged direct rule.

If the Anglo-Irish agreement works against a united Ireland, it will be by way of the embitterment it has caused.

## 4. Socialists and the Anglo-Irish deal

Anything that would bring about reconciliation between the two communities in Northern Ireland, and thus create the preconditions for working class unity, should be welcomed by socialists. But the Anglo-Irish agreement does nothing of the sort.

While alienating the Protestants more profoundly than they have ever been alienated from Britain, it gives little to the Catholics other than the participation of the Dublin government as their champion. It is a profoundly undemocratic agreement, made over the heads of all the people in the Six Counties and resulting in structures that fall a great deal short of democracy.

The Anglo-Irish agreement does not solve the problem that has to be solved in Ireland; it exacerbates and inflames it.

The basic problem is that there is a natural Irish minority — the Protestants — which, according to democratic norms, would have every right to special treatment as a minority by way of having autonomy in its own heartland areas. But Ireland as a whole was ruled by Britain, and the minority — partly for reasons of protecting itself against the Irish majority — allied with a powerful section of the British ruling class against the Irish majority. As a result of that alliance Ireland was partitioned, with the Protestants having their own home-rule state within which there was a Catholic minority bigger as a proportion of the Protestant state's population than the Protestants of all Ireland would have been in a united Ireland.

The Catholic minority in the North

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was some 35%, and they were in the majority in a sizeable part of the Six Counties — so they were felt to be a permanent threat to the Protestant majority. They were treated as second-class citizens, discriminated against and rigorously excluded from any say in ruling the Six Counties, even in local government where they were the local majority (eg. Derry).

They suffered for decades and then revolted with a strength and determination that the British government has found impossible to quell.

The problem is to find a democratic framework which (a) takes account of the legitimate concerns of the two communities in Northern Ireland, of the wish of the Protestants not to be incorporated as an oppressed majority in a Catholic-majority Ireland as well as the wish of the Six County Catholics not to be an artificial minority in the Six County state, and, (b) allows for reconciliation and the development of normal class politics in Ireland.

That framework can only be a federal united Ireland — in which the minority areas will have autonomy — combined with the close link between Ireland and Britain acceptable to the Irish majority.

The fundamental criticism of the Anglo-Irish agreement from this point of view is that though it provokes the Orangeists about as much as a united Ireland would, it does not move any way towards providing a workable democratic framework.

The majority of the Orange population want a restoration of Orange majority rule. They will resist anything short of that and anything other than it. There would be resistance to any attempt to create a democratic federal structure. But resistance to structures that actually do take account of Orange interests could eventually dissipate. By contrast the Anglo-Irish agreement does not offer structures within which the Orangeists can be reconciled.

It puts them forever under the joint ultimate control of Britain and Britain's inter-governmental conference partner, the Ferman government which they believe schemes and plots endlessly to take out the Six Counties and incorporate its people as a helpless minority in the Catholic state.

## 5. Prospects

The Orangeists seemed almost unanimous in their opposition to the Anglo-Irish agreement. Their unity has begun to shatter in face of the intransigence of Thatcher.

As a section of the Orangeists go all the way to outright illegality, the process of differentiation within the Orange ranks will accelerate. Already the Official Unionist Party leader James Molyneux has said 'Never again' after the violence of the 3 March strike, and the OUP officially kept away from the illegal demonstration at Portadown on 31 March.

A two-way separation will occur. A section of the Orange politicians will

probably try to reach accommodation with Britain, as Paisley and Molyneux did in late February. Others will go into militarist occupation. The creation of a 'Protestant IRA' is most likely — an organisation striking at the South.

The majority of Catholics have been shown in opinion polls to favour the Hillsborough agreement, and the SDLP has been boosted at the expense of Sinn Fein. But the Catholics have in practical terms gained little, and the Orange backlash now threatens them with the sort of campaign of sectarian assassinations that swept across Northern Ireland between 1972 and 1976. The consequence of the Orange backlash in the Catholic community is that the IRA will be boosted as a defensive force.

In the months ahead the prospect is for a series of fierce clashes between the police and the Army and the Orange militants. The RUC will probably be eroded by the campaign against them in the Orange community (though this may provoke a revulsion which will be part of the process of polarisation in the Protestant community). In any case the RUC could hardly cope with the level of conflict that looms in the marching season ahead.

Therefore the British Army will be drawn more and more into 'police' work against the Protestants. The experience in 1969 and after when the Army did police work in the Catholic areas where the RUC had ceased to be acceptable suggests that this will further poison the already very bitter relations between the British government and the Protestant community.

The chances that Britain, caught between the two communities, will just pull out, are probably very small. The consequences, including the very likely spread of Catholic/Protestant conflict to British cities like Glasgow, are far too grave for any British withdrawal in response to the new situation. Britain will try to tough it out.

## 6. The Republicans

If any benefit to the Catholics can be claimed from the Anglo-Irish agreement, then to the Republicans' military campaign belongs the credit.

The tragedy is that the cost of that campaign in terms of the deepening of the ancient gulf between the two communities is immense — and it has not yet been paid.

The revolt of the Catholics was a just revolt, its channelling into this sort of military campaign the product of the domination of a particular political tradition. Today the dilemma of the IRA lies in this, that if the military campaign were to stop then the pressure for change would stop; and if it goes on now then it is the pyromaniacal activity of pouring petrol on a fire that may anyway be uncontrollable.

The temptation to 'detonate the Protestants' and use them against Thatcher must be great. After all it was the Protestants who wrecked power-sharing in 1974. But no good can come of it.

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Out of the sectarian civil war that is a clear possibility in this situation can come neither a united, nor a democratic, and still less a socialist Ireland.

## 7. Civil war

The fundamental threat in Northern Ireland is of sectarian civil war — which would lead to a bloody repartition, complete and fix the division in the Irish people for perpetuity, and probably boost clericalist reaction on both sides of the new border. Compared with that, the carnival of reaction which accompanied the 1920 partition would seem mild and moderate.

One consequence of the vicious Irish nationalism so widespread on what might be called the organisationally inchoate but ideologically Mandeliste left is that the danger of sectarian civil war is not properly appreciated. It filters through the ideological spectacles as 'the socialist revolution', 'the permanent revolution', or as a little local difficulty which the good guys would win.

We must fight this irresponsible and light-minded attitude. In the period ahead it will otherwise isolate the left from serious and sober-minded labour movement militants who will rightly recoil from the prospect of sectarian civil war.

## 8. The left

Most of the so-called Marxist left is politically subservient to Sinn Fein. They relate to Ireland through romantic populist spectacles which allow them to avoid seeing the horrifying spectre of communal civil war that looms behind events there.

In their reaction to the Anglo-Irish agreement most of the left have surpassed themselves, focusing on the alleged surrender of Irish sovereignty and failing almost entirely to see anything new. The writers and readers of publications like *Socialist Action* and *Labour and Ireland* must be mightily surprised by the recent events in Northern Ireland.

On Ireland the left needs urgently to rearm itself with working-class Marxist politics.

## Troops Out

The single isolated slogan 'Troops Out' has come to be the mark of a sizeable part of the left in the last decade. It has become something of a fetish, isolated from the rest of a socialist or democratic programme on

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### Ireland.

We are for Irish self-determination, therefore for troops out. But *Socialist Organiser* has repeatedly criticised the slogan-mongering use of troops out as if it were a self-sufficient programme. Right now troops out without a political settlement means — for a certainty — sectarian civil war and reparation. It means not self-determination of the Irish people as a whole, but the dog-eat-dog destruction of any chance of unity of the Irish people as a whole.

Troops out is not a political programme, but only part of one — and it can be part of more than programme. Plain troops out tomorrow means sectarian civil war — troops out with a political settlement means something radically different.

We are in favour of British withdrawal but as part of a political solution which actually allows Irish self-determination: and that can only mean a solution which leads to some form of federal Ireland within which Protestant and Catholics will not, immediately Britain goes, have to set about determining how they relate to each other by sectarian civil war, perhaps even on the pattern of Lebanon.

We do not say 'we support troops out only after a federal Ireland has been agreed'; we say 'a serious movement for troops out among the Irish working class, let alone the British working class, can only be built as part of a programme for actually realising Irish self-determination.' In a sense this is conditional support for British withdrawal — but withdrawal is not a fetish. And it does not mean that we take any responsibility for the British troops. They buttress an untenable status quo and they serve British governments — Labour and Tory alike — which over the last 17 years (and now again with the Anglo-Irish agreement) could not have acted very differently if they had been deliberately trying to make sectarian civil war inevitable.

As the Orange mobilisation develops, sections of the soft left will probably start supporting British troops against the Orangists or advocating their use. We do not back the Orange bigots, but we do not back the troops either. We remain the party of irreconcilable opposition.

### 10. The Catholics

The Northern Ireland Catholics remain the chief victims of partition. They are likely now to be victims of reactivated Orange murder gangs. In the event of sectarian civil war they will be

the most vulnerable, especially in Belfast.

While we advocate a democratic solution to the Protestant Catholic conflict, and reconciliation and working class unity as a basic immediate policy for Northern Ireland, in face of sectarian conflict we must stand with and defend the Catholics.

### 11. Socialism

The unspeakably bitter spectacle of the workers who live in the run-down Shankill area of Belfast in murderous conflict with their Catholic working-class neighbours in the run-down Falls area sums up what capitalism, British rule and the activities of the Irish

bourgeois and petty-bourgeois politicians have done to Ireland.

The massive 25% unemployment rate among people who often lack the means of life above the bare necessities is a further indictment of that system.

The Irish working class, Protestant and Catholic alike, needs socialism — that the workers should join together and take power from the capitalists.

We do not counterpose future socialism to the just struggle of the Catholics now, nor pretend that a divided Irish working class can miraculously make a sudden leap from the terrible reality of today to socialism.

But we need socialism, and a movement that fights for socialism as well as for a democratic solution to the Catholic/Protestant conflict.

# Socialist Organiser debates Sinn Fein

## Daisy Mules — Sinn Fein

It is very useful for us to get a feedback of what the British left are thinking about Ireland and about the issues that concern us in Ireland — and obviously also concern you in Britain.

First, I'll deal with the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Judging by the actions it has triggered, this agreement signed by Thatcher and Fitzgerald on November 15, 1985, could be deemed a momentous step forward. However, our attitude is that it is nothing of the sort.

Acclaimed internationally, approved by Irish establishment parties, and opposed with growing vehemence by the Northern Unionists — surely the Agreement cannot be that bad? But it is.

The Agreement is a setback for all socialist forces in Ireland, and their supporters in Britain who have been working for Britain's disengagement from Ireland, and for Ireland's right to self-determination as a whole.

The Agreement does not offer anything new. In it, Dublin recognises that the Northern Unionists have a right to veto Irish unification. And the two governments announced the setting up of an inter-government conference in which Dublin's role will be consultative, and which will look at ways of improving Dublin's cooperation on the security front, as well as reforming the Northern state, prior to devolving some sort of power back to an acceptable administration there.

So what exactly are the objectives of the Agreement? One of its prime aims has been widely and accurately described as the defeat of the IRA. It proposes to achieve this by a mixture of reforms in the North, supposed to erode the support of the IRA and Sinn Fein, and increased collaboration by armed forces both sides of the border.

This was seen specifically when Dublin ratified the European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism. Until then, only four other EEC countries, including Britain, had done so.

This will further reduce the already frayed right to political asylum in the 26 Counties. At the moment, as some of you are probably aware, there are great moves going on to renegotiate the extradition treaty between the United States and Britain.

The Ulster Defence Regiment remains — whose members have time and time again been found guilty of assassinating innocent Catholics. Only recently, four UDR men were convicted although they were not given a specific sentence.

The Royal Ulster Constabulary, whose members have been involved in 'shoot-to-kill' tactics against nationalists, beating in detention centres and recruiting of paid perjurers for mass trials, will not be disbanded. Non-jury courts are here to stay despite mentioning that they might do away with them in the future.

The so-called reforms which we were

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told to expect have not happened — except one. I am not sure if you are aware of this, but in the North, if you were born in the 26 Counties, you have no right to vote in any election apart from a Westminster election. The one concession that has now been given to us is that those who were born in the 26 Counties can now vote in any election in the Six Counties.

It is intended that these reforms be presented as a result of the agreement, and a victory for the SDLP, in the hope of wooing nationalist voters away from Sinn Fein.

However, the thinking that underlines this part of the agreement is that the IRA and Sinn Fein thrive on the misery of Northern nationalists — as is often said by the SDLP, the Catholic hierarchy and the Dublin politicians. Unemployment breeds violence, they say. Hence the recently agreed US financial input, and the possible financial back-up from the EEC which will presumably be used to create jobs. Sinn Fein says that unemployment breeds demoralisation, apathy, ill-health, alcoholism, domestic violence against women and children, drug taking. But it does not breed political activism.

Far from thriving on misery and deprivation, Sinn Fein works hard through its advice centres, trades unions and local campaigns to help bring about change.

In the meantime, while Dublin waits for an auspicious moment to pass some reforms, the Dublin government will be expected to carry out its duties, as spelt out by the agreement. Consulted about the North, it will share responsibility, but not power, with Britain. And it will be expected to shoulder a great burden of the massive military and judicial operations aimed at containing republican resistance.

Already the cost to the tax-payer in the 26 Counties of maintaining partition is £53 per person per year, while the equivalent tax to the British tax-payer is a mere £9.

Thatcher has the Dublin government over a barrel. She has got the Fitzgerald government to accept responsibility for part of Ireland over which it has no power. She will make them pay for every crumb of reform that may be brought about by increasing their collaboration with the British Army, the RUC and the Northern Judiciary. Furthermore, the Unionist veto has been recognised in a legally-binding agreement.

Why then has this Dublin government, which calls itself a nationalist government, signed such an agreement? Indeed, why is it supported by Northern middle-class nationalists like the SDLP leader John Hume?

The first reason is that they feel threatened by the emergence of Sinn Fein as a credible political force since the 1981 H-Block hunger strike. The second is that the constitutional parties in the 26 Counties have no urgent desire to achieve Ireland's reunification, and self-determination, as this would radically change the balance of power and the

conservative nature of Irish politics.

As for the SDLP being the 'respectable' middle-class nationalist alternative to the IRA, it will always be assured of a little place in a devolved administration at Stormont. In fact, our belief is that if it had not been that the Assembly was dissolved there recently, the SDLP were actually preparing to re-enter Stormont.

Why are the Unionists opposed to the Agreement? After all, the aim is defeating the IRA, and it plans to enroll Dublin's help for that purpose.

At the turn of the century, Unionism represented economic power and industrial wealth. But since the Second World War, especially, things have changed. The linen mills are no more. Most of the heavy engineering industry has been nationalised and needs large subsidies to survive. Unionists with their naked bigotry and their decaying economic muscle are no longer an important partner for Britain's policy in Ireland. They are, however, a sizeable minority in Ireland as a whole, and heavily armed.

Unionists presently feel jilted by Britain, deliberately kept away from the London-Dublin talks. They were told on November 15 that Dublin's opinion would be listened to before London decides how to administer the Six Counties. That was enough.

Assurances that Britain's sovereignty over the North was intact were not listened to. Reaffirmation of their constitutional guarantee was ignored.

Any move in the direction of Dublin was seen by the Unionists, not so much as a slippery slope to a united Ireland, but rather as yet another sign that their bargaining power was on the wane. But the days of unchallenged Unionist rule in the Six Counties are no more.

In 1986 the interests of Unionism are narrower than the interests of Britain. Unionism today is not so much about the Union as about partition. It is partition that has secured a permanent Unionist majority in the Northern State for 64 years. It is partition which has kept the benefits of industrial development away from nationalist areas, with the result that many Unionist areas of the North enjoy a lower unemployment rate than in Britain, while in nationalist areas 40-80% unemployed are not uncommon.

It is those marginal privileges that working class Unionists want to preserve, more than the Union Jack or the link with Britain.

The idea of an independent Ulster comes from working class loyalist groups, like the paramilitary UDA. Even repatriation has been mentioned — anything rather than lose this corner of Ireland where they rule supreme.

Furthermore, unemployment and other figures show that 14 years of British direct rule have failed to erode Unionist domination significantly. Only Irish independence could hope to end Unionist power.

All this talk of reconciling the two traditions — Unionist and Nationalist

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traditions — within the Six Counties, is therefore a smokescreen. Unionism and nationalism are two diametrically opposed political viewpoints. And the people who hold this can only be reconciled within partition if one side, or both, abandons its ground.

It is obvious that both London and the Dublin government will be expecting Northern nationalists once again to knuckle under. Crumbs of reforms will be thrown at them. Republican 'troublemakers' will be interned, proscribed, censored or otherwise disposed of. And British interests in keeping Ireland under control will have suffered not one bit.

This is why the present British government is trying to stabilise the Six Counties, and normalise North/South relations, while establishing closer links with Dublin. Like its predecessors in 1971 and 1973 it would prefer a 32 County statelet, rather than the present powderkeg. For this it must seduce the Irish nationalist middle class, appease the Unionist monster, and eliminate Republican resistance. The first objective has been reached. To achieve the second it hopes to deliver the third: the defeat of the IRA and Sinn Fein.

But Unionist opposition is not just caused by IRA actions and Sinn Fein's presence in the councils. It is mostly about losing their supremacy. This could be Thatcher's first miscalculation. The second is about defeating Republican resistance.

Whatever its future holds, it remains that this Agreement is a step backwards for Irish nationalists — and for all those that want to see the development of a free, independent, united and socialist Ireland. Socialists and progressive people everywhere must oppose the Agreement as another attempt by Britain to consolidate its hold on Ireland under cover of peace and reconciliation.

They should not be confused by the support given by the Irish nationalist middle class to the Unionist veto.

In the final analysis, Britain's colonial stranglehold on Ireland can only be broken by a process of decolonisation. Peace and stability can only be established within a framework of Irish national self-determination.

The inherent weakness of the Hillsborough process is that it is not geared to these objectives. On the contrary, it is geared towards thwarting the attainment of these objectives. And for this reason, as for many of the other imponderables, it is doomed in the long-term to failure.

## John O'Mahony (SO)

I have a somewhat different viewpoint from that of Sinn Fein. I do not start out with the idea that Irish nationalism is a fixed star. I have a different standpoint in judging this agreement and everything else about Northern Ireland: what best serves the interests of the Irish working class? What will help create the possibility of working class unity and therefore of a socialist solution in Ireland, North and South?

So I start with that different perspective and I also have a somewhat different analysis.

What I want to do today is deal with four different things: why the Anglo-Irish Agreement has come into being; what it is; what its prospects are; and, finally, what is wrong with the Anglo-Irish Agreement from a socialist — as distinct from a nationalist — point of view.

For like Sinn Fein I also conclude that we should reject the Anglo-Irish Agreement and oppose it, but for reasons different from those of Sinn Fein.

Why the deal? Because the Six County state broke down in 1969. It had existed for 50 years as a Protestant-ruled state, a state dominated by a Protestant community making up about two-thirds of the Six County population. For fifty years that had one-party rule.

The Protestant community lorded it tyrannically over the Catholic one-third of the Six County population, reducing them to second-class citizenship, keeping them down because they felt threatened by them. That system broke down in 1969.

It broke down initially when the Catholics began to demand an end to the various forms of oppression and discrimination against them and that in turn created a big Protestant backlash. In turn the Protestant backlash quickly escalated to the point where, in mid-1969 there were serious attempts at pogroms in Belfast and Derry.

There were pogroms in Belfast where some 500 houses were burned down in August 1969. That led to the British Army having to go into the streets — 'having to' from the point of view of the ruling class, to stop the situation becoming uncontrollable.

Now that meant that the Six County state had broken down. But Britain did not admit that the state had broken down. The troops were put out to control the streets and they formed a sort of tight scaffolding to keep the state from collapsing. Britain allowed the Protestant Home Rule government to continue in Belfast until March 1972. But in fact from the point where the troops took over control of the streets in 1969, Northern Ministers had senior British civil servants assigned to understudy them and act as commissars over them.

So to an important extent Britain took a very big share of direct rulership as early as the middle of 1969.

But that did not solve anything. True, Britain began to push through serious reforms. Against it is important to understand what happened.

If you look at how Northern Ireland was destabilised after 50 years it was in the beginning the result of the British government giving insistent signals to the Northern Protestant regime that it wanted reforms. Britain wanted reforms because in the 1960s Britain had long ceased to look to partition for any benefits. On the contrary, Britain was moving closer to the 26 Counties which had been growing in importance as an economic partner of Britain.

Britain and the 26 Counties signed a Free Trade agreement in 1965. Both Britain and the 26 Counties were preparing to enter the EEC, which they finally did in 1972. Britain wanted to get rid of the embarrassing backyard police state that Northern Ireland had been for most of the previous 50 years.

That led to the pressures on the Northern liberal Unionists — such as they were, and there were not too many of them and they were not very good as political leaders. And it encouraged the development of the Catholic Civil Rights movement. The unprecedentedly vigorous campaigning of that movement led to the sequence of events which I have already described, culminating in the British Army taking over in 1969, with the job of creating a scaffolding within which Britain could remodel the Six Counties.

But Britain taking control in 1969 did not stop anything. Lots of Catholics remained fundamentally unsatisfied, especially the youth in Derry and Belfast. The Catholics may have marched in 1968-9 for one man, one vote; one man, one house; one man, one job and basic civil rights. But in reality the root civil right they lacked was self-determination. Their troubles grew out of the fact that they were an artificially carved-out minority in an artificial state.

It is important to keep in mind that the Six Counties and its majority and minority are artificial. But it is also important to be aware that even if the existing untenable Six County entity had

not been carved out, there was still a powerful and compact Protestant-Unionist minority — it is a natural minority — in an area of north-east Ulster, in the north-east of the Six Counties. The point is that the Six County entity made the problem of how the Irish majority and minority relate to each other more intractable and in no sense was it a democratic resolution of the conflict.

From the Catholics' lack of self-determination came the Catholic revolt — and that revolt has to this day remained unquellable. The IRA had been virtually non-existent in 1969, during the pogroms, and what did exist calling itself the IRA had disgraced itself. But with an astonishing speed a new IRA was created. Initially it was very right-wing, an avowed right-wing split off from the old IRA. The Provisional movement was to be quickly radicalised in the early 1970s.

The new IRA initiated and developed a military campaign within a matter of 18 months after the British Army took to the streets in mid-1969. The Catholic revolt became unquellable — it took the form of a series of bombings in the centres of towns and killings of soldiers and personnel of the Six County state.

This in turn led to an intensification of the Protestant-Catholic polarisation. The result of the Provo campaign was that in March 1972 Britain abolished the Stormont regime.

Now it is important to keep in mind that Britain — through all the zig-zags of policy since 1969 — has always had the intention of politically restructuring Northern Ireland. If you see it simply as old-fashioned, bone-headed immutable British imperialism or British colonialism, I think you miss the point of what has been going on, you misunderstand the dynamics of what's been going on.

Since 1972 Britain has always had the objective of reforming Northern Ireland from above, to stop things getting completely out of hand below. This, of course, is a central pattern in Irish history, things being done from above to stop the revolt from below. That has been Britain's goal.

When they abolished the Protestant Home Rule parliament in March 1972 there was an enormous Protestant backlash against that. The UDA, a mass Protestant militia, was formed and at its peak in 1972 it had between 30,000 and 40,000 members. There are about a million Protestants, so to get a British equivalent you would have to multiply that figure by about 60!

It was an immensely powerful Protestant-Unionist mobilisation.

Britain tried to replace the home rule of the Protestants by power-sharing, in which the Catholic middle class, through the SDLP, was co-opted into the system. And Britain succeeded for a period in doing that. In 1973 and the beginning of 1974 they set up the power-sharing executive.

The real strength of that executive lay in the SDLP, the Catholic constitutional nationalist party. They were the

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bedrock, the real power in that administration through which, in partnership with minority Protestant politicians led by Brian Faulkner they ruled for the first five months of 1974.

Their power-sharing executive was destroyed by a Protestant general strike in May 1974. The general strike was got going to some extent by coercion at the beginning, but it became a genuine expression of the Protestant dissatisfaction and bitter anger at the whole situation.

That general strike was an immensely powerful demonstration of the latent power of the Protestant working class. Unfortunately it was the use of revolutionary methods for a reactionary goal, because their fundamental demand was that they be put back in control of the Catholics by way of "majority rule" in the artificial state. Nevertheless, it was one of the most powerful and successful examples of a general strike in European history. They smashed the power-sharing executive.

After that, Britain tried a number of experiments to get a new power-sharing executive and then gave up.

The form their giving up took was that the British Labour government thereafter swung round to a policy of defeating the IRA, and this quickly became an intense repression of the entire Catholic community.

It was the Labour government which withdrew political status from convicted republican prisoners conceded by the Tories in 1972. That led to the protests round the prisons which culminated in the hunger strikes of 1981. By the end of this whole process in the early 1980s you had the powerful Catholic build-up behind the republican organisation, Sinn Fein.

In 1983 Sinn Fein got 12% of the whole vote, about 42% of the Northern Irish Catholic vote. That meant that Britain had failed — and failed dangerously. Britain's policy after 1976 of beating down the Catholics had quietened the Protestants for a long time; since the British state was doing it, the Protestants felt that they didn't have to do much themselves, and they were relatively quiet.

An attempt by Ian Paisley and the UDA to get an Orange general strike in 1977 failed resoundingly.

The political rise of Sinn Fein threatened to eliminate the constitutional nationalists who had been the mainstay of the power-sharing attempt of the mid-1970s.

But of course Britain hadn't abandoned the idea of recreating a new set of political structures in the North of Ireland, it had merely believed in the mid-1970s that it had to let the thing wear itself out for a period of time. Now the political rise of Sinn Fein threatened to close the door on all sorts of deals for the foreseeable period ahead.

As a result of that threat, various people began to act — not only were the British very alarmed, the Southern bourgeoisie were alarmed too and they organised a get together of all Irish con-

stitutional nationalist parties North and South of the border. For a year they deliberated in the so-called 'New Ireland Forum', and finally they produced a series of proposals for a settlement with Britain. They presented their ideas as a series of options, listed in declining order of preference. Their first preference was for an immediate move towards a unitary Irish 32 County state. Their second option was an Irish federation or a confederation, which is even looser than a federation. Their third preference was some form of joint Irish-British rule in the Six Counties.

The immediate response of Mrs Thatcher was made during a notorious press conference where she banged the table, ticked off the various proposals and dismissed them: "That's out, that's out, that's out." But not long after Thatcher's "out, out, out" speech serious negotiations began between Britain and the Southern government which after a year produced the Anglo-Irish deal.

So the fundamental reason for the



Anglo-Irish Agreement was that the breakdown of the Northern Irish state threatened the stability of the whole island and of parts of Britain too. From that stemmed the vigorous activities of the constitutional nationalists around the New Ireland Forum. The immediate goal was to save the SDLP from political oblivion or at least from being marginalised; fundamentally the goal was to find a basic solution that would allow the IRA to be quelled and to have its base of support gradually undermined and removed.

So that's the why. What is the agreement? I think it is rather more substantial than comrade Mules says. I think it is a sort of political power-sharing agreement between Dublin and London. And it is enshrined in an international treaty which is binding, solemnly binding.

International treaties, of course, have limited force. If you have a dispute in Britain under the British law you have recourse to the courts and ultimately to the power of the state to enforce your legal rights. In international treaties there is no such state power to appeal to and such international treaties as the

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Anglo-Irish Agreement break down.

But nevertheless, as it stands, what it is is an international treaty whereby Britain has agreed with Dublin that they will jointly set up an inter-government conference to oversee the running of the Six Counties and Britain has bound itself, wherever there is disagreement on how to run Northern Ireland, to earnestly seek agreement before acting. In other words, it amounts to an international power-sharing agreement with the 26 Counties sharing with Britain a serious degree of political control of the Six Counties. It seems to me that's a very important development.

It's not exactly full power-sharing, it's not what the New Ireland Forum asked for, because the Executive is entirely in the hands of Britain. Nevertheless, in real terms it is a high degree of power-sharing.

There are a number of parallels to this sort of development. I think that what the British and Irish bourgeoisies are doing is trying to set up a framework that can evolve and allow the creation of new structures.

Both governments claim sovereignty in Northern Ireland. If you look at what they have done in the Anglo-Irish deal, they have agreed to leave the question of sovereignty alone. They haven't formally left it alone, there are various forms of words floating about, but in practice they've decided to leave the whole business alone.

The procedure reminds me of two things and I am going to make two parallels. Firstly with the way the English natural scientists of the 17th century dealt with the religious dogma that was still formally very much part of the English state and to which they were nominally obliged to conform. The way they dealt with the fact that England was still a state where you had to believe in the established church and all its doctrines, the way they freed themselves to really explore nature was by declaring that of everything in nature God is the first cause, but there were then many second causes. By paying lip service to God as the first cause, they managed to leave God alone on the sidelines and get on with the empirical exploration of reality.

I think that the British and Irish bourgeoisies have done something like this in the Anglo-Irish Agreement. They have pushed the question of sovereignty aside and they are trying to get on with groping their way towards new structures.

The second parallel is with the EEC.

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Twice this century Europe has been convulsed by wars, world wars which were fundamentally rooted in the fact that the nation states of the advanced European countries were a fetter on the needs of production, the need to unify the European economy. On two occasions Germany tried to unify the European economy by simply conquering Europe, but that failed. Germany was defeated and at the end of World War 2 Russia was able to threaten to dominate Europe.

How did the bourgeoisie proceed? After the war they very urgently needed to unify the European economy but they were stopped by all the various nationalisms. So what they did was to begin in 1951 by creating something called the Iron and Steel Community which allowed the steel and coal industry, both German and French, to be unified and to escape from the normal fetters of the nation state. This led to the creation of the EEC in 1958. The EEC has largely eliminated the economic boundaries separating the European states, which are now more thoroughly integrated economically than the 50 states of the USA.

I think that what is being done in the Anglo-Irish deal is to attempt to develop in the same way, to grope towards new structures, leaving insoluble questions of sovereignty alone.

One final thing about this that we should note is that they have made provision for a joint Southern Irish and British, and probably eventually Northern Irish, parliamentary committee, which could actually develop into a powerful intra-parliamentary link between Britain and Ireland, by far the closest political links since the 26 Counties seceded from the old UK in 1922.

The prospects of the Anglo-Irish Agreement so far seem to be quite bright from the ruling class's point of view. Thatcher and company show themselves to be pretty firmly committed to the deal. So far they've stood up for it with impressive determination. From the point of view of the two ruling classes, the real weakness of the deal if you examine the two pillars on which the deal must stand or fall — the British bourgeoisie and the Southern Irish bourgeoisie — is in the South of Ireland. Fianna Fail will most likely be the new government there in a year or so and it is not at all clear what Fianna Fail will do about the Anglo-Irish Agreement. It may try to renegotiate it, it may even scrap it.

Fianna Fail is not an honest bourgeois

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nationalist party. It will not act on principle, it will act opportunistically and it may act in a way that will destroy the new Anglo-Irish treaty.

What's wrong with the deal? From a socialist as distinct from an Irish nationalist point of view? Even if you hope (as the ruling class, I think, do) that it can eventually lead to the evolution of new structures which will supersede the old structure and the old relationships, even if you can hope for that, it's still a very long-term prospect.

Meanwhile the grinding poverty and the built-in sectarianism in the North continues. Meanwhile the various repressions continue. Meanwhile mass unemployment is starting to bleed the South once again, after a 15 year interruption.

Apart from that, it is an undemocratic way of dealing with the problem, particularly with the Catholic-Protestant relations in Northern Ireland. It seems to me therefore, that is not a solution that socialists can support.

However, I think it is very important that we should understand it for what it is — a series of quite subtle moves by the ruling class which, if it sticks, can perhaps evolve and create new relations between Ireland as a whole and Britain.

Now that, if it survived in the long, long term, can bring some benefits but I don't think we can support it in the hope of benefits in the distant or medium distant future.

## John Bloxam

Recently an editorial in *Republican News* warned of the danger of sectarian civil war. The result of such a war, the editorial concluded, would not be a united Ireland, but bloody repartition. Daisy in her contribution suggested that the idea of repartition exists in the Loyalist community, but in the cold light of day they would drop it very quickly. If that is her view I think it is under-estimating it, and the *Republican News* editorial was more accurate. Could she explain in more detail Sinn Fein's attitude?

## Martin Thomas

It's quite common on the Left in Britain to hear people describe the Northern Ireland Protestants as 'paper tigers'; to say that the Anglo-Irish deal is entirely in their interests, and they just don't understand what's going on. The analysis that Daisy gave is a lot more realistic.

That raises a question. If the Protestant backlash is a response to a serious shift in the policy of the ruling class, that same backlash is going to exist against any movement towards a united Ireland. How should socialists and republicans deal with that?

There are two theoretically possible answers. First is that you look to conquering the Protestants by physical force; the other is that you look towards

winning them over, or at least a section of them.

Whether or not conquest is desirable it seems to us that, given the relationship of forces, it is not possible. The Protestants could hold at least a part of the north-east of Ireland through pogroms against Catholics living there and so on. Therefore you have to look towards winning over a section of the Protestants, particularly the working class, politically. I'd like to ask what Sinn Fein's ideas are about that task?

## Daisy Mules

When Paisley made his very aggressive statements about civil war, we analysed that as a result of the power struggle going on among the Loyalists. Peter Robinson being seen by the harder line Loyalists as a potential leader, so somehow Paisley had to regain ground. Also Paisley wanted to scare people.

After the divorce referendum, he immediately backtracked. He said that now there was no need for a civil war because the 26 Counties had shown by their denial of divorce as a civil right the Irish view was not possible.

There's been a lot of publicity of Loyalist attacks on the RUC and the UDR — mostly the RUC — houses and homes. But they've also been attacking Catholic homes, especially in places like East Belfast. These attacks are very similar to the pogroms of the early seventies.

In new buildings near Derry, Catholic families have had to move out because of Loyalist attacks on their homes.

So that possibility of civil war is always there. But in our analysis it certainly isn't going to happen at the moment. And Britain won't allow it to happen.

Paisley and the other Unionist leaders are very well aware that the Anglo-Irish Agreement does not erode their rights. In fact it entrenches their rights in many ways. It actually states that the Loyalist veto will always be upheld.

Repartition isn't a real possibility, in our view.

What are we going to do to win over Protestants politically? There's no doubt that Sinn Fein is going to win over Loyalists by political argument while their supremacy is guaranteed to them by the British government. So long as their supremacy is guaranteed, they won't listen to any discussion or talks. They won't even talk to John Hume.

We think a basic requirement for any talks to develop is that the Unionist guarantee is taken away. Then they will engage in discussion. But until then, what should they talk to us?

## Tony Dale

Paisley talking about civil war does highlight the danger of it. Paisley is softening up compared to many others in the Loyalist camp. With people like Robinson taking on

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vent civil war will be removed. It's strange for people fighting British imperialism to look to it to prevent civil war.

### Liam Conway

**D**aisy said there wouldn't be a civil war. I think it's true that the Anglo-Irish Deal won't lead to civil war, because it doesn't threaten the union between Northern Ireland and Britain. But if you look at history, civil war has been most likely when the Union was threatened.

On the question of Protestant supremacy, I think it's wrong to deal with the Protestants as a whole unit in a supremacist sense, or to talk about them as if they were only the Protestant leaders and not ordinary Protestant people as well. Socialists have got to cut through Protestant — and indeed all — leaders and look at the root of the Protestants' fears.

And of course there are plenty of Protestants suffering unemployment as well as Catholics. We have to look not just at their social concerns, but other concerns too.

The Protestant minority in the whole of Ireland see themselves as having a separate identity. It's a working class interest, that they feel a separate identity. It's not just a concern of their leaders who are duping the Protestant workers. Looking across the border at the South reinforces their ideas.

I'd like to ask why Sinn Fein dropped their commitment to federalism, which goes some way towards creating a framework in which the working class of both communities can have their identity satisfied. It would create the possibility of the unity of the working class to create a socialist Ireland.

### Niall Power

**F**irst, on civil war. Nobody would underestimate the very real danger of civil war. But I do detect a certain double standards when some people on the British Left discuss this question.

We call for an end to apartheid and one person, one vote in South Africa. There is the distinct possibility that the granting of those things would lead to civil war — not just between whites and blacks, but between blacks and blacks: a distinct possibility. But that doesn't lead us to water down our support for the ending of apartheid, or for one person, one vote.

I fail to see why we should water down our support for one person, one vote in Ireland, either.

Second, on the sincere — I presume — call for workers' unity in the North. Comrades, as much as you may wish for that to happen, I can assure you it simply won't happen while Britain remains in Ireland. If you doubt that, I suggest you go to Ireland, get more informed of the mentality and the material privileges of

the Protestants — workers included.

You won't break through to any form of working class unity while Britain remains there.

A majority — a majority — of the Irish working class wants to see Britain out of Ireland. Why don't you support that majority clearly and unambiguously, without wanting provisos about particular forms of unity with one significant minority in a particular part of the country?

Third, I would like to ask SO for more information about federalism. John O'Mahony mentioned that federalism was one of the proposals coming out of the Irish Forum Report. Is that a form of federalism that you would support?

I think Britain would like to leave Ireland, but it also needs to protect its interests. It does have financial interests, it does have industry, not only in the North but also in the South. The British taxpayer may be losing from it, but the British capitalist isn't.

And the military interests need to be protected, in the sense of American bases in the north of Ireland. A united Ireland — and certainly a militarily independent one — would threaten those quite seriously.

And ideologically, Britain isn't going to be forced out, like Vietnam was forced out of Vietnam.

### Martin Thomas

**I** don't think any of us are saying that it's an easy, straightforward task for socialists or republicans to address themselves to Protestant workers. We're not saying, like Militant, that if you talk about working class unity enough the Protestant workers will flock round and everything will be lovely. We understand that it is difficult almost to the point of impossibility even to get a hearing, let alone to get them to agree with you.

Nevertheless, if you analyse the situation realistically, you come to the conclusion that that difficult task is the key task. To say that it's difficult is to say that progress in Ireland is difficult.

It's not just a because we're fanatically concerned with the rights of the Protestants, though I think we should be to a certain extent. It's also a question of realistic calculation. Even if we said that the Protestants don't have any rights at all, they nevertheless have force. As Daisy put it, they're a substantial minority, concentrated and heavily armed. They have the force to prevent

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of the mobilisations it increases the danger.

It's not a question of crystal ball gazing — will there or won't there be a sectarian civil war? To recognise the possibility, as Sinn Fein do, is more than enough for the British Left. The British Left much of the response to the Deal has been to say, 'Well, it's not really affecting the Protestant people, or threatening the link with Britain'. There's a tendency to see the Protestants as puppets, just as dupes, and not recognise that their reaction to the Deal shows the extent to which they are an independent force.

Daisy said that the Anglo-Irish Deal strengthens the Loyalist veto. Yes, it's written into it that the Protestants should be consulted and so on, but the socialists want themselves alone to decide what happens in the North. The Deal takes that away; it says that what's going to count is what we think in London, and what our counterparts think in Dublin. It's taken away 'Protestant self-determination', and that is an important change.

### John Keenlyside

**I** worry me when people describe the relationship between Britain and Ireland as 'the last vestiges of colonialism', 'imperialism', etc. To me that just doesn't make sense.

Ireland derives very little benefit from the maintenance of its rule in Northern Ireland. I don't know the exact figures, but I suspect that more money goes into Ireland than comes out of it. Most industries are heavily subsidised. In a certain sense, it's a strange imperialism. If Britain got out of colonies where it is in a better position to extract profit, I don't know what it gets out of Ireland. The situation can't be explained with the classic analysis of imperialism. If you try to explain it like that, you miss a lot of things.

The Protestants have got every reason to be wary of deals like the Anglo-Irish agreement. At the end of it, the project for Britain to establish a relationship with Irish capitalism like that it has with other capitalist country: an inter-capitalist relationship.

The project for both the British and Irish ruling classes is to normalise the situation. That does mean doing away with this 'odd' situation in the North. At the end of the day, it's in the interests of British capitalism to have a united Ireland.

That's not to say that the project will succeed. It will fail because it's a solution imposed from above.

Daisy said — and it struck me as very strange — that there isn't much likelihood of a sectarian civil war. And the reason she gave is that Britain wouldn't allow it. Now, whatever the rights and wrongs of using the slogan 'whoops out', on its own, we're all agreed that Britain's involvement in Ireland must end. What if we're successful — tomorrow? Then the thing that will pre-

Ireland being united.

Even on those grounds you have to address the problem.

Daisy's answer is a sort of two-stage theory. At one stage there's nothing you can do, politically, in relation to the Protestants. Your efforts should concentrate on putting pressure on the British government so that it will repeal the acts of the British Parliament that say that the Northern Ireland Protestants can maintain the Northern Ireland unit as long as they wish. Once that has been done it will be possible to talk to the Protestants and create unity.

There are two problems with that sort of two-stage theory. First, the Protestants have two vetoes. They have one veto written into legal Acts of Parliament; and they have another veto secured by their own force.

Part of the legal veto has been taken away, Direct Rule has been imposed. A veto on relations with the South has been taken away.

How have the Protestants reacted? By becoming more willing to talk to their fellow workers? No, on the contrary, you've seen a hardening of the Protestant sectarianism over the past 14 years.

Taking away the legal veto won't automatically make the creation of class unity easier. In fact, the immediate result might be to make it more difficult. That doesn't mean we should oppose taking away the legal veto; it means that we have to couple it with other political demands.

But how do you get the veto by force taken away? I can't see any reason why the British government should be able to actually take that veto away. It seems to me you need some degree of class unity. I'm not saying we're not interested in a united Ireland unless it is created by a united working class, I'm saying that practically, it won't happen.

Niall said: you won't get a united working class until you have a united Ireland. You'll get a united working class after a united Ireland. You can see the force in that argument. But if you analyse the situation the opposite also holds: you don't get a united Ireland until you've got a united working class.

Does that mean the whole situation is impossible? It means it's very difficult. It means you can't rely on the two-stage theory. You have to be trying to create a united working class, or at least a partially united working class — you're not going to win over the entire Protestant working class — at the same time as you fight for a united Ireland.

## Pat Murphy

**W**hat's happening in the Loyalist community? What are the prospects for its opposition?

It seems to me that if Ian Paisley is being forced into posturing — like his call for action on the streets and so on — it's an indication of the strength of the Loyalist opposition. Paisley has dominated the Protestants since 1970 and his party has been increasingly dominant since 1979 or so. If he's forced to posture, it shows the strength of the Loyalist opposition.

Civil war isn't just morally bad because people start butchering each other. The point is that the political settlement that would come out of it would be repartition. So there are political reasons as well as moral ones to recoil from the prospect of civil war.

It's not a question, as Niall said, that we don't recognise the right of the Irish people to determine their own future. But there's a difference between recognising that right and realising it. To put it starkly: the political force that can create a united Ireland doesn't exist at the moment; it has yet to be created. That's one of the reasons why a united Ireland seems so distant.

Sinn Fein's struggle, justified as it is, is limited. It's limited geographically, and also physically to 10% of the entire Irish people. It's also politically limited, but that's another discussion. Its continued struggle at best can defend the Catholic community. But all it can do is maintain the stalemate, and push and prod the British government into attempted reforms.

Support amongst constitutional nationalists for the Accord is partly, as Daisy said, due to their fear of Sinn Fein. But it also concedes something to them that's new. It concedes that the Southern Irish government has got a say in the affairs of the North.

But also the Republican movement is vulnerable to that kind of strategy. The idea of reforming the Northern Ireland state continues to have some weight. The alternative — a united Ireland — seems remote and distant. That's a problem we have to confront.

The British and Irish governments are trying to create a framework that will break the stalemate — in their interests. That's exactly what we have to do. We have to create the force that can achieve a united Ireland.

We have to break from conventional Catholic Irish nationalism, and return to traditional Republicanism — uniting the Irish people.

## John Bloxam

**N**iall complained of double standards. But there's a difference between the kind of civil war you might see in South Africa on the one hand, and Ireland on the other. It's a difference for example of a situation like the Lebanon — two working class com-

munities slaughtering each other, with no progress coming out of it; and a situation perhaps like Spain.

Civil war in South Africa might be a necessary to unite the whole country and allow the working class to fight for its own demands. Civil war in Ireland would be different. And that's what the discussion is about. Everyone here supports the struggle for a united Ireland. But if there is a civil war, which would mean repartition, that would certainly not be an advance on the situation, and could well be a step backwards.

That's our concern in talking about civil war and repartition. Daisy said she doesn't think there would be repartition. I'm not quite sure why she thinks that. There are two arguments, I think. One is that the Protestants aren't strong enough to organise their own state outside of Britain. I just don't think this is the case. They're strong enough numerically and armed enough to do it.

The second is that a Protestant state wouldn't be economically viable. But it doesn't depend upon cold economic calculations. I can't assess that. It depends upon a political drive, which would be very strong.

Comrades have pointed quite rightly to the problems of creating working class unity. But they're missing the point — it's a problem, it's been tried before and failed so it'll have to wait for a united Ireland...this just ignores the points that have been made here.

We're not saying that we've got all the answers. We're trying to address the problem. That's important. The comrades haven't explained how a united Ireland is going to happen outside of some kind of unity.

## John O'Mahony

**Y**ou can't measure the threat of sectarian civil war by Paisley.

What comrade Mules said about his motivation — the infighting in Unionist ranks — is quite right. But then it is an old joke that Ian Paisley is a bit of a 'fake right'. He's a demagogue. You can't measure the threat of civil war by Paisley's manoeuvrings.

The basic thing is that even today, even with the Deal, the Protestants think they can rely on the British state — it's their state, they identify with it. So long as it's there, they don't have the motivation to organise themselves for sectarian civil war, or rather for a war to carve out their own area of Ireland, to create their own state.

But given their heavy concentration, particularly in Antrim and Down, I don't see any reason to doubt that if they feel fundamentally threatened they will resist, and sectarian civil war will be a real part of the situation.

We should beware of logic chopping. It's fine to point out the contradiction in comrade Mules' argument — that Britain prevents civil war, etc. But it's also absolutely irrefutably true. It's true that

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if Britain left without a political settlement the Protestants would try to sort it out in their own way.

In Britain we have to insist all the time that the Six County state is an artificial entity, and shouldn't exist. But that idea also contains a potential lie that Leftists can tell themselves: the lie that no Protestant majority state is viable or conceivable. In reality there is such a conceivable state — smaller than the present one — that could emerge out of a sectarian clash.

It is inconceivable that the Catholics could win. I don't think that subjugating Protestants is desirable, but in any case it wouldn't happen.

I agree that in the current situation, working class unity is not possible. However, the idea that you will only get it after a united Ireland is simply nonsensical. You will not get a united Ireland unless you find some way of uniting the Irish people; you will most likely get a repartitioned Ireland as a result of the Provo war. So it's a vicious circle.

You won't get a united Ireland by Catholic conquest of the Protestants. The Catholic half-million in the north could not conceivably conquer the Protestant million. It's inconceivable that the Catholic population in the South would mobilise to try to do it. It's just not possible.

Out of that we derive the notion of combining our propaganda for a socialist Ireland and for British withdrawal with some sort of democratic solution — a democratic version of

federalism. On that basis you could at least talk to some of the Protestants. You could create small groups of united workers on that democratic basis.

In reality that's one of our differences with Sinn Fein. We would accept that the Protestants are a legitimate Irish minority. They are not just a political minority that can be said to be pro-imperialist or 'unionist' — though they are unionists. I'm not too sure of the precise definition though I wouldn't balk too much at calling them a national minority.

Ireland's problem is that there's a national minority, but instead of that minority relating rationally and democratically to the Irish majority, the whole thing was snarled up by the intervention of the British ruling class in the artificial form of an artificial partition — which created a bigger Catholic minority than the Protestants would have been in the whole of Ireland.

We've got to look at that rationally, as socialists, and also as Republicans.

One of the problems with Sinn Fein is that to a considerable extent it's come to reflect the northern Catholic minority and to a serious extent to break with fundamental aspects of republicanism, for example in its abandonment of federalism, which it advocated for a decade.

Federalism isn't something SO has just thought up. As long ago as 1921 the political leader of the Republicans who were soon to be in arms against the Free State government, De Valera, adopted

some notion of federalism, recognising that there had to be an attempt to accommodate the Protestant minority.

It was very late in the story. History might have gone differently if that proposal had been part of the original Home Rule Bill of the 1880s. It wasn't. 1921 was very late in the affair, and there have never been many Protestant takers for the idea as far as I know.

But the point is to have a basic democratic programme that will allow workers to talk to workers and allow socialists from either community to assure people from the other community that they respect their identity and do not propose any form of sectarian or national oppression.

I don't think that just because we're in Britain we can accept a self-denying ordinance that we have no right to do or say anything but simply reflect straightforward Provo Irish nationalism. I think it's far too complex for that.

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## Daisy Mules

What hasn't really been touched on is why Britain wants to stay in Ireland. It is an economic reason, which no-one has touched upon.

Seamus Mallon and Fitzgerald, when the Anglo-Irish Agreement came out, actually touched on it. Mallon indicated that he would be willing to negotiate an end to Free State neutrality if he felt that would end the Northern Irish political deadlock. So Britain is here for strategic reasons tied up with NATO.

If they think they can bargain with the 26 Counties for an end to their neutrality, they'll do so. There's already been moves towards that; Fitzgerald is already talking about it.

When I said Britain wouldn't allow a civil war, I meant at present, within the partitionist state. If the troops are removed, some people say there would be a civil war. We would like to believe — and maybe it is an illusory belief, but we'll have to wait and see — that if the troops are withdrawn, Britain declares its intention to withdraw, withdraws its military presence and hopefully eventually its economic presence, this will force the Protestant working class to open dialogue with Republicans. That is our belief.

The veto gives Protestant supremacy, whether you like it or not, or you think that they're not supreme. They're not in the sense that they are unemployed, as Republicans are, though not to the same extent. You just have to look at Harland and Wolff, and Short Brothers, which employ a total majority of Protestant working class people. Republicans don't have that input into the job scene.

You can see that from the majority of the trade unions, from the NICITU committee in the North, which is totally controlled by the Protestants. That's because they're in work. Not full employment, but in any case whether they're in employment or not, they still believe they have that supremacy. Whether or not reality says otherwise, they still believe that. While they do, and while their veto enshrines that belief, as it does, there's no way they will talk to Sinn Fein or Republicans. They won't even talk with the SDLP.

To suggest that this is what we should be doing is cuckoo land stuff. Come over to Ireland and try it for yourselves. It's not going to happen.

I'm not saying that flippantly. Ideally

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that's what we would want. Some of us try it through trade union work, where we're meeting Protestant working class people. But most of the unions have clauses in their constitutions disallowing any discussion of political matters — by which they mean things to do with Ireland; they don't mean talking about the war in South Africa or Nicaragua. They simply mean talking about the war in Northern Ireland.

Until the ICTU removes that constitutional bar on discussing politics, there will be no discussion. But in unions and

trades councils where we can discuss, we do raise these issues.

Federalism. When Sinn Fein did have a policy of federalism, it certainly didn't encourage unionists to talk to us, or encourage the Protestant working class to do so. I don't think federalism would create more discussion.

Sinn Fein dropped it because we saw it as a sop to the Loyalists and we felt it was weakening our positions. We also felt strongly that it wouldn't in the long run create a socialist Ireland and that's what we are trying to do.

# Hillsborough and Sunningdale

A comparison of the Hillsborough agreement with the Sunningdale agreement of 1973 reveals both the factors of continuity in London and Dublin policy, and the shift in tactics represented by Hillsborough.

At Sunningdale in December 1973, a conference of representatives of the British and Irish governments, the SDLP, and the pro-power-sharing Unionists of Brian Faulkner, worked out a 'new departure' for Northern Ireland. There would be institutionalised power-sharing for all future provincial governments, and there would be a 'Council of Ireland' to link the Six and 26 Counties. Both London and Dublin made declarations about their own basic positions and committed themselves to respect the traditions and interests of the other side.

According to the 'Sunningdale Communication' of 9 December 1973, 26 Counties Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave "continued to uphold the aspiration towards a United Ireland. The only unity they wanted to see was a unity established by consent."

The formal text put the British government position like this: "The Irish government fully accepted and solemnly declared that there could be no change in the status of Northern Ireland until a majority of the people of Northern Ireland desired a change in that status."

For its part the British government committed itself to a united Ireland if a majority in the Six Counties wanted it. "The British government solemnly declared that it was, and would remain, its policy to support the wishes of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. The present status of Northern Ireland is that it is part of the United Kingdom. If in the future, the majority of the people of Northern Ireland should indicate a wish to become part of a United Ireland, the British government would support that wish."

A referendum had been held in March 1973. With most Catholics abstaining, only 4,643 electors voted for a united Ireland outside the UK, while 591,820 voted for Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK.

Sunningdale too was to have led to a "formal agreement incorporating the declaration of the British and Irish governments [which] would be...registered at the UN", but it was killed off by the Orange general strike of May

1974 before the Council of Ireland could even to existence.

The Council of Ireland planned at Sunningdale was to have been a substantial affair, approximating to a conference of Northern and Southern Ireland.

"[The] Council of Ireland would be confined to representatives of the two parts of Ireland, with appropriate safeguards for the British government's financial and other interests. It would comprise a council of ministers with executive and harmonising functions and a consultative role and a consultative assembly with advisory and review functions. The council of ministers would act by unanimity, and would comprise a core of seven members of the Irish government and an equal number of members of the Northern Ireland executive, with provision for the participation of other non-voting members of the Irish government and the Northern Ireland executive or administration when matters within their departmental competence were discussed."

"The council of ministers would control the functions of the council. The chairmanship would rotate on an agreed basis between representatives of the Irish Government and of the Northern Ireland executive."

"The consultative assembly would consist of 60 members, 30 members from Dail Eireann chosen by the Dail on the basis of proportional representation by the single transferable vote, and 30 members from the Northern Ireland assembly, chosen by that assembly and also on that basis. There would be a secretary to the council, which would be kept as small as might be commensurate with efficiency in the operation of the council."

"The secretariat would service the institutions of the council and would, under the council of ministers, supervise the carrying out of the executive and harmonising functions and the consultative role of the council. The secretariat would be headed by a secretary general."

"Following the appointment of a Northern Ireland executive, the Irish government and the Northern Ireland executive would nominate their representatives to a council of ministers. The council of ministers would then appoint a secretary general and decide upon the location of its permanent headquarters. The secretary general would be



directed to proceed with the drawing up of plans for such headquarters...

"In the context of its harmonising functions and consultative role, the Council of Ireland would undertake the important work relating, for instance, to the impact of EEC membership." (Britain and Ireland joined the EEC on 1 January 1973).

What role would Britain have? "It would be for the [Dublin government] and the Northern Ireland assembly to legislate from time to time as to the extent of functions to be devolved to the Council of Ireland. Where necessary, the British government will cooperate in this devolution of functions..."

The Council of Ireland never came into being because the majority vote at Stormont in May 1974 by supporters of the power-sharing executive to activate the Council of Ireland part of the agreement triggered a Protestant general strike which wrecked the whole agreement.

Sunningdale was designed to build upwards from a ground level. Nationalist-Unionist agreement in Belfast towards a Council of Ireland; Hillsborough aims to get a government acceptable to both communities going again in Belfast, but it does not wait for it. Sunningdale depended on agreement between two Irish governments; Hillsborough depends on agreement between Dublin and London. The Council of Ireland was a rather tentative framework which

might have had certain functions devolved to it; the intergovernmental conference has all the power in Northern Ireland that Britain has and it is a government in Belfast which might have certain powers devolved to it. Sunningdale looked to an all-Ireland framework and was scuttled by the Unionist refusal to work it; Hillsborough depends on a British/Irish framework. Sunningdale provided for the setting up of a Parliamentary tier of deputies delegated from Dublin and Belfast; Hillsborough provides for a parliamentary tier made up of Dail deputies and Westminster MPs.

If the Unionists can be persuaded to share power with the SDLP, much of the power being shared by Dublin will devolve to a Belfast home rule government. But that may not happen, or not for a long time yet.

The essential feature of the Anglo-Irish deal, compared with the approach tried at Sunningdale and embodied in the power-sharing executive of January-May 1974, is that it does not depend on agreement between the Northern Ireland communities, nor on any agreement between a representative elected body in Northern Ireland and the Dublin government. The big two in Dublin and London have dealt directly with each other, acting 'in loco parentis' for the two Northern Ireland communities. In a sense they have repartitioned Northern Ireland, recognising each other's spheres of com-

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munal — which is also territorial — influence.

Power-sharing has now come to mean power-sharing between Dublin and London because it has been shown to be impossible between the communities in Belfast. If it is eventually paralleled by power-sharing 'on the ground', well and good. But it does not need to be, for now. The deal does not depend on it. It will not collapse without it. Anglo-Irish power-sharing can survive without Protestant-Catholic power-sharing. It is by no means to be taken for granted that a common British/26 Counties approach will collapse even if the Protestants do make Northern Ireland 'ungovernable' for a while.

# Is an independent Northern Ireland possible?

John Hume and others warned in the House of Commons debate that the logical end of the road down which the Unionists' refusal to accept Parliament's endorsement of the Hillsborough agreement propels them ends in a Unilateral Declaration of Independence — or any worse some form of an independent Northern Ireland.

The present Six Counties entity would split apart if it were 'independent'. An independent Protestant state of north-east Ulster could not come into existence without repartition, either repartition supervised from above by Britain and the 26 Counties, or repartition by way of civil war. Any unilateral declaration of independence by a provisional government in Belfast would — if they could make it good against the British government and its army — inevitably involve repartition by civil war.

Just as there are Provisional IRA/Sinn Fein supporters of a unitary 32 Counties state who know it could only be achieved by way of bloody subjugation of the Protestants, so there are supporters of an 'independent Ulster' who would accept that it could only lie at the other side of bloody civil war and repartition. They would pay that price — if...if a Protestant state of north-east Ulster could be economically viable.

The fact is that it would not be viable at anything like its present economic and

social level. Economically Northern Ireland is massively dependent on Britain — so much so that many Southern politicians now believe that the 26 Counties cannot afford unity with such an economically weak and feeble Northern Ireland. There has been a dramatic reversal in the relative economic position of the Six and the 26 Counties. The facts and figures speak for themselves.

In 1911 the contrast was between the industrialised north-east and the underdeveloped, mostly rural, South. Ulster had 48% of all Ireland's industrial workers and Belfast alone, 21%. Only 14% of the workforce in the 26 Counties was in industry or commerce.

By 1961 40% of the 26 Counties workforce was in industry and commerce, and 25% in industry alone. The South had become a predominantly urban, industrial economy. Since the 1960s manufacturing for export has increased sharply in the South. The 26 Counties are now more industrial than the Six Counties: 29% of civilian employment in the South is in industry, as against 27% in the North. And the South's industries are generally more advanced.

A full 40% of manufacturing jobs have gone from Northern Ireland since 1970. Unemployment is now 22%. Since Protestants had more jobs to start with they have been worse hit, but still unemployment is twice as high for

Catholics as for Protestants. 25 years ago living standards in the South were on average scarcely half those in the North; now EEC figures reckon the purchasing power of income per head in the South at only 2% less than the North.

Take what has happened to Derry and Carrickfergus. Carrickfergus is a town of 30,000 people, mostly Protestant, not far from Belfast. In the past it has been one of the islands in the Protestant archipelago of industry and comparative prosperity within the long-depressed economy of Northern Ireland. But it has been devastated by the slump. The synthetic fibre plants owned by Courtaulds and ICI have been closed, wiping out 5,000 jobs.

In parts of Derry unemployment among heads of households is 70%. Derry's shirt factories for long employed women and girls, producing a substantial role reversal because there were many more men than women unemployed and the men looked after the house and children. Now even the shirt factories have closed. Courtaulds abandoned Derry in 1981, wiping out over 1,000 jobs.

Over half the population of Northern Ireland is directly dependent on the British state for its income, either because they live on social security or because they work for the government. (25,000 of the new jobs created in the Six

Counties since 1970 are in the police and military: this is a large factor in the maintenance of the Catholic-Protestant unemployment differential). Northern Ireland receives a net subsidy from Britain of about £1.5 billion a year — a quarter of Northern Ireland's total income. Without this subsidy Northern Ireland living standards would plummet.

And the position from which Northern Ireland would plummet is that of being the area with the worst poverty in the EEC, except only Calabria in southern Italy. About a third of households in Northern Ireland have a weekly income of less than £75.

After a civil war in which there would be forced population movements, communal slaughter, and the hiding-off of some Catholic areas to the Republic, there would almost certainly be a Protestant-controlled area in north-east Ulster in which an independent Orange state would be viable politically, culturally and in having a common agreed national identity. But unless it could keep British subsidies, or find alternative subsidies, it would have regressed socially and economically below the worst level in Europe. According to economist Norman Gibson, writing in 'Fortnight' magazine, living standards would be cut by 25 to 50 per cent.

Those are the hard economic facts that inhibit the growth of support for independence among the Six Counties' Unionists, alienated though they now are from Westminster.

## Dates and events

**The 1960s: the South reopens its economy to the world market; Britain moves cautiously towards reforming the North.**

**1959** New foreign investment law in South gives big subsidies to investors. Start of an influx of foreign capital.

**1965** January: Northern and Southern prime ministers meet. December: Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement.

**1967** Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association formed.

**1968-72: The Catholic revolt explodes: the Northern Ireland state breaks down.**

**1968** October: Civil rights march in Derry banned and attacked by police.

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**1969** Constant conflict between police and Catholics. Battle of the Bogside to keep the police out of the Catholic areas of Derry. Catholics burned out of their homes in Belfast. August: British Army takes control of the streets.

October: Catholics in Belfast and Derry take down their barricades. December 1969-January 1970: Republican movement splits into Official and Provisional wings.

**1970** July: Army curfew and house-to-house search in Catholic Lower Falls area of Belfast. August: Social Democratic and Labour Party formed.

**1971** August: Internment without trial introduced: 600 Catholics and radicals arrested. Big increase follows in Catholic alienation and armed activity by both Provisional and Official IRAs. September: Ulster Defence Association — a mass-based Protestant paramilitary group — formed.

**1972** January: Bloody Sunday. 14 marchers on a peaceful Republican demonstration in Derry shot and killed by British Army. Barricades go up in Catholic areas of Derry and Belfast. March: Northern Ireland's home-rule parliament abolished. 200,000 Protestant workers strike in protest. Previously monolithic Unionist Party breaks up over the following year.

**1972-6: Britain seeks a solution through reform but is beaten back by Protestant militancy**

**1972** May: Official IRA ceasefire (which proves permanent). June: temporary Provisional IRA ceasefire. July: secret talks between Provisionals and British government. Late July: 'Bloody Friday' — nine killed by Provisional IRA bombs in centre of Belfast. Operation Motorman: army takes down Catholic barricades in Derry and Belfast.

**1973** December: Agreement drawn up by London and Dublin governments and Northern Ireland 'moderates' at Sunningdale for power-sharing in Northern Ireland and a 'Council of Ireland'.

**1974** January: Power-sharing executive set up. February: Big victory for anti-power-sharing Unionists in Westminster election undermines Executive. May: General strike by Ulster Workers' Council brings down Executive.

November: Over 20 killed by bombs in pubs in Birmingham. Provisionals condemn the bombing but say it was probably done by Provisional IRA volunteers. British government rushes through Prevention of Terrorism Act.

**1975** February to autumn: truce between Provisionals and British Army. May: New British initiative — Constitutional Convention, supposed to design a new form of power-sharing. Dominated by Loyalists who will settle for nothing less than restored Protestant majority rule.

**1976** Convention shut down by British government.

**1976-82: Britain tries to hold the ring**

and 'sweat out' the Catholic revolt.

**1976** March: 'Political status' withdrawn for Republican prisoners (it was introduced in 1972). In protest, prisoners refuse to wear prison uniform and wear blankets instead. 'Ulsterisation' policy: local forces strengthened, British Army presence reduced.

**1977** May: Paisley attempts Protestant strike for greater 'security' but it fails. British government found guilty of inhuman and degrading treatment of prisoners by European Commission for Human Rights.

**1978** Prisoners refuse to have cells cleaned in 'dirty protest' against removal of political status.

**1979** Paisley tops the poll in Euro-election, and four Paisleyite (DUP) MPs elected to Westminster.

**1980** October: H-Block prisoners go on hunger strike for political status. Strike called off at Christmas on basis of expected concessions.

**1981** March: Second hunger strike begins, led by Bobby Sands. April: Sands is elected MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. His agent, Owen Carron, is elected after Sands' death in May. Ten prisoners die before hunger strike ends in October.

**1982** Sinn Fein successes in local elections. SDLP proposes 'Council for a New Ireland' with Southern Irish parties.

**1983-9: Sinn Fein consolidates its 'political' turn, and London and Dublin seek a new solution through reform from above.**

**1983** Gerry Adams elected as MP for West Belfast. SDLP attends the first meeting of the New Ireland Forum with Southern parties. In the South, abortion is made constitutionally illegal after a referendum.

**1984** May: New Ireland Forum produces a report with three options — a unitary Irish state, a federal Ireland and 'joint (London-Dublin) authority' over Northern Ireland. Forum report is supported by US and British Labour Party, but Thatcher replies 'out, out, out' to the three options.

November: Anglo-Irish summit. **1985** Anglo-Irish talks proceed throughout the year. Orange marches through Catholic area in Portadown are re-routed. November: Anglo-Irish Accord signed.

**1986** January: 13 Westminster by-elections due to Unionist resignations in protest at the Accord; Unionists lose one seat to SDLP. March: One-day Protestant general strike against Accord. Violent clashes between RUC and Protestants.

Over the summer: further clashes between RUC and Protestants when Orange marches are re-routed. Hundreds of Catholics forced to move house because of sectarian attacks.

**1987-9** Protestant activity against Anglo-Irish deal subsides, but Protestants still refuse to cooperate with the deal. Few reforms result from the deal, and Northern Catholics' support for it wanes; but the deal remains in place.

# For a federal united Ireland

**S**ocialists in Britain frequently talk as if the Protestants of Northern Ireland simply do not exist. The classic example is *Socialist Action's* headline reporting Sinn Fein's electoral success in 1983, which announced that they had got "42 per cent of the vote". In fact it was 42% of the Catholic vote, the whole of which is about a third of the Northern Ireland electorate. This headline was not an accidental slip, but typical of a whole approach.

In fact the Protestants have been central to the Northern Ireland crisis. It was the Protestant backlash against Britain's policy of reforming Northern Ireland in the '60s which generated the Provisional IRA; it was the Protestant general strike, not the Provisional IRA campaign, which wrecked the power-sharing experiment in 1974. It is important, therefore, that the Left is clear about the Protestant/Catholic conflict in Northern Ireland.

The Protestant community in Northern Ireland is a distinct community with its own history, culture and psychology. If it existed in its own distinct territory it would have all the features Marxists recognise as making up a nation. It does not have a distinct territory — there is a major Catholic community even within the Protestant heartlands. Therefore it is not a fully formed nation.

In any case, because the Protestant and Catholic communities in the North of Ireland are so intertwined, there can be no question of full 'Protestant self-determination'. Our slogan for Ireland is self-determination for the people of Ireland as a whole. But within that we need a democratic policy for the question of the Protestant minority.

The tragedy of Irish society, and specifically of the Irish working class, lies in this: that the divisions among Irish workers stand as an impenetrable barrier to socialism and a socialist revolution which would bypass those divisions; while at the same time the decayed state of capitalism in Ireland, and the decrepitude and feebleness of the divided Irish bourgeoisie, has so far ruled out a democratic rearrangement of relations



Orangeists burn effigy of Thatcher

between the two communities of Ireland (within the Six Counties and between the North-East and the rest of Ireland) which would allow working class unity

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to develop.

### Bolsheviks

**T**here can be no socialist revolution in Ireland without the unity of large sections of the Catholic and Protestant workers. There can be no democratic solution in Ireland — that is, no solution offering the best, clearest conditions for the free development of the class struggle — without democratic relations between the majority (Catholic) and minority (Protestant) community. Socialists should therefore support the maximum democratic rights for the Protestant minority compatible with the rights of the majority.

As a general principle, Marxists favour regional or provincial autonomy for markedly distinct areas within a state, together with the most decentralised possible local government. The Bolsheviks put it like this:

*"In so far as national peace is in any way possible in a capitalist society based on exploitation, profit-making and strife, it is attainable only under a consistently and thoroughly democratic republican form of government...the constitution of which contains a fundamental law that prohibits any privileges whatsoever to any one nation and any encroachment whatsoever upon the rights of a national minority."*

*"This particularly calls for wide regional autonomy and fully-democratic local government, with the boundaries of the self-governing and autonomous regions determined by the local inhabitants themselves on the basis of their economic and social conditions, national make-up of the population, etc."* (1913 Resolution of the Bolshevik Party Central Committee)

Within Ireland our slogan for the Protestant community must be: autonomy and local self-government of that community's own affairs to the furthest extent compatible with the democratic rights of the majority of the Irish people.

Such a proposal for a united, independent Ireland, and within it a measure of self-government for regions, and within those regions maximum local autonomy for towns, districts, etc., can offer both majority and minority the maximum of democratic guarantees possible without infringing the rights of the other community. The Catholic majority of Ireland would have the rights of a majority within all-Ireland politics. Catholic minorities in mainly Protestant

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regions would have the protection of local government (town/district) autonomy, plus the constitutional guarantees (courts, bills of rights, appeal procedures, inspectors, penalties against sectarian practices) of the federal government. Likewise Protestant minorities in mainly-Catholic regions. The concentrated Protestant minority in the North-East would have the safeguard of regional institutions. So far as formal democratic constitutional provisions can ever guarantee anything, this proposal would protect the rights of both Catholic majority and Protestant minority, while allowing neither to oppress the other.

The precise details of such an arrangement will be worked out by those who will live within such structures. A federation of two regions — the four heavily-Protestant counties and the other 28 — with local autonomy within each region, eg. for the Belfast Catholics, is one possibility. The parts of the federation would have roughly the same relation to each other and to the federal (all-Ireland) government as the states in the USA have to each other and to the US federal government.

Short of military conquest or driving out the Protestants, there is no other conceivable form of united Ireland than one that allows such autonomy.

Bourgeois green nationalism and its petty-bourgeois spin-offs can never unite the Irish people. The sectarian Catholic nature of the Southern state has reinforced partition and the communal divisions. Indeed: it is by no means certain that a socialist Ireland could dispense with such federal arrangements. The divisions are profound — cultural, psychological, historical. Even an agreement between Catholic and Protestant workers to cooperate in fighting for socialism would not mean that these differences between the sections of the Irish people were immediately eliminated.

### Democratic demands

The proposal for local autonomy is a democratic proposal — it is part of a transitional programme for Ireland. "The Fourth International," wrote Trotsky, "does not discard the programme of the old 'minimal' demands to the degree to which these have preserved at least part of their vital forcefulness. Indefatigably, it defends the democratic rights and social conquests of the workers. But it carries on this work within the

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framework of the correct actual, that is, revolutionary perspective..." (The Transitional Programme). The sectarian fear of advocating reforms and democratic demands lest they undermine the prospect of revolution should be rejected. To advocate democratic demands in no way confines us to a perspective of reform. Reform demands within the revolutionary programme are weapons for the mobilisation of the masses, including (as in this case) the reconciliation of divisions within the working class.

The socialist programme for Ireland is workers' revolution. That requires the unity of the working class North and South, Protestant and Catholic, and the building of an all-Ireland revolutionary party that can combine the struggle against British imperialism and for the unity of Ireland with an all-Ireland working-class struggle for socialism. Reforms and democratic demands are not counterposed to the workers' revolution: on the contrary, they are an irreplaceable part of the work of leading the working class towards it.

### Republicanism and Green Nationalism

From the point of view of both Irish Republicanism and working-class politics, the choice to be made about the Northern Ireland Protestant population is either to accept its existence and its right to existence or else to try to drive it out or suppress it by force — to 'undo the conquest'. As long as 200 years ago, secular and democratic Irish Republicanism adopted the former policy, and Wolfe Tone expressed it thus:

*"To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of all past dissensions, and to substitute the common name of Irishmen in place of the denominations Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter..."*

This is the irreducible basic principle of secular Irish nationalism and Republicanism, and also, of course, a basic principle of Irish socialism. Anything less is inevitably a lapse into sectionalism, communalism, 'Catholic nationalism' and Revanchism. To try to define away the Protestant community as 'pro-imperialists' is to abandon Republicanism. It stands nearer to the programme of King James's Dublin Parliament of 1689, which made wholesale confiscations of Protestant property, than to Wolfe Tone, whose oft-quoted words (above) marked the decisive break with that mainly-Catholic tradition.

Green nationalism can only propose to replace the present oppressed half-million Catholic minority in the North with an oppressed one-million Protestant minority in a united Ireland. If a united Ireland bore any resemblance to the existing 26 County state, then the

Protestants would be an oppressed minority from the beginning. Lenin's principle: "A struggle against the privileges and violence of the oppressing nation and no toleration of the striving for privilege on the part of the oppressed nation", should guide us also on the relation between communities and groups within a nation.

In the event of a working-class upsurge in the South which could appeal to the Northern Ireland Protestant workers on a class basis, the consistently democratic element in our programme would in no way limit us or hold us back. On the contrary, its advocacy by revolutionary socialists and Republicans would help prepare the way for a socialist solution, in so far as it was successful in placating Protestant fears of being incorporated as a minority into a state like the existing green-nationalist, Catholic-sectarian 26 Counties.

### Against 'self-determination' for the Protestants

There is a radical difference between the proposal above, for regional and local autonomy within a united Ireland, and the proposal of a separate, partitioned Northern Ireland state, whether independent or ruled by Westminster. The 'right to self-determination' of the Protestant community does not make sense. There is no territory naturally suited to the exercise of such 'self-determination'. Any 'Protestant state' would entrap and oppress a large Catholic minority, as the Six Counties had done for over 60 years. Concretely, now, 'Protestant self-determination' would mean restoration of Stormont (the Northern Ireland parliament abolished in 1972) and/or repartition. It would not be a democratic solution, clearing the path for class struggle, but a sectarian solution bitterly divisive for the working class.

### No constitutional illusions

Federalism could not mean letting the Protestants in the North-East go on as usual, discriminating socially against Catholics. In so far as such discrimination is a matter of local (or, in a federal Ireland, regional) government patronage, etc., would be outlawed. Formal democratic constitutional guarantees can never, of course, guarantee anything if the conflicts of real social forces dictate otherwise. The essential purpose of the proposals above is not as advice to the powers-that-be, but as part of a socialist programme around which Irish socialists and Republicans could assemble a real united working class force, capable of being a real material guarantee against all sectarian discrimination.



Orange thugs terrorise Catholic during '74 general strike

## Lies the left tells itself

Discussion on Ireland has been stifled not only by censorship in the mass media, but also by lies the left tells itself.

**Lie No. 1: Ireland is a single unit.**

Ireland is one island, but plainly not one people. A minority of one million define themselves as different from the rest of the Irish, and as essentially British. They form the compact majority in north-east Ulster — that is, the north-east of the present artificial 6-county unit. They have been manipulated by British ruling class politicians playing 'the Orange card', but they have their own identity or sub-identity and their own concerns.

The existing 6-county entity is not, and never could be, a reasonable expression of the democratic rights of the Irish protestant minority because it imprisons a large, artificially carved-out Catholic minority.

Nevertheless, the root problem in Ireland is that there is a big Protestant minority which has yet to work out a mutually acceptable way of living on the island with the majority.

**Lie No. 2: Southern Ireland is a British neo-colony.**

The 26 Counties is fully independent politically. You cannot be more independent than Southern Ireland was during World War 2, when it remained neutral despite Britain's desperate need of Irish ports. (Britain had given up its military

bases in the South as late as 1938). And Ireland's refusal to join NATO after 1949 also plainly shows that it is politically independent.

Southern Ireland has one of Western Europe's weaker capitalist economies. But it is not a colony. It is ruled by the Irish capitalists. And of some 900 foreign-owned companies in Southern Ireland, over 300 are US-owned, 130 West German: only 200 or so are British owned.

**Lie No. 3: Northern Ireland is "British-occupied Ireland".**

Northern Ireland is an artificial unit. But the majority of the people in it want Britain there. Opinion polls over many years show that the big majority of the people of the whole island want Britain there.

Northern Ireland has been part of the English or British state since the 12th century — earlier than the union of the Scottish and English crowns, and five and a half centuries before the Act of Union between England and Scotland. The majority of the people there consider themselves British, though their ancestors have been in Ireland for centuries.

Partition brought many injustices for the Catholic minority, but even so, the relationship of Northern Ireland to Britain is not one of a colony seized by an alien power against the wishes of the majority of the people concerned.

**Lie No. 4: Britain needs to rule Northern Ireland for economic reasons.**

Economically, Northern Ireland is a

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drain on British capitalism, to the tune of about £1.5 billion a year. British capitalists have more profitable relations with the independent South than with Northern Ireland. And in no way does Britain's military presence in Northern Ireland help British capitalists' profit-making in the South.

**Lie No. 5: Britain needs to hold on to Northern Ireland for military reasons.**

Militarily, control of Ireland has been irreplaceable for Britain in the past. Northern Ireland bases were very important in World War 2. The British government considered invading Southern Ireland to regain port facilities, and so did the US in 1943-4. But all that has changed in the era of intercontinental ballistic missiles. Militarily Irish facilities may be useful and desirable, but they are not essential.

Of course, NATO would like to have Ireland in. But why did right-wing Catholic, pro-US Ireland stay out of NATO when it was founded in 1949? Because of partition! Irish Foreign Minister Sean MacBride offered — so says his then party and Cabinet colleague, the socialist Dr Noel Browne — to bring Southern Ireland into NATO in return for the creation of a federal link between the Six and 26 Counties.

Partition, or British control of the North, has cost NATO the participation of Southern Ireland. Partition frustrates the overall military considerations of the Western Alliance here, it does not help them. That is one reason why the US wants to end it.

**Lie No. 6: The Orange vote on fundamental changes in the position of Northern Ireland is something granted to them by the British state.**

The Orange vote is ultimately dependent on the power of the Orangists on the ground and on the credibility of their threat to use force. And for over a dozen years, too, the Catholics have had a veto on any return to a Protestant home-rule government in Belfast. That veto too is a matter of the power of the Catholics to resist, that is of the Provisional IRA.

**Lie No. 7: It is just bigotry and irrationality, and the desire to lord it over the Catholics which motivate the Protestants in refusing to go into a United Ireland.**

Many Protestants are guilty of bigotry and irrationality, and they have lorded it over the Catholics. But it is perfectly reasonable for a minority not to want to submerge itself. The 26 County state is a heavily Catholic-confessional state. In the last six years, majorities there have voted to write a ban on abortion into the constitution, and not to allow divorce.

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This means banning those whose religion allows divorce (Protestants, Jews) from having it because the religion of the majority does not allow it.

**Lie No. 8: The matter is a straight one of majority rights. The majority wants independence and unity, and that's it.**

Apply that argument to the old United Kingdom when Ireland was still part of it!

The majority was heavily against Home Rule for Ireland. For democrats and socialists that did not exhaust the question — because the Irish claimed, and therefore had, a distinct identity, separate from the majority. They rebelled in the name of an identity which they considered higher than the UK majority. The principle of self-determination meant that the Irish minority in the UK had the right to secede.

The minority within Ireland has rights too. Consistent democrats concern themselves with minorities and minority rights as well as a geographical sense. Geography is not politics. James Connolly said it very well: "Ireland without her people means nothing to me!"

It is no sort of progress to free half a million Northern Catholics from oppression by making one million Protestants into a minority which is, or feels, oppressed. The Northern Catholics are right to fight against oppression. But doubling the number of those who feel oppressed is no answer.

**Lie No. 9: The Protestants reject Irish unity because they want to preserve economic privilege over the Catholics in Northern Ireland.**

In decades of mass poverty and unemployment an informal system grew up in the 6-County state of reserving certain jobs for Protestants and discriminating against Catholics. Fear that in a United Ireland they would lose the protection such discrimination gives them is a big consideration with Protestant workers.

Of course socialists oppose such discrimination. We advocate a trade union campaign against it. But many Protestant workers can and do oppose discrimination while still feeling themselves different from the rest of the Irish and without ceasing to fear and reject a United Ireland. Defence of privileges is not the only consideration for Protestant workers in opposing a United Ireland, or even the main one. Preservation of their own felt identity and tradition, and refusal to submit to a majority they consider alien, are central. Socialists should reject the approach

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embodied in the so-called MacBride Principles, of campaigning to get US States and companies to disinvest from Northern Ireland unless there is full and immediate equality. Disinvestment will not help Northern Ireland workers, Catholic or Protestant. This is nothing less than a demand for the immediate expulsion of large numbers of Protestants from their jobs and their replacement by Catholics. That is what it must come down to. It would further deepen divisions, and further poison relations between the two sections of the working class in the Six Counties. The resulting antagonisms within the factories could paralyse the working class there for a generation.

Instead of this economic warfare against the Protestant working class victims of Northern Ireland's wretchedly inadequate economy, socialists should demand that the root of job discrimination be cut by a campaign for shorter work hours and public works to create more jobs. If a campaign to redivide the existing jobs can only be poisonously divisive, a campaign to create jobs might help unite the Six Counties' working class.

**Lie No. 10: Troops out without a political settlement will lead to a United Ireland.**

No it won't! It will inevitably lead to sectarian civil war and bloody reparation. On a number of occasions the Northern Protestants have shown themselves willing to fight rather than let themselves become a minority in a Catholic Ireland.

**Lie No. 11: If British troops withdraw without a political settlement, then the Protestants won't fight.**

Irish Protestants fought all-Ireland Home Rule, and the densely concentrated Northern Protestants finally settled for a fall-back position: partition. They allowed the disbanding of the 'B-Specials' in 1969 — to have them replaced by the UDR. They allowed the abolition of Belfast home rule (in 1972) — to see it replaced by the direct rule of the British state, which they regard as theirs. They fought the 1973 power-sharing agreement, which included tentative links with Dublin through a Council of Ireland, and in May 1974 they organised a powerful general strike which defeated the government.

Even today, despite the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which they detest, the Protestants still think that the British state is their state. Threaten to put them as a permanent minority in an all-Ireland Catholic-controlled state and they will certainly resist, guns in hand. Northern Ireland has the most heavily-armed civilian population in Britain, and probably in Europe.

**Lie No. 12: Any Protestant state in Ireland would be artificial and unstable.**

The present Six Counties is an artificially carved-out entity. Its borders were drawn to engineer a Protestant majority in an artificially large area. It has a Catholic majority in large areas outside the Protestant heartlands of Antrim and Down. British governments have im-

PLICITLY recognised that Northern Ireland is not a tenable or viable political unit by imposing direct rule almost continuously since 1972; local self-government would be likely to break down in a civil war.

But the existence of the compact Protestant community in the north-east of the island is no artificial contrivance or figment of British policy. When the partition of Ireland was being discussed, one option was an area of four counties. The proportion of Protestants would have been much bigger, and the Catholic minority much smaller.

Today such a smaller Protestant state is still possible. It is what would emerge from a civil war between the Catholic and Protestant Irish.

After a sectarian civil war the Protestant area would be smaller, but it would exist. Eamonn de Valera and other Republicans long ago abjured the idea of trying to unite Ireland by force, because they recognised that it could not work. It would result not in the removal of the Border, but in shifting it north and east — and making it permanent.

**Lie No. 13: If there is a civil war it will be a small, controllable one.**

And what if it is not small and not controllable? Who would control it — British troops, UN troops, 26 County troops — or a combination of all three? In fact it would be small and controllable only if there was no serious threat to subjugate the Northern Irish majority.

**Lie No. 14: The Catholics would win a civil war.**

Would they? And is it desirable from either a Wolfe Tone Republican or a Socialist point of view that the Catholic-Protestant conflict should be 'resolved' in this way? What would the resultant Ireland look like after the conquest of Ireland's Protestant-Unionists by the Catholic majority? Why should anybody think that afterwards there would not be something like a Protestant Provisional IRA movement?

In any case, the Catholics could only win a civil war — if they could win it at all — if the resources of all Catholic Ireland were mobilised and concentrated on the task. That would be no small, quick civil war! The idea that the Catholics would win is the idea that all-Catholic Ireland would mobilise to subjugate the Protestants. The idea is absurd. In fact, Catholic Ireland would not mobilise — it has given scant support to the revolt of the Catholics in the Six Counties over the last 20 years.

**Lie No. 15: Civil war can be avoided or minimised by British troops disarming the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Ulster Defence Association before they leave.**

Such disarming would pitch the British Army into full-scale war with the Protestants. It would mean vastly more British troops, and for an indefinite period ahead. It would be 1798 again! The British withdrawal would be very slow and bloody, if it ever came at all.

**Lie No. 16: What matters most of all is to see the British government defeated. Defeat in Ireland will shatter, or very**

seriously weaken and destabilise, the British government.

Britain has liquidated the greatest empire in history with few domestic convulsions. It withdrew precipitately from India, Palestine and Aden without domestic crisis.

But it can't survive defeat in Ireland? Ireland will be the last straw that breaks the camel's back? The idea is stupid beyond belief!

Britain would gain from a withdrawal from Ireland as long as that withdrawal led smoothly to a united Ireland and not an Irish civil war which could well spread to parts of Scotland.

The idea that the defeat of the British government matters more than anything that happens in Ireland is also British parochial nationalism of the most shameful and irresponsible sort. The nationalism is back to front, inside-out, negative, but the indifference to Ireland brands it plainly for what it is.

**Lie No. 17: Britain has no rights in Ireland, therefore the British left has no right even to discuss Ireland.**

A million Irish people insist that they are British. Therefore, the 'principle' does not hold. In any case, Britain is in Ireland. For the left to deny itself the right to freely discuss the possibilities, will not change that. And the argument is a fake, because it is used to favour Sinn Fein's minority Catholic Irish nationalism against other equally Irish — and even equally Republican — alternatives — alternatives representing the very big majority of the Irish people. Standing open-mouthed, lighted candle in hand, before the altars of Irish Catholic nationalism, the left simply excludes itself from rational discussion.

**Lie No. 18: Sinn Fein is not only a Republican, but also a socialist organisation.**

There is a current of political activists in Sinn Fein who would be at home in, say, *Socialist Action* or *Briefing* in Britain. They sometimes talk to the British left. But they are not the bedrock Sinn Fein. Look at how quickly Sinn Fein dropped its commitment to a woman's right to choose to have an abortion (adopted against the will of the leadership at the end of the Ard Fheis in 1985 when many delegates had left; thrown out at the Ard Fheis in 1986).

Sinn Fein's 'socialism' is for export now and the future, maybe, where Ireland itself is concerned. Right now it is concerned with 'the national struggle'. Because Sinn Fein is drawn exclusively from the Catholic community, and does not even try to reach out to Protestants, it is not a Republican organisation in Wolfe Tone's sense. Tone aspired to unite Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter under the common name of Irish. Any lesser objective is not Republicanism but communalism of one camp or the other.

**Lie No. 19: Socialism is the answer.**

The answer to what? Yes, socialism is the only answer to the chaos and cruelty of capitalism, which underlies the tensions in Ireland — but only the working class can make socialism, and the Irish

working class cannot make socialism while it remains grievously divided by the national/communal conflict. Socialists need answers to that conflict, and collective ownership of the means of production is not in itself an answer.

Even if the working class could take power despite its crippling divisions, once in power it would still need a policy for dealing with the divisions in the Irish people. Such a policy could only be that of the 1917 Bolsheviks for dealing with national and communal divisions: consistent democracy, the fullest possible freedoms, limited only by conflicting claims, for peoples and fragments of peoples to join or leave existing states, or to set up states of their own. In Ireland now that could only be some form of autonomy for the mainly Protestant areas in a federal united Ireland, which would probably have to establish closer links with the British state which the Protestants still identify with.

**There are many other ideological lies the left tells itself, but these are the main ones. The result is that the left's policy on Ireland has no grip on reality.**

The first thing British socialists must do is understand the Irish-British question. We must stop telling ourselves ideological lies, and look at reality squarely. Otherwise we will never change it.

The Bill for withdrawal which Tony Benn put to Parliament recently is modelled on the Bill for withdrawal from Palestine. It would be worth the British left's while to reflect on what that Bill led to 'on the ground' in Palestine. When the British state abdicated in Palestine, Jews and Arabs set about making war on each other, vying to control roads, hills and towns. A similar thing would happen in Ireland. Nothing is more certain.

We must stop making a fetish out of

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the single slogan 'Troops Out'. 'Troops Out' is only one part of a settlement. On its own, without the rest of the settlement, it would bring disaster.

It would achieve none of the desirable things its socialist advocates want, and it would inevitably lead to something worse than exists in Ireland now. After sectarian civil war would come repartition and great bitterness between the two resulting Irish states, within which the forces of reaction and religious bigotry would surely have been much strengthened.

The only way out is through the creation of a free United Ireland, within which the Protestant-majority areas would have regional autonomy. Ties of some confederal sort between that United Ireland and Britain would give further guarantees to the Protestants that this solution aimed to do away with the oppression of the Northern Catholics, but not to replace it by making the Protestants a new oppressed minority.

The programme of a federal United Ireland is not a magic solution to be presented to Westminster and Dublin — but it is the only solid political base on which a united Catholic-Protestant workers' movement can be built and can give answers to the national and communal conflicts which are torturing Ireland.

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# More Loyalist than the Loyalists

Geoff Bell wrote this polemic against the article 'Lies the left tells itself'.

**T**here is nothing wrong in reassessing Marxist interpretations but where this has led Socialist Organiser as far as this particular exercise is concerned is to the other side of the class divide. This is illustrated in an article by Sean Matgamna.

This is entitled 'Ireland: lies the left tells itself'. A more fitting headline would have been 'Ireland: examples of the lies the right tells itself'. For what has now emerged from what at first was a sloppy and impressionistic analysis is one which stands four square with the opinions of the British ruling class.

We are told that there would be a bloody sectarian civil war if British troops left the north of Ireland, that those troops have every right to be there anyway because 'Northern Ireland has been part of the British state since the 12th century', and that Britain has no political, economic or military interest in staying in the north of Ireland.

The reason they do so apparently is because of the 'power of the Orangists on the ground', and it is this power which if British troops did leave, would result in all sorts of nasty things happening to Catholics.

Not only do we have a series of views which suggests the role of the British army is to keep two sets of mad paddies apart, we have an additional reactionary bonus. This is that Protestants in the north of Ireland are quite right to resist any attempt to submit them to the rule of the Irish majority because they are British, have always considered themselves so and because they are faced with 'Sinn Fein's Catholic Irish nationalism' which is alien to them and their 'traditions'. These politics of Sinn Fein are also something which break from the traditional republicanism of Wolfe Tone which, contrary to Sinn Fein's version, was non-sectarian.

There is, in all this, so much disinformation it is difficult to know where to gasp most. But, for example: \* 'Northern Ireland' was only part of the British state in name since the 12th cen-

tury. Ulster was so resistant to British occupation that it did not happen in reality until the 17th century when the native Irish were driven from their land and were replaced by English and Scottish settlers.

\* The Protestant community of the northeast of Ireland have rarely considered themselves as 'British' in the sense that term is understood in Britain. From the Home Rule Bills of the 19th and early 20th centuries to the Anglo-Irish accord of today they have continually resisted the 'right' of the British parliament to rule them. Moreover, historically speaking, the protestants in Ireland as a whole have generally defined themselves as 'Irish' or some variant of that — 'Anglo-Irish', 'Scots-Irish', 'Northern Irish' or 'Ulstermen' (sic). Even today the majority of northern Irish Protestants reject the view that the British parliament has the right to tell them what to do. They also toy with advocating an independent Ulster (the UDA) or Ulster as a British dominion in the way Canada is (Ulster Clubs).

\* The notion that contemporary Sinn Fein republicanism is different from that of Wolfe Tone is an historical illiteracy. Sad to say, but in fact the examples of anti-Protestant sectarianism in Wolfe Tone's 1798 rising were much more commonplace than in the present IRA's campaign, although in both cases such sectarianism was no part of the politics of the vast majority of those involved.

\* To define Sinn Fein as 'Irish Catholic nationalism' is slander. Irish nationalism has often had a rather right wing and Catholic side to it, but Sinn Fein in world

and deed has resolutely opposed it. If there are present day Catholic Irish nationalists they are most likely to be found in the SDLP in the north or Fian-na Fail in the south.

\* The attempt to justify the presence of British troops in the north of Ireland by raising the spectre of the Protestant backlash is rather old hat these days. Let us remember that the troops went onto the streets in 1969 because the loyalist security forces had been defeated. And today the political unity which would be necessary for the Loyalists to be a real threat to Catholics in the event of British withdrawal is completely missing. The failure of the Loyalists to defeat the Anglo-Irish agreement is just one example of the limited capability of the 'Protestant backlash'.

In seeking to minimise British responsibility for the situation in Ireland, in suggesting that, for the good of the Irish, British troops must stay, in painting the 'Loyalists' more 'British' than they paint themselves, *Socialist Organiser* ends up calling for the extension of both Loyalist 'rights' and the British presence.

The advocacy is for Protestant self-rule — in other words, a statelet drawn up purely on a sectarian headcount. This statelet would apparently be part of a federal Ireland. But then comes the biggest howler. There have to be 'ties of some confederal sort between that united Ireland and Britain'.

In other words, Brits into the south of Ireland. Wave the Union Jack and pass the ammunition.

## Marxism or Catholic chauvinism?

John O'Mahony replied.

**I**f it was worth Geoff Bell's while to respond to my article, then it was worth doing properly — especially, perhaps, given that he and I are an Irish 'Protestant' and an Irish 'Catholic' arguing the 'wrong' way round, and that can't have happened very often in the last 100 years.

It is a shame he didn't. But he scarcely bothers to argue. He hunts heresy and denounces as from a pulpit, and none too scrupulously — as if guided by the injunction that the faithful are not obliged to keep faith with heretics.

He nit-picks and goes off at tangents. Even if he were right that 'Northern

Ireland' was not really in the 'British' state until the 17th century — essentially he isn't — would that make a difference now to our attitude to Ireland's Protestant minority, which certainly dates only from the 17th century? You could throw the pedantry back in his face. He equates British 'occupation' (of Ulster) with colonisation: so was the uncolonised (or unsuccessfully colonised) part of Ireland never 'British-occupied Ireland'?

Geoff Bell further argues that the Protestants are not British because they will not obey the British Parliament. So what were the British colonists in America in 1776 when they declared independence from the British government? Or the British colonists in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe

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in 1965 when they made their Unilateral Declaration of Independence? Some notion of development and dialectics would help here, Geoff.

He uses strong words without in his text justifying their use. I am on "the other side of the class divide". Yes I am, or vicarious Catholic Irish nationalism is the working-class side; but if it isn't, on what side of the class line are Geoff Bell and the others who 'forget' Marxism and a large part of the Irish working class, and embrace Catholic nationalism garnished with misleading (and, in the circumstances, irrelevant and even deceptive) socialist phrases and aspirations.

Geoff Bell tries to damn what I say by association. I stand "four square", he says, with "the opinion of the British ruling class". If true, that literally means that I support the status quo. Of course, he means that I recognise that the pressing and irreducible problem is the division among the people who live in Ireland.

Is it true or isn't it? That is the question. Geoff's best approach to an argument here is a quibble about whether the Protestants think they are British or not "in the sense that term is understood in Britain". For sure they don't consider themselves Irish in the sense in which that term is understood in Dublin!

He translates what I say into the language of crude British chauvinism: Britain "keeps two sets of mad paddies apart". He then contradicts himself in the next sentence by angrily accusing me of saying that the Protestants are anything but mad to resist being reduced to a minority in a Catholic-dominated state.

Geoff Bell goes in for rewriting history, too. He writes that "the troops went onto the streets in 1969 because the loyalist security forces had been defeated". Some of the Protestant state forces were beaten back in Derry in 1969 — but the resources even of the Six County state were not exhausted; and the Orange forces had not been beaten in Belfast.

Geoff insists that "the examples of anti-protestant sectarianism in Wolfe Tone's 1798 rising were much more commonplace than in the present IRA's campaign". Which "Wolfe Tone rising" is he talking about? There were at least three disparate movements in 1798. Indeed there was sectarianism in the risings. But there was no sectarianism in the programme of Tone's United Irishmen, which counterposed to existing and old divisions the goal of replacing the denominations of "Protestant (Anglican), Catholic and Dissenter (Presbyterian)" by the common name of Irish. There is sectarianism in the programme of the Provisionals — which is a programme for the majority to incorporate the minority into a unitary state, leaving them no protection if the majority choose to override them.

If Gerry Adams had any serious aspirations towards Wolfe Tone's

politics, would he go around in Northern Ireland parading his religious creed, as when he publicly explained his escape from assassination by his going to Mass regularly? Sinn Fein has "resolutely" opposed sectarianism in words, especially in words for export. Deeds are another matter.

"If there are present-day Catholic Irish nationalists", writes Geoff Bell, "they are most likely to be in the SDLP". Read the papers, Geoff. In the state of elections triggered by the Unionists in March 1986 to have, in effect, a referendum on the Anglo-Irish Agreement, Sinn Fein — which opposed the Agreement — proposed a common front to the SDLP, which supported the Agreement. This common front could only be on the basis of Catholic head-counting, as the gleeful John Hume pointed out.

You could — though I don't especially want to — make a case that, taken all in all, what they do as well as what they say, the SDLP, despite being a narrow communal party, is nearer to Wolfe Tone Republicanism than the Provisionals are.

Geoff Bell cites "The failure of the loyalists to defeat the Anglo-Irish Agreement" — which has little practical consequence for them so far — to argue that they would be no "real threat to Catholics in the event of British withdrawal". So they would not try to hold on to what they have? They would not resist incorporation into an all-Ireland Catholic-majority state? Draw comfort from that sort of reasoning if you can, Geoff. I take it as proof that you can't face the facts.

One of the strangest reactions to the Anglo-Irish Agreement was that of People's Democracy, the Irish group linked to *Socialist Outlook*. Criticising even the Provisionals for softness on the Agreement, they denounced the Dublin government for betraying "the 1937 Constitution" — that same Constitution which contemporaries, including at least one writer in the leading Trotskyist magazine of that time, the *New Internationalist*, denounced as clerical-fascist in tendency. (To this day the Irish Senate is chosen on the basis of the Catholic corporatism dominant in the '30s).

In the same vein Geoff Bell throws back his ears and gives out an angry phillistine bray at the idea of some revived — confederal — link between Britain and Ireland. What does he think of that dirty old West-British shoneen Karl Marx, who came late to support for Home Rule and then disgraced himself by arguing that "after separation may come federation"?

We have to raise the issue of confederal links between Ireland and Britain because over 100 years of political struggles have shown Irish unity and Irish independence to be incompatible. In a different historical and political world De Valera tried to come to terms with the problem in 1921, when he came out for 'external association' with the British Empire, primarily as a means of keeping a common framework between the Irish majority and minority. For the same reason he was privately against Ireland's

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withdrawal from the Commonwealth in 1949.

You might remain on Marxist, internationalist ground, and oppose confederal links between Ireland and Britain because a process of necessary separation had not had enough time to do its healing and reconciling work. Northern Ireland cuts across all that. The truth here, though, is that the ruling classes have been twitching to re-knit links. Under the Anglo-Irish Agreement provision is made for a British-Dublin-Belfast Interparliamentary Committee, which draws the two islands closer than at any time in 65 years.

Why should the Marxists take their stand on absolute independence — an independence that has nothing more to give the Irish people, and the drive for which helps prime a sectarian civil war?

Opinion polls tell us that a big majority in Catholic Ireland does not want, or radically fears, a united Ireland. Election results tell us that in the North the Provisional Republicans have the support of little more than one Catholic in three. Their support in independent Ireland is minuscule — less than two per cent in elections.

Of course, moods can change and swing, and in Ireland they do tend to swing according to what we call "the politics of the last atrocity". Opinion swung to the Republicans after the Gibraltar killings and the Milltown massacre, against them after the two soldiers were spectacularly killed at a funeral, and so on.

But in the last 20 years those shifts have not changed the rocky underlying facts of communal antagonism, nor altered anything fundamental. 20 years of the IRA's war have resulted in stalemate and stasis.

The lesson of the last 20 years is the same as the lesson of the 100 years since Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill, and is itself now one of the 'basics' — events have shown the linked aspirations of the Irish majority for independence and for unity to be incompatible.

The Irish minority, define them how you like, will not have a united Ireland, and, if they are thrown entirely on to their own resources, they will fight to prevent it. Of course, in the past sections of the British ruling class stirred up and used that Irish minority, playing the 'Orange card'; but the minority had to be there in the first place to be so used. It is still "there" now that the British ruling class is united in policy for Ireland as it never was between 1885 and 1922, and no section of that ruling class has any use at all for the Irish Protestants.

The British-designed Partition put a proportionately bigger Catholic minority

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ty in the 'Protestant' state than the Protestants would have been in an all-Ireland state. The Northern Catholics were oppressed because they were seen as a threat. The consequence has been the prolonged Northern Ireland Catholic revolt and the partial destabilisation of the state system established in 1920-22 by the British and the different sections of the Irish bourgeoisie.

It is necessary to support the half-million Catholics in their opposition to the unjust settlement of 1920-22; but it is no solution to force one million Protestants into an all-Ireland state against their will and leave them feeling as the Northern Ireland Catholics do now. The Leninist policy for situations like this is long-established and very much to the point. As Trotsky summarised it: "In so far as the various nationalities, voluntarily or through force of necessity, coexist within the borders of one state, their cultural interests must find the highest possible satisfaction within the framework of the broadest regional (and, consequently, territorial) autonomy, including statutory guarantees of the rights of each minority".

It is absurd to say that Partition helps either capitalism or imperialist domination of southern Ireland today. But if it did, socialists could still not dismiss the legitimate claims of the Irish minority. In such conflicts between communities — in Ireland, in Palestine, in Sri Lanka, or anywhere — Marxists recognise that all the antagonists have rights and seek working-class unity across the divide on the basis of conciliation and justice.

The idea that there are good and bad — or 'imperialist' and 'anti-imperialist' — nations or countries comes from narrow irredentist and populist nationalism (sometimes in Maoist or other versions), not from Marxism, Leninism or Trotskyism. These are the Marxist policies for Ireland:

- Consistent democracy,
- Conciliation,
- Defence of the oppressed Catholics,
- Guarantees for the Protestants who fear oppression by the Catholic Irish majority,
- Working-class unity on a programme of democratic rights,
- And on that basis a struggle for socialism. In the language of the Trotskyist movement: a programme of democratic and transitional demands.

My *Workers' Liberty* article spelled out the false ideas and assumptions which — I believe — bewilder the far left and turn them into cheerleaders, usually ignorant cheerleaders, for Sinn Fein.

## IRELAND: The Socialist Answer

Geoff Bell has written books and pamphlets which codify the dominant ideas of most of the 'hard left' about Ireland. How does he respond to my systematic listing of arguments against those ideas? Take them point by point.

• Southern Ireland is not a neo-colony, and in any case, with most foreign investment in Ireland American and German, not a British neo-colony. Geoff Bell is silent about this.

• Northern Ireland is not merely 'British-occupied Ireland', unless the desires of the Six County majority count for nothing. Geoff Bell's only relevant comment is to quibble about the length of time Northern Ireland has been linked to Britain.

• Ireland is one island, but plainly not one people. To pretend that Ireland is one unit is to confuse geography with society, nationality, and politics. Geoff Bell pretends it is, but defend the pretence he does not.

• It is not just bigotry or irrationality which motivates Protestant resistance to a united Ireland. The laws of the 26 Counties impose Catholic morals even on those who reject them, banning divorce for example. Geoff Bell is very contemptuous about this argument. He ignores the Protestants, and implies that they should be ignored by claiming that the Provisionals are not in any way sectarian and that Protestant resistance to a united Ireland would not be substantial.

• To pretend that Protestants are only concerned to protect their job privileges is to ignore the distinct history and insistently-proclaimed distinct identity of the Six County Protestants. Geoff Bell is positively heroic in his determination to ignore it!

• Marxists cannot see the issue as just Irish majority rights. No majority — neither in Northern Ireland nor in all of Ireland — has a right to oppress a minority community. We are concerned with minority rights, too — with consistent democracy. Geoff Bell's programme is not that of a Marxist, but of an adoptive Catholic-Irish nationalist. He is, rightly, concerned with the second, artificial, Irish minority, the Northern Ireland Catholics; but, absurdly, he is indifferent to the concerns of the much bigger basic Irish minority, the Protestants.

• The Orange veto depends on the threat of Orange resistance. It is not something Britain grants. It has been coupled since 1976 with a Catholic veto over internal political arrangements in Northern Ireland. That Catholic veto is based ultimately on the armed strength of the IRA. My argument on the Orange veto makes Geoff Bell indignant. He does not, however, try to refute it. Why not?

• Britain does not gain economic advantage from Northern Ireland (yes or no, Geoff?), but pays out £1.5 billion a year.

• Far from giving overall military advantages to Britain, control of the Six Counties has deprived NATO of the 26 Counties for 39 years. True or not, comrade Bell?

• The existing Six County state is indeed an artificial, unviable entity; but nevertheless a viable Orange entity is possible if Northern Ireland's borders are moved north and east, shedding the mainly Catholic areas. Such a new 'Northern Ireland' would be the certain result of sectarian civil war. It was recognition of this fact that led De Valera and other mainstream bourgeois Republicans to rule out violence as a means of uniting Ireland. They knew it could not work. What makes you think it could work, Geoff?

• The Protestant community organised, threatened, and armed to stop a united Ireland, and settled reluctantly for Partition in 1920-22. They smashed the Power-Sharing Agreement with a general strike in 1974. The Anglo-Irish Agreement remains intact, and Protestant opposition to it is ineffectual; but it has not had much real effect yet. Northern Ireland remains under the control of the British government which, despite everything, the Protestants consider their own.

If the British state abdicates, leaving the Protestants the choice of incorporation in a Catholic state or resistance, they will resist. At the very least a proportion of them equal to the IRA's proportion of the Catholic community will resist.

At the *Socialist Organizer* summer school in 1986, Geoff Bell admitted that civil war would probably break out — but he said he thought it would be a small, controllable civil war. What if it isn't controllable? Who will control it? Southern Irish troops? UN troops? British troops? The common demand that Britain should 'disarm' the Orangists before going implies that we rely on British troops to control the civil war; it also implies not fewer, but more British troops, and for a long time to come!

• Troops out without a political settlement will not lead to a united Ireland, but to sectarian civil war and bloody reparation. It will not lead to self-determination for the Irish people as a whole. It can only set the Protestants in motion to secure their self-determination — against the Irish majority.

I would be happy to be convinced that this nightmare is not the certain consequence of troops out without a political settlement. Geoff Bell seems sure that it will not be, but the only reason he cites for his sureness is that the Protestant resistance to the Anglo-Irish Agreement has been limited.

• The thin veneer of left activists who form one facet of Sinn Fein's public face make it a socialist organisation only for those who want to be convinced. Sinn Fein is confined to the Catholic community; its leaders, like Gerry Adams, publicly parade their Catholicism; it has no interest in the Protestant community; its policies leave it no possibility of even talking to the Protestant community; some of the IRA's killings are scarcely-disguised sectarian acts, and all of them are seen by the Protestant community as