

sectarian acts.

Much space in the Provisionals' paper *An Phoblacht* is given to denouncing 'sectarianism'. But does it ever denounce sectarianism on its own side? Why not? Does not sectarianism at all exist on the Catholic side? Denouncing the sectarianism of the others can also be a means of appealing for communal solidarity and of incitement against the other community.

Unlike most of his political tribe, Geoff Bell does know something about the real Ireland, as distinct from the fantasy Ireland in the collective mind of the 'anti-imperialist' British left. Is it unreasonable to conclude that his flaccid performance in this polemic says something about the nature of the position he wants to defend? Is it an accident that he ends his article with a piece of Gerry Healy level misrepresentation of what I advocate?

Geoff Bell says I advocate "Brits into the south of Ireland. Wave the union jack and pass the ammunition". Where did I advocate that? When? Confederal links between Ireland and Britain could not mean that. Nothing I say can be loyally read as advocating or implying it. Confederal links imply voluntary association of the sovereign Irish and British states.

Bell is indulging himself in ridiculous hyperbole. But there is more here than a confession that he can't handle the facts, the issues, or the arguments.

Some readers of *Socialist Outlook* are bound to think — on Geoff Bell's authority, and not having read my article — that I really do advocate something like 'British troops into the South'. I've grown used to boneheaded and malicious sniping and misrepresentation, but this, I repeat, is Gerry Healy stuff.

The chain of publications put out by Geoff's tendency over the years — *International*, *Red Mole*, *Red Weekly*, *Socialist Challenge*, *Socialist Action* — have not, in my view, contributed much to political enlightenment, least of all about Ireland, but they did not deal in shameless factual lying and outright

misrepresentation like this. You should not start now, Geoff Bell.

A few words, finally, about the broader issues involved in this discussion. It links, obviously, with similar debates like that on the rights of the Jewish nation in Palestine.

Our attitude to these questions is all of a piece, and so is that of *Socialist Outlook* and the 'kitsch-Trotskyist' political culture of which it is part. Geoff Bell and his friends are comprehensively wrong. The issue goes way beyond Protestant and Catholic Ireland and Arab and Jewish Palestine.

Vast areas of the world are now covered by multi-national states — many of them old colonial units of more or less arbitrarily grouped peoples which have remained units after colonialism and become bureaucratic states. Almost everywhere in these states there is the domination, sometimes genocidal, of people over people, nation over nation or fragment of nation.

The Marxist programme for this vast area of world politics has already been outlined — consistent democracy. Depending on circumstances that may mean the right of various peoples to full independence, to local autonomy, or to special cultural rights, etc.

The alternative to this Marxist approach is to decide that some peoples are bad and some good, to ascribe some universalist and transcendental 'world-revolutionary' significance to the nationalisms of chosen nations, and to deny any collective rights to other nations.

Of course, on some issues you have to take sides, sharply and clearly, as we side now with the Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza against the Israeli occupation, and as the tendency to which I belong has always supported the Northern Ireland Catholics in struggle against the British state and against the oppression to which Partition consigned them. But you must do that within the political framework of the Marxist and Leninist programme for resolving conflicts like those between Arabs and Jews and between Catholics and Protestants.

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Where the only proper Marxist approach in national conflicts is to argue for the equality of peoples — and in the first place for equal rights and unity within the working class — the kitsch-Trotskyists pick and choose, designating 'good' and 'bad' peoples, 'pro-imperialists' and 'anti-imperialists'. They do not know it, but they are in the tradition not of the mature Marx or Engels, or of Lenin and Trotsky, but at best of the young Frederick Engels, who in 1848 denounced "small, pig-headed nations" in Europe. (Engels argued that such nations would inevitably serve as the tools of reactionaries wanting to obstruct the then progressive unification of the big nations of the continent).

More: Geoff Bell and his friends hold to the view of a 'world revolution' marching inexorably ahead as if guided by some god of history. This teleological view lends itself especially to the approach that designates some nations 'good' and others 'bad'. The nationalism of the 'good' nations is in the camp of the 'world revolution'; the nationalism of the 'bad' nations is in the other camp, of 'imperialism'.

In Geoff Bell's case, this approach leads a member of the Protestant Irish minority not to rise above the tragic communalism dividing the people of our island to working-class internationalism — or even Wolfe Tone Republicanism — but simply to swap communities. Communalism is the problem. Consistent democracy, and the fight for working-class unity on that basis — that is, socialist Republicanism — is the answer.

How to argue for troops out

Geoff Bell wrote this polemic in response to a report in *Socialist Organiser* on a Labour Party conference debate on Troops Out. The report argued that the left had lost not only the debate but also the argument, because it failed to answer the objections of the right-wing or to explain how troops out could lead to a positive solution.

Socialist Organiser of 17 October 1985 gave over three pages to attacking myself and three other movers and seconders of the resolutions

on Ireland at the Labour Party conference.

In reply to this, the first admission I would make is that I am somewhat dubious about doing so. I find it rather difficult to take seriously John O'Mahony's 'review' of the Irish debate at conference. It is reminiscent of those old stories about theatre reviews written by someone who spent the entire performance of the play in the theatre bar. Like John O'Mahony, that reviewer may have read the script — and O'Mahony reproduced ours at great length — but there are more to plays

than the script. And there is more to debates at Labour Party conference than what is actually said in speeches.

However, let me begin by questioning O'Mahony's methodology. In asking why, or rather asserting that, "the Troops Out current still counts for little in our movement" he says that those who seek an explanation for this can begin by looking at the debate at conference and at the weak argument put over by those who made speeches there.

This is a very silly suggestion. The movers of the resolutions have five minutes each, the seconders and other

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speakers three minutes. To expect any individual to make a detailed, theoretically-sound, answering-all-possible-objections-that-might-be-raised type of speech in that time is absurd. This is especially the case when the issue concerned is Northern Ireland: an issue continually distorted or neglected by the ruling class press and the labour bureaucracy. No, all we can do when speaking to resolutions on Ireland at the party conference is hope to make a couple of polemical points, correct one or two misapprehensions and supply the odd bit of information which perhaps, just perhaps, may start the odd delegate thinking afresh about the Irish issue.

These may appear modest intentions, but I do suggest that John O'Mahony is rather naive if he believes that it is speeches at Labour Party conferences which win or lose debates there. As I am sure he knows, the vast majority of votes are decided beforehand at caucus meetings of the unions. What informs their discussion on Ireland I will discuss shortly, but to give over three pages of Socialist Organiser to discussing four or five speeches of a few minutes each is to elevate the importance of those, and the possible effect they could have, to a level they do not warrant.

But if John O'Mahony wishes to do that, at least let him get off his metaphorical theatre bar stool, buy a programme and see what the play was called. The basis of his attack on us was to insist "the single slogan 'Troops Out' needs to be replaced by a broader agitation which would make 'Troops Out' one element in a coherent programme." I agree, as I am sure do the other delegates O'Mahony attacked. And that is why, totally contrary to the impression given by Socialist Organiser, the resolutions we moved and seconded went way, way beyond 'Troops Out'.

O'Mahony wants "a coherent programme". So do we, which is why in the resolution I moved we called not just for withdrawal within the lifetime of the next Labour government, as Socialist Organiser reported, but also for the working out of "a detailed policy for British withdrawal". Call it a "coherent programme" or a "detailed policy", it matters little: what does matter is they amount to the same thing.

Certainly we did not detail this policy or programme, although the second resolution mentioned some possible components of it — the ending of the PTA, plastic bullets and strip searching — but what we did do, in the wording of our resolutions, was to suggest that the working out of this policy/programme

was of such importance that we needed a wide-ranging discussion within the labour movement to flesh it out. That is what the resolutions called for, and for John O'Mahony to try and parade us as Troops Out simpletons is a sectarian distortion.

And, if I may, I will add a personal note here. John's kind enough to say in his article that I have written some "useful works" on Ireland. For that, thank you, but if he had read one of those works a little more closely — "The British in Ireland" — he would know that in the conclusion I argue for and detail a coherent programme for British withdrawal.

The Labour Committee on Ireland also argue the importance of establishing a programme for withdrawal. All of which underlines the importance of not jumping to too many polemical conclusions on the basis of what is said in a couple of minutes of speechifying at Labour Party conferences. As to the quality of those speeches which O'Mahony seeks to denigrate, that is, of course, a matter of opinion. In the opinion of the *Irish Post*, for instance, "the Irish case was put most eloquently at Bournemouth — the best ever presentation and all who spoke in favour of those resolutions must be warmly congratulated."

Now the *Irish Post* may not possess the theoretical wisdom or Marxist analysis of Socialist Organiser, but there is one reason for taking its views a good deal more seriously than those of O'Mahony: its coverage of the Irish debate at conference concentrated on attacking the disgraceful, incoherent performance of Alex Kitson, the spokesperson for the NEC.

That, for me, was a much more important target — the target of the labour bureaucracy who historically and presently must share the responsibility for British misrule in Ireland — than that of their left critics such as myself and the others who spoke in the debate in favour of ending that British misrule. Mention of the labour bureaucracy raises a further point concerning the debate in the trade unions in Ireland and the relationship of this to discussions in the Labour Party. When O'Mahony asked: "Why is the Troops-out-of-Ireland current so feeble in the British labour movement?" he was not only mistaken in characterising us as simply 'Troops Out', he was also wrong in his assessment of our strength.

Within the last four or five years we have won the party to supporting, on paper, Irish unity; secured promises to repeal the PTA and stop the use of plastic bullets; and defeated the NEC on the ending of the jury-less courts and strip-searching. Support for our positions in the CLPs has also ensured that Ireland has been debated at conference for the last five years.

I would also argue that we now have the majority, if not overwhelming, support in the CLPs in support of British withdrawal. Where we lack support is in the trade unions, and it is their block vote which has consistently ensured our

withdrawal motions are lost.

Why have the unions adopted this attitude? Is it because, as John O'Mahony suggests, the trade union delegations at conference are worried about the prospect of a blood-bath if Britain leaves? They may be worried about this, and certainly the question of the blood-bath needs serious discussion, but to suggest this is what informs the unions' opposition — or that of the NEC — to British withdrawal is to ascribe to these union bureaucrats — as many of them are — a degree of concern and compassion for the poor Irish Catholics of which, quite frankly, there is as much evidence as there is of snow in hell.

No, as any half-decent materialist analysis would recognise, the reason the union leaderships are hostile to British withdrawal is because of their membership in Northern Ireland, the vast majority of whom are loyalists and who would quite likely leave their unions if they believed their leaderships were voting for pro-Republican resolutions at Labour Party conferences.

Add to that fact the unions' local leaderships in Northern Ireland have, in some instances, been themselves accused of operating discrimination against Catholics by the Fair Employment Agency, and you begin to get a materialist explanation for the unions' attitudes towards Northern Ireland, rather than some idealistic notion that it is all in people's heads and if we put the right argument over we will win the debate.

With that in mind, let me just conclude by making a couple of remarks as to how we can help to change this situation. The work of building up support for British withdrawal from Ireland within the rank and file of the unions is an obvious priority, and one way in which, in future, the material interests of the bureaucracy could be negated. And we are all agreed that to win that support means going beyond Troops Out Now.

Where the real dispute lies, I suspect, is just exactly where do we go? For myself, the guiding political principle is that socialists insist that British withdrawal from Ireland is unconditional. To spell this out, neither the British government, the Labour Party conference nor even Socialist Organiser can place conditions on British withdrawal. The principle of self-determination means that they have no right to insist that the Irish construct their state in this or that way before Britain leaves.

That is why I object to John O'Mahony's practice — both in this article and others — of coupling British withdrawal with the advocacy of a federal Ireland in which there would be considerable autonomy for the Protestant North. I have no intention of entering into this argument here because I do not accept the prime responsibility of British socialists at this stage in the Irish struggle is to sit around and commentate on debates at Labour Party conferences one day and construct con-

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withdrawal is because of their membership in Northern Ireland, the vast majority of whom are Loyalists and who would quite likely leave their unions if they believed their leaderships were voting pro-Republican resolutions at Labour Party conference. (This suggests) a materialistic explanation for the unions' attitude towards Northern Ireland rather than some idealistic notion that it is all in people's heads and if we put the right argument over we will win the debate."

So the arguments don't matter? Or anyway not very much? But the arguments do matter — and if they don't, why write articles and books, why bother to make speeches at all? The arguments had an importance outside the 'theatre' of the conference — they went out live on two TV channels.

Was five minutes not enough? That wouldn't explain the virtual absence of even attempts — rushed and garbled as they might have to be in the circumstances — to take up the arguments. Nor does it explain the fact that in an article of about 1800 words — which can't be much less than the 'comment' part of my article — Geoff Bell still doesn't attempt to answer any of the points. Perhaps our disagreement then, is about what the arguments in the movement are? Well then, what are they?

In fact, Geoff Bell's position seems to be not that the arguments don't matter, nor that they are different from what I stated, but that we don't have the right to discuss such issues. Neither the British labour movement nor British Marxists (nor — in my own case — Irish Marxists who live in Britain) have any right to discuss the issues. Our political rights can go no further than the right to repeat, as often as we can muster the energy and conviction, the single relevant slogan, Troops Out Now, with no qualifications.

I must have expressed myself badly, because Geoff Bell has not taken on board the main point I made, about the need for seeing Troops Out as one element in a coherent programme. His response is "that the resolution we moved and seconded went way, way beyond Troops Out...the resolution I moved... called not just for withdrawal in the lifetime of the next Labour government...but also for the working out of a 'detailed policy' for British withdrawal." Further:

"Certainly, we did not detail this policy or proposal, although the second resolution mentioned some possible components of it — the ending of the PTA, plastic bullets and strip-searching

arguments used by advocates of Troops Out, I concluded that: "...The left lost the argument at this year's Labour Party conference. With the partial exception of Geoff Bell *the left did not even seriously attempt to answer the arguments*" (emphasis added). Was I right or wrong?

Geoff Bell is of course right that there is more to the Labour Party conference 'play' than the mere script, the speeches, alone embodies or can convey. The pressures and vested interests of the outside world overshadow the debates, giving their precise meaning and weight to the sentiments and ideas expressed there and sometimes predetermining the vote and without regard to the speeches and arguments that emerge at conference.

Geoff is right that it is a weakness in my account of the debate that I didn't underline and bring out the significance of Kitson's reference (which I cited) to the TGWU's 200,000 Irish members. But my subject was *the script*, i.e. the arguments. The absence of comment on the trade union bureaucracy's vested interest not to upset the status quo is a weakness in my article, but not a decisive one unless you want to say that the arguments are irrelevant.

I itemised the three arguments on which the opponents of Troops Out base themselves: "(1): That British withdrawal would be followed immediately by sectarian civil war, and therefore, (2): Troops Out leads not to a united Ireland but to bloody repartition and two Irish states; and (3): That Northern Ireland is some sort of legitimate expression of the rights of the Protestant community, which can only be changed fundamentally with their consent."

My summary of all the points made by the speakers established the remarkable fact that only one left-winger even attempted to deal with any of these arguments — Geoff Bell took up the bloodbath argument. The rest of the arguments were not touched at all by any of the left speakers. That was the most striking feature of the debate — *they didn't try to argue*. In terms of the arguments it was almost a non-debate because the left simply defaulted on the arguments.

If I'd seized on this or that nasty speech and said the equivalent of: "It is no accident, comrades, that comrade X in his speech about rate rises in Tower Hamlets neglected to deal with the class character of the Communist Parties of Cuba and Outer Mongolia!" — then that would be very unreasonable. But what happened in the conference debates needs an explanation.

Because movers of the resolutions have only five minutes, says Geoff Bell, and seconders only three, "to expect any individual to make a detailed, theoretically sound, answering-all-possible-objections-that-might-be-raised type of speech in that time is absurd." Moreover, though "the question of the bloodbath needs serious discussion", "any half-decent materialist analysis would recognise (that) the reason the union leaderships are hostile to British

strategic arrangements by which Ireland will be governed the next.

Our job is to work for British withdrawal from Ireland. In the course of that work we can suggest ways and means of lessening the threat of a bloodbath — for instance, the disbandment and disarming of the UDR — and we can include these measures in a wider and more detailed programme for British withdrawal.

That, however, is an entirely different process than the Irish priority Socialist Organiser has chosen to adopt in the last couple of years — arguing in Britain for a Federal Ireland.

It all conjures up an amusing vision: we win the debate in the Labour Party; a socialist government prepares to withdraw from Ireland; John O'Mahony parades up and down Whitehall with the banner 'Troops Must Stay Until Protestant Rights Are Secured'.

This, of course, is a caricature. The point I am making is that, for me, any theoretical discussion on the nature of loyalism which we in Britain have is best placed in the context of advocacy for unconditional British withdrawal. Once that context is agreed, then perhaps we can get away from both the type of 'reportage' Socialist Organiser used for the Irish debate at conference and the type of reply which was necessitated by that reportage.

The need to link the issues

John O'Mahony replied

Did I "attack" Geoff Bell and others whose speeches at Labour Party conference I summarised and commented upon in SO 248? Certainly I criticised them pretty severely, and I suppose I was a bit unkind to Sarah Roelofs, whose writings on Ireland in Labour Briefing sum up for me much of what's wrong with much of the left. But to disagree is not necessarily to "attack". I consider myself to be on the same side as those who spoke for Troops Out at Labour Party conference.

I presented full summaries of the speeches in order to avoid giving the impression of trigger-happy factional sniping and to give readers the chance to form an independent judgement: I solicited Geoff Bell's present reply because I believe a serious debate *within the left* on the question of Ireland is one of the most urgent tasks we have to tackle.

Unfortunately Geoff Bell declines to discuss most of what I wrote. Having summarised and critically analysed the

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— but what we did do... was to suggest... that we needed a wide-ranging discussion within the labour movement to flesh (this programme) out." By "detailed policy" he understood a detailed policy for how to withdraw the troops, not a proposal for what is to replace the present structure which depends for its survival on British troops.

My entire argument was — and I said it explicitly — that 'Troops Out' alone is counter-productive. It begs questions — like the bloodbath issue — which it does not answer and which can only be answered by a programme for how Ireland should be restructured. I said our programme should be "self-determination for Ireland as a whole and within that autonomy for the Protestant areas." Even allowing 50% of the responsibility to the opacity of my writing, it is still remarkable that Geoff Bell does not seem able to take in the point, let alone reply to it.

In fact he explicitly refuses to discuss issues like 'federalism' in a profane publication like SO in a foreign country. Ours is not to reason why...

"We are all agreed that to win that support means going beyond Troops Out Now. Where the real dispute lies, I suspect, is just where we do go. For myself, the guiding political principle is that socialists insist that British withdrawal from Ireland is unconditional. To spell this out, neither the British government, the Labour Party conference, or even SO can place conditions on British withdrawal. The principle of self-determination means that they have no right to insist that the Irish construct their state in this way or that way before Britain leaves..."

But this is metaphysical, not politics of any sort and certainly not working class politics. You elevate Irish self-determination into an absolute principle against which everything else is measured and to which everything else is, if necessary, sacrificed.

Now I'm for a united federal Ireland (any other form of united Ireland is simply inconceivable). But I don't start out from the idea that a united Ireland, or even an independent Ireland, is the goal itself, an unquestionable axiom. I arrive at support for a united Ireland as a result of asking other questions. How can the Irish working class be united? How can the paralysis of the Irish working class be lifted? What are the conditions in which the Irish working class is most likely to separate itself politically from the Green, Orange, and Green-White-and-Orange segments of the split and divided Irish bourgeoisie?

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I arrive at the belief that a united Ireland is necessary because I believe a federal united Ireland in which the democratic rights of both sections of the Irish people will be protected is the necessary way towards another goal, working class unity, which I consider a higher goal and, if there were a choice to be made, a far more important goal.

I reject the politics of ABC economic agitation combined with abstract socialist propaganda characteristic of Militant and other groups because it simply has no way of relating to the political questions which dominate the life of the Six County working class and sections of the 26 County working class, and therefore has no grip on reality.

But if I thought the working class could be united by ignoring the unresolved and festering national question, then I would consider it a socialist duty to ignore it. Neither Irish independence, nor Irish self-determination, nor Irish unity is an absolute principle if your standpoint is that of Marxist socialism. That is what distinguishes us from all nationalists, left and right: Irish independence and unity is not the end but a means to an end. We are for it or against it depending on other things.

You make of 'self-determination' a self-sufficient programme with Troops Out as its sole expression. It is not even something that can be discussed. Your position conflates the Marxist support for a democratic programme and for those fighting for it — a support that is always conditional in the sense of being a means to an end — with the nationalist view of slogans like Troops Out as an end in themselves.

You collapse the particular, and exceptionally complicated, Irish question into generalities about self-determination — the concrete into the abstract. For a certainty the 26 Counties have self-determination and full political independence from Britain — they took a different line in World War II and the recent Falklands war, they argue with Britain as an equal within the EEC.

Southern Ireland hasn't got economic independence? No, it hasn't. But that is an entirely different question. The socialist programme against colonialism and imperialism is not the reactionary utopia of economic independence and autarky, which the Irish bourgeoisie partly attempted between 1932 and 1958. Our solution to the economic questions is class struggle and socialism.

Self-determination is an organising principle for socialists, and an always binding and active principle. We are obliged to oppose its opposite, oppression and denial of national democracy. But how, if not by discussion, can we decide concretely whether we are for self-determination of particular groups, what self-determination means in particular circumstances, and what form of self-determination it is to be?

You cannot make 'self-determination', meaning concretely 'Troops Out' and no talk about what

comes after' an absolute principle, presented to British workers in a spirit of ultimatum sectarianism. Self-determination has to be assayed, concretely, discussed and weighed: you have to make your case for your interpretation.

How should British (or Irish) workers work these things out? After all there is good reason to be perplexed, and reason to fear that Troops Out is the road to a bloodbath and the repatriation of Ireland. How? I say, by reason and argument. You say, by accepting the issue as posed now by the militant nationalists and in the demand 'Troops Out Now' with no nonsense or procrastination and no talk of a programme other than for how to withdraw.

This is metaphysics for another reason. For how is 'self-determination' and Troops Out going to be realised? By a sudden British pull-out with no political settlement?

Any serious talk of British withdrawal is necessarily talk of Britain negotiating its way out, arranging for a replacement for the state power which Britain now sustains. It will be a negotiated pull-out.

This is the Sinn Fein version of 'Troops Out', and the only one that does not raise the spectacle of Troops Out meaning an inevitable bloody civil war, leading to repatriation. Why should the left and the labour movement confine itself to the phrase-mongering role of saying 'Troops Out and no discussion', thereby depriving itself of any possible role in shaping a political settlement? It makes no sense.

The 'Troops Out and no chatter' line amounts to a self-denying ordinance for the left in trying to explain and argue its case. This may not matter too much if you confine yourself to a 'constituency' predisposed towards you by attitudes on Nicaragua, Cuba, etc — people who might indeed well be lost by having the issues and arguments teased out in a way that would make the Third World parallels difficult to sustain.

I worded carefully what I wrote about the "feebleness" of the Troops Out current: "Even after a notable accession of strength in the last three or four years, the Troops Out current still counts for little in our movement." Geoff Bell replies by claiming victories on the juryless courts, strip-searching, the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and Labour's commitment to a united Ireland.

Even if you accept the claim that the Troops Out current won all those victories, the fact remains that all those positions — and especially a united Ireland — are counterposed by the Labour Party leadership to Troops Out! It is true that there is a lot of support for Troops Out in the Constituency Labour Party left, and there is also a lot of passive support for Troops Out in the British population (over 50%). Yet the Troops Out current still has very little clout outside the comprehensively left-wing sections of the CLPs. You admit that it counts for little in the unions.

More is involved than numbers. The Troops Out current is politically feeble.

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It is a current that cannot answer its opponents politically and at the conference did not seriously try. I think that Geoff Bell is kidding himself if he thinks the solid Troops Out support can be identified with the number of votes that Troops Out can get at constituency GCs. Will those who cannot answer the arguments of our opponents on the bloodbath question and on Troops Out not leading to a united Ireland stand up under pressure of a serious civil war scare? Passing a resolution reflecting conventional left wisdom at the ward or GC is one thing — sticking to it in face of the harsh realities that may unfold in Northern Ireland is something else, and so is being able to go out and argue and campaign in the trade unions for it.

For example, given the wide passive support for Troops Out in the population, why are the Constituency Labour Party Troops Out forces unable to win the unions? The Troops Out current is a lot bigger than it was, but I didn't

neglect to record that. But it remains feeble.

The argument that we have no right but to support those in struggle in Ireland is not only widespread but also a very old argument. I have difficulty taking it seriously because I encountered and opposed it as far back as August 1969, when it was used as an argument against British socialists calling for Troops Out!

When the British troops were put on the streets in August 1969, Catholics in Belfast and Derry welcomed them. Socialists and Republicans in Northern Ireland did not call for their withdrawal and some explicitly welcomed them. The biggest revolutionary socialist group in Britain dropped its previously prominent call for British withdrawal and polemicalised in Socialist Worker and elsewhere against those of us who refused to give de facto support to the deployment of British troops. And as one of their most 'clinging' arguments they us-

ed the fact that neither our socialist co-thinkers in the Six Counties nor even the Republicans were calling for Troops Out.

You will say, of course, that they were wrong. But logically, Geoff, you shouldn't. For if it is a principle now for us that we have no option but to go along with the Northern Ireland left and Republicans then the same principle must have been in operation then, even though it led to diametrically opposite conclusions.

When the 26 Counties voted to ban divorce

The partition of Ireland and the repressive Six County state in the North were given a much-needed boost from the voters in the South in June 1986.

That was one of the tragic effects of the massive vote against legalised divorce in a referendum proposed by the then coalition government of Fine Gael and the Labour Party.

The referendum proposal was to allow divorce under fairly tight conditions when a married couple could show that their marriage had broken down for at least five years. All that is available now are church and civil annulments after which separated people have no right to re-marry.

The Church worked hard for a 'no' vote. Fianna Fail campaigned for 'no', though it claimed to be neutral. And by two to one the voters rejected the proposal to liberalise the law.

The first victims were the 70,000 Irish women thought to be affected by the ban on divorce. These women have no rights to maintenance or help, and yet no right to remarry.

The second victims were the Northern Catholics. Their basic civil and democratic rights cannot be won in the mainly Protestant and sectarian Northern Ireland state. They need to break down that state and create a united Ireland.

The harsh reality is that this united Ireland will not come about without big defeats for the two traditions of sectarianism. The referendum defeat showed the malignant vigour of Catholic sectarianism.

John Hume, leader of the main Northern Catholic party, the SDLP, realised this. For the sake of the Anglo-Irish Accord he made a final appeal to Southern voters to say 'yes' to divorce reform.

Sinn Féin, in a confusion which reflects the populist politics of the movement, came out for a 'yes' vote, but then went on to explain how they could understand many of their supporters not being able to vote 'yes'. They evaded the issue.

Many socialists who are sympathetic to Irish nationalism will point to the reactionary attitudes of most Loyalist leaders on issues like divorce, and say that it is all really irrelevant. They will be right about the Loyalists. They will be wrong about the relevance of the vote.

What the vote showed us is how the Irish Republic treats a minority — non-Catholics,

or separated women. Since the whole of the national question in Ireland today revolves around the question of a minority, the Northern Protestants, the point could hardly be more relevant.

One of the ironies of this is that many of the leading anti-divorce campaigners would see themselves as strong fighters for a united Ireland. For us, as socialists, that just underlines the vast gulf between secular republicanism, whose aim is to remove the divisions between the communities in Ireland, and chauvinist Catholic nationalism.

In its explicit attempt to create "a Catholic state for a Catholic people", that nationalism simply mirrors the Protestant-sectarian politics of the Unionists of Northern Ireland.

Uniting Ireland and uniting its working class are two things that have to go together. If you are not for both you are not for either.

Labour's 'unity by consent'

Jonathan Hammond and John O'Mahony interviewed Clive Soley for Socialist Organiser in February 1983

At the time, Clive Soley was deputy Labour Party spokesperson on Northern Ireland

Can you outline the Labour Party policy for us, as it stands now?

The first think Labour would do on gaining power would be to give a clear commitment to a united Ireland by consent.

Why consent? First of all, we prefer to govern by consent, obviously. But, secondly, and this is very important, the population of Ireland is five million. Of those five million, one and a half million live in Northern Ireland. Of that 1½ million, one million, to a greater or lesser extent, support the Unionist cause. And to try to force one million to join the other four million without their consent would be a recipe for disaster.

I don't think a united Irish government would be well equipped, particularly in the early days, to cope with the problems that would come from that. But what consent must not mean is a veto on political progress. We would legislate in a way that would lead people to the conclusion that a united Ireland was in their best interests.

The sort of things I would like to see us consider, and I think we would consider, would be measures like joint citizenship, joint voting rights, the ability to vote and stand in each other's elections, very close harmonisation, so that the Unionist won't feel trapped in a united Ireland — so that he knows that if he chooses to be can travel on a British passport or an Irish passport, he can vote in British elections, he can vote in Irish elections and, I would hope, could stand in elections on both sides too.

I think we would be looking very quickly for a major effort to harmonise various matters on the economy, social factors, and political institutions north

and south of the Border. I believe the Border has distorted the economies of both North and South alike. One of the things I would want to consider very urgently would be an all-Ireland Economic Development Council. I'd also like to look at some form of all-Ireland council, or a sort of British-Irish council — with elected representatives from the North and the South, and possibly from Britain.

We'd want to consider an all-Ireland police force, recruited — and I emphasise this — from both sides of the Border, trained in a common training school, with a common sense of identity.

I would say to people who are worried about an all-Ireland police force that unless you do consider things like that, then frankly you are not serious about a united Ireland. At the end of the day, there has to be a police force that can cross that border, and it's an important step forward.

There's a whole range of factors of that sort which we'd want to consider.

Do you see withdrawal of troops as an objective of Labour Party policy?

The aim should be troops back to barracks as soon as possible. That is actually happening, but slowly. We want to continue it as quickly as possible.

I'm not a Troops Out man, nor am I for setting dates for British withdrawal. I see a policy of British withdrawal from Ireland as opposed to a policy for a united Ireland. It does not follow that if we withdraw our troops then you will have a united Ireland.

We all know that some unionists are prepared to fight for an independent Northern Ireland. I don't think it would work, but I do know that plenty of them are prepared to fight for it.

Therefore my view is that policies that are designed simply to get Britain out don't provide a solution. They simply get Britain out, which might be nice for us but doesn't solve the problem.

Can I put to you a view of what the last Labour government did? You have a situation where the government balances between the Protestants and Catholics. The Labour government capitulated to the Orange general strike in May 1974. I think it simply let its strategy (power-sharing and a Council of Ireland) be wiped out. Then it swung in the opposite direction and, after he succeeded Marilyn Rees, Mason adopted a policy that was essentially one of bending down the Catholics. There is a lot of evidence of very widespread searches of thousands of Catholic homes. It amounted to terrorisation. It was basically a policy of holding the ring, doing nothing, sweating it out — immediately after buckling under the pressure of the Orange strike. That's what happened.

I understand that view. Can I say how I see it? I wasn't involved in the politics

of Ireland until I came into this House in 1979. I always felt there should be a united Ireland. Then when the civil rights movement came along in the late 1960s I got very excited. I thought there was a good chance of real political and economic progress by peaceful means.

I think the destruction of that civil rights movement was a crucial step. A lot of people have got a lot to answer for. The main people are the Stormont government, and then the paramilitaries on both sides of the divide over there.

Because, leaving aside the obvious things the Loyalists and the Stormont government did, the other thing that happened is that the IRA, as it then was, recognised that the initial popularity of the British troops could not be allowed to continue. So they started their policy of shooting at British forces.

But why do you think the civil rights movement of the late 1960s turned into the armed offensive led by the IRA?

I think the civil rights movement was threatened to the paramilitary groups on both sides. Certainly it was a massive threat to the Stormont government and the Loyalists generally. There is no doubt in my mind that a whole lot of people who had a very fixed view of how they saw things developing, thinking they represented their particular group set out to destroy the movement.

The IRA started exiles in 1969.

Well, it existed all right, and it existed enough to do the damage by turning out the British troops.

The Provisionals emerged at the end of 1969 as part of a reaction against the fact that over the previous seven years there had been an evolution towards peaceful methods by the old IRA. They were involved in the civil rights agitation. They had no guns, or scarcely any, during the pogroms of 1969. The IRA didn't, in fact...

I'm quite prepared to accept that you know more about the IRA than I do. I wasn't deeply involved. But I put it to you that there was an effort to alienate the minority community from the British presence there when the troops were first brought in. Is that not correct?

I doubt it — not at first. I could, for example, tell you in detail about how the British army was allowed into Catholic Free Derry, and the protective barricade (erected in August 1969) voluntarily taken down, in October 1969. It was actually organised by the Republicans. Later the IRA split and things changed. But can I put the point in a different way? It seems to me that there was an absolutely necessary political logic in the development from civil rights to the IRA offensive, in that the basic civil right that the Catholics lacked was the right of self-determination.

Right.

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The whole logic of the struggle for limited objectives led to a Protestant backlash, which in turn pushed the Catholics, in fear and terror, towards self-defence, and then boosted those who wanted to go on an armed offensive, after the IRA split. That takes us back to what you said about waiting for a majority in the Northern state. The point is that it has been artificially carved out — very artificially. 35% of the population are opposed to the state's existence. Over the past 15 years, in fact from before the violent phase, when it was a question of Britain putting pressure to reform on the old Orange state, the central problem has been that the state was deliberately designed to give a permanent Protestant majority. It was not reformable. Yet you are committed to remaining within the narrow limitations of a state which has a built-in Protestant sectarian majority.

These are very important points, and I recognise the logic of what you have said. I'd go along with quite a bit of it. I'd have reservations about some of it. What I would stress to you is that the key to this is having the political skill and determination to go through with the political, social, economic and institutional changes regardless of opposition from the Unionist group.

I don't mean rough-riding over them. I am saying that we would not accept that they had a veto — for example, on setting up an all-Ireland Economic Development Council, or an all-Ireland police force, and a whole host of other things of that nature.

If you do that, you are saying something you've never said before to the unionists: it's not just that we want to get things better in Northern Ireland. We are saying to you that we don't want you in the UK any more, we want you in a united Ireland. That is a very different message going out to the Unionists than has gone out before.

I don't think you can assume that all Unionists are hard-liners who will fight in the last ditch. Obviously there are lots of those. They keep making their presence felt. But there are also a lot of them saying things that they would not have said even five years ago, let alone ten. 'Well, we can't go on as we are, can we?' for example. That's a very significant change.

I think you could not coerce the Unionists. Quite certainly you would have to have a federal Ireland and give them rights over their own affairs. The thing is that a British Labour government could create the political conditions for change by a declaration of intent to withdraw; by really energetic determination to change the whole structure and framework to make some form of a united Ireland realistic politics for the Protestants — give them options where they would have an incentive to accept change.

I haven't ruled out any of that.

But if you start by accepting the majority's rights within the artificial entity, then you are in fact saying to them: 'We'll always let you veto us'.

No, I'm not saying that at all. All I'm saying, very clearly, is that what we'll do first is have talks with the Dublin government — whatever government it happens to be — to set up new economic and social institutions, and we do not allow them to veto that.

I've already indicated that, obviously, governments can get pressurised and deflected if the pressure is strong enough. That's where the political skill comes in.

There would be a major effort not to allow any group or any individual to veto those things that were agreed by London and Dublin. In effect what I'm saying is: yes, we are giving a strong commitment to get out. We are not setting a date. I think, as I've said, a commitment to getting out is not a policy for a united Ireland — it might be that the real policy is to have a commitment to a united Ireland, and that's what I'm saying. You yourself say we can't do it by coercion. Therefore we have got to do it by consent. But you don't allow them to veto the political progress.

How would a new Labour government treat the Catholics?

Better.

For example, it was a Tory government which granted political status as part of an attempt to find a new solution after Bloody Sunday (when 13 unarmed men were shot dead in Derry, on 30 January 1972). A Labour government took it away. You still seem to be committed to a policy that would involve a continual harassment of a big section of the Catholic population.

I would hope things like the Prevention of Terrorism Act can go, and that we would have a major review of the Emergency Provisions Act. I would want to have a whole look at human rights issues there, like the delay in getting death certificates and coroners' reports on children killed by plastic bullets, and all sorts of other things like that.

That won't come about quickly. The Catholics, for very understandable reasons, don't trust the security forces, and it's very difficult to change that quickly. I mean, I'd like to change it tomorrow morning.

We'll make the forces be seen and felt to be totally impartial. I haven't got a magic wand that would do that. I have got a number of things in my mind, including an all-Ireland police force, that would help do that. But not overnight, I fear.

What do you feel about restoring political status to Republican prisoners?

I would not give political status. I've always been very opposed to political status, not least because as an probation officer I very strongly take the view that if you decide to lock people up for whatever reason then you should treat them equally, except on the grounds of security (ie. a burglar doesn't get the same sort of security as a mass murderer).

I think it is wrong in principle. The only justification for it would be under the Geneva Convention on prisoners of

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war, in which case you have got to have two states that have declared war on each other, both sides wearing recognisable uniforms.

One of the most dangerous things about political status for nationalists is that you also give it to Loyalists. If you do that, and you then have a united Ireland, you hand over a large number of Loyalist prisoners of war to the new state, which is the surest way I know of saying to the Loyalist people — you have a legitimate fight, you are entitled to prisoner of war status too, you have got it, and make sure you keep it.

I know that the Unionists will be prepared to fight and kill and die themselves for their cause, as are the Nationalists at present.

But you accept that the Catholics have been oppressed terribly for 60 years at least. On what definition are the IRA straightforward criminals?

They're not. Of course they're political, I'm not disputing that for a moment. But if we lock them up, that doesn't mean that they should be treated differently.

You are saying that an ordinary criminal should be treated worse. As a penal reformer I reject that strongly. There is no reason why a so-called common criminal — personally I find the phrase very offensive — should be treated worse than you who committed your act for political reasons.

Secondly, what's political? If you are a young black in this country, you feel the police don't defend you, and you take out a brick in your pocket to defend yourself — is that political or not? I would argue it is political.

So would I.

Someone who goes around shoplifting and says, 'I don't like the present structure of society in capitalism', is political.

You're mixing up two questions, though. I'd be in favour of penal reform, and of recognising the political dimension in the case of the young black or the unemployed person shoplifting. But there is a qualitative difference between the political element in these things and the political army of an admittedly oppressed community, with grievances which — you admit — pose a united Ireland as the only solution, even if you disagree with their methods.

That's not a reason for treating them differently. And certainly no reason for treating them better — which is the request.

They are soldiers.

If they are soldiers, then prisoner-of-war status comes from a very specific

The left

agreement. It is the Geneva agreement, which covers two states at war, and wearing a uniform when you are in combat. It's a dangerous policy because at the end of the day you'll wind up with a Loyalist prisoner-of-war camp in a united Ireland. If you want that, OK. But it's dangerous.

The Geneva Convention in its details is a product of established governments. We are talking about an oppressed people and their guerrilla army, which does not wear a uniform because it is outnumbered and so on. But they are soldiers.

By that definition, anyone who is fighting the British state as such, including the Tartan Army in Scotland and the Welsh arsonists and the Angry Brigade, are soldiers. We give them political status, do we? What sort of status would you give them and why treat them better?

I think you are using the whole business about penal reform to obscure the qualitative difference. For example, the Catholics in 1969 did not have guns. The IRA offensive grew out of the civil rights movement in reaction to the Protestant backlash and the pogroms. Your picture about how the armed conflict developed is somewhat askew, because one of the earliest events was the British curfew in the Falls just after the Heath government was elected, in July 1970 — before

the IRA offensive got under way. The whole chronology of how it developed shows that the IRA began as the defensive militia of the Catholic community.

I think that people who pursue this line are, not intentionally, betraying socialist values. There is no reason to argue that people who are less articulate — the vast majority in your prisons are working class people — don't in fact have political motives for what they do. Some of them act as organised groups like the Provisionals do. But that does not justify unequal treatment. If you want specific prisoner of war status, then two things follow: one, you must accept prisoner of war rules and regulations under the Geneva Convention; two, to my mind more importantly, you must give PoW status to Loyalists too. You must take on board that you will hand over to a united Ireland political prisoners of war and you are virtually saying to the rest of the Unionist population that this legitimises their fight against the new Irish state.

Isn't that the distant, or mid-distant future?

I don't think so. I'm working as fast as possible on this programme. Although I'm not setting dates, I'm not writing it off as some distant future aim. You are using the 'Unionist PoWs' argument and the political element in ordinary so-called criminal activity to

obscure the actual problem, that the Provisional IRA is an army of an oppressed people.

I've been working for good treatment in prisons for donkeys years — but I want it for everyone, not just one group. So you're in favour of a blanket reform in prisons?

Yes. One of my positions from early on in the hunger and dirty protests was that if we had made such reforms, we would have had no problem — the five demands would have been met.

So your policy in Northern Ireland will be to bring in a complete prison reform to include all sorts of rights for political and other prisoners?

In fact Northern Ireland prisons are better than the ones here, which are appalling. If we could do more to liberalise prisons, I'd be very happy.

You will in effect grant political status to all 'ordinary criminals' in Northern Ireland?

No. You are twisting my words. I'm saying I want good conditions for prisoners, and I'm not prepared to distinguish as to why a person committed an offence or not.

You are evading the actual point.

I don't think so, but we'll have to leave it there.

Thank you very much.

Tony Benn on Ireland

The time has come when British withdrawal from Northern Ireland must be moved to the centre of public debate. For too long those who have so courageously advocated it have been denounced as if they supported terrorism.

Yet it must be obvious to everybody that the present policy of military repression has failed, is failing, has no prospect of success and, in so far as it is intended to enforce partition, does not deserve to succeed.

Not only is the bitterness growing, along with the casualties, but the techniques for para-military policing and counter-insurgency are turning Northern Ireland into a police state, and those techniques are in danger of spreading to mainland Britain. Though there is massive media coverage of the violence, it is presented in such a way as to blank out any serious discussion of the alternatives.

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Parliament itself devotes a few hours every year to the procedures necessary to renew the emergency legislation, listens to ministerial statements that follow major incidents and debates, in a very low-key way, such administrative issues as fall to it to deal with under direct rule. My own experience of Cabinet is that the real choices do not even

get properly discussed there.

There was a debate in full Cabinet in 1969 when troops were sent in; again, after the Birmingham pub bombing when the anti-terrorist legislation was brought forward, and we had reports on the Ulster workers' strike. But at no time was the option of withdrawal ever seriously considered. Even discussions of successive Labour manifestos were always hedged about with warnings that any commitment to withdrawal might cost lives — as if they were not being lost all the time.

I believe that one reason why Britain retains control is based on an analysis by the chiefs of staff that an independent and unified Ireland might constitute a defence threat, though this is never made explicit and is not a valid reason for staying there. Some confirmation of this may be drawn from the papers that have come to light recently, suggesting that during the last World War Winston Churchill himself was quite prepared to ignore the Ulster veto if the Dublin government would assist Britain in its war effort.

What we should be discussing now is the way in which Britain could break the deadlock by a clear statement of intention to withdraw.

First, we should legislate "to terminate Her Majesty's jurisdiction in Northern Ireland", and set a date — not more than two or three years ahead — by which time Britain would withdraw, leaving open the possibility of an earlier withdrawal if suitable arrangements could be made meanwhile.

Second, we should invite the United Na-

tions to send a peace-keeping force into the province to replace our troops and to sustain law and order until such a time as the new government could assume that responsibility.

Third, we should negotiate a tripartite agreement setting out a basis for future relations between Britain, the Republic and a new Northern Ireland government, including safeguarding of human rights.

Fourth, we should declare an amnesty for prisoners held under the emergency.

Fifth, we should offer financial aid to the new government equal to the present contributions to Northern Ireland plus the costs of the emergency, for a five-year period, to be renegotiated thereafter on an annual basis for a further fixed period.

The very fact that such an alternative was being seriously considered by Britain would force both communities in Northern Ireland to discuss how they could best cooperate to

tackle the real problems of the province. These are mass unemployment, bad housing, poverty, inequality and social deprivation, the solution to which require reconciliation and political action, especially by the labour movement, that could override the sectarian hostilities that have been deliberately encouraged to divert people from the main tasks that need to be faced.

No-one can be sure that a policy along these lines would succeed, but there would certainly be massive support for it in Britain and the Republic. The people in the North, once they realised that we were in earnest, would then have a chance to build a future for themselves and their children, free from the unending prospect of further violence that now seems inevitable.

It sometimes appears as if Britain is an excuse that can be used to postpone consideration of what so many people in the province

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know must be done sooner or later. A clear statement of our intention would strip away that excuse, end an ancient injustice perpetrated by Britain on the Irish people over many centuries, and open up possibilities for cooperation that for the moment seems totally beyond our reach.

The Guardian, 18 July 1983

A reply to Tony Benn

Tony Benn has outlined a policy for ending the conflict in Northern Ireland in his *Guardian* column on 18 July 1983.

He wants to make the proposal for British withdrawal central to public debate in Britain. "For too long those who have so courageously advocated it have been denounced as if they supported terrorism," he says.

Benn's solution is this:

(1) Britain should set a date for withdrawal not more than two or three years ahead.

(2) The UN should be invited to send troops to replace those of Britain.

(3) A tripartite agreement should be negotiated — "including safeguarding of human rights" — between Britain, the Southern Irish state, and "a new Northern Ireland government".

(4) There should be an amnesty for prisoners "held under the emergency".

(5) Financial aid should be given to the new Northern Ireland government, equal to what is now spent on 'security' and the present British subsidies to Northern Ireland, for a five year period.

This is, essentially, the 'independent northern Ireland' policy long favoured by the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and by one or two Catholic mavericks like former SDLP socialist Paddy Devlin. It begs questions that Benn does not even consider, let alone try to answer — and these are the decisive questions.

What would be the political system in an independent Northern Ireland? Majority rule? Rule by the Protestant majority artificially built into the state?

The references to 'guarantees' suggests that Benn's trend of thought would lead him to answer yes. The Catholics have no reason to believe such guarantees, and would fight on indefinitely rather than accept it.

They would be right to do so, for majority rule would be sectarian rule, whatever the guarantees. Though the British makes propaganda that the Six Counties are the democratic expression of the rights of the Protestant majority, in practice it refuses to let them exercise their majority. Why? Because there is no



way that 'majority rule' in Northern Ireland could avoid being, or quickly becoming, Protestant sectarian rule. The British government knows it — and so do the Northern Ireland Catholics.

The 'independent Northern Ireland' policy is unviable because the Six Counties is not a stable entity — it would quickly dissolve into communal civil war. If the South could be kept out of it all the UN could hope to do would be to freeze the conflict at a certain point, as in the Lebanon.

The explosive communal eruptions in Ceylon, with its mass movement of people to their own 'safe' areas, shows us what would inevitably happen in an 'independent Northern Ireland'.

Benn hopes that proposals such as these and a British declaration that it was going "would force both communities in Northern Ireland to discuss how they could best cooperate to tackle the real problems of the province. These are mass unemployment, bad housing, poverty, inequality and social deprivation, the solutions to which require conciliation and political action, especially by the labour movement, that could override the sectarian hostilities that have been deliberately encouraged to divert people from the main tasks that have to be faced."

Sure, the ruling class in both Britain and Ireland encouraged and took advantage of the communal division: it is much deeper-rooted than that, though.

The 'real problems' include the problem that — in social and political fact — shapes and conditions all others: the problem of the right to national self-determination of the majority of the Irish people, and how that Irish majority community will relate to the natural Irish minority, the Protestants of north-east Ulster.

To appeal to 'bread and butter questions' as the 'real issue' — though where possible working class unity should be built even on this minimal basis — is to repeat the error of the 'socialism-is-the-only-answer' activists who were outflanked in Northern Ireland by the rising IRA at the beginning of the '70s. Militant is the heir of such politics for Ireland.

Another argument thrown in by Benn is that Britain sees a united Ireland as possibly posing a military threat. This is out of date by three decades and an epochal revolution in military technology (from battleships and World War II aircraft to Cruise missiles).

In fact Benn's policy is an ineluctable mix of the UDA, Militant and the Communist Party (Bill of Rights/'guarantees'). The UN presence would not jell it. Nothing could.

The solution is a united Ireland with, within it, as much autonomy for Ireland's natural minority (the Protestants) as is compatible with the rights of the majority.

Who was James Connolly?

Any man who tells you that an act of armed resistance — even if offered by 10 men armed with stones — any man who tells you that such an act of resistance is premature, imprudent or dangerous — any and every such man should! at once be spurned, spat at. For remark you this and recollect it, that somewhere, and somehow, and by somebody a beginning must be made, and that the first act of resistance is always and must be ever premature, imprudent and dangerous."

James Fintan Lalor
Thus it was with the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin. This was the spirit in which the successors of Lalor acted. And to act at all they needed such a spirit.

One thousand men, one quarter of them the trade union militants of the Citizen Army, badly armed and with little training, went out into the streets of Dublin to challenge and to fight the greatest empire the world had seen. Many of them knew — certainly the leaders knew — that, given the isolation of Dublin, they had little chance of success.

Yet: "We went out to break the connection between this country and the British Empire and to establish an Irish Republic...believing that the British government has no right in Ireland and never can have any right in Ireland," proudly explained Connolly to the military court that condemned him to death a week later.

Earlier Connolly had summed up the spirit of desperate determination which governed him between the outbreak of war in 1914 and his murder in 1916: "If you strike at, imprison or kill us, out of our prisons or graves we will still evoke a spirit that will thwart you, and maybe, raise a force that will destroy you. We defy you! Do your worst!" (Irish Worker, 1914)

With such conviction Connolly faced the British government and its firing squad. Awaiting his executors, he remained unrepentant. "Hasn't it been a good life — and isn't this a good end?" he said to his wife when she visited him for the last time. Yet, at his death, he believed that the socialists who knew him in Britain and America would never understand what he, a revolutionary socialist, was doing fighting for the mere

national independence of Ireland. He knew that any of the socialists would regard it as an aberration for a Marxist to take Connolly's course. And of course many of them did.

How came Connolly to that end of his, which united the heroic act of traditional Irish Republicanism with the first decisive act of revolutionary labour?

Born of Irish parents in Edinburgh in 1868, Connolly started work in a print-shop at 10 or 11 and at 12 in a bakery. Like most emigre families, the Connollys remained very much attuned to Ireland. There at that time the crypto-socialist Fenian movement of the 1860s had given way to the fight of the Land League and Parnell's parliamentary party.

The League welded the tenants together to fight the landlords. Tenant solidarity and its warlike expression, the boycott, together with Parnell's obstruction in parliament, shook the English system. Callous men who had never bothered when the Irish people suffered in silence now became convinced of the need to solve 'the Irish problem' from above, before it solved itself from below.

The Connolly family atmosphere in Edinburgh, like that of most Irish families then, was saturated with a spirit of bitter rebellion against the 'English system': it was the air which the child James Connolly breathed, and it never left his system.

At 14 he joined the army, following many young workers forced in by economic pressure and following also a Fenian tradition: in the army they learned to use arms. Connolly was stationed in Ireland and it is probable that he deserted.

The Irish Socialist Republican Party

By 1889 he had become a socialist.

The Jacobin ideas of the Irish Republicans transplanted to the conditions of the workers in Edinburgh blossomed easily and naturally into a socialist consciousness. From then to 1896 he developed his knowledge; winding up in the Marxist Social Democratic Federation. (Though his 'Marxism' remained one-sided: he seems never to have shed Catholicism.)

He married and 'inherited' a job as an Edinburgh dustman, but when he fought a local government election he was squeezed out and thereafter found it impossible to get a job.

Then came the turn which threw him for the first time completely into Irish politics. The Dublin Socialist Society invited him to become its paid organiser. He accepted.

By May 1896 he was ready to transform the group into the Irish Socialist Republican Party. From the start the ISRP distinguished itself by declaring for an independent Irish Republic. Even the SDF declared only for Home Rule for Ireland and many socialists considered it a betrayal of 'socialist internationalism' to bother at all with the question of oppressed nationalities.

Following Marx rather than the shallow 'Marxists' of his time, Connolly blended the plebian revolutionary tradition of the United Irishmen and the Fenians with revolutionary socialism. He declared: "Only the Irish working class remains as the incorruptible inheritors of the fight for freedom in Ireland."

Often he expounded his ideas on this question:

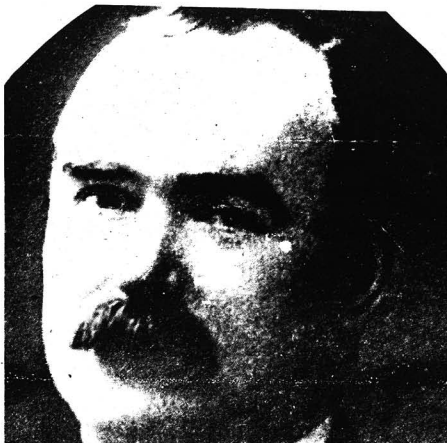
"The development of democracy in Ireland has been smothered by the Union [ie, the Act of Union of 1801 of Britain and Ireland]. Remove that barrier, throw the Irish people back upon their own resources, make them realise that the causes of poverty, of lack of progress, of arrested civil and national development are then to be sought for within and not without, are in their power to remove or perpetuate, and ere long that spirit of democratic progress will invade and permeate all our social and civil institutions." (Workers Republic, 1897)

"The Socialist Party of Ireland [the ISRP's successor] recognises and most enthusiastically endorses the principles of internationalism, but it recognises that that principle must be sought through the medium of universal brotherhood rather than by self-extinction of distinct nations within the political maw of overgrown empires." (Forward, march 1911)

And: "We desire to preserve with the English people the same political relations as with the people of France, of Germany or of any other country. The greatest possible friendship, but also the strictest independence...Thus, inspired by another ideal, conducted by reason and not by tradition, the ISRP arrives at the same conclusion as the most irreconcilable nationalists." (1897)

But: "Having learned from history that all bourgeois movements end in compromise, that the bourgeois revolutionaries of today become the conservatives of tomorrow, the Irish socialists refuse to deny or to lose their identity with those who only half understand the problem of liberty. They seek only the alliance and friendship of those hearts who, loving liberty for its own sake, are

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not afraid to follow its banner when it is uplifted by the hands of the working class, who have most need of it. Their friends are those who would not hesitate to follow that standard of liberty, to consecrate their lives in its service, even should it lead to the terrible arbitration of the sword."

These words were written 19 years before Easter 1916.

Connolly at the same time struggled against the middle class Home Rule party. He mocked at those who saw mere independence as a panacea.

"If you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the Green Flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the socialist republic your efforts would be in vain. England would still rule you. She would rule you through her capitalists, through her landlords, through the whole army of commercial-industrial institutions she has planted in the country and watered with the tears of our mothers and the blood of our martyrs. England would rule you to your ruin."

A social as well as a national revolution was necessary: "A system of society in which the workshops, factories, docks, railways, shipyards etc. shall be owned by the nation...seems best calculated to secure the highest form of industrial efficiency combined with the greatest amount of individual freedom from despotism..."

But he qualified this: "State ownership and control is not necessarily socialist — if it were, then the army and the navy, the police, the judges, the gaolers, the informers and the hangmen

would all be socialist functionaries as they are all state officials — but the ownership by the state of all the lands and material for labour, combined with the cooperative control by the workers of such land and materials, would be socialist...To the cry of the middle-class reformers, 'Make this or that the property of the government', we reply — 'yes, in proportion as the workers are ready to make the government their property'." (Workers Republic, 1899)

Arguing thus, fighting for working-class independence from Home Rulers and Nationalists alike, Connolly was by no means a 'millennial socialist'. He fought for limited gains and against sectarian socialists who refused to do so.

"Of course some of our socialist friends, especially those who have never got beyond the ABC of the question, will remind me that even in a republic in France and the United States. Therefore, they argue, we cannot be Republicans. To this I reply: The countries mentioned have only capitalism to deal with. We have capitalism and a monarchy..."

This, too, was his approach to the national question: we have capitalism and national oppression. Connolly would have had no time for the 'pure' nationalists today. Neither would he have time for those who, with the slogan 'For Connolly's Workers' Republic' on their lips, declare that the reunification of Ireland, even under capitalism, the removal of part of the double oppression of the workers of Ireland, is of no interest to socialists. Connolly was no

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'Connolly sectarian'.

Connolly's ISRP never had more than 100 members, though at certain times it was influential beyond its membership. During the Boer War its anti-government, pro-Boer press was smashed by the police.

Industrial unionism

In 1903 Connolly went to the United States on a lecture tour. Shortly afterwards he moved there with his family. He worked for the American Socialist Labour Party and the Industrial Workers of the World. He had been one of the guiding spirits of a group of SDF members who had split off the same year to found a British SLP on the model of the American party.

Though eventually it was to become rigidly sectarian, Daniel De Leon's SLP was at that time producing trenchant criticism of the existing trade union and socialist organisations. De Leon was among the first to castigate the increasingly conservative and cautious trade union bureaucrats as 'labour lieutenants of capitalism'. He also saw how feeble were the big socialist parties of Europe, with their dominant parliamentarianism. Both the one-sided trade unionists and the equally one-sided parliamentary socialist parties seemed to De Leon to rule out any chance of working class revolutionary action. Just how right he was was shown by the collapse of the labour movement in 1914, when the World War broke out and most socialists supported their own governments.

De Leon tried to answer the problem he himself posed by arguing that the working class needed to build up a real social strength inside the womb of capitalism just as the capitalist bourgeoisies had done in the womb of feudalism. He proposed the creation of an infrastructure composed of industry-wide unions, capable of both seizing and running industry. And he saw the need to build on both the political front and the economic front, towards a strategy of taking power. De Leon was groping theoretically for the specific working class organisational form of industrial and social self-rule. History was to provide her own answer: the workers' soviets thrown up in Russia in 1905 and in Europe after 1917.

Of De Leon, Lenin was later to say that, despite certain sectarianism, he was the only man since Marx to add anything to Marxism. But, as too often happens,

The Republicans

the De Leonites combined many correct ideas with a sectarian practice which rendered their ideas impotent.

Connolly remained with the De Leonites for some years, eventually breaking with them. But while shedding much of the political harshness and intolerance of the SLP he retained a belief in 'industrial unionism'. Until 1910 he was an organiser for the IWW — the great syndicalist trade union movement of mainly migrant workers in America.

In 1910 he returned to Ireland, armed with the ideas of industrial unionism, to begin a period of mass activity which saw the Irish working class rousing itself for the first time into militant action.

The Irish Transport and General Workers' Union

Connolly returned from the USA to a changing Ireland. Jim Larkin had been at work for three years organising the dockers, carters and other trades misnamed 'the unskilled'.

The 'new' general unions which grew in Britain after the matchgirls', gasworkers' and dockers' strikes of 1888 and 1889 had been feeble in Ireland. Now labour was stirring itself again in Britain and in Ireland as well.

In Britain, where the general unions were already in the grip of self-serving officials, the labour upsurge created a rank and file 'unofficial' movement. In Ireland a 'new model' union was being built: the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union.

Connolly became an organiser for the ITGWU. A chastened Connolly, reflecting perhaps his experience in the American SLP, he had written before leaving the USA:

"Perhaps some day there will arise a socialist writer who in his writings will live up to the spirit of the Communist Manifesto, that the socialists are not apart from the labour movement, are not a sect, but are simply that part of the working class which pushes on all others, which most clearly understands the line of march."

Yet he remained a 'De Leonite' in his basic conceptions: the workers must build industry-wide unions which would act together against the capitalist class. As the organisational strength and class consciousness of the workers grew, it would be reflected in the ballot box, un-

til finally a sort of dual power in society existed with the militant workers organising and mobilising, to confront and finally expropriate the capitalists. Should the capitalist state attempt to use repression its limbs would be paralysed by the industrial power of the workers — and bloodshed would be minimal.

Whether the workers, once a majority wanted socialism, were to be helpless before the bosses' state, or the bosses helpless before the workers, would be determined by the industrial strength and cohesiveness of labour.

Both Connolly and Larkin saw their trade union work — and the ITGWU itself — in this revolutionary syndicalist light. But Connolly was no narrow anti-political syndicalist. He became a member of the Socialist Party of Ireland, the successor of the ISRP, as the other plane of the labour army they were mobilising. He helped found the Irish Labour Party in 1912.

As ITGWU organiser in Belfast from 1911 Connolly came up against the division in the working class which is still rampant today. In 1907 Larkin had allied with Protestant radicals (who had split from the Orange Order to form the Independent Orange Institute) and had briefly succeeded in uniting Catholic and Protestant workers in Belfast. But the rising tide of anti-Home Rule agitation (during which the original Ulster Volunteers were organised) swamped what was a promising beginning of working-class unity. Connolly got to the heart of the problem when he wrote, in 1913:

"Let the truth be told, however ugly. Here the Orange working class are slaves in spirit because they have been reared up among a people whose conditions of servitude were more slavish than their own. In Catholic Ireland the working class are rebels in spirit and democratic in feeling because for hundreds of years they have found no class as lowly paid or badly treated as themselves. At one time in the industrial world of Great Britain and Ireland the skilled labourer looked down with contempt upon the unskilled and bitterly resented his attempt to get his children taught any of the skilled trades; the feeling of the Orangemen of Ireland towards the Catholics is but a glorified representation on a big stage of the same unworthy motives."

This is true. Yet it is only a part of the truth. It ignores the entwining of such attitudes with the distinct — British — national identity felt by the Protestant population.

Connolly, however, didn't just denounce and castigate the Orange Order. Some of his most bitter comments were directed at the Home Rule party.

"The English Socialists have failed utterly to fathom the character of the capitalist Home Rulers of Ireland. Their failure arises from their inability to understand the difference between 'rebelly' talk and serious revolutionary purpose, even in a Nationalist sense, they are absolutely lacking. They easily succeed in fooling the so-called 'hard-headed' English working man, but they

never succeed in fooling the Socialists of Ireland. The latter know their men too well; they know in what an inferno of reaction they have succeeded in keeping the domestic affairs of Ireland, such as education and municipal housing and sanitation, and they see them ever in league with the most merciless exploiters of labour on the island." (The Harp (USA), September 1909)

"I have always held, despite the fanatics on both sides, that the movements of Ireland for freedom could not and cannot be divorced from the world-wide upward movements of the world's democracy. The Irish question is part of the social question, the desire of the Irish people to control their own destinies is a part of the desire of the workers to forge political weapons for their own enfranchisement as a class."

"The Orange fanatic and the Capitalist-minded Home Ruler are alike in denying this truth; ere long, both of them will be but memories, while the army of those who believe in that truth will be marching and battling on its conquering way." (Forward, 12 July 1913)

Connolly looked to a future unity of all Irish workers in struggle against capitalism for the Workers' Republic. *"In their movement the North and South will again clasp hands, again it will be demonstrated as in '98 [1798] that the pressure of a common exploitation can make enthusiastic rebels out of a Protestant working class, earnest champions of civil and religious liberty out of Catholics, and out of both a united social democracy."*

The Dublin lock-out of 1913

In contrast with the North, the workers in the South, led by Larkin, were making big advances. The standard of living of the newly organised rose substantially. So did their confidence. They had found a new weapon — class solidarity. No trade, no workplace, was isolated in its struggle. The policy of sympathetic strike action was applied by the union with tremendous success.

And of course the employers hit back. Led by William Martin Murphy, 400 Dublin employers organised to break the union. The famous Dublin Labour War of 1913 followed. Those workers who refused to sign a document repudiating the union were locked out. But all the union's members stood firm.

For eight months the bitter war dragged on. Before it ended strikers had been batoned to death by police. Larkin and Connolly (recalled from Belfast to help) had been arrested, and the Citizen Army, the strikers' militia that grew to become the first Red Army in Europe, had been organised to fight back against the cops.

After eight months the labour war ended. The workers were not defeated — the union remained intact. But it was

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The Irish Citizen Army

not a victory either: after that the union was more cautious and less able to bring full pressure to bear on the bosses. Connolly blamed the semi-defeat on the isolation of Dublin — on the fact that the British trade unions had merely given financial help while withholding the decisive aid of direct industrial action which they had it in their power to give. This failure of solidarity was a big blow to Connolly.

However, as late as November 1913 he had written: "We are told that the English people contributed their help to our enslavement. It is true. It is also true that the Irish people contributed soldiers to crush every democratic movement of the English people...Slaves themselves, the English helped to enslave others; slaves themselves, the Irish helped to enslave others. There is no room for recrimination."

But after the strike Connolly had less confidence in the immediate revolutionary potential of the English workers, seeing them, correctly, as tied too tightly to their imperialist ruling class. The support of the British labour movement for the 1914 war reinforced him in this bitter conclusion.

With the end of the strike in 1914, Larkin went to the USA (where he remained until 1923) and Connolly took charge of the union and the task of rebuilding its strength and confidence. And the Citizen Army was maintained and strengthened as labour's independent armed force. This was made possible by the fact that northern Unionists and the Green Tories also had their 'private' militias: the Ulster Volunteers and the Irish Volunteers.

Partition

When the English Liberals and the Irish Home Rule Green Tories, in face of a virtual rebellion by the Unionists and their Ulster Volunteers, agreed to the partition of Ireland, Connolly wrote the most tragically prophetic words he ever penned:

"The proposal to leave a Home Rule minority at the mercy of an ignorant majority with the evil record of the Orange Party is a proposal that should never have been made, and...the establishment of such a scheme should be resisted with armed force if necessary...Filled with the

belief that they were after defeating the imperialist government and the Nationalists combined, the Orangemen would have scant regard for the rights of the minority left at its mercy.

"Such a scheme would destroy the labour movement by disrupting it. It would perpetuate in a form aggravated in evil the discords now prevalent and help the Home Rule and Orange capitalists and clerics to keep their rallying cries before the public as the political watchwords of the day. In short, it would make division more intense and confusion of ideas and parties more confounded..."

"The betrayal of the national democracy of industrial Ulster would mean a carnival of reaction both North and South, would set back the wheels of progress, would destroy the oncoming unity of the Irish labour movement and paralyse all advanced movements whilst it endured...All hopes of uniting the workers, irrespective of religion or old political battle cries will be shattered, and through North and South the issue of Home Rule will be still used to cover the iniquities of the Capitalist and Landlord class. I am not speaking without due knowledge of the sentiments of the organised labour movement in Ireland when I say we would much rather see the Home Rule Bill defeated than see it carried with Ulster or any part of Ulster left out."

With the outbreak of war the issue was shelved 'for the duration' and the Home Rules became recruiting agents for Britain. Their Irish Volunteers split, with a minority adopting a revolutionary nationalist stand.

Connolly now recalled — publicly — the Irish truism that Ireland could only hope for a successful rebellion against Britain while Britain was at war. And he vowed not to miss the chance to strike at the Empire. In August 1914, to avert the expected threat of a wartime famine, of high prices in the towns, he advocated guerrilla resistance, strikes and sabotage to keep enough food in Ireland to feed the people.

The article ('Our Duty in this Crisis') ended on a note which showed that he did not see it as merely an Irish struggle: "Starting thus, Ireland may yet set the torch to a European conflagration that will not burn out until the last throne and the last capitalist bond and debenture will be shrivelled on the funeral pyre

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of the last war lord."

He began to plan an insurrection. After initial conflict, an alliance was entered into with the nationalist volunteers of Pdraig Pearse. The Communist International was later, in 1920, to encourage communists, where genuinely revolutionary nationalists existed, to join with them — 'to strike together, while marching separately'. Connolly's well-known remark to some Citizen Army men before the Rising: "The odds are a thousand to one against us, but in the event of victory hold onto your rifles, as those with whom we are fighting may stop before our goal is reached" shows he had a similar conception to the International.

The Easter Rising

As early as 1910 Connolly had come close to an understanding of the theory of permanent revolution, which then may have had some grip on Irish realities. (Today it's an empty catchphrase used by people who know nothing of what the theory of permanent revolution is). In the foreword to his book 'Labour in Irish History', he wrote:

"In the evolution of civilisation the progress of the fight for national liberty of any subject nation must perforce keep pace with the struggle for liberty of the most subject class in that nation and...the shifting of economic and political forces which accompanies the development of the system of capitalist society leads inevitably to the increasing conservatism of the non-working class elements and to the revolutionary vigour and power of the working class."

The Irish bourgeoisie "...have a thousand economic strings in the shape of investments binding them to English capitalism...Only the Irish working class remains as the incorruptible inheritors of the fight for freedom in Ireland."

If Irish labour between 1916 and 1923 had adopted this perspective, maintained its political independence and assumed the leadership of the Irish national revolution, at the same time fighting for its own class goals, then history could have taken a very different turn. To examine why it didn't is to explore the great weakness of Connolly: the inadequacy of his understanding of the organisation needed to fight for socialism and to fight for socialist hegemony in

The Republicans

national revolutionary movements.

He had understood that labour's real strength is industrial. But he had lost sight of, or perhaps never fully grasped, the fact that the potential social strength of labour, however militant on economic issues, would only be real to the degree that it was ideologically prepared, educated and class-independent; and in turn that this must be expressed in a political organisation which knew its own mind and had the structure and sinews to act as a revolutionary force — a party like Lenin's party.

Connolly's SPI was (whose leaders were expelled when the party was reorganised as the Communist Party of Ireland in 1921) an old-fashioned and ramshackle affair, over-recoiling from De Leonite 'purism'. The compromisers, the Lib/Labs, the 'Men-sheviks', were not outside it, looking in — some of them were its leaders as they were also of the ITGWU.

After 1916 they set themselves up as a bureaucracy within the ITGWU and betrayed socialism by timidly trailing after the bourgeois leaders who had seized control of the national struggle.

This was the flaw in Connolly's design. Not seeing it, he felt no inhibitions. Relentlessly he pressed for an armed rising, outdaring even the nationalist idealists around Pearse. From his writings we can understand the attitude adopted then.

In 1910, in 'Labour in Irish History', Connolly had told the endless story of the lost chances and the botched risings that succeeded each other like monotonous days of mourning and depression in Irish history. Bitterly he wrote — and the bitterness attested to his determination to do better himself if the chance came. Nor did he believe that there was such a thing as a ripe revolutionary situation. Revolutionary action would make it ripe.

"An epoch to be truly revolutionary must have a dominating number of men with the revolutionary spirit — ready to dare all and take all risks for the sake of their ideas... Revolutionaries who shrink from giving blow for blow until the great day has arrived and they have every shoestring in its place and every man has got his gun and the enemy has kindly consented to postpone action in order not to needlessly hurry the revolutionaries nor disarray their plans — such revolutionaries only exist in two places: on the comic opera stage and on the stage of Irish national politics."
(November 1915)

The plan finally agreed on was for

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simultaneous risings in a number of areas. But at the eleventh hour the titular head of the Volunteers called off the Easter Sunday manoeuvres, which were planned as a cover for the rising. Faced with this catastrophe, expecting to be rounded up, believing that European peace was imminent and that, through their failure to act, Ireland would miss the chance of an independent voice at the coming peace conference, the leaders in Dublin had to make their choice.

Connolly had already indicated what his choice would be in such a situation in 1914. He had written: *"Even an unsuccessful attempt at socialist revolution by force of arms, following the paralysis of the economic life of militarism [by a general strike], would be less disastrous to the socialist cause than the act of socialists allowing themselves to be led in the slaughter of their brothers."*

After Easter 1916

On Easter Sunday 1916 their choice lay between one kind of defeat or another. Either a defeat in battle, that might help rouse the forces for a new struggle. Or defeat without a fight, which would bring discouragement and demoralisation in its wake as so often before in Irish history.

Connolly and Pearse decided to fight. They went out to try and start that fire

Connolly had written of at the outbreak of the war. For a week they defended in arms the 32 County Irish Republic, one and indivisible, which they had proclaimed on Easter Monday 1916. Before they surrendered, Dublin was in ruins.

They died before British Army firing squads, together with the other leaders of the Rising, after summary Court Martial. Connolly, grievously wounded, was court-martialled in bed and shot propped up in a chair.

They did indeed light the fire of revolt which Connolly had spoken of, but it was not to be controlled by men of their persuasion nor to lead to their goal. The middle-class leaders of the Irish national revolution first misled it and then betrayed it to British imperialism.

And today, the bonds and debentures, the capitalists and their warlords, still exist. In Ireland they rule — for themselves and also for international and British capitalism. The Southern Irish capitalists, wrapped in the Green trappings of 'traditional' Nationalism and perpetually 'honouring' — in hollow, gruesome mockery — the men of 1916, still oppress the workers of Ireland with exploitation, poverty, unemployment and forced emigration. They collude with Britain in the North.

Connolly's name is that of a national hero, while his ideas are either suppressed or heavily toned down. As if foreseeing it, he himself once said of the great Irish Jacobin Wolfe Tone: "Apostles of freedom are ever idolised when dead but crucified when living."

Is Sinn Fein socialist?

The Republican movement was crushed and pulverised in World War 2, subject to terrible repression North and South.

It was discredited by its active alliance with Germany, from which it hoped for aid and favour against Britain.

It began to revive in the '50s, but it had shrunk into a single-issue crusade for a united and independent Ireland — which it proposed to achieve by armed struggle only. The economic and social concerns of workers and farmers on both sides of the Border were held to be no business of pure Republicanism.

Not to go into the partitionist Parliaments was a matter of principle, and so was commitment to the idea that only physical force, not 'politics', would win the Republic.

In practice the movement's prejudices and assumptions reflected right-wing Catholic Ireland at the height of the cold war.

It launched a military campaign main-

ly against customs posts and RUC stations in the North. The activities were very small-scale by the standards of the '70s, but they mobilised a lot of support. Abstentionist deputies were elected in not only in the North, but also in the South — something Sinn Fein could not repeat in the '80s even during the hunger strike.

After the Border Campaign

The Fianna Fail government introduced internment in the South in 1957 to deal with the Republicans. By the end of the '50s the 'Border Campaign' had run out of steam. A formal ceasefire was declared in 1962.

Many activists dropped out. The remainder analysed their defeat, and reached conclusions rather like earlier Republicans of the '20s and '30s and like Gerry Adams and his colleagues today.

Concentration on the Border and on the pure military struggle alone would



Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams leading Republicans

never call forth and organise the forces to gain a united Ireland. They began to discuss social policies and socialism, and to move both to the left and away from narrow militarism. Timidly they edged towards a break with the principle of abstention.

The Republicans did this partly under the influence of former (or perhaps undercover) members of the British Communist Party and its Irish 'front', the Connolly Association — Roy Johnstone and Tony Coughlin. The strong Stalinist coloration in the Workers' Party today dates from this period.

The Republicans turned to housing action committees and agitation over Catholic civil rights in Protestant-ruled Northern Ireland.

They expelled and purged traditionalists throughout the country, evolving a Stalinist regime. Opposition to this turn often took the form of a reflex defence of militarism.

The birth of the Provos

In August 1969 anti-Catholic violence erupted in the Six Counties — partly triggered by the success of the Republicans' housing and civil rights agitation in mobilising the Catholics. The Republican movement was unprepared and almost totally disarmed, incapable of defending the Catholic ghettos. Impatient Republicans blamed this on the turn towards politics, and denounced the Stalinist influence. In December 1969 the Provisional IRA split off.

They denounced the Official Republicans as 'extreme socialists', seeking to establish a totalitarian dictator-

ship, and as Marxists.

It is pretty firmly established that the Provisionals, certainly those in the North, had encouragement, including money, from elements in the ruling Fianna Fail party in the South. Until it made a sharp change of policy in April 1970, the 26 Counties government channelled money and other support to the Northern Catholics, and Prime Minister Jack Lynch said that the 26 Counties army "would not stand idly by" and let the Catholics in the North be massacred.

But whatever about that, the Provisional movement soon took on a logic of its own.

It grew very quickly, essentially as a militia of the Catholic ghettos and initially with a purely defensive concept of its role. In Belfast the Provos numbered a few dozen at the beginning of 1970, and over a thousand by early 1971.

They recruited on a policy of simple opposition to British imperialism — and especially the British Army, present on the streets of Northern Ireland since August 1969.

The British Army's heavy-handed policing of Northern Ireland had brought it more and more into conflict with the Catholics who had initially welcomed it. The Army's role was essentially to keep the balance within the artificial Six Counties state, which had a built-in bias in favour of the Protestants. The Catholics were the trouble-makers. The Army responded with CS gas against rioting youths.

And so the Provos grew. Somewhere along the line a decision was taken to go on to the offensive. The first soldiers were killed early in 1971, and there was a spate of bombings.

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Then in August 1971, internment without charge or trial, and exclusively for Catholics, was introduced. It completed the alienation of the Catholic community.

The Provos grew greatly. Many of the young radicals of 1968-9 joined them. The social reality of the Six Counties, the logic and power of the socialist Republican ideas of James Connolly, and the example of revolutions like those of Cuba and Vietnam, radicalised the Provo rank and file in the North. Under the formally right-wing platform staked out by the Provisional leaders in 1969, militant left wing currents developed.

The split with the Official Republicans was not mended. After mid-1972 the majority of the Officials began to veer towards abandoning Republicanism. Today they are the Workers' Party, venomously anti-nationalist, denouncing the Provos as 'fascists'.

And the radicalisation within the Provisionals has remained confined to segments of a politically unclear movement, still essentially bound together by commitment to the military struggle against the British Army in the Six Counties.

The IRSP

Another Republican faction emerged from a split in the Officials. At the end of 1974 Seamus Costello led a split which became the Irish Republican Socialist Party. Though he had been one of the foremost advocates of a 'political turn', Costello opposed and fought the drift of the Officials to exclusive reliance on the ballot box and their abandonment of the goal of Irish national unification and independence.

The IRSP set out to create a revolutionary socialist Republican movement opposing both British imperialism and Irish capitalism on a day-to-day basis, both sides of the Border. It said it would concern itself with the workers' struggles in the South much more seriously than the Provisionals did.

But when Seamus Costello was killed by the Official IRA in 1977, it was a fatal blow to the IRSP. It has since declined and fragmented; its armed wing, the INLA, has become more notoriously reckless and anti-Protestant than the Provos.

The form of 'socialist Republicanism' which the IRSP tried to organise is still strong, however, influencing people on the fringes of the Provos and inside too.

The Provos in the '70s

The Provos fell into the doldrums in late 1973 and early 1974, when a power-sharing Executive was being set up and operated in Northern Ireland.

They were pushed very much to the sidelines during the decisive struggle between the Protestants and the British government in May 1974.

Then the IRA's first response to the wreck of Britain's strategy was a surge of energetic militarism, which included a stepped-up campaign in Britain. When things slowed down, it became clear that the Republican movement was seriously disoriented. It must have been pretty clear to many in the movement that they had been decisively checkmated by the Protestant General Strike. The days of 1972, when the Provos were able to get direct talks with the British government, were long past. Prospects for any immediate political change in Ireland were bleak.

For most of 1975 there was an IRA ceasefire in Northern Ireland. This was the year in which Britain's Labour government set up an elected assembly to try to work out an agreed constitution to replace the one that the Protestant workers wrecked in 1974.

Sinn Fein was allowed to set up 'incident centres', recognised by the British authorities, through which a considerable amount of contact and co-laboration took place.

In early 1976, the constitutional assembly's Protestant majority reported its conclusions to the British government: that majority (that is, Protestant) rule be restored immediately. Britain rejected this. It decided to make an end to the search for political solutions, and to go all-out to stabilise the Six Counties.

This meant making military defeat of the IRA the central immediate goal. The IRA was both the direct source of the Catholic military offensive against the British Army, and the indirect cause of the Protestant unrest.

Towards the hunger strikes

Britain launched a new offensive against the IRA. As always, it translated itself into a savage assault on the Catholic community, a sizeable part of which gives active or passive support to the IRA. This assault massively alienated the Catholic population; the IRA recruited, reorganised itself on a tighter cell structure, and fought back.

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In 1976 the Labour government withdrew, for all paramilitaries convicted after April 1976, the 'special status' conceded by the Tories in 1972. Republican prisoners began the 'blanket protest'. They refused to wear prison clothes. When confined to their cells in blankets, they refused to 'slop out'.

Outside, Relatives Action Committees agitated and built up support. Over five years the Catholic mass movement renewed itself, focusing on the prisoners.

By the time Bobby Sands was elected MP, and died on hunger strike — the first of ten — in 1981, the Catholic mass movement was on a scale not seen since 1972. There were even stirrings in the South, for the first time since 1972.

When the hunger strike was over, the Republican leaders had to decide what to do about the fact that their main gains had been political gains. The feeble state of the SDLP made politics — the chance to become the electorally recognised representative of the Catholic community — irresistible to the Provo leadership.

After years of wasting and going to seed in the no-politics wilderness imposed in Northern Ireland by Britain after 1976, the SDLP had been forced by the feeling in the Catholic community into reluctant, tepid support for the hunger strike. It was pushed into the invidious position of indirectly supporting the Provisionals, thereby conceding a tremendous moral advantage to them.

A new approach rose out of the grave of Bobby Sands MP. 'An armalite in one hand, and a ballot paper in the other', became the self-definition of the radical wing of the Republicans, based in the North. This was the politics that took over the national organisation at the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis (conference) of November 1983.

The contradictions in the radicalisation of Sinn Fein

The radicalisation was accompanied by a turn away from any serious notion of conciliating the Protestant workers. In 1972 the Provisionals had adopted the policy of a federal united Ireland which, in however confused a way, did (as one Provo leader put it) "extend the hand of friendship" to the Protestant people of Northern Ireland.

Now federalism was rejected as a sop to 'pro-imperialists', and implicitly replaced by a perspective of forcing the British state to force the Protestants into a united Ireland. Provo leftists continued to talk about reaching out to the Protestant workers — but said it would be possible only after a united Ireland had been imposed.

There are other contradictions in the radicalisation of the Provos, contradictions rooted deep in the history of Irish Republicanism.

One reason why the Republicans in the '40s and '50s had been so unrelievedly right-wing — in contrast to the '20s and '30s, and earlier — was the thinness

of their ranks. Scattered over the surface of Irish society, they lacked organic contact, involvement, or concern, as a political movement, with the social problems of either workers or small farmers.

In the North in the '70s it was different. The Catholics of the cities and towns were the specially oppressed, in semi-permanent unemployment, sunk in poverty and often in hopelessness.

In addition, the leaders of the Republican movement and its activists saw their own reflection in movements of the oppressed throughout the world, just as the Catholics of Derry in the late '60s saw themselves as the counterparts of the Blacks in the USA.

Apart and aside from all questions of political conviction, a movement like the Provisionals in conditions like Northern Ireland's has an imperious reason to be radical — it needs to attach as many people as possible to its nationalist cause. Social agitation and becoming involved in community politics has the same recommendation to the Irish-separatist physical-force politician in Belfast as to the parliamentary Liberal politician in Liverpool — it builds support, it makes the politician the champion of the community.

The political faction of the Provisionals initially presented their ideas to the movement as an essential part of the social logistics of fighting a prolonged guerrilla war which, they said, might last for 20 years.

Turn to politics, to social issues, and to the left, thus is and was compromised by two fatal limitations. It remains subordinate and ancillary to the military campaign, which is still the central unifying principle of the Provos. And it is a turn confined to one community in Northern Ireland's divided working class.

Sinn Fein election candidates will campaign, for example, for better bus services — but for better bus services for Catholic areas.

The left Republican tradition

The other strand woven into the Provos' new approach is the powerful historical tradition of left-wing populist Republicanism.

We must turn to the men of no property, said Wolfe Tone in the 1790s, and his words were deliberately picked up and repeated by the socialist Republican Liam Mellows writing from Mountjoy jail in 1922 about the deal that the southern Irish bourgeoisie had made with the British Empire to subvert and overthrow the Irish Republic. Mellows was shot by the Free State government in December 1922.

In the aftermath of the defeat of the Republicans and the consolidation of the Free State government, this idea was taken up by George Gilmore and Paedra O'Donnell. Their politics was a genuine populism — radicalism basing itself on 'the people' in general rather than the

working class in particular.

This native strand of left Republicanism, moving confusedly towards working-class politics, met up with the Stalinists in the 1930s, and had all its nationalist limits reinforced and strengthened. The notion of the two-stage revolution — first complete the 'bourgeois revolution', and only then fight for socialism — was translated into 'Irish' as the idea that national independence had to be 'completed' as a first stage towards socialism.

'First win the broad common demand for the independent national Republic — and then go for the Workers' Republic' was the slogan of the majority of the left-wing Republican Congress, which included the Stalinists, in 1934.

These ideas gained influence in the 1970s because they seemed to offer a reconciliation of socialist and radical goals with an immediate focus on the nationalist war in the Six Counties — begun by the Provisionals in their right-wing phase.

Abandoning abstentionism

In November 1986 the men who founded the Provisionals in 1969-70, Rory O'Brady and David O'Connell, broke away to form a new organisation, Republican Sinn Fein.

They walked out when Sinn Fein voted by the necessary two-thirds majority to end its 64-year-old policy of refusing to take any seats in the Dublin parliament. Sinn Fein had decided three years earlier to take seats if elected to the EEC parliament, but continues to boycott Westminster and will boycott any further Belfast parliament.

O'Brady and O'Connell had also fought against the change of line on federalism. Only 30-odd of the 160 delegates who voted against the change of policy on taking seats in Dublin walked out with them, and Republican Sinn Fein remains a small group. Nevertheless the split was significant.

Republican history has a recurrent pattern of groupings which move away from commitment to physical force on principle towards politics — and become more or less radical bourgeois parliamentary parties.

Such was the origin of Fine Gael, which is the descendant of the party founded by the ex-Republicans who set up the Free State in the 1920s. Such was the origin of Fianna Fail, set up by Republicans who entered Dublin parliamentary politics in the 1930s; of Clann na Poblachta, a venture into parliamentary politics by left Republicans in the 1940s which quickly collapsed; and of the Workers' Party, which was the Official Republican movement.

Why has there been this pattern? Because the Republican movement is a single-issue movement. Onto the stem of that single issue, radical social politics have been grafted at different times over the decades; but the twin axioms of

physical force on principle and abstention from parliamentary politics have remained fundamental, as the guarantees against being distracted, the way to ensure that social questions cut channels to the national question and do not displace it.

Traditional Republicans are intransigent revolutionaries. Their revolutionism consists in a stark rejection of existing political and state structures, and the pursuit of other, ideal, alternative structures.

The goal is 'The Republic' — a slogan which represents a mystical future state of ideal freedom, harmony and prosperity entirely beyond the modest real prospects of a bourgeois-democratic united Ireland. The ideal future Republic represents the ideal will of the people; all existing institutions are the work of traitors and foreign influences. Physical force is the only practical action that is recognised as desirable for the work of substituting the desired ideal for what exists now.

Thus the fetishes of physical force on principle and abstentionism complement and reinforce each other to sustain a sort of revolutionary politics.

But it is not socially revolutionary. And that is why so many Republican groups which moved away from abstentionism have also moved away from any sort of revolutionary politics.

A Marxist working-class organisation can use tactics and techniques in a varied way, working in a bourgeois parliament and trade unions or through armed street-fighting, and remain all the while true to itself. But once the tactical fetishes that separated those ex-Republican groups from the existing bourgeois and petty-bourgeois order were cleared away, there was nothing solid to maintain their revolutionary stance.

Abstentionist and physical-force-on-principle Irish Republicanism has many things in common with Spanish anarchism. Its repeated fate in relation to government is similar to that of the anarchists who 'denied' politics and the state for decades, and then during the Spanish Civil War joined the Popular Front government of the Republic (which repressed rank and file anarchists).

The anarchists denied the state; but the state is necessary. It cannot be abolished at this stage of social development. It must be either the bourgeois state or the workers' state.

The Spanish Civil War convinced some of the anarchist leaders that the state was necessary. But then they could only relate to it by betraying themselves. Having no programme capable of dealing with reality, they accepted the existing state and became its prisoners.

That is why the Provos' shift towards participation in parliamentary politics has destabilised their movement and may destabilise it further. For the present their commitment to physical force on principle remains strong, and the traditionalist breakaway small.

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Are the Provos socialist?

It is indisputable that many, or even most, of the members of the Republican movement want it to be a left-wing and socialist movement, based upon and championing the working class and working farmers.

Sinn Fein defines itself as based on the 1916 declaration of the Irish Republic and on the 1919 'Democratic Programme' of the Irish parliament, Dail Eireann.

Both those documents had a certain radical edge to them in their own time. The 1919 document was drafted by the Irish labour leaders, and adopted by Dail Eireann in return for the labour movement subordinating itself to the nationalists during the struggle with Britain for independence.

But they are not documents of social radicalism today. They do no more than talk vaguely about the state having social responsibilities, treating 'the children of the nation' equally, and so on. Before the Welfare State that was radical, but today even many Tories would at least pay lip-service to such principles.

The Provos remain a loose populist party which cannot in its present form function as a serious force for socialism in Ireland. Indeed, because of its attitude to the Protestant workers in Northern Ireland, it is bound, despite good intentions, to work against working-class socialism.

It remains the military leadership and militia of the oppressed Catholics, and for that reason deserves the support of British socialists against the British state in Northern Ireland. But there should be no illusions about its socialist pretensions.

The Provos and the Protestants

The populism of the Provos is expressed in the vagueness of their ideas of socialism, but also, and crucially, in their attitude to the Protestant working class.

Since the Protestants include the big majority of the working class in Northern Ireland, an attitude to the Protestants also implies an attitude to the working class, and has decisive implications for the identification and definition of the force that will bring socialism. Whatever the Provos mean by

The Republicans

socialism, it is something to be created by the Catholic community, not by the working class, Catholic and Protestant alike.

Socialism is equated with anti-imperialism, and anti-imperialism with the military struggle in the North. Sectarianism is identified exclusively as a creation of Britain — and the answer to sectarianism, therefore, is once again the military struggle in the North.

The Protestant workers are seen not in social, class, terms, but almost exclusively as a catspaw of Britain and as the embodiment of sectarianism.

By a process of redefining terms, therefore, non-sectarian socialism is equated (for immediate activity) with a narrow nationalist militarism. Recklessness in relation to the Protestant workers is justified in terms of political intransigence against Loyalism.

Thus the 'socialist' element becomes a matter of sentiments, aspirations, and faith in the nationalist struggle somehow 'growing over' into socialism. The immediate practice is nationalist — or in fact, by means of defining the Catholics as 'the nationalist community', Catholic communist.

Yet there can be no genuine socialist revolution in Ireland without the participation of the decisive core of the Protestant working class.

The idea of socialism created by a military elite, no matter how much support it has in the Catholic community and no matter how good the back-up services it creates by community politics, is inconsistent with working-class self-liberation.

At the end of its 1985 Ard Fheis, Sinn Fein voted, against its leadership's opposition, for a woman's right to choose on abortion. The 1986 Ard Fheis promptly reversed the vote. Sinn Fein remains a Catholic party, both at leadership level and at the level of its rank and file and broad support.

Why Sinn Fein cannot lead a struggle for socialism

Because of the fact that they make the 'armed struggle' in the North central, the Provos have been unable to win much support in the South. A programme which makes the forcible inclusion of the Northern Protestants into a united Ireland its centrepiece does not and cannot attract the mass of Southern workers. It cannot and does

not address their most important concerns.

But the Provos' politics would still be Catholic communalism even if they got mass support in the South.

It is not only undesirable, but impossible, to press the Northern Protestants into a united Ireland by Catholic military force; a serious drive to do it could only end in civil war and bitter repartition. The Provos' current politics are thus unable even to win a free united Ireland, let alone socialism.

Central to Irish politics is the fact that between a quarter and a fifth of the people of Ireland are the main obstacles to Irish unity. But in Sinn Fein politics,

the history of British crimes against Ireland, and the reality of British army brutality in Northern Ireland now, are used to obscure and muddle this — to present the problem of the Protestants as merely a sub-section of the problem of British occupation.

This means evading the nature of the basic problem which any organisation which wants to forge Irish unity — let alone Irish working-class unity — must face and solve.

Irish workers who really want to fight for a socialist Ireland will have to reject and go beyond the politics of Sinn Fein, and take their stand on working-class Marxist socialism.

Stop the military campaign!

An open letter to Gerry Adams, November 1987

You have said publicly that you deeply regret the slaughter and havoc caused by the Provisional IRA bomb in Enniskillen last Sunday.

I'm sure you do. Not only have you slaughtered and maimed innocent Irish people attending a religious service, you have also dealt a grievous blow to the cause you want to serve — Irish unity.

But you have neither acknowledged nor apologised for the Catholic sectarian side of Sunday's massacre — though that is the side of it which will be most in the minds of Ireland's Protestant community, and especially of Protestants in areas of Northern Ireland where Catholics are in the majority, as they are in Fermanagh.

This carnage brings out clearly how sharply what you do contradicts what you want to achieve. The constitutional nationalist John Hume was right to describe the Enniskillen slaughter as a "sectarian provocation". You say you want a united Ireland — and you commit a sectarian atrocity like this against the community without whose consent there will never be a united Ireland!

Whatever you want to do or think you do, Mr Adams, your movement does not work for a united Ireland. The entire logic of your military campaign points not towards a united Ireland but towards bloody repartition by way of sectarian civil war — a war made up of such acts as Enniskillen.

Even if you gain your immediate objective, British withdrawal, through your military campaign, that will only be the first step towards the tragedy of sectarian civil war — out of which can only

come repartition.

Irish nationalists like Eamonn De Valera abjured violence against the Protestants as a means of uniting Ireland because they knew that the most it could achieve would be to shift the border east and north, incorporating some of the Six Counties territory into the Republic. The 16 year long war which your movement has waged proves that they were right on that. What was wrong about De Valera's approach was his social and political programme, not the lack of gunfire.

Doing what is necessary to defend Catholic communities in Northern Ireland against attacks by Orange bigots or British forces is one thing. Trying to unite Ireland by guerrilla war against the British Army — and, in fact, against the Northern Ireland Protestant community — is another.

It is a war you cannot win. It is a misconceived war. Its objective — Irish unity — cannot be won by war. It can only be won if the consent of the Irish community is won.

Your war is premised on radical misunderstandings and self-hypnotising ideological lies.

It is not 'British imperialism' that keeps Ireland divided. Fundamentally, it is the refusal of the Protestant-Unionist Irish minority, who are the majority in north-east Ulster, to accept the status of a permanent minority in a Catholic state.

A campaign aimed at re-uniting Ireland by military force is thus inevitably a war directed more against the Protestant community than against the

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British state.

An effective Republican movement should be fought against sectarianism in all forms, advocating a federal united Ireland with regional autonomy for the Protestant-majority area, and striving to unite workers in struggles for jobs, wages and conditions. It should ruthlessly reject all green-nationalist rhetoric and all provocative actions that divide workers. We cannot unite Ireland without uniting Irish people. James Connolly was right when he wrote: "Ireland without her people means nothing to me."

Yours is a war waged in the name of the Irish people, but actually based only on the Six Counties Catholic minority — and even on a minority of that minority. Your support in the rest of Ireland is minuscule.

Your chances of winning over the Northern Ireland majority are nil. In fact you don't try. Everything your movement has done over many years is proof that you have no interest in trying. Both your political aims — a unitary all-Ireland state, which would inevitably be Catholic-dominated — and your methods — a guerrilla war against the British state and against the Protestant community, are based on one community only.

A war against the Protestant community? Yes, Mr Adams, there is no other way to describe it, whether we are talking about what happened in Enniskillen or about the killing of Protestant workers earlier in 1987 after they had been labelled as "military targets" for doing jobs somehow related to maintaining the army or police.

The slaughter of the innocents in Enniskillen will convince many of Sinn Fein's erstwhile supporters that the Provisional IRA's war has landed your movement — and all of Northern Ireland's society — in a bloody dead-

end. It should convince the socialists within Sinn Fein that the military campaign needs to be called off now.

No good can come of this campaign. There is nothing revolutionary about militarism-on-principle. Even if this campaign should succeed in forcing the British to withdraw — and it won't do that — then it will not unite Ireland, but bloodily redivide it...forever.

Enough is enough!

John O'Mahony
Editor, Socialist Organiser.

Provos and Protestants

This excerpt from Gerry Adams' speech to the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis (conference) in January 1989 represents the furthest the new Sinn Fein has gone in recognising the need to reach out to the Protestants. It raises many of the right questions; but gives no answers.

Since our last Ard Fheis I had a series of discussions with a number of Northern Protestants.

These discussions crystallised for me the need for Republicans to understand the perceptions and fears of this section of our citizens.

The majority of Northern Protestants locked into their support for unionism and imperialism see the demand for Irish national independence as a demand for a creation of a Catholic state and an end to their Protestant identity. Many of them wrongly conclude when Republicans call for a British withdrawal that we include them in that withdrawal scenario. Their fears are fed by the reactionary utterances and antics of sectarian politicians.

Those perceptions, though foreign to Irish Republicans, are held by many Northern Protestants. They represent a barrier

which we must consistently try to break down. When we consider the gulf of pain and hate and the years of physical separation that exists between ourselves and the Northern Protestant population this is a formidable task. Yet it is one to which we must remain committed.

It may be crystal clear to Republicans that the Protestant population have got it wrong about our political intentions but this sincere conviction is not sufficient. Their perceptions are equally sincere and we have to see ourselves from their point of view. The Republican analysis is correct in seeing the defeat of imperialism as the key to peace and justice on this island.

Many Republicans who understand this and who understand the centrality of imperialism to the conflict underestimate or have yet to consider the trauma that will be experienced by the Protestant population when the union with Britain is severed. How can we lessen that trauma? Or indeed, can it be lessened at all? Our education as Republicans will be incomplete until we have developed an understanding of all this.

Our search for peace has to rise above the consequences of imperialist rule if the post-partition independent Ireland is indeed to be based on the unity of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter.



Some economic facts

NORTH AND SOUTH TODAY

The South is now slightly more industrialised than the North. This is a big change from the previous pattern.

	South	North
Value added: % industrial	37%	35%
Industrial (excluding utilities) % of civilian employment	29%	27%

(EEC statistics, 1984.)

GDP per head is on average almost exactly the same in the South as in the North. Social benefits are also on similar levels — 1982 figures (from EEC) for social benefits per head of total population were UK £1110, 26 Counties £1040.

Major differences:
 • Southern industry is much more modern. Electronics accounts for over a third of manufacturing exports. Metals and engineering account for 38% of value added, office and data processing equipment for 19% (*Financial Times* 8.7.86). Chemicals are now the next major sector.

In the North, 40% of jobs in manufacturing disappeared between 1979 and the mid-'80s. The remaining industry is generally old-fashioned and declining.

• The South is still more rural and agricultural. In the North a huge role is played by public service employment — 36% of total employment (*Irish Times* 26.8.85). With even higher unemployment that the South (around 20 per cent), over half the North's population is directly dependent on the British state for income (wage or benefit) (*Irish Times* 26.8.85).

Net subsidy from Britain to Northern Ireland is £1.5 billion a year, about 30% of Northern Ireland's total income.

So: economically the North is a drain on British capitalism, which has however been able to establish profitable relations with the independent South.

The condition of the working class is worse in the North than in the South — Northern Ireland is the worse-off region in the EEC after Calabria in Southern Italy.

Protestant workers in the North are slightly better off than Catholic workers — Catholic unemployment is two and a half times Protestant unemployment. The Protestant workers may, therefore, possibly have

a slightly higher average living standard than Southern workers; but to see the Protestant workers as the pampered pets of imperialism and the Southern workers as 'Third World' people makes no sense.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE 26 COUNTIES SINCE 1958

	1960-1	Mid-80s
% of working population		
in agriculture	35%	17%
Urbanisation	46%	56%
Manufacturing % of exports	12%	68%
% of exports to UK	72%	35%
% of exports to other EEC countries	11%	34%

(Figures from World Bank and Oxford Economic Atlas of the World. Earlier figure for manufacturing exports is 1955.)

Ireland is now an advanced capitalist country. It is on roughly the same level, as measured by National Income per head, as Southern Europe. In terms of the introduction of modern capitalist relations in the countryside, it has long been in advance of Southern Europe, since the landlords were bought out after 1903.

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80% of the 26 Counties' manufacturing exports are produced by foreign-owned companies, which also employ almost half the country's manufacturing workers — and repatriate 60% of their profits. The 26 Counties also has a huge foreign debt.

But two other facts should be born in mind before this feature is cited as proof that the 26 Counties are still a 'semi-colony'.

Most of the foreign-owned companies are not from the country which the 26 Counties would presumably be a semi-colony of — Britain. Of about 900 foreign-owned companies, over 300 are US-owned, 130 West German, and only 200 or so UK-owned.

And Ireland has been exporting capital since the 1870s. By 1914 Ireland was a creditor country and Irish capitalists had total investments abroad of £150 million (L M Cullen, *An economic history of Ireland since 1660*). A survey in 1964 found that Ireland had the fourth highest level of investment income from abroad, per head of population, in the world! Its inflow of investment income was \$104 million, its outflow \$67 million (*Britain's Invisible Earnings*, 1967, chapter on *World Comparison of Invisibles*). Only in more recent years has the inflow of capital to Ireland made it a clear debtor country.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

At the time of Partition there was a stark contrast between the North and the South. In 1911 Ulster had 48% of all Ireland's industrial workers, and Belfast

alone, 21% (Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland: the Orange State*). The North exported manufactured goods internationally (a large proportion to the US); the South, agricultural produce, mainly to Britain.

17th century: The bulk of Ireland's land seized and given to English or Anglo-Irish landlords or farmers. Plans to clear the native Irish from large areas and replace them by settlers generally fail; the only large area when English and Scots settlers become the majority is in the north-east, and that is as much due to free migration as government policy.

Semi-feudal land relations, but under the 'Ulster Custom' Protestant tenants in the north-east have more security and a property right on improvements they make to the land. Attempts to clear peasants off land to make room for sheep and cattle. Big outflow of cash to absentee English landlords.

18th century: The 'Protestant Ascendancy' established, with 'Penal Laws' against Catholics. Growth of linen industry, especially in the north-east, as a rural cottage industry. Weaver-peasants do deal with merchant capitalists rather than wage-work for industrial capitalists.

After 1800 (Act of Union): decline of industry in South, rise of Belfast industry (linen, shipbuilding, engineering). Before 1800 most of the linen trade from the north-east had gone through Dublin merchants; after 1800 it goes through Belfast. By 1835 Belfast is a busier port than Dublin. *There is no integrated all-Ireland economy.*

After Famine of 1840s: massive depopulation. — people replaced by sheep and cattle.

After 1885, and especially after Wyndham Land Act of 1903: Britain government decides to 'buy out' landlords to pacify Irish countryside. A 'bourgeois revolution' on the land — from above.

1920-1: Partition. Southern Ireland gains partial independence from Britain, which over the following decades it makes complete. Northern Ireland remains attached to Britain, but with home rule as a 'Protestant state for a Protestant people'.

After 1932: 26 Counties shifts to economic nationalism. 'Economic War' between 26 Counties and Britain. Industrial employment expands by 50% between 1931 and 1938, but at a cost.

From mid-1950s: With the old nationalist policy leading to stagnation, the 26 Counties reopens its economy to the world market. Meanwhile Northern Ireland's industries, founded in the 19th century, are declining.

1972: Ireland joins the EEC. Major benefits for Irish farmers.

Ireland today is highly integrated into the international economy. The 26 Counties exports over 50 per cent of what it produces, and is increasingly tied in to the EEC. Any economic policy today seeking to cut Ireland off from the rest of the world economy is utopian and reactionary.

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A Catholic state for a Catholic people?

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"If the old Protestant Stormont Parliament, with the full backing of the Protestant Church, but against the united will of the Roman Catholic Church and people, had forced through Parliament a law dealing with some complex moral issue, do you not think that Stormont would have been accused of the vilest form of sectarianism by acting against the united wishes of the Roman Catholic community and by insensitivity to Roman Catholic opinion".

Victor Griffin, dean of St Patrick's, Dublin.

The abortion referendum in the 26 Counties in 1983 led some before the poll to talk of a 'new partition of Ireland'. The result showed they were right.

In a very low turn-out (54%) there was a two-to-one majority to insert into the constitution a ban on abortion (which is already illegal).

For the sponsors of the referendum it was, however, a very qualified victory. Only one third of the electorate voted yes.

There was a sharp division between Dublin — where half voted no — and the rest of the country. And the senior partner in the coalition government, Fine Gael, was heavily divided.

The youth of Fine Gael campaigned openly for a no vote. At the end prime minister Garret Fitzgerald came out, timidly, for 'no'.

The Labour Party, junior partner in the coalition, was divided too: half the deputies for yes, half for no.

The supporters of the amendment pulled out all the stops in their campaign, and they had a lot in their favour. The South of Ireland has long been a Catholic, conservative society, where the priests are a tremendous social power. It has been in the grip of a savagely repressive sexual puritanism since the mid-19th century Famine.

Though the society has changed massively in the last 25 years, with industrialisation and urbanisation, the forces of Catholicism and conservatism are still strong. Over 80% of the people still go to Mass regularly.

Those at the top of the Catholic hierarchy made pseudo-liberal statements that people should vote according to their consciences. The lower clergy made every pulpit a political platform for the 'Pro-Life' campaign.

The mass circulation press and the provincial press said vote yes. Behind them they had the Catholic teaching that

an embryo has a soul from the beginning, and abortion is therefore infanticide.

Most of the opponents of the amendment are against abortion. Some — like Fitzgerald — argued against the amendment on the grounds that, because of ambiguous wording, it could lead to legalised abortion.

Behind the argument about wording, there was also a more important argument about the role of the Catholic Church in Irish society.

The amendment was tailored to fit Catholic social teaching. The Protestant churches in the South opposed the amendment. They are against abortion, but not as unconditionally or obsessively as the Catholics. Victor Griffin, Dean of St Patrick's, Dublin, put it like this:

"There can be no true Republicanism without equality of recognition, and this implies the toleration of different views and practices in relation to certain moral issues within the framework of an agreed public morality. Such moral issues should be the affair, not of a Republican state, but of the particular Churches, each having the right to exercise its own particular moral discipline and none having the right to enforce theirs on others.

"At present we must admit, however reluctantly, there is no strong commitment in this state to any kind of united Ireland which would involve accommodating the Protestant minority point of view".

A massive blow has been dealt to the pretence that the Southern political parties really want a united Ireland.

The Irish people is divided. Whatever the historical and economic roots, and political/economic underpinnings, this expresses itself in the consciousness of the Catholic and Protestant people as a matter of religion — to which are attach-

ed ideas about liberty of conscience, and of the relationship of the individual and his or her conscience to Church and State.

On every count the referendum has been an attempt at a Catholic triumphalist assertion of the dominance of one side over the other. On 7 September 1983 the Irish constitution was explicitly identified with the Catholic church. The nationalist cause was identified with the Catholic cause.

Fianna Fail identified completely with the amendment campaign. After a 20-minute (!) meeting of its parliamentary deputies, Fianna Fail decided to vote yes, and the party's discipline did the rest. Yet Fianna Fail is The Republican Party — and the party which the 'left Republican' IRSP, for example, has supported in elections.

In the North, the SDLP majority was for a yes vote.

Symbolically, even Sean MacBride, founder of Amnesty, son of the 1916 martyr, and Chief of Staff of the IRA in the late '30s, voted yes. It was a repeat of his stance in 1951, when the Fine Gael/Labour Party/Clann na Poblachta government buckled under the pressure of the Catholic hierarchy's opposition to a health scheme for 'Mother and Child'. MacBride was then the leader of Clann na Poblachta, and forced the Clann na Poblachta Minister of Health, Noel Browne, to resign.

All this is very relevant to the dispute about 'federalism' in a united Ireland. The fact is that the forces that dominate Southern Irish politics ignored the protests of the Protestants (and Jews). The two-thirds who voted no or refused to rally to the priests are a basis of hope for the future, but the yes vote won.

A fight to ensure the rights of the Protestant minority must be part of the fight for a united Ireland.

What do the Irish people want?

An opinion poll in February 1983 asked people in Northern Ireland what political solution they wanted.

Among Catholics 31 per cent wanted a home-rule government for Northern Ireland with power-sharing, 25 per cent wanted a united Ireland.

47 per cent of Protestants wanted integration of Northern Ireland with Britain; 17 per cent power-sharing, and 14% Protestant majority rule.

No solution commanded a majority in either community. The only one that had sizeable support in both communities was

power-sharing — a formula that evidently sounds attractive, but which has proved impossible to establish despite repeated efforts by British governments over 16 years. 56% of Protestants and 84% of Catholics said they agreed with the 'principle' of power-sharing.

These figures register a political impasse. Hand talk about 'supporting the struggle of the Irish people for a united Ireland' looks very simplistic indeed when you consider that only 18% of the population of Northern Ireland and only 25% of Catholics (fewer than vote Sinn Féin) give 'united Ireland' as their favoured solution. (Fortnight, April 1983)

The Workers' Party

At the conference (Ard Fheis) where the former Official Republican movement changed its name to The Workers' Party, a Dublin solicitor, Pat McCartan, argued in favour of the name change that it would allow "professional people and tradesmen" to feel at home with the party.

He wasn't making a music-hall joke. He knew what he was talking about.

The dropping of the Republican name followed a sweeping repudiation of traditional revolutionary republican attitudes, and the Workers' Party name has not stopped the party voting for Haughey as prime minister and guardedly supporting both the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Tories' previous 'Prior initiative' for 'do-it-yourself' devolution in Northern Ireland.

The WP calls for the building of a workers' party on an all-Ireland basis. It claims to be recruiting Protestant workers in the North. It bitterly denounces the contention of "the Fianna Fail/SDLP/Provo axis" that Northern Ireland has failed as a political entity. Its solution to the Northern conflict is "peace, work, democracy and class politics".

Now influence has frequently been gained by Labour and socialist parties in Northern Ireland on the shallow ground of trade-union and economic issues, but it has never withstood the disruptive power of communal and sectarian, not to speak of republican, politics.

The leaders of the Workers' Party should have learned this the hard way in the late '60s, when their supposedly unifying civil rights campaign aroused the Catholics but alienated the Protestants. After leading Catholics to take a first step of calling for civil rights, the second step had to be to tackle the root reason why they had been deprived of civil rights — partition.

The Workers' Party's solution to the communal divisions in the North is essentially to bury its head in the sand and pretend that this time, despite all previous experience, working class unity can be built on a basis of economic issues and socialist propaganda.

In the meantime its approach is to be a responsible and 'constructive' force in

mainstream politics, putting forward reasonable and balanced proposals on all the issues of the day — within the parameters of the existing system.

Involvement in the Southern political establishment on this basis is already ravaging the Workers' Party's socialist credentials. Its commitment to the existing structures will inevitably mire it completely in the bog of bourgeois, anti-working-class politics.

When they called themselves Republicans, they used to talk about completing the Irish bourgeois revolution (national independence) as the necessary first stage, before starting on the second stage — the struggle for socialism. They are still trapped in that Stalinist stages theory of revolution.

Now they denounce the Irish bourgeoisie for not having industrialised the country. They say that the immediate task, the task that has to be accomplished before starting a direct struggle for socialism, is the 'Irish industrial revolution'. And their role in that task is reformist pressure and Parliamentary deals.

There is a precedent. In the 1940s, a regroupment of Republicans, seeking a way out of the blind alley politics of physical force on principle and abstention from the existing political structures, formed a party called Clann Na Poblachta, led by Sean MacBride, a Chief of Staff of the IRA in the 1930s.

It was a mildly reformist organisation.

It played a big role in bourgeois politics for a while, holding the balance in the Dail. In 1948 it joined a Fine Gael/Labour coalition government.

When the Catholic Bishops vetoed the establishment of free medical care for pregnant women, mothers and infants, the party repudiated its own Minister of Health, Dr Noel Browne. The coalition collapsed and Clann na Poblachta rapidly fell apart.

History never repeats itself exactly, but the Workers' Party has all the ingredients of a slightly more radical version of Clann na Poblachta.

The additional feature of the Workers' Party is the Stalinist influence. The Workers' Party supported, for example, General Jaruzelski's military coup and the suppression of the workers' movement in Poland.

Workers' Party leader Sean Garland declared: "It was clear that the Polish armed forces had to take action to stop it sliding into anarchy and total chaos and ultimately ending in the hands of imperialism". No-one should accuse these defenders of forgetting about imperialism!

But quite a few of the Workers' Party's rank and file activists probably think that it is a real working class alternative to traditional Irish nationalist politics. Whether some of them can go on to break with it and help build a real revolutionary socialist working class party must still be an open question.

Why bread-and-butter workers' unity is not the answer

The Militant tendency argues that bread-and-butter trade union unity and a drive to form a Labour Party in Northern Ireland show the way to a socialist united Ireland. Why are they wrong?

From a working class point of view, the basic problem about the Six County state is that in that state framework,

working class unity, developed on a trade union level, has always shattered at any political test. So long as the 'constitutional question' remains at the heart of political life there, it always will shatter on the rooted communal antagonism between Catholics and Protestants, Nationalists and Unionists.

Trade union unity is possible in struggles like the NHS dispute of 1982. But

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The sectarian divide

there is no way that such unity can open the way to solid political working class unity in the sectarian Six County entity. Even spectacular examples of Protestant/Catholic working class unity have proved to be mere episodes.

For example, the well known 'outdoor relief' fight in 1932, unity in working class resistance to cuts in social security payments was possible because both Catholics and Protestants were hit impartially. Barricades went up in the Protestant Shankill Road and in the Catholic Falls Road. Activists went from the Falls to man Shankill barricades, and from the Shankill to defend the Falls against the police. (Some on both sides were influenced by the Irish Stalinists.)

Within weeks of this spectacular unity, no less spectacular sectarian rioting had been fomented. There are other examples, both before and after Partition.

The experience of the various incarnations of the Northern Ireland Labour Party runs in parallel to this. Today a very tiny Unionist rump, the NILP has at various times grown to a significant size.

It attempted to confine itself to bread-and-butter working class issues, that is, to generalised trade unionism, bargaining in the working class interest on the level of provincial and 'United Kingdom' society. It evaded, hedged and compromised on the issues that divide Northern Ireland's workers.

In the 1940s, for example, NILP speakers on the Falls Road campaigned under the nationalist tricolour. In the 'mixed' centre of Belfast they campaigned under the Red Flag; and party leader Harry Midgley campaigned on the Shankill under the Union Jack (he ended up a Unionist).

Such a balancing act could not get far. Sectarian suspicions soon disrupted the party and scattered its forces.

To reject Militant's view of a Labour Party as the cure-all is not to say that socialists should not work in a Labour Party if it existed. Serious work was done, for example, in the late '60s in the Derry Labour Party, which became cen-

tral to the civil rights struggle.

Even after it split, Eamonn McCann could get 8,000 votes on a revolutionary socialist platform in the mid-1970 election.

Yet McCann's experience, too, underlines the basic point that simply trying to generalise from trade unionism within the Six County framework is no solution. The Derry Labour Party left wing tended to ignore the national question, and was bypassed by the eruption of the Republican movement. Their forces scattered, too: some went to the Officials and then to the IRSP, one or two to Militant.

Many well-intentioned tricks have been tried to unite Northern Ireland workers. In 1907 Jim Larkin had united Protestant and Catholic workers on a trade union level. When it came to the marching and rioting season, on July 12, he tried to preserve the unity by organising his own united Orange/Catholic working class parade around the walls of Derry.

The Protestant workers, said Larkin, would march in honour of King William who secured their liberty in the 'Glorious Revolution'. The Catholics would march to honour the Pope, who at that time had taken the Papal States into the international alliance against France of which William was part! They had a successful, and unique, parade around Derry. Within weeks sectarian rioting had shattered working class unity.

The inescapable conclusion from history is that general political unity cannot be created on the basis of the trade union ('economic') unity; and that unity in trade union action is not the harbinger of a stable class unity.

Many on the left go on from this basic fact to a general dismissal of any concern for working class unity. The national question, they seem to say, supersedes everything else in Northern Ireland.

The trade union struggle is of little importance. The Protestant working class — that is, the big majority of the work-

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ing class — is of no concern of ours. The struggle for socialism will develop out of the revolt of the oppressed Catholics, even though that revolt fails to mobilise, and indeed antagonises, the Protestant workers.

We concern ourselves only with the 'anti-imperialist' military campaign of organisations representing perhaps half the Catholic third of the Six County population. Only when that campaign is victorious will questions like working class unity be important.

That is the mirror-image of the Militant caricature of socialist and Marxist politics.

Militant's approach to Ireland relates only **selectively** and **arbitrarily** to the issues, processes and struggles in Ireland. It **pretends** that trade union battles involving workers from both communities already amount to, or by way of being generalised into a new Northern Ireland Labour Party can be made into, working class political unity.

It goes from this to general socialist propaganda about nationalising the entire economy. Its version of 'socialism' is bureaucratic, statist, and somewhat 1890s-Fabian. As James Connolly put it, "State ownership and control is not necessarily socialist — if it were, then the army and the navy, the police, the judges, the gaolers, the informers and the hangmen would all be socialist functionaries as they are all state officials... To the cry of the middle class reformers, 'Make this or that the property of the government', we reply — 'yes, in proportion as the workers are ready to make the government their property'."

But even if Militant's conception of socialism were more revolutionary, there would still be a problem. In between sub-political industrial issues, and the political maximum, the socialist revolution, they leave a great void. The void is what's wrong with their politics, not that they advocate and want to build working class inter-communal unity at any level possible, and not that they make propaganda for socialism.

A working class political party that can really unite the working class in Ireland, specifically in Northern Ireland, will have to be one that can honestly answer all the problems the key sections of the working class face — and in the first place the 'constitutional question'. Militant's answer is the same as its answer to every living struggle in Britain or anywhere else — **propaganda** for 'socialism, the only road', combined

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with a routinist and politically accommodationist approach to the basic struggles of the working class and the labour movement. It is a vicious circle: there can be no socialism without the working class, but the working class is deeply divided. To offer 'socialism' as the solution to this division is simply to restate the problem, not to give an answer.

From this general approach has flowed Militant's record over the last 20 years. Initially it opposed the deployment of British troops on the streets after August 1969, and sympathised with the Catholics. It quickly veered (by 1970 or 1971) to an attitude of condemning the 'sectionalism' and then the 'terrorism' of the Catholics. It was like its attitude to the struggles of blacks, women, gays and others in Britain itself: the Catholic revolt in Northern Ireland was a complication which it wished would go away.

Ever since they have not supported the just revolt of the Catholics. Within the labour movement they are among the most vicious opponents of any attempt to get a calm discussion of the

Republicans, their struggle and their objectives. Militant peddles its own curials and nostrums, the famous 'trade union defence force', for example.

A good idea — for a different society. The workforce is heavily stratified as a result of sectarian job preference. This affects the unions, where unity has been possible only on minimal trade union questions and by avoiding politics. The unions reflect the society they exist in. The Protestant UDA is (or at least the mass, 50,000 strong, UDA of 1972 was) the nearest thing to a trade union militia that Northern Ireland will see this side of a revolutionary change of working class consciousness.

Essentially Militant lacks the democratic programme which has to be part of filling the void between trade union minimalism and the socialist revolution. It relates to the political world around it by pretending that the communal divide can be ignored, and that the national question can be pushed aside. It pretends that socialism can be the cure for divisions whose healing is

the precondition for socialism in Ireland.

Militant's policy is a recipe for building a sect in Northern Ireland. It has as little chance of uniting the Six County working class as the previous Labour Party minimalists had. No political formation that does not have in its programme a democratic solution to the Irish national question and to the communal antagonisms in Northern Ireland will even begin to play a positive role in Irish politics.

The best democratic programme is that of a federal united Ireland with as much autonomy for the Protestant community as is compatible with the democratic rights of the majority of the Irish people. An all-Ireland revolutionary movement must be built which integrates this with the direct work of educating and organising the labour movement to fight for workers' power, and which links up with the workers' movement internationally, especially in Britain and in Europe, on the programme of the United States of Europe.

Militant's record on Ireland

Militant has a record on Ireland unique on the British left.

Since 1968 it has argued for working-class unity and immediate socialism as the answer to the conflicts in Northern Ireland. Support for working class unity is not unique to Militant, nor is the idea that socialism is desirable in Ireland, as everywhere else. What is unique is that Militant says: 'unity now and socialism now', and counterposes more or less general and timeless propaganda for workers' unity and socialism to all partial struggles and particularly to the struggles of the oppressed Catholic minority.

To the problem of communal divisions in the working class, its answer is that the workers should be united. To the problem that the different working-class communities are mobilised around national and communal issues, its answer is that they should be mobilised for socialism. Militant steadfastly refuses to address the situation more concretely or seriously.

For 20 years Militant has stubbornly refused to acknowledge the bitter facts about Northern Ireland.

The unions in Northern Ireland organise a workforce much of which has long been selected on a basis of sectarian job preference for Protestants, and therefore the sectarian

divisions are internalised in the unions. Irrelevant, says Militant. Chronic working class division inevitably paralyses the trade unions, and they would split who open if they tried to engage in politics in conditions where different sections of their members give radically different answers to the question of Northern Ireland's relationship to Britain and the South of Ireland. Not so, says Militant: the trade unions have Catholic and Protestant members, and therefore they are non-sectarian. They can rise above the little political questions that convulse the Six Counties and lead a united Protestant/Catholic working class to socialism.

The workers of the two communities actively or passively support 'their own' paramilitary organisations. No, says Militant. The paramilitaries are tiny grouplets suspended in mid-air. Anyway, if the labour movement were to create a workers' defence force, the workers would support that.

For 15 years Northern Ireland has been torn apart by what the Catholics see as 'the national question'. What answer do Marxists offer to this problem in its peculiar Irish context? Socialism is the only answer, says Militant.

An internationalist would say that the problem in Ireland is a problem of how the Irish minority — the Protestants — can relate to the majority without becoming an oppressed group; and that this basic problem has been staled up and made septic by the interactions of the Protestant minority with Britain, because they have 'solved' the Irish minority problem by imprisoning within the murderously narrow and artificial Six County state a Catholic minority proportionately bigger than the Protestants would be in a united Ireland. A Marxist internationalist would at least ask the question: does not the Bolshevik teaching that wherever such problems exist we advocate a radical democratic solution, involving maximum autonomy for oppressed or potentially oppressed communities, na-

tions, fragments of nations, or national minorities, apply? What does Militant say to the question: is the only answer — and anything less is treason to socialism?

Now the elitist armed groups like the Provisional IRA and INLA, much denounced by Militant, can talk about socialism irrespective of the state of the working class, and even against the majority of the working class, without being untrue to themselves. But for Marxists to talk about a socialist solution as the immediate answer to chronic and acute communal division within the working class, whose unity is an irreplaceable precondition for socialism, is nonsense.

For 16 years Militant has advocated 'solutions' for Northern Ireland that just could not happen in the circumstances. It has proposed ideas that are not a guide to any meaningful action, but only consoling phrases, ideological booze. The answer, it says, to the paralysis of the trade unions, is for them immediately to act for socialism and to create a workers' defence force. Until 1974 it advocated the same solution: the formation of the Unionist Northern Ireland Labour Party. Such proposals cannot conceivably bring the 'socialism now' which is supposed to be the 'only solution'; nor can they conceivably assist in doing what can possibly be done in a positive way towards workers' unity and socialism.

Militant's key ideas, summarised above, have been a broad fixed framework within which, over 16 years, it has had a rich and varied series of notions and speculations. In 1969, it speculated, fantastically, about the prospects for a pioneering socialist society in...the Six Counties unit! 'If the demands [minimum wage; equal pay; crash building programme; take over big building companies; improved social services] are pressed home in action, it can be linked up to the demand for the taking over of the big monopolies and the establishment of a democratic socialist society — which would

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This July 1972 article was unique in Militant, in that it recognised that there might be some problems in the trade unions: "We still believe that this [workers' defence force] could be realised, even at this eleventh hour, despite the relative animosity which has also now [1] affected the trade unions..."

Mostly Militant has stuck stubbornly to the 'trade union defence force' demand, as though the communal clashes against which defence must be organised were in a different world from the trade unions. But occasionally it makes strange sallies. Though venting its implacable hostility to the Provisional IRA, Militant could nevertheless in 1972 make a strange 'call' on the Catholic leaders — including the Provisionals — to create a party of labour!

"Much of the onus for [building the party of Labour] is today on those in the vanguard of the struggle, the leaders of the Catholic workers. Were these people to direct their energies towards the organised labour movement they could pave the way for united action with their Protestant fellow workers." (Militant no.118, August 1972)

It should be added that the leader of the Northern Ireland Labour Party component in

this ecumenical front, David Bleakley, had been in the government that brought in interment against Catholics — and only against Catholics — in August 1971!

At the same time Militant speculated about the processes going on in the UDA that would produce class consciousness. "The development of the UDA with its veneer of class consciousness shows that Protestants are well aware of their class position..." (ibid)

And during the Orange general strike of 1974 Militant opposed any action by the Labour government to break the reactionary — and even racist — strike, thus telling British workers that the strike was entitled to be treated as a working class action, if not quite a proper or normal one.

In 1980-81 Militant opposed the granting of political status to the Republican hunger strikers.

These are just a few examples of the nonsense that has grown up, at various turning points, under the umbrella of Militant's general ideas. There are many others that could be cited.

This is the record of a tendency that, on Northern Ireland, has not dealt in real politics. It has made socialist propaganda, either very abstract propaganda (but presented as if it is an immediate answer to specific issues) or propaganda in which the socialist message is tied tightly to absurd but supposedly practical proposals.

An example of the latter is its often-repeated proposal for a conference of Northern Ireland trade unions and others to launch a Party of Labour which could nationalise the commanding heights of the economy, etc., and thereby solve every problem, including sectarian divisions in the working class. Think about it. Trade unionists in Northern Ireland vote Tory-Unionist or Catholic-Nationalist. A truly representative conference of the trade unions would be at a more backward stage than were the trade unions which founded the British Labour Party in 1900 — and they were at best Liberal. Such a party in Northern Ireland would need time to evolve and develop. But what would Militant do such a conference, faced with the trade unions as they are, far from socialism?

Would it do what the sectarian British Marxists, the SDF, did in 1901, that is, move a resolution with a full socialist programme and walk out when it was rejected (as it inevitably would be)? Perhaps not. But then it would accept that the conference could not produce the miracle results claimed for it. In fact it is a certainty that such a conference could not lead to anything like Militant's 'socialist solution' in the short or medium term.

Militant, in essence, has had no policy for Ireland — only timeless propaganda, linked to more or less bizarre and, in the circumstances, impossible 'practical' proposals. What distinguishes Militant on Ireland is not the desire for workers' unity and socialism, which it shares with all socialists, but its stubborn refusal to face the facts about Northern Ireland. For working class Marxists, the facts, not fantasies and wishes, are the necessary starting point.

have immediate repercussions in the South, in Britain, and internationally..." (Militant, May 1969)

Then, responding to the slaughter of 14 Catholics by the British Army in January 1972, Militant waxed eloquent about...organising the British Army for socialism. "A campaign of individual assassinations...of the British soldiers can only provide excuse for further repression...Also it can only reinforce the hostility of the ordinary soldier to the Catholic population...[Rank and file] soldiers could be appealed to on a class basis and won away from the army brass, if a clear socialist alternative was given to them..." (Militant, 4 February 1972)

Faced with what looked like civil war in mid-'72, Peter Taaffe wrote this: "But, given the failure of the trade union leadership to initiate a trade union defence force, every working class area must have the right to defend itself." (Militant no.113, July 1972)

You're on your own boys! In fact, this was to give the seal of Militant's approval to the UDA. It should be remembered that it was the Catholics who were likely to need defending if it came to all-out war.



Our record on Ireland

Socialist Organiser traces its attitude on Ireland back to the small group of socialists who produced the journal *An Solas/Workers Republic* in 1966-7, under the umbrella of the Irish Workers Group.

We believed that traditional Republicanism was not and could not be a consistently anti-imperialist force; that it was, by its ideas, goals and methods a petty-bourgeois movement; that its petty-bourgeois nationalism was a barrier to working-class unity; that its 'little Irelandism' cut in the opposite direction to the interests of the Irish working class.

We believed — in the mid-'60s — that the adoption of a socialist coloration and the brand name 'Connolly socialism' by that movement was not progressive but confusing, and could only produce a populist mish-mash like the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party.

"...the IRA is just not revolutionary in relation to the objective needs of the only possible Irish Revolution.

"The same is no less true if 'left' slogans are grafted onto the old base, and a nominal 'For Connolly's Workers' Republic' pinned to the masthead. Such talk of a socialist programme, a Bolshevik party, a workers' republic, demands a proper appreciation of the relationship between the party and the working class...It demands a sharply critical approach to the traditional republican conceptions of revolutionary activity. Otherwise these slogans combined with a largely military idea of the struggle against imperialism and the Irish bourgeoisie, will not produce a revolutionary Marxist party, but an abortion similar to the Socialist Revolutionary Party in Russia, against which the Bolsheviks fought bitterly."

We believed that though there was national oppression — especially and directly against the Northern Ireland Catholics — this was in part the product of a split in the Irish bourgeoisie, and not simply a matter of 'British-occupied Ireland'.

"A division of the Irish bourgeoisie, originating in economic differences, led to a split which was then manipulated by British imperialism, according to its practice of divide and rule. The Northern section, having a measure of

political autonomy, kept close links with this imperialism; the Southern section being dominated according to the logic of modern imperialism [i.e. economic weight within more or less free market relations].

"In maintaining their closer links with Britain, the Northern capitalists were aided by British troops, who also assist in holding sufficient people to make the state viable. Despite this, talk of 'British-occupied Ireland' obscures the real identity of the garrison in Ireland — the Northern Ireland bourgeoisie."

(*Editorial of Irish Militant, paper of the IWG, February 1967. Irish Militant was loosely associated with the British Militant until about 1966 and thereafter had no connection with it.*)

Basing ourselves on Lenin's 'Imperialism' and such documents of the Communist International as the 'Theses on the National and Colonial Question' (1920) we believed that the economic domination over Ireland by Britain and other great powers could not be eliminated except by the reorganisation of the world economy through the international socialist revolution.

"The IWG stands against the divided Irish bourgeoisie, Green, Orange and Green-White-and-Orange, and for the revolutionary unity of the workers of all Ireland in a struggle for state power.

"We stand for the revolutionary combat against imperialism and national oppression in every form, whether that of garrison-imperialism, neo-colonialism, or the glaring economic domination of the small nations by the super-powers which is inevitable where the capitalist world market remains as the sole regulator of relationships. But we denounce those who, in the name of 'Republicanism' and 'anti-imperialism', attempt to subordinate the working class to any section of the bourgeoisie, and who counterpose a defunct petty-bourgeois nationalist narrow-mindedness to the socialist struggle of the workers for power. National unity will be achieved, if not by the coming together of the Irish capitalist class under the auspices of the British imperialist state and the capitalist drive towards West European federation, then as an incidental in the proletarian revolution.

"The possibility of any other revolutionary reunification is long since past. The only revolutionary Republicanism is the international socialist Republicanism of the proletariat."

(*'Towards an Irish October', preambule to the constitution of the IWG.*)

We thought that the nationalist (left and right) focus on gaining 'real' independence was both meaningless for the 26 Counties and confusing from the point of view of the Irish working class.

We rejected economic nationalism as being no more than the discarded and discredited former economic policy of the 26 County bourgeoisie (1932-58). It was a reactionary petty-bourgeois programme counterposed to the necessary — and, in so far as it was developing and augmenting the Irish working class, progressive — integration of Ireland into the existing world economic system. It was a backward-looking utopia, counterposed to the economic programme of the Irish working class, for whom there could be no purely Irish solution.

"The one serious progressive act of imperialism and Irish capitalism has been the creation of an Irish proletariat capable of putting an end to capitalism's futile existence, and capable, as part of a world revolutionary class, of realising the age-old dream of the people of Ireland for freedom. The best traditions of the old, bourgeois, Republicanism have passed to the socialist working class, the only class in Ireland today capable of transforming society and the subordinate relation with Great Britain — the only unconditionally revolutionary class. The only genuine liberation of Ireland will be from the inexorable — uncontrolled — pressures of international capitalism. All the essential goals of all the past defeated and deflated struggles of the Irish people over the centuries against oppression and for freedom of development and freedom from exploitation, can now only be realised in a Republic of the working people, as part of the Socialist United States of Europe and the world."

(*'Towards an Irish October.'*)

We naturally rejected the Menshevik-Stalinist notion that there had to be a two-stage revolution in Ireland — first 'the Republic' (independence) and then 'the workers' Republic'. We rejected the hybrid 'populist Republicanism' — a fusion of the Stalinist two-stage theory with 'native' Republicans who were left-wing but put 'the national question' first — represented historically by Paedar O'Donnell, George Gilmore and the Republican Congress of the 1930s, and in the mid-'60s by the 'left' of the Republican movement, the future Official IRA and Workers' Party.

We rejected the kitsch 'Trotskyist' response to the stages theories and the populists — the reflex invocation of 'Permanent Revolution'. The job was not to match texts with texts, ours against theirs, permanent revolution against stages theories, as in a card game. Instead we had to analyse reality concretely. On this approach, the conclusion was inescapable.

Ireland had had its 'bourgeois revolution'. In the North, bourgeois relations had been established by extension from

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Britain after its bourgeois revolution in the 17th century. In the South, land reform was organised 'from above' by Britain in the late 19th/early 20th century, under pressure of a mass revolt. The national division was not pre-capitalist. The basic problem was the split bourgeoisie and the varying links of its different parts with the British ruling class; and the fact that the bourgeoisie, North and South of the Border, could command the allegiance of the working class.

Ireland was a relatively advanced bourgeois country, integrated into European capitalism, albeit as a weaker capitalism. That the 26 Counties was really independent politically — independent to the degree possible under capitalist world market economic relations — was shown by its neutrality in World War II.

"The division [in the Irish bourgeoisie] prevented the accomplishment of one of the major tasks of the traditional bourgeois revolution — national unification. However, if history and the relationship to Britain make the two statelets peculiarly deformed, they are nonetheless undeniably bourgeois, as a glance at the social organisation and relations of production makes obvious...

"We who fight for the workers' international Republic know that the present Irish capitalists are the only ones we will get. Calling them traitors is useless — they are not traitors to their class, as the only sphere in which real loyalty, as opposed to demagogic talk of loyalty, counts..."

[*Editorial, Irish Militant, February 1967.*] Irish Militant was not linked politically to the existing Militant group.]

THE WORKERS REPUBLIC

No. 19

FORMERLY AN SOLAS



'An Solas', Irish Marxist journal of the 1960s

WORKERS FIGHT

ALDERSHOT TRAGEDY



Our political forerunners refused to join the outcry against 'terrorism' in the early '70s

After 1968

The massive revolt of the Catholics in 1969 and after, and then the rapid growth of a new IRA after 1970, forced us to reconsider and modify these assessments, and to respond politically to new facts.

Many Irish socialists responded initially with a 'socialism-is-the-only-answer' message, neglecting the national question. We did not. On the contrary, we were the first on the left to point to the nationalist logic of the civil rights struggle, and to argue for raising the national question boldly.

But we did not forget what we had learned. We did not go in for romanticism and flights of fantasy, in the style of Socialist Action — then IMG — or Briefing, about the Catholic revolt being the socialist revolution. Even when the Catholic revolt was apparently most successful, we pointed to its limitations.

"The Northern Ireland Catholics fight in isolation, in the most unfavourable conditions imaginable. The rearguard of the Irish fight for national freedom, they are betrayed and abandoned by the 'leaders' of the Irish nation, and are simultaneously cut off from the allies who would make an advance on a socialist basis possible — the Orange majority of the Northern Ireland working class..."

(*Workers' Fight, July 23 1972*)

We defined what was happening as primarily a Catholic revolt with a limited potential of solving the national question. It was the revolt of the Six County Catholics, not a rebirth of the 1918 all-Ireland nationalist upsurge. It was limited as an anti-imperialist movement

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because it was confined to the Six Counties, and because of the split working class there. Nevertheless, it had to be supported.

When the Catholic civil rights agitation got underway in 1968-9, we supported it, but criticised it on three counts.

(1) Logically the central issue was the national question, and events would inexorably force it to the fore. The basic underlying civil right the Catholics lacked was the right to national self-determination. We said in early 1969 and long before the Republican movement, some of whose members were leading the civil rights struggles, said it: the goal has to be to smash the Six County state.¹

(2) At the same time, because of its petty-bourgeois, Stalinist and populist-Republican leadership, the entire civil rights movement was needlessly divisive. The demands one man (sic) one house, one man one job, one man one vote, were inevitably seen by Protestants as a desire to re-divide and share what little there was. The issue could have been dynamically and progressively posed in these (transitional demand) terms: build more houses, thus creating more jobs, etc., etc.

(3) We criticised the civil rights movement (including such of its leaders as the then IS/SWP supporters in Northern Ireland, like Michael Farrell, who has since become a political satellite of the Provisionals) for political confusion on the national question and on the need to try to unite the working class around the Catholic movement (if they wanted to play down the national question in the cause of uniting the working class in the Six Counties around civil rights and socialist propaganda). We also criticised them for organising provocative marches and demonstrations in Protestant areas which were helping stoke up a sectarian explosion.

When the Provisional IRA launched its military offensive in 1971, we critically supported their right to fight against the British government in that way. We defended it outspokenly in the British labour movement.

We did not use our previous assessment of the improbability of a revolutionary reunification of Ireland short of a socialist revolution to draw sectarian and abstentionist conclusions about the actual struggle that had erupted. But we did not forget that assessment. In fact the 20 years of war have in their own way established very clearly the truth of that assessment.

We maintained a critical political stance towards the IRA. In the early

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'70s, when such a thing existed, we reprinted Irish socialist criticisms of the IRA from 'People's Democracy' and from the 'League for a Workers' Republic'. We never had other than derision and scorn for the wild Third-Worldist fantasies and incredible 'permanent revolution' scenarios which the IMG — the closest group to us in its political responses in the early '70s — spun around the Catholic revolt.

At best we believed that the Catholic and IRA revolt would force Britain and the Irish bourgeoisie into a radical reorganisation of the Irish state system. Of course it did: Protestant Stormont was abolished in March 1972 and direct rule substituted. In November 1985 Dublin and London signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement, giving Dublin a share in the political decision-making in Northern Ireland.

After 1972

Since 1972, despite many important twists and turns, the basic facts of the situation have remained unchanged, in stalemate. The British Army cannot defeat the IRA; the Catholics cannot defeat the combined forces of the British Army and the Protestants; the British government is not sufficiently energetic or sufficiently driven, to impose a rearrangement on the Protestants.

In the 26 Counties, there have been some impressive one-off waves of solidarity action — after Bloody Sunday in 1972, and during the hunger strikes. But the basic facts of the political set-up have not changed. The two Green Turf parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fail, remain dominant — as they were in the '60s. The Irish Labour Party remains a tail of Fine Gael — as it was in the '60s.

Thus the Irish national struggle remains essentially confined to 10% of the Irish nation — the Northern Catholics. That does not detract from the justice of their fight. It does limit its prospects.

It is possible that the situation in the North may be transformed by something from outside it — for example, by a revolutionary upsurge of working class struggle in the South, creating a new basis for workers' unity in the North. Socialists should do all we can to help such a possibility emerge. But we cannot guarantee it at all; and in the meantime we have to formulate ideas showing some way forward from the situation as it is now, not as we hope it will be some-

day.

We advocated a federal arrangement within Ireland from as early as 1969, but the importance of this element in our politics has increased with the 20 year stalemate.

In this and other aspects of the Irish-British question we differ from other Marxists. Militant has long refused to campaign in any way for British troops out of Ireland, instead they use general propaganda about the need for socialism to evade the issue. That is contemptible. But the attitude of those many on the left who argue that 'troops out' and 'the defeat of British imperialism' are the crux of the Irish question, and all else is pettifoggery and probably 'capitulation to imperialism', is empty phrasemongering and in its own way just as shameful as Militant's evasions.

'Troops out' is a good slogan. But it is not sufficient. In most national liberation struggles we can say simply: the imperialist power should get out and hand over to the local nationalist movement. There is no all-Ireland nationalist movement. There is a nationalist movement of the Northern Catholics (10% of the population of the island) which is regarded with bitter hostility by the Northern Protestants (20%) and sporadic sympathy, but some alarm, by the Southern Catholics (70%). The situation is further complicated by the political split in the 10% of Ireland's people who are the half million Catholics in the Six Counties. According to election results, only about 1 in 3 of Northern Ireland's Catholics positively support the Provisional IRA or Sinn Féin.

Lenin argued:

"There is not, nor can there be, such a thing as a 'negative' Social-Democratic slogan that serves only to 'sharpen proletarian consciousness against imperialism' without at the same time offering a positive answer to the question of how Social Democracy will solve the problem when it assumes 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."

Nowhere is this more true than on the slogan 'Troops out of Ireland'. In early 1969 some of us argued against IS/SWP's almost-exclusive concentration on 'Troops out' (until the troops went on the streets, in August 1969, and IS dropped the call). We criticised the implied illusion that the Catholic civil rights movement would organically 'grow over' into socialism; and argued for propaganda for the workers' republic.

In the mid-'70s we argued against the notion (put forward by the IMG — now divided into Socialist Action and Briefing — and others) that a mass movement could be built in Britain on the single slogan, 'Troops out'.

We use 'Troops out' as one means of focusing the issue in Britain. It is not a full programme, though some on the left sometimes talk and act as if it is. Even the Provisionals, more serious than their

less thoughtful British admirers, put precise demands on the way Britain should get out.

If British troops quit Ireland tomorrow, it is quite likely that there would be a sectarian civil war, leading to repatriation.

Self-determination? Unify Ireland? The Provisionals are not strong enough to do it. The Northern Protestants are actively hostile to it. The 26 County ruling class has no real wish for it.

The scene would be set for a section of the Protestants to make a drive for the current UDA policy of an 'independent Ulster'. This drive would involve at least a massive crackdown on the Republicans, and, probably, the mass slaughter, rounding-up and driving-out of the Catholics. The Northern Catholics would, naturally, resist violently. Dublin would give some token assistance to the Catholics but do nothing decisive. There would be mass population movements, a repatriation: Ireland would be irrevocably and bitterly split into Orange and Green states. There would be a bloodbath.

The conventional left answer to this, that 'there's already a bloodbath', is no answer. Simmering war with hundreds of casualties is different from all-out war with thousands. Different not only in immediate human terms, but also in terms of the implications for the future possibilities of socialism — i.e. of the Catholic and Protestant workers.

The other answer, 'revolutions always involve bloodshed', is no better. There is no comparison between the revolutionary violence of the working class against its exploiters, or of a subject nation against a conquering army, and the violence of two working-class communities slaughtering each other.

All this does not mean that we should fail to support troops out. That the situation and the prospects now are so bleak is in large part Britain's work.

But it does mean that we should couple the call for troops out with politically adequate proposals for a solution within Ireland — and condemn those who call for troops out without such a proposal as mindless phrasemongers.

The only conceivable solution given the present facts of the situation or anything resembling them is a united Ireland with federalism: i.e. an attempt to negotiate between the sections of the Irish people and to conciliate the Protestants. This would probably involve the recreation of closer British-Irish ties so that the two islands would provide the broader framework within which the intra-Irish conflicts can be resolved.

The conciliation, realistically, would be backed up with a certain element of coercion — i.e. strong indications to the Protestants that prospects for an alternative to a united Ireland were pretty bleak — and would involve some repression against die-hard Protestant groups. But that is different from straight conquest of the Protestants. Logically, conquest is the only alternative to such conciliation, given the Protestants' attitudes. But it is not possible — who

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would conquer them? — and not desirable either, from any working class point of view.

It is possible to evade these issues by wishful thinking. It is possible to fantasise that at the crucial point, the national struggle would magically 'grow over' into socialism, and in some 'dialectical' leap the Protestants would be converted to Republicanism. It is possible to remain blinkered in a sort of inverted British nationalism, saying that 'the defeat of British imperialism' and its effect on the 'balance of world forces' are the things that really matter, and that a positive solution and the avoidance of sectarian civil war within Ireland is a secondary issue.

It is possible to delude oneself with a crude theory of the Protestants as pure pawns of Britain, so that their reactionary ideas would drain away like waters out of a bath once the 'plug' of British troops was pulled out.

But that is not Marxism. It is not serious, honest politics. We will not even be very reliable anti-imperialists if our 'anti-imperialism' is only as strong as our ability to use consoling myths to shield our eyes from uncomfortable facts — until they explode in our faces. Such fantasies and evasions will never allow those socialists who poison themselves with them to make any political contribution to the work of uniting the Irish working class.

The federal proposal might not avert sectarian civil war, either. Whether anything short of a mass socialist movement uniting the workers of both communities (or a big section of them) can end the present impasse in a progressive sense is doubtful. Our programme is to develop that socialist movement; seriously, not by empty schematising about the present nationalist struggle becoming socialist if only it is intensified sufficiently, or national/communal issues fading away if only bread-and-butter trade union issues are emphasised loudly enough.

We should not blunt our socialist programme by false 'realism', by getting tied up in working out 'answers' for the present forces in the situation over which we have no control anyway. But a socialist programme needs to include democratic demands, and a possibility of relating to the political situation now, more concretely than just by saying that a united class movement would be better.

Whether we can have any positive influence on the situation within Ireland depends on there being a material force to fight for such a programme. At present there is no such force. But no force can be gathered without first proclaiming a programme. And no adequate programme can be formulated without first coldly 'saying what it is'.

Our errors

This summary demonstrates, we think, the consistency of the approach that some of us have

had since well before the beginning of the Catholic revolt. Whatever inconsistencies may be found in this or that detail, the fundamental approach is correct.

That does not mean, however, that our politics have been completely adequate. Even in the early '70s, when we put most stress on solidarity with the Catholic revolt, we were critical of the IRA: on the whole, however, we tended to suppress criticism as much as we decently could — and that was too much. The basic principles, views and assessments were correct: but we tended to downplay our own assessments, criticisms and politics in deference to a petty-bourgeois nationalist formation because it was 'leading the struggle against imperialism'. We should not have been so self-effacing.

Footnote

1. We tried to bring the national question to the centre in 1969 by posing it like this: the mainly Catholic areas (about half the land area of Northern Ireland) should secede to the Republic. This was based on the idea that it would make the Northern state unviable.

The belief that secession of the Catholic areas would force the Protestants into a united Ireland was a major reason why the Free State made the deal they did in 1921. Lloyd George promised that a Boundary Commission would in fact redraw the boundaries, thus making Northern Ireland unviable.

In fact secession was anyway the trend in Northern Ireland. Two times before August 1969, Catholic Derry, two miles from the border with the 26 Counties, had set up barricades to keep out Northern Ireland state personnel. In August 1969 Catholic Derry and Catholic West Belfast set up 'free' areas guarded by their own militias. These survived until October 1969.

But in retrospect secession was an artificial way to pose the question of the smashing of the Six County state. In the light of experience since then, there can be no doubt that a Protestant state stripped of the mainly Catholic areas would be viable because the Protestants would make it so.

Some of us were in IS at the time, and our (tentative) proposal about secession was contained in a resolution for IS conference, written in May or June 1969. At the September 1969 IS conference, the leadership used a disloyal misrepresentation of it to distract the discussion. In the meantime they had changed their line from opposition to the British troops to effusive support for them, and we were campaigning against this.

The IS leadership said that we wanted the repartition of Ireland. But our resolution explicitly said the goal should be to smash the Northern Ireland state and establish a united Ireland. Because of the weight of the IS/SWP, this misrepresentation of our position is widespread. It is to be found, for example, in the Penguin book 'The Left in Britain', edited by David Widgery.

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How not to argue for with- drawal

from back page

'CounterBlasts' series, of which Foot's book is part, as "Britain's finest writers and thinkers...in the best tradition of pamphleteering...new perspectives...voices of dissent...written to question, to surprise, to stir up debate and to change people's minds."

Given the content of the book, only one conclusion can be drawn — that the series' editors know absolutely nothing about Ireland, past or present. Otherwise they would not have published a book containing such wild inaccuracies and bizarre 'surprises'.

One of the 'surprises' discovered by this 'fine writer and thinker' is that Ireland, contrary to popular belief, has 36 counties (p.10). No wonder Foot is described as aiming to 'stir up debate'. Another 'new perspective' is the interchangeability of the terms Home Rule and independence. Foot seems to believe they mean the same thing.

Few other 'fine thinkers' share his belief, indeed many people outside the 'best tradition of pamphleteering' would describe this as a criminal mistake leading to distortion and confusion. It may be that Foot genuinely believes that a Home Rule deal which means an oath of allegiance to a foreign monarchy and no power for the Irish government to raise taxes or an army is the same thing as a treaty of independence. Certainly the Republicans, including the lauded James Connolly, didn't believe any such thing.

But even if Foot is confused about Home Rule, and the 36 counties is a typographical error, the following 'new perspective' surely cannot be a mistake: "In July 1970, before a single shot was fired by the IRA, British troops imposed a curfew in the Catholic Falls Road in Belfast — but there was no equivalent curfew in the Protestant Shankhill."

For the record

The facts, which are presumably available to this 'fine thinker' are these: the curfew was imposed after Protestants attacked a church in the Falls, and three of them were shot dead by the Official IRA. A curfew had been imposed in the Shankhill the previous October. Those facts don't suit Foot's argument so, 'in the best tradition of pamphleteering', he has left them out.

For every accurately recorded fact, there is a piece of nonsense like the above. Confusion abounds. How long have the British been oppressing the Irish? a) six centuries or b) since the 16th century or c) 300 years?

When were the B-Specials abolished? a) 1970, b) 1969, c) they are still going? When is a ban (of the Orange Order) not a ban?

The answers to these and other questions cannot be found in Paul Foot's book — because neither he nor anyone else has bothered to read the manuscript and weed out the inaccuracies, contradictions and other 'surprises'. On average, the reader can find at least one such 'surprise' on each page.

However, this is really nipping, even a 'fine writer' like Foot can make mistakes — though this many is indeed a 'surprise'!

The first 50 odd pages of the book are spent establishing what passes for Irish history in Foot's mind, with a selection of quotations from James Connolly and various Orange and British politicians. Foot has obviously had access to a wealth of material, so it is astonishing that he makes such a bad job of it.

He cannot resist hyping up every atrocity, and consequently distorting most of what he relates, until the distortion ruins what, told baldly and without hype, would be a damning tale of British ruling class plunder and oppression in Ireland.

He uses emotive words like 'colony', 'imperialism' and so on, over and over again, without serious definition. Ireland's history does not need codifying into left jargon, and it particularly does not need confusing in the process. The truth of Ireland's history does not sustain many left prejudices and 'wisdoms', and it should not be distorted so that it does.

The Republican cause espoused by James Connolly loses absolutely nothing from an honest account of history. It can only gain, because by learning from that history we have the potential to move forward.

The final chapter of *Ireland: Why Bri-*

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62 Workers' Ireland

tain Must Get Out is given over to Foot asking himself four hard questions, and then attempting to answer them — or rather avoiding answering them at all.

The first question concerns the pledges made by Britain to the Protestants that Northern Ireland will remain tied to Britain — "How," asks Foot, "can we break these pledges to them without their agreement?"

He answers the question thus: the British government has broken lots of pledges (not least to the Catholics)



John Downes murdered by RUC

therefore there isn't a problem if another one is broken. The real issue of course is not promises made by British governments — "we" can neither keep nor break those, nor do we identify with or take responsibility for the British state — but the fact that one million Protestants insist they are tied to Britain because they consider themselves British.

The problem is not the pledge — that can be broken at the drop of a hat — but the agreement of the people to whom the pledge was made. All Foot does is say the pledge can be broken, he says nothing about persuading the Protestants to agree to British withdrawal. Does he think that doesn't matter? Apparently.

But he does raise the question of minority rights: "If there is a 'duty' to the majority in the North of Ireland, there is also a 'duty' to the minority." How true. Does it not therefore follow that the Protestants who would constitute a minority in a united Ireland should be considered in the same way as the current Catholic majority in the North? In other words, is Foot, having raised the idea of minority rights, going to apply it consistently to both communities?

He doesn't say, but he makes another attempt to skate around the issue in his next question: The Protestants are a majority in Northern Ireland — how can

any democrat flout the will of a majority? A fair question (though not the really important one). The majority in Northern Ireland don't want to be incorporated into a united Ireland. So what does Foot say?

He says that in a united Ireland the Protestants would not be a majority. In other words if we pretend that Ireland is already united we can safely ignore the wishes of a million of its people and still be democrats. And this from the man who raised the issue of minority rights!

In fact Foot is not in favour of minority rights at all. He simply wishes the current Northern Ireland Catholic minority to become part of an all-Ireland majority, and to hell with the consequences. The question of getting the Protestants to agree to become a minority has now been buried for good, although he does go on to deal with the Protestants' most obvious reason for not agreeing.

Foot asks: if a united Ireland became a reality, would the Protestants lose their religious and cultural freedoms in a Catholic state? His answer to this question is essentially Yes, they would, so it's back to 'minority rights'.

"Protestant fears... have some force. But how best are minority rights protected in any society? Are they best protected by partition, by isolation of the minority in a separate state of their own? Throughout the world, where these problems of racial and religious minorities are repeated over and over again in a thousand different forms, separation and partition of communities on racial or religious lines merely inflames the differences, institutionalises them in politics and in government, and turns one former minority, fearful of persecution, into a persecuting majority, seeking others to discriminate against, to mock, bully and suppress."

Indeed. Once again Foot creates the illusion that he is in favour of minority rights, this time for the Protestants whose right to agree to what happens to them in the future he has just written off, in answering questions one and two.

What solution does he propose therefore to overcome the unwillingness of the Protestants to be incorporated into a Catholic state — given that he appears to be arguing that they may very well finish up a persecuted group?

"Guarantees of religious and individual freedoms are what they say they are: guarantees, which every society owes to its minorities. The way to ensure that the Jewish or black minorities in Britain are safe from persecution is to hold out to them the rights of free citizenship which are available to everyone else; to ensure that there is no privilege afforded to anyone because of their race or religion; and to persecute racial and religious persecutors."

"Wherever such freedoms are upheld, they ensure freedom for religious and racial minorities a thousand times more effectively than do separate states which shore up the political power of gods or skin colour over human beings and create and persecute other minorities."

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Foot is the author of works on racism including *The Rise of Enoch Powell*, so he cannot but know that Jews and blacks in Britain "have the rights of free citizenship" — and that isn't enough! Britain, an essentially secular state, does "not ensure that no privilege is afforded to anyone because of their race...etc." Racism, despite 'guarantees' is rampant.

What then does he expect from a determinedly Catholic state? In fact nothing — he does not expect 'guarantees' to be kept, as he has said in answering his first question. Pledges can be, and consistently are, broken by governments when it suits them.

All the evidence is that pledges and guarantees to religious and racial minorities are broken the world over. Already in Southern Ireland Jews and Protestants have to abide by Catholic laws on divorce, so why should a 'guarantee' have any effect? And the Protestants obviously don't believe in offers of such 'guarantees'. The essence of Foot's argument is simply this: in an ideal world, everything would be ideal.

Foot misses the point. The danger is not that a Catholic united Ireland would ban Protestant churches or Protestant religious opinion. The Catholics in Northern Ireland have always had freedom to practise their religion and indeed to have separate Catholic schools. They have been oppressed socially, as a minority community with a national identity distinct from the majority, not as a religious group. Such oppression is what the Protestants fear from a Catholic united Ireland.

Legal guarantees of individual rights from a state they considered alien could no more satisfy the Protestants than a Bill of Rights could settle the problems of the Catholics in Northern Ireland.

Britain made guarantees to the Northern Ireland Catholics. It didn't keep them. This is Foot's argument in favour of Britain not keeping its pledges to the Protestants.

Why does he therefore assume, as he so blithely does, that Ireland would keep any pledges to the Protestants. He may believe that the Irish state is more honest in its promises than Britain — but the Protestants obviously don't. And that is the point at issue.

Foot has already demonstrated that he believes in majority rule. What he is doing here is covering his back for a British audience, who may be prepared to go along with him for an easy life, and a glib answer. The Southern Ireland state has made vague promises to the Protestants. The Protestants don't want to know. Why? Because they wouldn't be guaranteed while majority rule is the only rule, unless the Protestants have some kind of autonomy.

Foot argues that there are two alternatives — majority rule in a united Ireland, or the status quo, which for him is the only possible expression of Protestant political rights. Actually the Northern Ireland state is not equivalent to Protestant political rights, and the Protestants have good reason to fear a united Ireland with majority rule only.

He won't look at what would really constitute Protestant political rights (local autonomy, a federal system) because a) he doesn't believe in minority rights at all, and b) he thinks Protestant rights means the current Northern Ireland state.

For Foot, as for most of the British left, if he can solve the problem of the Protestants on paper by repeated use of the word 'guarantees' that is enough. Unfortunately for the British left this is not a logic-problem. The current minority is brutally oppressed because, through no fault of its own, it got trapped in an artificial state. Therefore socialists side with that minority. Therefore also we do not advocate the creation of a situation where one oppressed minority is liberated to be replaced by another twice the size.

Socialists also have a duty not to advocate the signing away of the rights of a million people because we can't be bothered to think things through consistently.

Foot asks his final question, the so-called 'bloodbath' question. As with his previous three questions he doesn't answer it. He devotes several pages to debating whether the Protestants are capable, or willing, to fight to the last drop of blood to defend 'their' state. Then, having concluded, in the teeth of the evidence, that probably they won't, he says that such speculation is anyway not the 'chief answer to the bloodbath argument'. The 'chief answer' apparently lies in Foot's own speculation, or rather gambling, on the following longshot:

"There is a chance, after withdrawal, that Irish labour, so often truncated by religious feuds between workers, might come together to demand the new Ireland of which Connolly dreamed. In the shock of the collapse of the Old Order, the positive sides of the people of Ireland of both religions could well prevail over the narrow superstitions which have kept them at each other's throats for so long."

Quite apart from the fact that Foot has just reduced centuries of communal conflict, which he spent 60 pages proving had a material base, to 'religious feuds' and 'narrow superstitions', this boils down to: maybe if you take the troops away everything will be all right.

This is an assertion, not the answer to a very serious question. It is moreover the same assertion Foot made on page 1 of his book: "There is a way out of the endless cycle of killing and terror. It is for the British government to cut its connection with the state of Northern Ireland and to get out of Ireland." Foot cannot prove this assertion. He does not try. He evades either proving it or answering the 'bloodbath' question by answering another question — why won't Britain withdraw the troops?

He argues that Britain does not keep the troops in Ireland because withdrawal would result in a bloodbath. He says that when Britain withdrew from India and the Central African Federation there were bloodbaths. From this he

does not conclude either that there would be a bloodbath in Ireland or that there wouldn't because things are different in Ireland, but that Britain didn't care that there were bloodbaths in Africa or India, so why should Britain care about a bloodbath in Ireland?

Foot concludes that Britain in fact stays in Ireland because it doesn't want to be 'defeated' by terrorism.

As this is what successive British governments have said openly and repeatedly, it doesn't need a 'fine thinker' like Foot to work it out. Most schoolchildren would come up with the same answer. He couples this conclusion with his original assertion to produce the following:

"As long as...persecution...and [the British] state remain, terrorism and the sectarianism which breeds it, are certain to continue. The fear of 'defeat' therefore is nothing more than political paralysis. It conserves terrorism without ending it. It sustains sectarianism."

Therefore the British people should demand "that the troops come home". The page 1 assertion all over again. The only difference is that 'narrow superstitions' etc. have become 'terrorism' and 'sectarianism', again negating everything previously said about who precisely are the terror merchants in Northern Ireland.

In other words, what Foot is doing is trying to tell us 'Why Britain Must Get Out' by actually telling us 'Why Britain Stays In' — an entirely different question.

Part of the reason this book is so monumentally irritating is that it is so full of inaccuracies, inconsistencies and contradictions that it is extremely difficult to find the politics it is supposed to contain. Foot throws out an argument, a few bits of dodgy history, hypes it up a bit, then concludes that the troops should leave whether or not the original argument supports that conclusion or even has anything to do with it. Foot's arguments and conclusions are entirely unrelated. Consequently, what comes across is that Foot is not particularly convinced himself.

Most rank and file SWP members, who have not been writing about Ireland or involving themselves in Irish politics for as long as Foot has could come up with a more convincing case for withdrawing British troops. Moreover the same rank and file would talk about socialism as the only 'solution' to Ireland's problems, and would argue 'troops out' as an aid to this goal rather than to assist the Catholics to become

Continued on inside
back cover, column 3

In most of the hard left today it is difficult to get a rational discussion about whenever we should be for or against the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of British troops. Troops Out is a dogma and a fetish. To question it is to define yourself out of the left. Amongst the most dogmatic and least thoughtful on this question is the SWP — whose members reflexively shout abuse at those who question the wisdom of Troops Out without a political settlement.

Yet, back in 1969 when the British army was first put on the streets in Northern Ireland, the SWP refused to call for their withdrawal. Members of the SWP (IS) who wanted to call for Troops Out were denounced as "bourgeois fascists". The leadership kept up an unprincipled common front against the opposition. For example, Duncan Hallas was in agreement with the opposition, but he either kept his mouth shut or backed Tony Cliff in the debates. For nearly a year IS maintained the position.

Today they deny that they ever had it, and say it is slander to say they did. In the interests of clean living and in the hope of shocking comrades miseducated by the SWP's current line on Ireland — that 'Troops Out Now' is a matter of basic principle which only 'scabs', 'pro-imperialists' and 'Zionists' question — in thinking about the issue, we print this account of what happened in IS in 1969.

In August 1969 the major group on the far left in Britain, panicked by the pogroms in Belfast and Derry, were so relieved to see the British troops go into action that for nearly a whole year they dropped the slogan 'British Troops Out'.

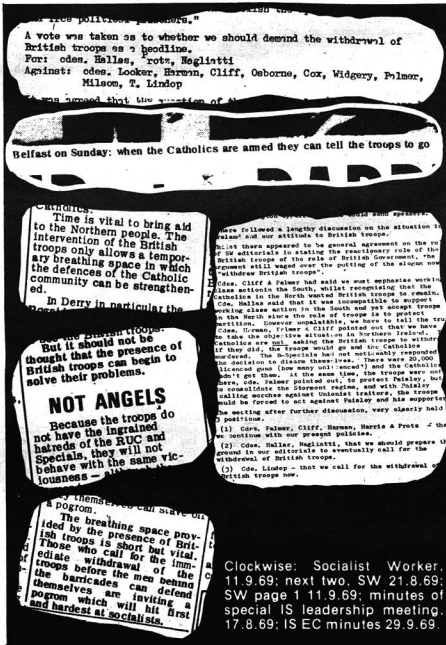
For months before August, when the British troops had no role in Northern Ireland affairs, they had made Troops Out one of their main slogans. It was a front page headline in Socialist Worker in April 1969! In August, when the troops moved center stage, it was eloquently dropped.

On August 17th 1969, a hastily convened special meeting of members of the two leading committees of the International Socialists voted by 9 to 3 to drop the Troops Out slogan "as a headline", while the text of articles and editorials would make clear that IS wasn't really siding with the British Army.

But the IS leaders were facing both ways. The decision to approve what the troops were doing had to be defended against the IS leadership's critics from the left, notably the Workers' Fight faction within its ranks.

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Socialist Worker and 'Troops Out'



Clockwise: Socialist Worker, 11.9.69; next top, SW 21.8.69; SW page 1 11.9.69; minutes of special IS leadership meeting, 17.8.69; IS EC minutes 29.9.69.

Already in the very first editorial, which was supposed to put to rights the absence of Troops Out "in the headline" by warning about the army's "long term role", Socialist Worker readers were told that though the

troops were "not angels" they will not behave with the same viciousness as the RUC and B-Specials "because they do not have the same ingrained hatreds". (A resolution at the Executive Committee to insert a statement

that the troops' presence was "in the long term interests of British imperialism" had in fact been voted down by Tony Cliff, John Palmer and Paul Foot.)

The warning seemed to consist of the mild-critical thought that "It should not be thought that the British troops can begin to solve the problems (of the Catholic workers). The role of the British troops is not to bring any real (!) solution to the problems of the people of Northern Ireland..."

Within a couple of weeks, the main fire was directed at the leadership's critics. (Meanwhile, a Troops Out emergency motion at IS's conference was defeated after the leaders had pulled out a good many demagogic stops to create an atmosphere of hysteria in which those who argued for Troops Out were accused of being "fascists" who "wanted a bloodbath".)

There were constant attacks in Socialist Worker on "those who call for the immediate withdrawal of British troops", accompanied by warnings about the horrors of life in Catholic Belfast without British troops. "When the Catholics are armed they can tell the troops to go", a front page caption in SW generously conceded. But the idea of these armed Catholics using their bullets to tell the troops to go was just unthinkable: "...they would merely add their bullets to those of the Paisleyites and provide an atmosphere of hysteria in which they would lead to massacre." And "when the Catholics are armed" they would tell the troops to go because, the assumption went, they wouldn't need them anymore — not because they were and would be the enemy.

The paper had at first presented the issue as a purely internal Northern Ireland one, as if the British ruling class had no interest in the matter. The troops were passive and neutral: "Behind the lines of British troops the repressive apparatus of Stormont remains" — as if the troops were not themselves repressive.

Containing this line of thought: "The Special Powers Act, which permits imprisonment without trial, has not been revoked!" — presumably, if the troops were really doing a proper job, they might have gone on to revoke the Act. "And when the troops leave..." it will all still be there. It didn't occur to them that the troops might not leave but stay on and themselves imprison people without trial.

The IS leaders concocted an elaborate and convoluted theory of lesser and greater contradictions to justify their position.

The greatest 'contradiction' was between the troops and the Paisleyites, who were thwarting British designs for a bourgeois united Ireland. Meanwhile the 'contradiction' between the troops and the Catholics' barricades, and the Catholic workers' arming and self defence, would only become acute "at some future turn". A centre page article by Stephen Marks presented the case for British troops to stay under the heading: "Fine slogans and grim reality — The contradictory role of British troops gives Catholic workers time to arm against further Orange attacks".

The benefits of the British army in Belfast and Derry were that they were "freezing" the conflict, "buying time" and providing "a breathing space" in which Catholics could prepare to fight the Orange mobs. They could also, apparently, "re-arm politically" in the course of opposing the moderates' calls for reliance on the army — though no thanks to Socialist Worker, which stood four-square with the moderates with its apologetics for the British Army.

The 'contradiction' between the Army and the Catholics' barricades and guns was in fact acute from the first day. The army's aim was to prevent such self-defence — by

substituting for it, and by repressing it.

In the very week when the troops were taking down the barricades this same article talked of a "future turn in the situation when the demolition of the barricades may (!) be needed in the interests of British capital itself and not merely of its local retainers".

IS made a big thing of the barricades. Defence of the barricades had been its militant call, substituted for Troops Out as soon as the troops were on the streets. The special issue of SW on Ireland following the change of line had declared in banner headlines: "The barricades must stay until 'B-Specials' disbanded "RUC disarmed "Special Powers Act abolished "Political prisoners released". And on 11th September the main headline was: "Defend the Barricades — No peace until Stormont goes".

This was in fact a call for British direct rule indefinitely — just as today calls for "Troops Out and Disarm the Protestants" translate in the real world into a demand for more troops not less — for who is going to "Disarm the Protestants"?

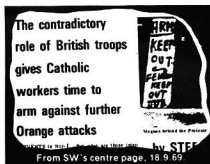
But the week the barricades were taken down in Belfast found SW with its main centre page policy article defending SW's failure to call for the troops to go (and in so doing, defending the troops themselves); and the week the barricades were brought down in Derry, as a prole from the liquidation of Free Derry, found SW utterly silent on the question.

To continue to call for the defence of the barricades would have meant to call the Catholics into conflict with the troops — which really would have exposed 'the main contradiction' in IS's line.

When IS finally re-adopted Troops Out in May or June of 1970 on a National Committee resolution from Sean Magtamma of Workers' Fight (they had fought tooth and nail to avoid defeat on the question at the Easter conference two months earlier) the IS leaders said they had been right all along, and of course they were right now to change. One Tory's position "in response to changes in the immediate role of the troops". It all depended on just what the Army was doing at any particular time, though in fact the decisive change in the relationship of the Catholics to the British soldiers didn't come until later, when the switch from a Labour to a Tory government (June) led to a clumsy 'get tough' attitude to the Catholics, and then to the curfew on the Lower Falls in July 1970.

The IS leaders didn't for long hold to that line that they had been right all along. For many years they have denied they ever argued for the troops to stay, and declare that those who say so are slanderers, "scabs", "pro-imperialists", "Zionists" etc.

In true Stalinist fashion they go through the old papers, picking out a quote here and there out of context to support their claim that "week after week after week" they opposed the troops. But there are two simple words that they can never quote after the August of that crucial year, and they are: TROOPS OUT.



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part of the majority in a bourgeois united Ireland, which would not fulfil the oft-quoted Connolly's desires one jot.

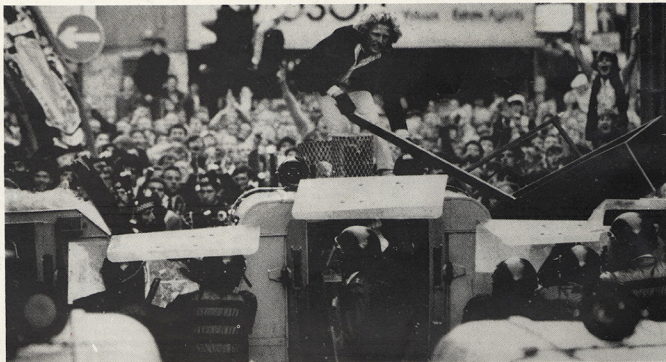
But the real tragedy is that Foot's book does not advance his cause at all. The cause is peace in Ireland, and the unity not of geography but of the Irish working class — Orange and Green. There are real injustices in Northern Ireland, injustices arising out of the artificial state imposed by partition. A minority of Catholics have been imprisoned inside this state, and they are entitled to better treatment than they get at the hands of the British army or Orange bigots. They are entitled to fight back — and Foot can call it terrorism if he wishes, but if he does he panders to the very prejudice he claims to be fighting. The fact remains that it is the Catholics who have been systematically terrorised, and oppressed, and it is with these people that our sympathy should lie.

But the British left has a responsibility to do more than sympathise or to raise the empty cry of 'troops out' in isolation from the other issues.

The question why Britain Must Get Out is easily answered: because Britain has done a lot more harm than good, and cannot aid the Irish working class in their struggle for peace, unity and socialism. But if the British troops left tomorrow, a million people calling themselves British would be left behind. They do not want to be incorporated into a Catholic state, and there is far more reason to suppose that they would forcibly resist incorporation than to suppose, as Foot does, that it would all be OK.

The evidence is that the Protestants would fight. The evidence is that there would be a bloody civil war, and that civil war would lead not to unity but to re-partition with, probably, a smaller Protestant state with a smaller Catholic minority. The problem created by the fact that there are two communities in Ireland will not go away with the British troops any more than it can be written away by sleight of hand rhetoric. That problem has to be met head on, confronted, faced up to, not slid round with talk of 'guarantees'.

The reason the problem must be addressed is not to simply conclude that the Protestants will only accept a continuation of the status quo. The status quo is unacceptable, it does not work, it is an artificial creation and it is not the expression of the Protestants' political rights.



Protestants clash with the RUC in Portadown. Photo: John Arthur (Reflex)

**Liz Millward reviews
'Ireland: Why Britain
Must Get Out' by Paul
Foot**

Any consideration of the political situation in Northern Ireland amongst socialists must be based on three central points — one that the oppression of the Catholic minority must be lifted, two that the two segments of the Irish people must be able to live together, and three, that the final goal of any 'solution' must be to unite the Irish working class, Catholic and Protestant, Green and Orange, in a fight for the socialist answer to the ruin, poverty and mass forced emigration which Irish capitalism imposes on the workers of Ireland, North and South of the partition border.

The British left often loses sight of these goals and becomes fixated on slogans — using the history of Ireland to justify the slogans and distorting it in the process. It would do the left good to forget its slogans for a while, and look at the real situation.

British troops are responsible for maintaining the framework of an unjust, unworkable state, which necessitates the denial of civil liberties to a large section of the community, resulting in deaths, maimings, horrors like strip-searching, non-jury courts and mass denial of human rights. Where that community has fought back it has been labelled 'terrorist' and the word has been used to justify further oppression. The Northern Ireland state can only be sustained by these methods because it is artificial and unjust by its very nature.

But any attempt to change the situation comes up against the fact that there are two communities in Northern Ireland. The united Ireland which would satisfy the Catholics is unacceptable to

How not to argue for withdrawal

the Protestants, and they have always been prepared to fight to stop a united independent Ireland.

When Britain has tried to impose a more equitable framework on an unworkable system the Protestants have fought them — as they fought power-sharing in 1974. There is every reason to suppose they would do so again and that they would fight the Catholics as well. So any suggestion of a united Ireland comes into conflict with an apparently immovable obstruction.

The Protestants do not want to be a large minority in a Catholic state. They are a distinct community, considering themselves British or at least different from the Irish majority.

The way to get them to agree to a united Ireland is not to simply pull out British troops and leave them to sink or swim. But it is not reasonable to allow the current situation to continue because the Protestants don't want change.

The Protestants must have rights as a large minority in a united Ireland, and the structure of the new state should be such that the majority cannot remove those rights. The only possible structure which could work is that of a federal united Ireland, freeing the Northern Catholics from their oppression, but giv-

ing the Protestants local autonomy in the geographical area where they form the majority (which is **not** the whole of Northern Ireland by any means).

A solution ensuring the security of both communities gives a real chance that the communal divisions can break down. Just calling for socialism won't suffice, because the working class in Ireland is both Catholic and Protestant and only the united working class can make socialism. It is wishful thinking to suppose the working class can be united now, under these conditions, by bread-and-butter issues and calls for socialism. Unity may be possible for a short time for a few people, or on a few issues — but such accord swiftly breaks down in a country split by communal tension.

There is no magic slogan which will ensure peace, unity and the potential to build socialism. The debate has been raging on the left for many years with too much hiding behind slogans and far too little honest appraisal of reality.

The blurb on the back of Paul Foot's offering to the debate on *Ireland (Ireland: Why Britain Must Get Out)* describes the

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