

A COMMUNIST PARTY PAMPHLET

NORTHERN IRELAND

CIVIL RIGHTS AND
POLITICAL WRONGS

by Desmond Greaves

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Northern Ireland is now in the news. Cameramen have brought into almost every British home visible evidence of the hair-raising situation that exists there. Police violence, sectarian thuggery, anti-diluvian political attitudes among those in authority, all have been seen by every television watcher. There is no need for an elaborate commission of enquiry to certify that something is wrong. That is obvious. But the ordinary British worker who wants to understand things may find the picture somewhat removed from his own experience. It is to provide background and explanations that this pamphlet has been written.

The very name 'Northern Ireland' is baffling, for the most northerly point in Ireland is in the Republic of Ireland. Sometimes the area is called Ulster. But this is an unhappy title, for Northern Ireland consists of six counties. Ulster contains nine and three of them are in the Republic.

The explanation is that Northern Ireland was artificially created by a British Act of Parliament, the Government of Ireland Act of 1920. This carved up Ireland into two parts. One part broke away and formed the Republic. The other part remains an area of Ireland held in the United Kingdom, under the Union Jack, but with certain limited local governmental powers.

It is often said that the troubles in Northern Ireland are due to religious differences. Why religious differences have one effect in Northern Ireland and another in Britain or the Republic is not usually explained.

The way religious differences are used to divide the people will be explained shortly. Let it be said now that the main issue in Northern Ireland is not religion but class relations and politics. It is the continuance of the 'settlement' imposed by the Government of Ireland Act, by which the Irish nation is not allowed to settle its own affairs without outside interference, but has a Government it did not ask for imposed on a part of its territory.

It will be necessary to go into a little past history.

When Protestantism replaced Catholicism as the state religion in England it did so as part of a popular upsurge which weakened aristocracy and prepared the way for industrial development. Protestantism was introduced into Ireland by confiscation of the land of native Catholics, and religious differences among the tenants were

played upon to the advantage of the landowners. Similarly when shipyards were established in Belfast in the 1850's the shipyard employers deliberately created religious feuds in order to keep wages down.

Economic Basis of Unionism

Sectarian strife continued intermittently from that day on. It is a historical fact that whenever it reached serious proportions it was invariably followed by reductions in wages.

Originally devised as a weapon against the tenants and the workers in the economic field, sectarianism was extended into the political field when in the eighteen eighties the movement for Irish independence took the form of the demand for Home Rule.

The north east had been allowed more industrialisation than the rest of Ireland as part of a policy of creating a division of interest within Ireland. A mass movement had forced the British Government to buy out the landlords and hand the land to the people. It was now proposed to transfer the charges to the Irish exchequer. This would have resulted in the northern capitalists being taxed to buy land for the peasants.

Here was the economic basis of modern Unionism. The "Orange card" was played. "Home rule is Rome rule" was the cry. The aim was to safeguard capitalist profits. There is an old joke that Unionists are loyal not to the Crown but to the half crown.

In 1919, during the anti-imperialist upsurge following the Russian Revolution, the Sinn Fein (i.e. Republican) Members of Parliament, refused to attend at Westminster and declared an independent Republic in Dublin.

For over two years every kind of terror and repression was loosed upon them by Lloyd George's Government. The great fear was that the Irish struggle, already influencing Egypt and India which were also at that time waging a struggle for independence, would merge with the struggle of the British people for socialism, and thus bring down the whole capitalist system in Britain.

It was as part of a policy to prevent this eventuality that Lloyd George enforced the partition of Ireland. Religious sectarianism had practically died a natural death when in 1920 Edward Carson, a Tory die-hard, deliberately inflamed it in his speeches. All Catholics were driven out of the shipyards, sometimes with terrible brutality. Armed bands attacked Catholic districts, burned down houses and drove thousands out of the city.

While it is true that some trade unionists were afraid to stand up against sectarian violence and prejudice, it is also true that many of them, especially the socialists, protested and were driven out along with the Catholics. This suited the employers.

Lloyd George's Government took advantage of this situation created by the Tory Party, to pass the Government of Ireland Act in 1920. This created a separate administration in six Irish counties. The leaders of the new administration were chosen before the election, which proceeded under conditions of terror, with the country swarming

with black-and-tans (armed special police dressed in black and khaki uniform)—and troops. The people who controlled the six counties were the Unionists, in other words the Tory Party. They have controlled it ever since.

Thanks to the situation created imperialism was able to turn back the wheels of progress in the south as well. A powerful ally was removed from the side of the British workers.

The central political question in the six counties called Northern Ireland has always been whether the area should have a separate administration at all, or should remain as previously part of the single unit of Ireland.

While such a question dominates politics there can be no straight-forward road to socialism. For that reason Unionism has seen as its lifeline the perpetuation of religious sectarianism as the surest way to keep the situation as it is. By every possible means the Catholic and Protestant people must be kept apart.

Second Class Citizens

The principal means of doing this is by blatant and deliberate discrimination against the Catholics. This discrimination creates a body of second class citizens who can always be held up as a threat to the first class citizens. The Catholics make up about one third of the total population, and are doomed to inferior status as long as the present system exists.

In deciding how much of Ireland to cut off Lloyd George's coalition Government did not consult local wishes. Derry City, Fermanagh, Tyrone, South Down and South Armagh sent deputations stating that these areas wanted to remain in the separate Irish state. They were disregarded.

Once the unionists were in power they set out to make sure that these areas should not continue to return councils opposed to partition. For this purpose they introduced gerrymandering. Thus while Derry City had a two thirds anti-Unionist electorate, the ward boundaries were so drawn that two thirds of the councillors were Unionists.

The measures taken invariably strengthened the rich against the poor. Thus in local elections only householders are allowed a vote. This affects both Catholic and Protestant workers. Business men can have up to six votes for each business, according to its size.

Obviously it was in the Unionist interest that their opponents should not have houses. Hence the discrimination in the allocation of houses. There are council estates for example in Enniskillen where not a single Catholic lives. The Catholics are crowded into the poorest and most congested part of the town.

There has also been a deliberate attempt to drive opponents of the regime into emigrating. This is made easier because Northern Ireland workers have the lowest standard of living and the highest unemployment rate in the United Kingdom. The official Family Expenditure Survey for 1967 revealed that 14 per cent of adult men in the United Kingdom earned under £15 a week; but in Northern Ireland it was

more than 30 per cent. In December 1968 the unemployment rate in the United Kingdom was 2.4 per cent. In Northern Ireland it was 7.5 per cent.

New industry has been concentrated in the Unionist areas around Belfast. The result is that whereas unemployment in the Belfast area is not very much worse than that in a British 'development area' (though this is bad enough), unemployment in towns like Newry, Strabane and Derry ranges between 15 and 25 per cent. In human terms this is a terrible indictment. The population of these areas is falling, while that of the eastern areas is rising.

Discrimination in Employment

Throughout the whole of Northern Ireland there is discrimination against Catholics in employment. It may be asked how does a prospective employer know he is being approached for a job by a Catholic? One indication is the man's name. Those who are Presbyterians for example often have Scottish names. An infallible guide however is to ask what school the man came from. Catholics and Protestants go to separate schools.

The famous socialist James Connolly sent his children to Catholic schools in Belfast and explained the reason to his comrades. It was to spare the children the jingoism of the Protestant schools, and give them a chance to learn about the Irish national struggle. It would therefore be a mistake to regard the schools issue merely as a religious one. It is political as well.

Whatever his means of finding out a man's religion, an employer (with commendable exceptions of course) will often refuse to employ a Catholic. Some have even stated the reason openly to the labour exchange. It is sometimes stated that Catholic employers choose Catholics for jobs they have to offer. If this were so it would not be surprising. This only shows the evil consequences of the principle of discrimination.

All this builds up a resentment and a hatred among Catholics. The presence of this resentment is well known to the Protestant workers, and the Unionists then use it as a bogey to frighten the Protestant workers into political acquiescence with things that are really injurious to their own interests.

Another means of hampering the development of effective opposition is the use of oaths or tests. Thus an oath of allegiance to the British Crown is exacted from applicants for employment in government service. While many men will sensibly regard this as a meaningless formality, it remains, taken as it is under duress, a humiliation, for the programme of the opposition is adherence to the Republic. In the case of elections to the Stormont Parliament a candidate must sign an oath of allegiance and undertake to take his seat if elected. This means in effect that a Republican must repudiate his programme before he can enter Parliament.

Such being the state of the law it would not be surprising if from time to time sections of the opposition were tempted to go outside

it. If they do they meet a set of police powers so severe and complete that the South African Premier Verwoerd is said to have expressed his envy of them. Since April 1922 the Special Powers Act (amended and extended from time to time) has provided for the following measures.

Special Powers

The police and authorities are empowered to:

1) arrest without warrant; 2) imprison without charge or trial and deny recourse to Habeas Corpus or a court of law; 3) enter and search homes without warrant and with force at any hour of day or night; 4) declare a curfew and prohibit meetings, assemblies (including fairs and markets) and processions; 5) permit punishment by flogging; 6) deny claim to a trial by jury; 7) arrest persons it is desired to examine as witnesses, forcibly detain them and compel them to answer questions under penalties, even if answers may incriminate them. Such a person is guilty of an offence if he refuses to be sworn or answer a question; 8) do any act involving interference with the rights of private property; 9) prevent access of relatives or legal advisers to a person imprisoned without trial; 10) prohibit the holding of an inquest after a prisoner's death; 11) arrest a person "who by word of mouth" spreads false reports or makes false statements; 12) prohibit the circulation of any newspaper; 13) prohibit the possession of any film or gramophone record; 14) arrest a person who does anything "calculated to be prejudicial to the preservation of peace or maintenance of order in Northern Ireland and not specifically provided for in the Regulations".

Throughout the near half century of Unionist rule opposition has come from two main quarters. The fact that one third of the population is in more or less permanent opposition has been referred to already. This opposition at times took a Parliamentary form at Stormont under the Nationalist Party. At other times there were efforts at armed revolt supported by the republican movement across the border.

The other form of opposition has been labour and socialist. Unfortunately for some years past there has been one Labour Party for those opposing partition, and another for those tolerating it. Of late years there have been signs of a slow rapprochement, which is however far from complete.

The Civil Rights Movement

The present civil rights agitation had its origin early in the 'sixties in the left wing of the trade union movement. It was felt that there was little hope of presenting a united working class front against the

forces of Toryism while one third of the people were second class citizens. The removal of the dictatorial powers with which Unionism had armed itself was vital to the success of the working class movement, irrespective of religious opinion.

Conferences were called, notably by Belfast Trades Council; and for the first time for many years Catholic and Protestant trade unionists discussed the difficult problems caused by the Unionists' success in dividing the people. The Civil Rights Association now has the allegiance of many political trends, including nationalists, republicans, both Labour Parties and the Communist Party.

The danger of this development to the ruling clique was of course obvious. Mr. Ian Paisley, up to then a harmless fanatic in the wings, was brought on to the front of the stage.

As the movement for civil rights drew in fresh support, for the first time uniting the two trends in the nationalist movement and the two trends in the labour movement with trade unionists and Communists, the tactics of the Paisleyites became more aggressive. Demonstrations for civil rights were harried by counter demonstrations. The Unionists then banned the civil rights demonstrators on the grounds that this was necessary to preserve public order.

This development had been going on for a considerable period before the shocking police outrages at Derry ripped the veil of silence, and let the whole world see what was happening in Northern Ireland. On October 5th, 1968, a demonstration which had been banned under the excuse that a counter demonstration was imminent (it was not) was broken up by police commandos in the presence of several British Members of Parliament.

At the new year, judging it unwise to use policemen, the Unionist authorities permitted a civil rights march to be ambushed by Paisleyites at Burntollet. The thugs who hurled stones and small rocks at the marchers who included women were never brought to book.

Since then there has been a rising demand that decisive action should be taken. The civil rights movement demands freedom of speech and assembly, and that those who try to prevent this should be dealt with. The Paisleyite bands should be broken up, and the notorious B Special Constabulary should be disbanded.

The civil rights supporters demand that there shall be one man one vote in all elections, and that boundaries shall be fairly drawn. They demand a properly ordered points system by which homeless families can be housed on the basis of need. They demand that discrimination based on religion shall be made illegal; and that there shall be no discrimination in the siting of industry, so that the unemployment problem in the south and west can be solved.

They demand abolition of the Special Powers Act and withdrawal of the Public Order Act. Their yardstick of success is stated clearly. They want parity with the rest of the United Kingdom, and the same principles of civil liberty to apply to the six counties as to Britain.

The upsurge of the civil rights movement, as shown by the election of Bernadette Devlin who was the unity candidate of the opposition, has resulted in severe strains within the ruling Unionist Party.

Communist Party's View

Explaining the significance of the differences between the O'Neillites and the Paisleyites the Communist Party of Northern Ireland wrote in its election manifesto in February: "Behind the smokescreen of 'personalities' two distinct policies have appeared. On the one hand we have the O'Neillites—the political instrument of the monopolies in N. Ireland; and on the other hand the 'Right-wingers'—Craigites and Paisleyites, who reflect the fear within the Unionist ranks of losing privileges and sinecures which are maintained by political-religious sectarianism. **BOTH ARE THE ENEMY OF THE WORKING PEOPLE. . . .** Since its inception the Unionist Party has demonstrated its total opposition to the present demands of the Civil Rights Association. Events of the past few months have shown that both 'Rightists' and so-called 'Moderate' Unionists are still opposed to these just demands of the common people."

There have been increasing demands for intervention from Westminster. The policy of the Wilson Government has been to try to avoid this for fear of throwing into question the whole imperialist system of partition, which was underwritten by the Attlee Government with the aid of Tory votes against the opposition of Labour back benchers. It has urged those Unionists most responsive to British influence to introduce reforms of their own accord. The attempt to do so in a modest way, totally insufficient for the needs of the civil rights movement, cost Captain O'Neill his premiership.

Thus under pressure Captain O'Neill undertook to introduce the principle of "one man one vote" in the next local elections. This is now postponed to 1971, the intervening time to be spent re-drawing the boundaries, & Civil Rights speakers have warned against a new gerrymander. He appointed the British "Ombudsman" Parliamentary Commissioner in Northern Ireland. Since then his powers have been extended to grievances arising out of local government. This is to take a broom to the sea. There have been promises of unspecified "machinery for raising grievances" by the new Government, which has also undertaken to send model systems on allocation of houses to local authorities, but not to enforce them. The utter inadequacy of such measures is obvious, and reinforces the demand for action from Westminster somewhat more effective than Mr. Wilson's tea-time chats.

Until recently it was pretended that Westminster had no power to intervene. Then it was tardily admitted that the Government of Ireland Act vested supreme authority in the Westminster Parliament. Members who wanted to discuss British responsibility were told however that there was a "convention" that they did not do so; and the absurd position was reached where Mr. Gerard Fitt, the Member for Belfast West, was liable to be ruled out of order every time he asked a question about his own constituency.

Since the struggles in Derry and elsewhere the 'convention' has become somewhat battered. There have been debates on the subject of Northern Ireland. The danger is that the change in Government in Northern Ireland will be used as an excuse for delay; and if by

mischance a Tory Government were returned to Westminster at the next election, the Unionists might win a new lease of life. The masses in Northern Ireland would certainly refuse to accept such a position, and the danger of civil war, spoken of by several MPs, could become a reality.

British Labour Movement

The effect of such an event would be disastrous not only for Northern Ireland but for the British labour movement. In many British cities are large concentrations of Irish people. In some there are populations of Irish descent who still retain memories of the sectarian excesses of the past; and there are still prejudices left. The divisions which would affect the movement in such an event must be avoided by timely action now.

It is not a question of 'doing good' to Ireland. It is a vital interest of the British people that the Unionist bastion of reaction in these islands should be brought down. As long as Northern Ireland sends MPs to Westminster it is in the best interests of the British labour movement that these should be progressive not reactionary. From a longer term point of view it is in the best interests of the British people that democratic forces on both sides of the Irish Sea exercise power, rather than forces of reaction. The clearing of the ground that would enable the Irish people to go ahead and build up their own prosperity would be in the interests of all the inhabitants of these islands.

Solidarity Needed

What action is needed?

First the British working class movement, the trade unions and political parties must make it unmistakably clear that they will not tolerate a position where men and women can be put in danger of their lives through seeking elementary democratic rights. The Northern Ireland Unionists must be made to feel the full weight of public opinion on this matter. There should be protest resolutions from all trade union and labour movement organisations, and solidarity delegations from British organisations to Northern Ireland to those engaged in the campaign for civil rights.

Second, pressure must be brought to bear in every possible way on the Unionist Government to introduce the reforms that are demanded by the civil rights movement.

But third there is something of longer term significance. The root cause of the troubles in Northern Ireland is the constitution that has been imposed on the area. It consists of an Act of the British Parliament passed in the year 1920. Many of its provisions have been repealed as they become out of date, but the basic principles have never been questioned, although they are an anachronism. As the Act now works Northern Ireland only controls 10 per cent of its own finances. Its own taxes are doled out to it in dribs and drabs. It has no power over

trade relations with any other country, not even the Irish Republic. Least of all has it the power to discuss with the Republic the vital question of reunification of the country. There are strict provisions within the Act that it must not legislate religious discrimination. So it carries out religious discrimination by administrative means instead.

When the Act was passed there was proportional representation in Northern Ireland. This was abolished in 1929 and the British Government came within an ace of vetoing the change. When passed originally the Act envisaged a Council of Ireland to which both parts of Ireland could transfer powers. This section was repealed.

Civil Liberties

What is wanted therefore is a revision of the constitution which would bring it up to date, reimpose the restrictions that have been evaded, but confer additional powers to enable the people to work out their own salvation in their own way.

The British people have no right, and should not wish to have any right, to insist that Northern Ireland should remain a part of the United Kingdom. But they have the right to insist that while it does remain a part of the United Kingdom it shall be constitutionally compelled to afford the same level of civil liberties as exists in the rest of the UK and that it shall be free to leave the UK.

Recently Lord Brockway announced his intention of introducing in the House of Lords an Amending Bill to the Government of Ireland Act. Its purpose will be to amend the Act with a Bill of Rights, so as to provide a constitutional guarantee of civil liberties in Northern Ireland. Simultaneously a group of MPs will submit a similar proposal in the House of Commons under the Ten Minute Rule. These moves should be supported to the full.

Finally as a result of partition and the discriminatory policy of Unionism many of the depressed areas require vast injections of capital to modernise and re-equip industry; and provide homes and jobs for the people. The British Government should provide grants and loans without strings. The British people would reap the benefit, for Ireland is Britain's largest foreign market apart from the U.S.A. Irish prosperity is the prosperity of Britain's nearest neighbour. Every British worker should see the advantage of this.

If these steps are taken the way will be cleared for further developments leading to the unity of Ireland and the ending of the dispute that has done so much harm in these islands. The defeat of Unionism and the recognition of Ireland's national right of self-determination will clear the way to collaboration in the building of socialism.

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