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# IRELAND: A QUESTION FOR US ALL

**Report of a London District  
Communist Party Delegation to Belfast**

## **Preface**

*London Communists have always been in the forefront of the struggle to support the demands of freedom and unity of the Irish people.*

*Despite the repression that has taken place in Northern Ireland, the lack of democracy and the growth of terrorism, the voice of the Irish people continues to be heard.*

*A representative number of Communists from the London District of the Communist Party have recently returned to London from Northern Ireland. They had discussions with representatives of the broad community in Ireland and they now report their experiences and discussions in this pamphlet.*

*We hope that the report will be seen as a contribution from the representatives of the London District of the Communist Party and will assist London's labour and progressive movement in the struggle for peace, jobs and independence for Ireland. Delegates will be willing to report to any organisation on the issues discussed in this pamphlet. Please contact LDCP, 75 Farringdon Road, London EC1.*

**Bill Dunn**

**Secretary, London District Committee  
of the Communist Party**

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# Foreword

The Delegation did not want their report to be simply a day by day account of who said what to them during their stay in Northern Ireland — or, as one comrade put it, a 'political travelogue'. Rather, we have tried to combine political analysis, commentary and a programme for action.

Part I of the Report deals with the historical and political background to current developments in Northern Ireland and is informed by the Marxist analysis of the Communist Party of Ireland.

Part II describes the present situation in the region based on the Delegation's experiences and discussions.

Part III addresses the fundamental question, 'What is to be done?' based on the decisions of the 1983 Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

# Part I

## The Roots of the Irish Crisis

While the London Communist Party delegation were in Belfast, the Labour Party conference discussed Ireland but failed to advance its policy. Since then, however, the Communist Party of Great Britain, at its own 38th National Congress, have called for the elaboration of a strategy for British withdrawal.

We will summarise the major points in that strategy at the end of this Report. But it is our firm belief that before such a strategy can be discussed, it is necessary to reconsider the history of how Britain has so far maintained control over Northern Ireland — against the wishes of the majority of all the people of Ireland and in spite of a unified labour movement in Britain — and what the heritage of that control has been in terms of contemporary life in much of Northern Ireland.

The question of Ireland is not a domestic one — it is fundamentally colonial in nature. Ireland was England's first colony and Northern Ireland seems destined to be one of British imperialism's last enclaves. The discussions which the delegation held with Irish Communists clearly supported this view. These meetings, as well as those with a variety of other organisations, helped illuminate why and how this should be the case.

### Partition

The national struggles in Ireland during the 18th and 19th centuries were perceived as a clear threat by Britain to its rather lucrative hegemony over its neighbouring island. To a Britain under the political sway of reactionary forces, Ireland seemed, at the end of the 18th century, far too sympathetic with the ideals of republican France which it sought to enlist in support of its fight for national independence. By the beginning of the present century, Ireland would be seen to be equally too receptive to socialist initiatives, as the ideas of James Connolly linked the national struggle with the struggle of the working class for social emancipation. The perennial spectre of a free (and possibly of a free and socialist) Ireland on Britain's strategically important Atlantic 'doorstep' demanded that Britain secure a potent ally within Ireland itself.

That ally — Ulster Unionism — was and is a complete opposition to Irish freedom and a community of cross-class interests, welded together by sectarian-ethnic discrimination into identity with the occupying British power. Such discrimination was a central mechanism in maintaining a wedge between progressive elements in both the Catholic and Protestant communities — for, it must not be forgotten, many dissenting Protestants, themselves suffering under the oppression of the Anglican establishment in Ireland, had found common cause with Catholic nationalists at the end of the 18th century. It is noteworthy that the Orange Order, which has since become one of the chief instruments of anti-Republicanism, was established at that time.

Only in the 20th century, however, with the ascendancy of the Home Rule movement, when the likelihood that Britain could long continue to control the whole of Ireland had rapidly disintegrated, was the full potential of the 'Orange card' translated into the concrete terms of the geo-political partition of Ireland itself — and, with it, the creation of a spurious

Unionist majority in the northern six counties. Within this artificial statelet, under the guise of apparently democratic process, Britain had gerrymandered a secure majority against Irish unity and independence. The Home Rule Act of 1914, suspended during the course of the First World War, never had to be implemented.

Within Northern Ireland, however, it still required persistent effort to create a mass basis for Unionism that would break the link between the struggle for Irish freedom and the organised labour movement — particularly militant in Belfast, where right up to virtually the eve of partition in 1922, leading Unionists expressed deep fears about the susceptibility of working class Protestants to socialist ideas. Partition and the ensuing Civil War in the south, however, gave Britain's Unionist allies new and unprecedented opportunities to consolidate their rule by systematically reinforcing sectarian divisions and translating the ideology of Protestant superiority into pervasive political, social and economic discrimination against the Catholic community.

Through this apartheid-like system, Britain's ally in Northern Ireland was consolidated. A one-party Unionist monolith, linking religion with political influence and economic favour, won the support of all sections of the Protestant population in Northern Ireland, whatever their true class interests as worker, small businessman, farmer or capitalist.

This seemingly unassailable 'all-class alliance' was to wield virtually unchallenged power for half a century. In spite of the Westminster Parliament's supreme authority over 'all persons, matters and things' in Northern Ireland (according to the Government of Ireland Act 1920), the British Parliament was content to allow Unionist power to have free rein to prosecute its policies of repression, sectarianism and privilege unhampered. It was not, in fact, until the present crisis, when Britain's own interests were threatened, that the UK government was forced to intervene.

## Break-up of the monolith

British imperialism's interests were threatened by a number of parallel developments which disrupted Unionist rule. Among these were:

- **The entry of multinational capital into Northern Ireland.** Although heralded by the Unionists as a solution to unemployment, this in fact led to the destruction of traditional industries, to the detriment of both Unionist minded workers and employers.
- **Differences within Unionism over contacts with the South.** Northern Ireland premier Terence O'Neill met Taoiseach Sean Lemass in 1965, which was bitterly resented by hard-line Unionists.
- **The rise of a mass civil rights movement.** This created open hostility between 'moderate' and extremist Unionists.

Born out of the repressive character of political rule in Northern Ireland, the civil rights movement which coalesced in the late 1960s represented a visible part of a broad politicisation in the nationalist community. As such it was seen as a major threat to Unionist authority when a civil rights march was planned in Derry in October, 1968 — a city which played such a signal role in Orange mythology. Despite efforts by Northern Ireland Home Affairs Minister William Craig to ban the demonstration, it went ahead and was brutally attacked by the Royal Ulster Constabulary. O'Neill's gesture of a package of reforms to appease the minority community fell pathetically short of the cry by the civil rights movement for "One Man, One Vote"; yet, within the context of a corroding Unionist solidarity, it was enough to enrage the extreme elements within the Protestant population. After months of further marches and counterattacks, including the notorious ambush by RUC and Orange thugs at Burntollet Bridge, O'Neill was finally forced to resign after a Stormont

election which revealed the great divide in Unionist ranks. Subsequently, under Chichester-Clark, the new Northern Ireland premier, the institutionally sectarian "B Specials" of the RUC went completely out of hand in Derry and Belfast. As the more liberal elements in the Unionist camp, who recognised a need for some change, were pushed aside, right-wing Unionism increasingly responded to the actions of the nationalist community with state and vigilante violence.

As the situation slid more and more into one of violent confrontation between the Northern Ireland state and the nationalist minority, and between the Protestant and Catholic communities, Westminster was forced to assert its authority over the heads of the Unionists. On 14th August 1969, British troops were deployed in Northern Ireland; in Derry, they took over security operations from the RUC itself. The Unionist monolith, intact since 1921, was split, and British interests were once again visibly on the streets of Ireland.

## A Military Solution

With the return of the Tories to Westminster, Britain sought a military solution to prop-up their Unionist allies. Almost immediately, in July 1970, the army flooded into the area of the Falls Road, the main artery of Catholic West Belfast. As such military intervention increased, so did legal means of repression against protest and opposition. With British approval, Brian Faulkner, who had replaced Chichester-Clark in March 1971, invoked Section 12 of the infamous Special Powers Act to introduce internment. That was in August 1971. By December, 1576 persons had been interned without trial.

As the state thus went dramatically on the offensive, the response of the minority community inevitably sharpened: ever larger numbers within the nationalist fold took up arms, as the IRA — which had turned from military to political action through most of the 1960s — revitalised the armed struggle in the form of the Provisionals. Rent and rate strikes developed, and Stormont was boycotted by nationalist politicians.

On 30 January 1972, the first nationalist march in Derry after the introduction of internment was met by British paratroopers, who fired on an unarmed crowd, killing thirteen people in an infamous massacre known through Ireland — and around the world — as "Bloody Sunday".

On both sides, activity escalated: in the nationalist community, the IRA campaign intensified; while among right-wing Unionists the demand for still further and more effective repression mounted. With tacit consent from British authorities and the RUC, Loyalist vigilante groups developed and eventually came together to form the Ulster Defence Association.

British policy was in total disarray. Their Unionist allies were divided among themselves and powerless to deliver the political goods for which they had been installed in the first place. On 24 March 1972, Prime Minister Edward Heath suspended Stormont and declared direct rule over Northern Ireland.

## The Return of the Ultras

The desperation of the British position was dramatised by a secret meeting between the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, William Whitelaw, and leading members of the Provos in London in July 1972 in the midst of a cease-fire between British army forces and the IRA. Under pressure from right-wing Loyalists, however, London allowed the fragile truce to break down within days of the London talks. One immediate effect was that the SDLP, pursuing a centrist parliamentary course, undertook discussions with Whitelaw which eventually led to the effort to set up a so-called power-sharing assembly in which minority representation would, reflecting SDLP composition, largely take account of middle-class Catholic interests. More, they produced the so-called Sunningdale pact which simultaneously promised to guarantee the independent status of Northern Ireland while

offering the illusion of a stepping-stone to Irish unity. In bringing off this delicate strategy, however, Britain had underestimated the growing power of right-wing Unionism, dominated by Ian Paisley. Between the 14th and 29th May 1974, the self-appointed Ulster Workers' Council locked out thousands of workers at gun-point to effect an industrial stoppage in protest against Sunningdale and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Uncommitted even to the merest semblance of democratic reform, the British government did little to combat such political and economic sabotage. The Sunningdale accord collapsed; the Northern Ireland assembly fell; and Brian Faulkner's more moderate Unionism followed that of O'Neill and Chichester-Clark into obscurity. Right-wing Unionism was again in the ascendancy, as Britain was forced to retreat once more to a position of direct rule.

## **Silence in Britain**

This has remained the situation to the present day. Failed initiative has followed failed initiative. By the end of 1983 only the Alliance and the Democratic Unionist Parties remained in the Assembly. Unionism is more divided than ever before. And British policy in recent years (over the hunger strikes, plastic bullets and repressive legislation) is condemned around the world.

**How is it, then, that, without a clear institutional ally in Northern Ireland and with a monotonous failure of all their policies, the British seem as entrenched as ever in the region?**

Among other factors, the British Parliament has for decades simply refused to discuss Northern Ireland, let alone to intervene, acquiescing to the pretence of democratic prerogatives with which the region has been cloaked from its inception. Thus, after the Second World War, under pressure from Lord Brookeborough, one of the founders of the notorious B Specials and then premier of Northern Ireland, the Labour government introduced the 1949 Ireland Bill which contained the following clause:

"Parliament hereby declares that Northern Ireland remains part of His Majesty's Dominions and of the United Kingdom and affirms that in no event will Northern Ireland or any part thereof cease to be part of His Majesty's Dominions and of the United Kingdom without the consent of the Parliament of Northern Ireland".<sup>1</sup>

In this way, by continually affirming that the fate of Northern Ireland must be 'democratically' determined by a political system which was gerrymandered at birth to guarantee an undemocratic outcome, a bi-partisan consensus in Westminster has effectively stifled real debate in British politics about what goes on in the six counties.

## **Breaking with Imperialism**

The existence of this Unionist 'veto', which Communists oppose, has had two seemingly contradictory effects. First, it obscures the fact that, as the 1949 Ireland Act demonstrated, Westminster has within its power simply to disclaim any further British sovereignty over Northern Ireland — just as in 1949 it did with regard to the other 26 counties. Thus, the capacity of the British Parliament to effect a workable solution is far greater and more immediate than it pretends. Secondly, the general view of the constitutional relationship between Britain and Northern Ireland perpetuates the myth that the 'Irish problem' is merely an extreme form of *domestic* political trouble, when it is, in fact, a problem of British imperialism in Ireland.

The task of breaking Unionist domination in Northern Ireland thus presents itself differently, but in complementary fashion, in Ireland and in Britain. In Ireland, Communists see the task as further reducing the hold of Unionist ideology over the working class and petit bourgeois sections of the Protestant majority, in order to isolate Unionism politically.

Out of such an effort alone can emerge the political unity of the working class of all Ireland which is essential if the Irish struggle for self-determination and social emancipation is to be successful.

In Britain, Communists see their task as developing a clear ideological and political break between the working class movement and British imperialism which continues to rule in Northern Ireland with the tacit consent of the British people.

**We must fight to remove that consent and to demand a declaration of intent by the British government to withdraw from Northern Ireland, coupled with a broad programme for ending repression and instituting democratic reforms within the six counties that would create, in the shortest possible time, the political, social and economic conditions for the re-unification of Ireland.**

# Part II

## The Present Situation

In this section we draw on the Delegation's experiences and information largely obtained from meetings and discussions in Northern Ireland. Below, five key areas are examined: political parties, repression, deprivation, the trade union movement and women.

### The Political Parties

The Delegation met with representatives of a wide spectrum of political opinion in Northern Ireland, including — in addition to our hosts, the CPI — leading figures in Sinn Fein, the SDLP, the Alliance and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). Neither of the two major Unionist parties (the Official Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party) responded to requests for a meeting, while it proved impossible to arrange discussions with the Workers Party. In both cases, there is no doubt that this handicapped the work of the Delegation. It would, for example, have been extremely useful to compare the different and rival attitudes of the two Unionist parties whose representatives presently face each other across the floor at Westminster and in the Northern Ireland Assembly — an indication of the irreparable split in Unionism.

Similarly, it would have been valuable to hear what account the Workers Party would have given of themselves. Formerly known as Official Sinn Fein in the Republic and the Republican Clubs in Northern Ireland (changing its name to the present title in 1982), and known as the political wing of the Official IRA, they have — in the words of one leading Irish Communist — undergone a recent 'transformation from a radical republic party to a social democratic one [which] ..... has appeared to be embarrassed by its republican past, and to have been incapable of defining republicanism except as antithetical to socialism'.<sup>2</sup>

### The Communist Party of Ireland

It was among the Irish Communists — whose party was first established in 1921 — that the Delegation found the continuing loyalty to James Connolly's principles of linking the national struggle firmly with the fight for socialism. The CPI believe that united action by the working class in Ireland, North and South, and in Britain can defeat British imperialism in all its aspects and make a political reality of the demands it recently expressed in a statement of its National Executive Committee:

"The Labour Movement and other democratic forces in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and in Britain must intensify the fight for a new initiative in Northern Ireland. This must encompass the demands for an end to all repressive laws and measures, real devolution under a Bill of Rights and with certain fiscal and economic powers for a new assembly, accompanied by a declaration from the Westminster Parliament of its intention to withdraw from all interference in Irish affairs, political, military and economic, by a specific date and so to allow the Irish people, North and South, to exer-

cise their most basic democratic right — the right to determine what future economic and social structures are necessary to best serve their interests".<sup>3</sup>

In keeping with this viewpoint, the CPI noted in its submission to the Forum for a New Ireland that

"The Communist Party of Ireland is committed to co-operating in a genuine way with all forces which are serious about achieving Irish unity, provided that the unity they seek is one of independence and democratic equality".<sup>4</sup>

The CPI has thus, throughout its history, adhered to Connolly's view that republicanism, in its best sense of commitment to democratic revolutionary tradition in Ireland, was fundamentally antithetical to the sectarian divisions which prevented Protestant and Catholic workers from recognising their common exploitation. As such the CPI have tended to regard the military campaigns of Provisional IRA and especially of the INLA as simply helping to perpetuate a vicious circle. As they have commented in a recent editorial of *Unity*, the weekly paper of the party's Northern Area:

"Paramilitary activities allow a situation in which sectarian elements like the DUP [the Democratic Unionist Party of Ian Paisley] can gain credence for their bigotted demands and in which the role of British imperialism in Ireland is obscured".<sup>5</sup>

They see as far more essential the process of building concrete democratic alliances among the working class, of unifying progressive forces as a *precondition* for the dissolution of all the repressive structures which Unionism and British imperialism have together constructed, including partition as the ultimate bulwark of reactionary sectarian politics.

### The Nationalist Camp

#### Sinn Fein

The percentage share of the votes for the October 1982 Assembly elections and of those cast in Northern Ireland for the June 1983 General Election within the nationalist camp were as follows:<sup>6</sup>

	1982	1983
SDLP	18.8%	17.9%
SINN FEIN	10.1%	13.4%
TOTAL	28.9%	31.3%

If it is remembered that the vote for the SDLP alone at the May 1979 General Election, when Sinn Fein did not stand, was 19.7%, it is clear that the votes for Sinn Fein represent a 'new vote'. With seats that they gained — although Sinn Fein candidates ran on an abstentionist ticket and have not taken their seats — the party's position as a political force was considerably strengthened — something which has been a great source of embarrassment to British government policies.

Most important, of course, Sinn Fein has acquired in the process an important new platform from which to put forward their views — a platform which not even the most diehard Tory press in Britain has been able to ignore. Moreover, where for many years British journalists have been unwilling to report the views of Irish republicans for fear of prosecution under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, they are now falling over themselves to interview elected Sinn Fein representatives. All of this has facilitated the growing tendency for the party to be taken seriously as a political force and has certainly assisted it in its efforts to forge new links with sections of the British Left.

Sinn Fein's representatives told the Delegation — and this point has been emphasised

elsewhere as well — that its reason for standing candidates for the Assembly and Parliament was explicitly not reformist but for revolutionary reasons. Most significantly, they state that their political intervention has not only helped to mobilise Sinn Fein in general and to gather support within the Catholic community, but has also undermined the effect of continuous 'propaganda against the armed struggle'. It has done this most effectively, as we have noted, by giving Sinn Fein access to the media in unprecedented fashion, allowing its representatives to visit London and to speak at a fringe meeting of the 1983 Labour Party Conference at Brighton.

At that meeting, Gerry Adams, the Sinn Fein leader, said:

"The key question which British socialists, progressives and democrats have to answer is whether the right to sovereignty and national self-determination is vested in the Irish people or in the London government. The reply to that question for socialists, progressives and democrats is obvious".<sup>7</sup>

There is little doubt that in this way a notable advance is being made in reintroducing fundamental questions about the future of Ireland into the British labour movement.

One must recognise, however, that Sinn Fein today reflects two faces of republican tradition, not necessarily in easy alliance. One is represented by a simpler nationalism that has found its motive force in the middle class or in rural areas; more committed to the military cause, it has also tended to be hostile to progressive tendencies within the movement. Indeed, when Provisional Sinn Fein (and the Provisional IRA) was formed in 1969-70, it was largely as a reaction against a diminishing commitment to the military struggle in favour of more socialist political activity. That political dimension, the other face of the republican tradition, has in the last few years begun to reassert itself within Provisional Sinn Fein as well — a strong indication that it arises out of undeniable material circumstances of life in Northern Ireland. This progressive trend, which now gives the appearance of being in the ascendancy within Sinn Fein and is represented by Gerry Adams and other young members of the party, has its roots in the working class around Belfast and Derry, the two principal industrial centres in the six counties, and represents a legitimate but still rather nebulous (and certainly non-Marxist) socialist viewpoint which can only gain in coherence and conviction to the degree that Sinn Fein is not isolated from other progressive forces.

In the meanwhile, the leadership of Sinn Fein, while seeking to develop and broaden their republican message — even to the point of inviting Protestants as well as Catholics to join them — have not yet been able to transcend the need for a delicate balancing of contradictory forces within the movement. While the appeal for progressive unity, for example, cannot be faulted, Sinn Fein's view of the sectarian nature of the trade unions in Northern Ireland — as presented to the Delegation — while reflecting very real historical problems, nonetheless expresses a difficulty within the party in formulating a political role which can help to forge working class unity. Indeed, it is the Sinn Fein position that there is no possibility of working class unity until the 'Brits' are out. While this is an arguable point, their continued commitment to the armed struggle, which is seen at least in sectarian terms (if for no other reason than that military targets — such as the RUC — draw their personnel almost entirely from the Protestant community), has done little to draw Protestant workers to an anti-imperialist position, out of which socialist convictions could later be developed.

## SDLP

The SDLP, which considers itself 'broadly in the nationalist tradition', evolved out of the crisis of the civil rights period as conflict between state forces and the Catholic minority saw increasing popular support for the Provos and a shift from backing for constitutional politics

on the part of the nationalist community. Largely to preserve the constitutional alternative, six opposition MPs at Stormont — including Gerry Fitt and John Hume — combined in 1970 to form the new SDLP, with the support of the Catholic bourgeoisie in the North and Southern business interests. It is this particular support, as opposed to that of urban working class Catholics, which has established SDLP policy in the murky middle-ground of Northern Ireland politics, where it has bid for leadership of the nationalist community — though increasingly seeing its support slipping to Sinn Fein — while simultaneously maintaining a commitment to parliamentary developments and an antipathy to the armed struggle.

The SDLP believes that the British government should declare a long-term policy of Irish 'reunification by consent'. This, they say, would moderate the absolute nature of the Unionist veto, which as it exists today offers Unionists little reason to discuss the future of Northern Ireland with other parties. The recent Irish Forum was largely an SDLP initiative to formulate, in conjunction with the bourgeois parties of the South, various options for 'reunification by consent'. It was hoped that the final reports of the Forum would force the Unionists and the British Government to take such overtures more seriously, while impressing on the nationalist community the nature of the obstacles to a united Ireland. On the other hand, it is equally likely that a major outcome of the Forum will be to demonstrate precisely how much resistance reactionary forces will present to even the most thoughtful and conscientious constitutional perspective, if it threatens their interests in British hegemony over the six counties.

Like Sinn Fein, but for different reasons, the SDLP has little influence in trade union organisations and thus relatively meagre influence in the working class movement where the current crisis has been focused and out of which any workable solution will emerge.

## The Unionist Camp

The share of the Northern Ireland vote for the two principal Unionist Parties in the last two general elections and the 1982 Assembly election were:<sup>8</sup>

	1979	1982	1983
Official Unionists	36.6%	29.7%	34.0%
Democratic Unionists	10.2%	23.0%	20.0
TOTAL	46.8%	52.2%	54.0%

As indicated earlier, the members of the Delegation were keenly interested in talking with representatives of the Unionist tradition in Northern Ireland. Regrettably, no response to its invitation was forthcoming from either the OUP or the DUP.

The recent trends in voting within the Protestant community reveal the deep divisions within Unionism. This split is underlined by a fundamental divergence in political strategy, as the OUP has moved towards integration with Britain (and perhaps even retaking the Tory whip at Westminster) — a position certainly enhanced by the presence of Enoch Powell, since 1974 Unionist MP from South Down, among members of the Privy Council — while the DUP, under Ian Paisley, seeks a return to Stormont. The DUP represents an interesting and important tendency in Unionism which is deeply distrustful of British policy; repeatedly in recent days Paisley has been heard to say, 'I have no faith in the London government'. Such views represent the strains among the supporters of British imperialism in Ireland.

The Delegation, however, was able to meet with a leading member of the Ulster Defence Association, Andy Tyrrie, at the UDA's headquarters in East Belfast. Although untypical of

Unionism in general, the UDA does give an idea of the contradictions within the Unionist all-class alliance, as it seeks to represent a working-class dimension.

The UDA admit that their organisation arose from diverse vigilante groups in late 1971 — a 'citizens army' it was called — through the fear and suspicion of a siege mentality when working class Protestants felt that they could no longer rely on their own Government and security forces. By May 1974, the UDA was in a position to play a major role in the loyalist strike which helped destroy the power-sharing administration in Northern Ireland.

The UDA spokesman professed a pervasive distrust of British Government and the view that Westminster was "not really interested in us as a community". Through the "New Ulster Political Research Group," the UDA has begun to publicise its own political stance which reflects this particular perspective. In a 1979 document entitled 'Beyond the Religious Divide', it claims that

"any proposal which involved London would be rejected by the minority community and any proposal which involved Dublin would be rejected by the majority community".

Their recommendation: 'Negotiated independence for Northern Ireland is the only hope of achieving a united Northern Ireland'.<sup>9</sup>

Illustrative as the UDA position is of divisions within Unionism, it also expresses certain distinctive class views of conditions in Northern Ireland that are not found in the main Unionist parties, in particular an apprehension of capitalist interests which was expressed in the terms of a vague and hesitant 'socialism'. These tendencies, perhaps better understood as a kind of populism, reflect the worsening economic situation for many Protestants in Northern Ireland; as so many times in the past in other countries, they have a potential for exploitation by reactionary forces, but there is also opportunity for development along more progressive lines, if the real causes of their deprivation can be effectively spelled out, as Communists once did among the fascist supporters of London's East End.

At the moment, however, there is disturbing evidence of a remilitarisation taking place among members of the UDA, along with efforts to forge links with para-military groups in South Africa and to develop contacts with fascist organisations.

## The Middle Ground

A spokesman for the Alliance Party, founded in 1970, told the Delegation that they were formed to bridge sectarian divisions and that a spectrum of left/right views exists within the party. Believing that the minority must have a rightful role in running Northern Ireland, Alliance policy is presented as an alternative to 'triumphalism' — the Unionists wanting to retain majority rule, the Nationalists wanting to become the majority. With its backing largely from the bourgeoisie, the Alliance position coalesces around views that are described by the British media as 'non-sectarian', 'middle-of-the-road' and 'moderate'; but this is deceptive, for the party is by no means anti-Unionist. One of its 'four fundamental principles' is 'Support for the link with Great Britain and for devolved partnership in Northern Ireland'.

During recent elections in Northern Ireland, Alliance support has fallen — 11.9% (1979), 9.3% (1982), 8.0% (1983) — as the political battle within the region has developed into one between two discernible 'camps' — the OUP and DUP and the SDLP and SF — each of which, of course, contains its own manifest divisions. Thus, the hope that the Alliance would be able to draw greater participation from the nationalist community and minimise the national question has not been borne out.

# Repression

Since its inception, the Unionist state of Northern Ireland has relied upon repressive laws and police power to subjugate republican activity and to divide the working class in its tentative aspirations toward unified political struggle. The Delegation was reminded of this when they were shown copies of a poster advertising a series of meetings to commemorate the 1932 demonstrations of the Belfast unemployed. The poster carried a facsimile of the *Daily Worker* front page for 12th October 1932, the headline of which read:

## BELFAST UNEMPLOYED SHOT DOWN Armoured cars & machine guns used by police

Today, armoured cars and machine gun toting police are part of the daily scene in Belfast, one of the more public features of a general system of state intimidation. For those familiar in the slightest with scenes from repressive Latin American dictatorships, such sights are a forceful reminder that Northern Ireland is an imperialist enclave like so many other underdeveloped countries. In this respect, repression and state violence in the region has a long history. As one writer has put it:

"The conquest of Ireland was the first step taken by England towards empire; and the methods the English rulers learned in Ireland provided the blueprints for their every subsequent act of conquest or suppression. Ireland was, indeed, the testing ground for all the policies of British imperialism".<sup>11</sup>

Equally, it has been the place where varied forms of domestic repression have first been developed by the British authorities, including the first use of an official constabulary.

To an earlier London Communist delegation to Northern Ireland (in 1975), it was abundantly clear that the six counties persist in this role. They were advised, for example, that 'Army strategists saw Northern Ireland as a training ground for work that they would do in Britain itself' and warned 'of the "export of repression" to Britain'.<sup>12</sup>

The recent Delegation was fully aware of the prophetic nature of those warnings. As London Communist Party Secretary, Bill Dunn, wrote in a letter of greeting to the CPI:

"Since [the earlier delegation's visit] London's Communists have noted with grave concern:

- Joint army/police exercises at London's Heathrow Airport.
- The statement of ex-RUC boss (now head of the Metropolitan Police) Sir Kenneth Newman, in favour of plastic baton rounds in Britain and their purchase for possible future use in London.
- 'Shoot first and ask questions later' action by police in London's rush hour traffic.
- The increasing use of the PTA in the capital and its use with greater frequency against the Irish population and especially against leading figures in the progressive and trade union movement, and
- The Tory Government's new Prevention of Terrorism Bill which intends to provide the British state with powers to be used against political organisations, many based in London, which support freedom fighters in the third world".<sup>13</sup>

Such developments have amply confirmed Marx's observation in the middle of the last century that British imperialism in Ireland would not only repress Irish freedom but necessarily would contribute to the oppression of the working class in Britain and around the world.



Thus, the Delegation was under no illusion but that they were entering a region, formally under British rule, which is under martial law in all but name. As one member of the Delegation summed up the experience:

"From the moment we stepped off the ferry in Belfast Docks, and saw the first armed soldier poised by a wall we became aware of what state repression means in practice in Northern Ireland.

We were to see the signs time and again throughout our visit: the armed police and soldiers posted at key points in the city, at the entrance to Catholic estates and areas; the police and army road checks on the Derry road; the security screens and personal searches when going into the shopping centre; the helicopters hovering on surveillance over West Belfast; the army occupation of the top of the tower block in the Divis Flats; the heavily fortified police stations; and, perhaps most dramatic of all, our drive around Long Kesh prison camp one night a week after the mass break-out of Republican prisoners — an eerie sight of a huge lit up area with the most powerful search lights imaginable.

One of the most startling aspects of this repression is the way in which it coexists with people going about their daily lives. As we discovered, this scale of repression is used to contain certain areas, the most strongly Republican. In Protestant and middle-class parts of the city, there are fewer police around than is the case in London".

The attempt of late to represent a more 'normal' form of policing, as opposed to the appearance of military occupation, is known as 'Ulsterisation' — a policy which has sought to transfer much of the visible security role in Northern Ireland from the British army to the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The army remains, however, always ready and able to intervene, while senior British Army officers clearly retain a fundamental role in determining security policy. Moreover, the overall decline in army forces on the street — nowhere better seen than in Derry, where the appearance of complete normalcy is rigorously cultivated — reflects an increasing utilisation of other repressive measures, including more sophisticated surveillance and reliance on para-legal devices such as the Diplock courts and 'supergrasses'.

## Repressive Laws

The Unionist statelet of Northern Ireland has, since its inception in 1922, been founded upon the most repressive legal structure. The notorious Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act, which was in force since partition began until 1972 when, with Direct Rule, Westminster replaced it with the Emergency Provisions Act, conferred on the Northern Ireland Minister of Home Affairs or any official to whom he delegated his authority the power 'to take all such steps and issue all such orders as may be necessary for preserving the peace and maintaining order'.<sup>14</sup> It was a piece of legislation which led the South African Minister of Justice in 1963 to observe of his new Coercion Bill, that he would willingly exchange it or any similar law 'for one clause of the Northern Ireland Special Powers Act'.<sup>15</sup>

At present, the Emergency Provisions Act 1973 dictates the legal climate in Northern Ireland. It contains a 'schedule' of serious offences which, together with some offences specifically created by the EPA itself, are known as 'Scheduled Offences'. (It should be noted, that if someone is charged with a non-scheduled offence *and* a scheduled one, he/she can be tried for both as if they were both scheduled offences.)

Under the EPA for scheduled offences (and almost any offence can be included) there is no jury trial. Instead, the accused is brought before a single judge — the 'Diplock Court' — who is drawn from the most selective, sectarian and narrowly based legal profession imaginable, and tends to be so 'case-hardened' that conviction is a virtual certainty.

In the majority of such cases, conviction has been based on confessions which at least through the 1970s were routinely secured through oppressive interrogation. Defence counsel, in turn, were hindered not only by rules of evidence which admitted such 'confessions', but by the tremendous difficulty in proving that they were obtained under duress.

The Castlereagh interrogation centre still handles people arrested by the RUC and military. Since the days when Kenneth Newman (currently Commissioner of the Metropolitan police) was in charge of the RUC, the authorities have tried hard to improve their reputation — but with limited success. Castlereagh remains a place where confessions will be beaten out of prisoners if all else fails.

It is a measure of the increasing failure of such methods, however, that the authorities in Northern Ireland have resorted to the 'supergrass' system by means of which a judge can convict a prisoner simply on the basis of an unsubstantiated allegation by another prisoner — who may well have been an agent of the security forces in the first place.

## Army and RUC Abuse

In addition, the RUC, the UDR and the army retain enormous powers of physical coercion permitting wide opportunity for arrest and search — and for abuse of personal rights. Such abuses include the use of rubber and plastic bullets which, in the name of preserving civil order, killed 13 people between April 1972 and August 1981 — six of them children.

During the past 14 years, there have been 24,000 injuries and over 2,300 deaths directly or indirectly attributable to British colonialism in Northern Ireland, among a population of 1.5 million. Multiplying this by a factor of four to equate with London leads one inevitably to ask whether the London labour and progressive movement would have been so unwilling to take a stand if 9,000 men, women or children lay dead in London?

Of the 2,304 deaths between the beginning of 1969 and 30 June 1983, 1,297 (56%) were of civilians (i.e. neither security forces nor para-military). Of the 1,907 fatalities born in Northern Ireland, 1,045 (55%) were Catholic — a percentage that rises to 60% among the *civilian* dead.

Many of the dead have been simply the innocent and inevitable victims of a police state. Thus, while the delegation was still in Belfast, it was shown a current issue of the journal *Fortnight* with a table of 'some disputed shootings by security forces'. The table listed over 80 names — and those were only 'some'. The largest single category were victims of what are described as 'shoot to kill' situations; others died in the course of 'riot control'. But, most illuminating are the table notes which describe the character of the disputed shootings:

- 'All four were held by the Scarman Tribunal to have been innocent victims of police shooting in the Falls area of Belfast' (1969)
- 'All three shot by Army during curfew as alleged gunmen but were apparently innocent' (1970)
- 'Shot by Army marksman in her garden' (1971)
- 'All thirteen were shot by Army during and after anti-internment rally in Derry; Army claimed all were gunmen or had nail bombs; Widgery Tribunal concluded that it could not be proved any had been holding guns or bombs and that some of the shootings were reckless' (1972)
- 'Shot by Army during alleged riot' (1973)
- 'Shot from unmarked Army car' (1977)
- 'Shot by RUC while painting slogan' (1980)
- 'Shot by Army in Derry after arrest' (1982)

Of the 82 disputed cases listed by *Fortnight*, only six had led on to the initiation of prosecutions against the security forces. That, like the trail of civilian victims, is another hallmark of the police state.

## Deprivation

The last chapter dealt with the deprivation of life, liberty and justice. In the present chapter we look at the deprivation that prevails in Northern Ireland in the economic and social sphere — human costs which have their origin in Britain's colonial domination of Northern Ireland and in the refusal by successive London governments — Tory and Labour — to seek a political solution, rather than maintain the expensive apparatus of repression needed to prevent one.

### The Economic Cost

As part of the background to the work of the New Ireland Forum, the Irish Government has produced a document in which they estimate the direct and indirect costs, North and South, over the period from 1969 to 1982 (at 1982 prices) of the turmoil in Northern Ireland.<sup>17</sup>

#### Exchequer Costs to Britain and Northern Ireland

for extra security	£4,195,000,000
compensation	1,010,000,000
premium scheme for security staff	50,000,000

#### Exchequer Costs to the Republic

for extra security	990,000,000
compensation	29,000,000

#### Economic Costs to Northern Ireland

from lost output	3,490,000,000
capital and trading costs due to destruction of electricity interconnector	190,000,000

#### Economic Costs to the Republic

from damage to tourism	1,070,000,000
capital and trading costs due to destruction of electricity interconnector	40,000,000

TOTAL	£11,064,000,000
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(It should be noted that the security costs cited here are not the absolute costs, but additional expenditures arising from the situation in Northern Ireland.)

Mrs Thatcher and her Tory cohorts would pour the most vicious scorn on the heads of Ken Livingstone and the Greater London Council if they handed over one ten-millionth of that total in the form of a 'political' grant to an Irish organisation in London to monitor police harassment. Yet, all of these costs — and the human costs resulting from the maintenance of a police state in Northern Ireland — stem directly from the British Government's refusal to find a political solution to the troubles in the six counties.

One has only to compare the magnitude of these costs with the relatively modest scale of expenditure which the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (in its report, *The Trade Union Alternative*) recommended in its Interim Programme for economic reconstruction of the region:<sup>18</sup>

- an extra £150 million for housing
- an additional £150 million for a 'new energy programme'
- £15 million for education
- £10 million for health and social services
- £30 million for the Antrim Area Hospital
- £90 million for industrial development
- £60 million for road and rail transport
- £100 million for industrial training

Given the present Tory Government's own special priorities, however, it is little wonder that the authors of that report noted wryly that:

"the current and additional commitments by government to the people of the Falklands are now believed to be costing £1 1/2 million per person".<sup>19</sup>

### The Social Costs

In all these areas — social services, housing, jobs, etc — the people of Northern Ireland suffer gross deprivations. In the area of housing, for example, much of the present stock is desperately antiquated. As a recent report has observed:

"Northern Ireland has a stock of approximately 471,000 dwellings. One in three of these require action of some form ranging from major repair to renewal. Of those dwellings needing remedial action, nearly half are unfit for human habitation. Apart from the deplorable state of the stock, a total of 50,000 households were on the Housing Executive's waiting list in March 1981".<sup>20</sup>

Yet, by 1978, the number of housing starts by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was under 3,000.<sup>21</sup>

The housing in Northern Ireland reflects not only an endemic state of under-development, however, but also the historical discrimination against the minority community, since the bulk of new housing has tended to be co-ordinated with industrial development which has usually been sited in or near Protestant communities in the Belfast area. Similarly, the location of new housing has invariably been calculated to reinforce the ghettoisation of the Catholic population and to confine their voting strength geographically.

The result, compounded by the dislocations created since 1969 by sectarian conflict (an estimated 60,000 people moved house between 1969 and 1974 in Belfast)<sup>22</sup>, has been severe problems of overcrowding in such areas as Catholic West Belfast, where refugees from other parts of the city added to an already inadequate housing situation. Thus by 1978 the proportion of dwellings or households regarded as overcrowded in Catholic West Belfast was 23% — compared to 12.4% for the rest of the city.<sup>23</sup>

It was against the background of poor housing and housing discrimination that large numbers within the Catholic community sought to respond to the introduction of internment by one of the few effective peaceful means available: by withholding payment of rent and rates, beginning in 1971. The Stormont Government rapidly retaliated by introducing the Payments for Debt (Emergency Provisions) Act which allowed deductions for arrears to be made at source from social security benefits or wages if a person were a state employee.

## The Divis Flats

Like many visitors before them, the Delegation walked about the Divis Flats — the high-rise estate which has featured in innumerable television films of the troubles in Belfast. Nowhere is it more evident that social deprivation in Northern Ireland is far more profound and persistent than can be coped with solely through new construction, for Divis was built only in the late 1960s.

The flats consist of about a dozen interlinked 7 or 8 storey high blocks and one 20-storey tower — on which, today, a permanent Army base is perched, supplied by helicopter and watching the residents around the clock through special surveillance cameras. At first, the people who had moved into Divis liked the accommodation; but, as with so many similar high-density estates built during that period in Britain, they soon confronted the problems of isolation, disrupted family life, lack of defensive space and vandalism. Cheap but profitable construction methods contributed to deterioration of the structure within a relatively short period of time, while the general shortage of housing led to the same overcrowding in Divis that one found elsewhere in Catholic Belfast.

A description of the conditions in the Divis Flats provides perhaps one of the most telling summaries of the quality of British rule in Northern Ireland:

- 82% of the families on social security
- 60—65% of household heads unemployed
- More tranquilisers prescribed than anywhere else in Northern Ireland
- OAPs isolated, with some not descending to the ground floor for years
- Cases of people lying dead in their flats for weeks
- Damp and condensation leading to high incidence of respiratory complaints
- Cases of TB recently reported
- Many shops closed and boarded up
- No police protection; no-go area for RUC
- Permanent police surveillance
- Open hostility to the Army. Early morning raids commonplace
- Only the doors of flats open on to balconies; windows are hammered glass.

Today, after years of blaming the inhabitants of Divis for the conditions about which they have vociferously complained, the estate is finally acknowledged to have failed. Two of the blocks are empty, boarded up and ready for demolition. It is said, however, that it is no coincidence that those two blocks were chosen because they are the only two whose balconies the Army cannot see from their fort on top of the Divis Tower!

It is important to realise, however, that despite the visible condition of the Flats, there is consideration human dignity and courage there. Inside their flats, away from the squalid balconies and stairs and the grim, colourless concrete landscape, tenants strive to maintain as high a standard of comfort and appearance as poverty permits. And, outside, they struggle to develop a community consciousness, to maintain a perspective on their suffering. The Divis Community Arts Project, for example, have produced a 'selection of short stories, poems and illustrations by people of Divis Flats, Belfast', entitled *No Place for a Dog*. The title comes from a story by someone born among the two-bedroom, red-brick, back-to-backs that formed the 'Old Loney' slum cleared to make way for the high-rise estate. Looking back to those days of community, he remarks:

"But times have changed, and places like this create their own problems: loneliness, alcoholism, and depression. Kids who have nowhere to play will turn to vandalism or joy-riding, or rioting, for excitement; laying their life on the line for the thrill of it all".<sup>24</sup>

## Both Communities Deprived

Deprivation affects the whole of the working class of Northern Ireland and specifically of Belfast, though it has been central to the strategy of Unionist rule that Protestant workers, while exploited themselves, should enjoy perceptible privileges. Thus, because of the long-standing pattern of sectarian discrimination, Catholic unemployment has typically far exceeded that among Protestants. In 1978, for example, the purely Catholic wards of West and Northwest Belfast with 21% of the city's households, contained 43% of Belfast's unemployment.<sup>25</sup> Another marked contrast between the two religious communities, equally the result of years of systematic discrimination, has been the difference in representation in various categories of employment. Thus, a report of the Fair Employment Agency for Northern Ireland, published in 1978, noted:

"The occupational profile of Protestants and Roman Catholics revealed a distribution of Roman Catholics towards the unskilled occupations. The modal Protestant male is a skilled manual worker whereas the modal Roman Catholic male is unskilled. When occupations were matched with industry, which was only possible for construction and engineering, there was a tendency in construction for Roman Catholics to be employed in the lower status occupations while in engineering, a higher status industry, there was a general under-representation of Roman Catholics in most occupations, particularly marked at managerial level".<sup>26</sup>

This contrast in employment opportunities, which is as marked under direct British rule as under that of the Stormont Government, has had considerable influence on the perpetuation of sectarian loyalties and on the relative impact of the Protestant and Catholic communities on government policies. Thus, as the British state has become increasingly involved in the support of the Northern Ireland economy, public sector employment has grown. By 1979, it amounted to over 40% of total employment in the region, with about three-fourths represented by Protestants.<sup>27</sup> As a result, Protestant workers depend heavily for their livelihoods on on-going ties with Britain. At the same time, since Protestant workers substantially monopolise employment in such public sector activities as the power industry, they have enormous leverage to bear on the state — as the Ulster Workers Council was able to demonstrate in 1974 when their virtual stoppage of electricity production brought about the collapse of the Sunningdale agreements.

By the same token, their preferential employment situation has meant that Protestants have been able to dominate the policy of Northern Ireland trade unions and curtail their attempt to make any direct attack on the sectarian basis of the region's political or economic life. At the same time, because Catholic workers have historically been marginal to industrial production and have seen the failure of trade unionism to address sectarian discrimination, they have tended in the main to be attracted to nationalist, rather than class-orientated politics.

The catastrophic economic decline of the last two decades, much of it under the impact of multinational investment, has begun to alter the situation by reducing the material differences between the two religious communities. Precisely because they have traditionally enjoyed superior employment opportunities, the decline of industry in areas such as Belfast has disproportionately affected Protestant workers. In the Shankill Redevelopment Areas, for example, between 1968 and 1981, 1,700 jobs were lost in small businesses alone; Mackies engineering firm cut back its work-force from 4,500 to 1,200 and the closure of William Ewart's flax and linen producing firm in the 1970s cost another 1,700

jobs.<sup>28</sup> At Harland and Wolff — like Mackies, a major source of Protestant working class support for Unionist rule — the workforce plummeted from some 25,000 in the late 1960s to 6,500 by 1981.

Nor has it been the case that, in the area of housing, the relatively greater deprivation suffered by Catholics has meant that the problem of adequate shelter has not also affected the Protestant community. Speaking of a part of the Shankill where most housing stock was substandard, the Belfast Medical Officer of Health noted in March 1973:

“the dwelling houses in this area were built between 1852 and 1887. There was a state of general decay, disrepair, general dampness and instability. Many houses have no secondary means of access necessitating the delivery of fuel and the removal of refuse through the dwelling. Amenities for personal hygiene were almost non-existent and very few houses have internal WCs. There was inadequate provision for the preparation and cooking of foods and, in many cases, improvised sculleries had enclosed the drains and obstructed lighting and ventilation”.<sup>29</sup>

It is little wonder, then, that today through much of the working class of Belfast, regardless of religion, an identical cry is heard. In West Belfast:

“Clearly there is a strongly held opinion ..... that radical remedies are needed and that it is only the people without paid jobs that will be able to supply them”.<sup>30</sup>

And in the Shankill:

“The plague of unemployment is upon us. Related to this pressing social problem is that of urban deprivation and decay ..... The only effective solution to the problem will be a radical one”.<sup>31</sup>

Beneath the well publicised religious strife, deprivation — deepened by recent economic trends — has revealed the common interests and common needs that all sectors of the working class in Northern Ireland (and in Ireland as a whole) ultimately share. As it has before in the past, a common consciousness is being shaped out of this fundamental identity of class interests which recognises that a solution to the real problems in Northern Ireland lies in a *radical* change in the prevailing order.

It is the Communist view that it is in the political struggle to develop and sharpen this consciousness that the destruction of the reactionary ideology of Unionism lies. As James Connolly once wrote:

“..... 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”.<sup>32</sup>

## The Trade Unions

The industrial development of the UK in the mid-nineteenth century had a profound effect on Belfast. It expanded as an industrial centre as part of the capitalist economy of the west coastal region of Britain and Scotland, closely integrated with the economies of Glasgow and Liverpool. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the city's linen and textile industry was mechanised (by 1901, almost 22% of the Belfast workforce was employed in textile manufacturing); later in the century, shipbuilding and engineering developed into the major industrial specialisations for which the city became famous. Belfast — and the north east of Ireland — became the country's industrial centre; and, naturally, a stronghold of trade unionism.

## Divided Working Class

With partition, the industrial concentration in and around Belfast was cut off from its natural hinterland, thus damaging the economy of Ireland as a whole, not to mention imposing considerable constraints on the economic prosperity of the six counties that became Northern Ireland. Partition also divided the working class — by the border *per se* but also by creating conditions in which the ideology of Unionism could flourish among the skilled Protestant workers in Belfast.

Thus, there have been formidable obstacles to the development of a unified trade union movement — for example, in 1954, there were 19 Northern Ireland unions, 5 Republic-based unions and 68 British-based unions in Northern Ireland; there remains, moreover, a pervasive division between more skilled Protestant and less skilled Catholic workers. Nonetheless, there have been some important moves toward overcoming these problems. Today, for example, Ireland does have a unified trade union movement in the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), to which both Irish-based and British-based unions are affiliated. On the other hand, this was accomplished in part by allowing the northern trade unionists a certain measure of autonomy in the form of the Northern Ireland Committee (the existence of which pre-dated the 1950 formation of the ICTU). Thus, the divisive tendencies associated with partition have not been wholly laid to rest. Nor could the sectarian character of Northern Ireland have failed to affect the nature of trade unionism within the region; for by its effort to remain non-sectarian, the NIC has inevitably found itself unable to make any direct attack on the fundamental discriminatory principles that organise the social and economic structure of Northern Ireland. Similar constraints have been felt by local trades councils, such as that in Belfast, which celebrated its centenary in 1981. By its own frank admission, the Belfast Trades Council, like the trade union movement generally in Northern Ireland, has frequently “found it almost impossible to rise above the sectarian and political divisions of the workers”.<sup>33</sup> In its strenuous efforts to try to alleviate the burdens of social and economic deprivation, however, it has kept alive the ideal of common working class interests.

## United Action

The Delegation was able to meet representatives of the Amalgamated (British-based) TGWU, AUEW-TASS, Belfast Trades Council, Newtonabbey and Carrickfergus Trades Council and Derry Trades Council.

From our discussions, it became clear that trade unions in Northern Ireland face not only the usual problems affecting the organisations of the working class in modern capitalist society, but labour in a particularly desperate economic and political climate. Sectarianism perpetuates underrepresentation of Catholics in employment and in the trade unions. Unemployment in general is higher in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the British Isles, averaging 21% and reaching levels of over 50% in some areas. Long term unemployment is severe and joblessness among youth (16—19) is depressingly high. It is estimated that for every vacancy in Northern Ireland there are 139 people unemployed — compared to 1 in 16 in South East England.

It was in an attempt to ‘achieve an all-out effort by its membership to put divisions aside and concentrate on eradicating the economic and social evils besetting the people’<sup>34</sup> of the region that the Belfast Trades Council with the Northern Ireland Committee of the ICTU in 1975 launched its ‘Better Life for All Campaign’. Its demands included the right to secure well paid work for all, the right to decent housing, the right to adequate social services for the elderly and the sick.

## The Trade Union Alternative

The policies required to achieve such ends were more fully elaborated several years later, in 1983, when the Northern Ireland Committee produced a document called 'The Trade Union Alternative', an application to Northern Ireland of the British labour movement's Alternative Economic Strategy. This document contains a short-term programme to tackle poverty (including higher state benefits, to take into account that Northern Ireland has a higher cost of living than anywhere in Britain) and a plan to combat the region's housing shortage by building 10,000 new houses a year. It contains as well a long-term programme which aims to reconstruct the Northern Ireland economy which has been so ravaged by multinational corporations and through the policies of successive Westminster governments. Among its features is a new energy policy (impelled by the fact that present costs are on average 7% above those in Britain), which would make greater use of the natural resources of the North and make provision to accept natural gas from the Republic — a recognition of the need to rebuild the economic unity of the island.

Apart from such economic issues, the Northern Ireland trade union movement takes up many of the same broad political issues that have concerned unions in Britain: for example, the Belfast Trades Council is affiliated to CND and Northern Ireland Anti-Apartheid. Such organisations — particularly CND — have considerable potential for channelling widespread political concerns into effective non-sectarian forces whose eventual impact on the struggle for Irish unity cannot be underestimated. CND, for example, leads the fight to preserve the neutrality of the Irish Republic at a time when it is the strategic importance of Northern Ireland to the NATO alliance that is perhaps one of the strongest reasons for continuing British control over the region. As opposition to NATO forces in Northern Ireland grows, it must inevitably create a more favourable climate for extending Irish neutrality throughout the island, which in turn contributes to the fight against British imperialism.

This is one of several alternatives to the difficulty in the present climate of raising the national question within the trade union movement. As a representative that the Delegation met from the TGWU observed, were the TGWU — like so many other unions — to directly adopt a policy in favour of a united Ireland, its Protestant membership would quite simply quit. This perennial threat has repeatedly forced such unions to retreat from a direct assault on sectarian discrimination as well. The result, as another trade union official put it, was to confine the unions to the task of performing a 'holding operation', keeping their Protestant members away from the direct leadership and influence of Unionism.

Such constraints, as noted, have not prevented the trade union movement from campaigning on behalf of issues that confront the working class as a whole, including civil rights and better housing, nor from advocacy of 'the right to live free from violence, sectarianism, and discrimination' — issues which have gathered wide support and merit greater support still from the labour movement in Britain.

To struggle at present within many unions for an end to partition is not a practicable immediate strategy. The long-standing silence about Northern Ireland which has afflicted much of the labour movement in Britain must be ended immediately; but, the level of discussion and debate must proceed in stages, beginning with a clear recognition of the character of the repressive society that British imperialism maintains there. Thus, during the Delegation visit, a South Belfast branch of the Northern Ireland Public Service Association passed a motion condemning the use of 'supergrasses'. This was subsequently passed as well by the Trades Council. This kind of approach raises the

level of understanding, in this instance, exposing the indefensible features of the present judicial system.

If this approach is adopted, what has previously been a handicap, that many British unions have sections in the North which have effectively censored discussion of Irish nationalism, can be turned to advantage by providing new opportunities to coordinate the work of the British and Irish labour movements to begin to change the political climate in Northern Ireland.

## Women

As elsewhere, so in Northern Ireland it is generally the women who bear the brunt of social and economic deprivation and who must struggle to hold families together when husbands, fathers and sons are interned or imprisoned, killed or maimed as a result of the prevailing political situation. At the same time, they suffer from a disproportionate measure of political exclusion — for example, only three of the 77 Assembly members are women.

### Work and the Unions

Women have long played a crucial role in the economy — most notably, perhaps, in the linen mills of Belfast (since the late nineteenth century) and in the shirt-making industry of Derry. Cheap female labour reserves have long been essential to the process of capital accumulation in Northern Ireland.

Trapped into low-paid employment and part-time work, women workers have also tended to be distanced from the trade union movement. Nonetheless, there have been some notable women within the movement in Northern Ireland, such as Betty Sinclair, who came out of the Belfast Linen Mills and by 1947 had become the full-time Secretary of the Belfast Trades Council. But, the struggle to end the double burden of sectarian and sex discrimination which has so long burdened particularly the women of the Catholic community is in many ways only begun — impeded now by job starvation in Northern Ireland and a rate of female unemployment higher than in Britain.

Unfortunately, the Delegation did not meet with any women union officials, though a number of CPI women with whom they met were actively involved in trade councils and the ICTU Women's Advisory Committee. They were told by CPI women that they had recently assisted women electricians to fight for equal pay at Shorts — achieved after 18 months — and that the CPI had been instrumental in getting reserved seats for women in the ICTU. All this, of course, is recognised as just a small beginning in the joint fight for equal employment opportunities and for developing the relevance of the trade union movement to the needs of female workers.

### Political Parties: The Issue of Abortion

Of all the political parties that the Delegation met, the only women they talked with were from the CPI. All, however, were asked about their attitudes to abortion — both because it is a fundamental issue in the struggle for sex equality and because it was then so prominent an issue: a referendum in the Republic opposing abortion had taken place the month before the Delegation's visit. It is also characteristically an issue which is raised to complicate the national question — and therefore acquires political dimensions far beyond the immediate one of women's rights.

Only the CPI had an unequivocal position of being pro-abortion rights. The UDA told the Delegation that they had no policy on liberalisation of the abortion law. The Alliance Party

also said that they had no policy on abortion; rather, it was a matter of 'individual conscience' for their representatives in the Assembly— all of whom happen to be male. The SDLP said that they were against abortion, as the majority of their members were practising Catholics, but that in any case, as all the major Northern Ireland parties were against abortion, this was a 'non-sectarian' issue!

Sinn Fein apologised that their Women's Department could not be present when the question was raised (they were participating in a housing demonstration). They told the Delegation that Sinn Fein's last convention had adopted the policy that individual members should make their own decisions on the abortion issue. Regretfully, the party had not campaigned for a 'No' vote in the referendum (i.e. pro-the right to abortion) as its Women's Department had advised. The Delegation was told that the dominant view in Sinn Fein until recently had been that the women's question could only be tackled *after* Britain was out of Ireland — but, that this view was now recognised as erroneous.

### The Women's Movement

CPI women told the Delegation about their very active involvement in the women's movement, particularly with its expansion following International Women's Year in 1975. Communist women helped to set up the Women's Rights Movement and women's centres and have been deeply involved in the Poverty Lobby, Women and Education groups, Rape Crisis — in addition to trade union work on women. Their National Women's Advisory Committee publishes a newsletter<sup>35</sup> and is in the process of producing a pamphlet on women and nationalism. All such efforts are part of the pressing need to address the way in which capitalist underdevelopment in Northern Ireland has subjected women to particular forms of social, economic and political deprivation.

The women in the Delegation had the opportunity to participate in a 'Women's Information Day' taking place in Belfast. They reported:

"When we walked into the leisure centre near to the city centre, we found a large room crammed with women (and children) of all ages.

It became apparent that, unlike so many women's events in London this was a gathering of mainly working class women, Catholic and Protestant. The 150—200 women had come together to exchange information on what was happening on health matters.

The meeting was given brief reports from many groups:

to set up a Well Women Centre

Women's Aid (there are five refuges in Northern Ireland)

Gingerbread (the one-parent family association)

The Association for Improvement in the Maternity Service

Mental Health Association, and

Rape Crisis Centre

Alongside these organisations many individual women stood up to report small Self-Help Groups on their housing estates — on breast-feeding, youth counselling, post-natal depression, adoption, hysterectomies, mastectomies, etc. One told us how a meeting of 100 women on valium had led to a self-help weekly group to assist women getting off tranquilisers".

Such meetings as this are indicative of the positive developments at the grass roots level which rarely, if ever, hit the headlines. They suggest the significant practical part women are playing in crossing the sectarian divide by appealing to the common interests of all working class women in the region.

## Part III

# A Strategy for Withdrawal

Recently, a leading Irish Communist formulated the challenge facing the British labour and progressive movement on Ireland in these words:

"The British labour movement and political parties have to play a crucial role. Any progressive movement will have to find a way of separating themselves in a concrete manner from British imperialism on the Irish question. They will have to move to an independent class position which supports the right of the Irish people to determine their own future, unequivocally and positively".<sup>36</sup>

This task is of supreme importance to both the Irish and British peoples. It involves a struggle to win the trade union movement and the Labour Party to a clear anti-imperialist position on Ireland.

Moreover, carrying such a position into the Labour Party — and, further, into an eventual Labour government — would represent a tremendous breakthrough for the British working class. It would mean that a future Labour government would not just be forced to oppose Tory policies on Ireland but would be compelled, by the mass movement, to *oppose the imperialist state itself* — for the first time in the history of Labour governments. Thus, as Marx clearly recognised, the fight for an end to British imperialism in Ireland is an *essential* step toward socialist advance in Britain itself.

We cannot, however, be deluded into thinking that this is no mean task for a labour and progressive movement in a state where imperialist ideas are strongly held, not least within the working class itself. Just as the partition of Ireland has divided the Irish working class, so the entire question of Ireland has been used to effect an ideological disunity within the British working class.

### Toward an Irish Solution

After the consolidation of partition, Ireland effectively dropped out as a subject of British politics. In the decades that followed, British imperialism succeeded in creating an ideological consensus among the British people — right across the political and social board — based on the twin myths that, with the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the 'Irish question' was solved and that, henceforward, Northern Ireland was a *domestic* issue.

At the same time, the nature of this apparent consensus concealed a deeper divide, with the views of much of the British working class cut off from those within the socialist movement who perceived that social progress at home was inevitably constrained by any Labour government which did not recognise the on-going nature of the imperialist British state, *whichever party presided over it*.

British Communists oppose the myth that Northern Ireland is only a domestic issue, merely in need of responsible reform. They have never seen the Irish question as anything but an *international* struggle between the Irish people and British imperialism. As such, there can be no distinctively 'English solution' in the long run.

The Union of Ireland and Britain at the beginning of the last century and partition early

in the present century were both equally 'English solutions' to the Irish question — and as such were bound to fail.

Yet, today, right wing politicians continue to put forth more 'English solutions': joint sovereignty, 'IONA' (the Islands of the North Atlantic), Ireland joining NATO or rejoining the so-called Commonwealth. Sadly, and indicative of the theoretical confusion within the British labour movement, such 'English solutions' have also come from Socialists. Some call for the Labour Party to organise in Northern Ireland; others urge replacement of British troops by UN forces or for development of a joint RUC/Garda force. Still others call for a precipitous, unilateral withdrawal of British forces — 'Troops Out' — which grossly oversimplifies a complex problem, even while its heart is in the right place. Such a well-intentioned slogan ignores the fact that withdrawal of British troops can only be the final stage in a process of progressive changes; as an immediate move, it would represent only an apparent solution for British people who wish to wash their hands of Ireland.

The Delegation of London Communists must report that, among the many groups and parties which they met and with which they could in some way identify (civil libertarians, trade unionists, socialists, republicans and communists), nowhere did they find any support for such schemes. **They are simply not Irish demands!**

British progressives need to be crystal clear what their task really is: to remove the central impediment to Irish reunification, that is, the British imperialist presence in Northern Ireland (a presence of which British army troops are only one dramatic part).

## The Barriers to Reunification

There are, of course, other impediments — though these too are directly or indirectly associated with British imperialism. The hold of Unionist ideology over Protestant workers has been described earlier. Objectively, the continued armed struggle has necessarily also helped to perpetuate sectarian divisions. Yet, in both instances, there is considerable movement for change. Such change, however, is primarily the task of progressive forces in Ireland.

## The Unionists Challenged

The immediate task for British progressives is to elaborate a strategy for withdrawal which, once embarked upon, will pull the political and ideological rug from under the Unionist hierarchy. In its resolution on Ireland at the last national congress, the CPGB expanded on this point:

"There must be a clear and decisive break with all forms of bi-partisanship with the Tories.

The new concern that has been expressed since 1981 and the acceptance of a long term aim of a united Ireland on the part of the Labour Party represented an important step in this direction.

This has challenged the view that Unionist control of Northern Ireland is given for all time. It has not yet shown how to actually end that control and challenge the effective veto on any progressive or political change allowed to the ultra reactionary clique of Unionist leaders by the British Government. Together progressive forces in Britain and Ireland, particularly Northern Ireland, have to find ways of successfully challenging this Unionist domination and ending its ability to command the allegiance of the majority of working people in the North. An important element in this will be the removal of the constitutional guarantee of the union contained in the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973".<sup>37</sup>

This veto, it should be noted, is not only used by the British Government to nullify the

wishes of the majority of the Irish people — or the British, come to that — but also extends over the majority anti-nationalist community in the North which it also effectively prevents from seriously addressing the alternatives to the patently failed partition statelet. A move towards withdrawal by Britain will have to be addressed by everyone in Ireland — including Protestant workers.

Any strategy for withdrawal must entail several closely inter-related issues: it must involve the removal of British interference in Irish affairs. It must mean an end to repression — which is, of course, bound up with the continuing British presence. And it must include the winning of democratic rights, without which the repressive colonial regime in Northern Ireland would only continue in another guise.

## The Removal of Interference

The programme of the Communist Party of Great Britain states that:

"The British Government should recognise the right of the majority of the people of Ireland to rule the whole of their country, and should co-operate with their representatives in bringing this about by consent".<sup>38</sup>

Successive Irish Governments have expressed their willingness to come to the negotiating table — and have done so again in the recent Forum Report. Successive British Governments have refused.

All democratic bodies and individuals must now work to compel the British Government to acknowledge the right of the Irish people in their entirety to self-determination without foreign interference, to renounce all claims to Irish territory, and to declare its intention to withdraw and to help to create the political, social and economic conditions in which progressive forces in Ireland can work for reunification of their country.

Communists do not see this twin strategy of withdrawal and reunification as a single act, but as a process whereby an end to repression and its replacement by democratic structures, together with a British declaration of intent to withdraw, will lay the basis for full Irish freedom.

## An End to Repression

The system of repression and discrimination in Northern Ireland must be dismantled. The instruments of class and sectarian oppression must be destroyed if political progress is to come about. As an immediate, interim need for this to be accomplished, certain measures and developments are required:

**To begin to create a community of class interests between Catholic and Protestant workers, direct rule must be replaced by a local assembly, bound by a Bill of Rights, elected with proportional representation and with full fiscal and economic powers to begin to tackle the vast economic and social problems facing the people of Northern Ireland.**

The Bill of Rights cannot simply be a paper recitation of civic rights. It must entail the repeal of repressive laws such as the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Acts and the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act and everything that they have generated: Diplock Courts, imprisonment on alleged self-incrimination and paid informers ('supergrassess'). It must outlaw torture, discrimination and sectarian incitement.

Furthermore, the British Government — while it retains any remaining political authority after declaring its intent to withdraw — must effect a full demilitarisation

of the six counties, withdrawing its troops to barracks immediately, pulling out the SAS at once, disbanding the Ulster Defence Regiment and replacing the Royal Ulster Constabulary with an interim system of policing that merits the confidence of the entire community. It must ban the use of rubber and plastic bullets and CS gas.

## Democratic Reforms

A Bill of Rights is not and cannot be an end in itself. But the reaction by state forces to the civil rights movement in the late sixties and early seventies made clear that, within the context of an authoritarian regime, the fight for basic political liberties can be the cutting-edge of class struggle.

A Bill of Rights must prevent any local administration from seeking to reintroduce repressive measures.

It should provide for democratic rights for all members of society, backed up by:

- a non-sectarian police force acceptable to all and under democratic control
- an independent civilian body to investigate complaints against the police and army
- the review of the cases of all prisoners tried under emergency legislation
- the implementation of progressive health, social and educational legislation

Most importantly, the local assembly should have adequate powers to extend public ownership in industry, banking and agriculture and to further economic integration with Southern Ireland.

The British Government should cooperate with the Assembly to launch an Economic Development Programme designed to:

- eliminate unemployment
- eradicate the housing shortage
- meet acute social needs; and
- rebuild Northern Ireland's investment-starved industry

Essential to this plan — and to obviate the need to turn to British or other foreign business interests — is, as the CPI has urged, a fiscal transfer from the British Government which 'would constitute a form of compensation for previous actions by British governments and would be substantial'.<sup>39</sup> A future Labour government must be made to recognise that such compensation represents an essential part of the full responsibility involved in terminating Britain's imperialist domination of Northern Ireland.

British Communists believe that our Labour, trade union and progressive movements must make it a top priority to win a complete reversal of British government policy on Northern Ireland along the lines of the strategy outlined above and within the context of a normalisation of relations between Britain and Ireland.

The experience of the London Delegation has convinced them that it is the duty of all progressives in London — and in Britain as a whole — to seek to raise the Irish question clearly and openly within the labour, trade union and progressive movements. As the CPGB Congress Resolution on Ireland says:

"The crisis in Ireland remains one of the great unanswered challenges before the British labour movement. It is one that cannot and must not be shirked by anyone interested in democracy and progress in Britain. It is an issue which must be taken into all sections of the labour and democratic movement."<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusions

The members of the London Communist Delegation to Northern Ireland are unanimous in the view that their visit, brief though it was, was not only a sobering experience but also of profound political value.

In this document, we have tried not only to give a taste of what life is like at present in Northern Ireland, but also to interject some analysis to point the way forward for a political solution.

We have tried to show that the present situation in a partitioned Ireland has only served the neo-colonialist interests of Britain and of its allies north and south of the border. Now, added to the generations of profit that the colonisation of Ireland has represented, there is the strategic importance of a continuing British presence in the six counties from the viewpoint of NATO military policy. Thus, it is more important than ever to sharpen the struggle to terminate British imperialism in Ireland.

Only through that struggle, moreover, can the Irish working class be freed from the terrible burdens of sectarian strife. Only through the ending of British intervention can Ireland be reunited and the economic integrity essential to political progress be restored.

We call on all the democratic forces in London to follow our example, so that the real situation in the North can be laid before their members:

- Whatever your organisation, trade, profession or calling, find out for yourselves what your counterparts in Ireland have to contend with. And return to tell our trade unionists, women's organisations, youth, students, religious groups, civil servants, doctors, teachers, lawyers, health visitors and pensioners, what life is like in Northern Ireland.
- Invite your counterparts in the Six Counties to come over here.
- Campaign to get the British Government to seek a political solution rather than a military one.
- Take your opposition to repressive laws and demands for democratic rights in Northern Ireland to your MPs. Demand that they vote against the Prevention of Terrorism Bill.

Remember, that the situation in Northern Ireland is not as remote as it is made to appear. Recent events in Britain — at GCHQ, in Nottinghamshire — should make it abundantly clear that reactionary forces are making a major assault on fundamental rights. It is the same powerful interests that maintain the repressive system in place in Northern Ireland.

The need for working class solidarity is greater than ever. The more we fail the Irish, the more we necessarily fail ourselves.

## Tables

### HOUSING CONDITIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND BRITAIN

Percentage of total dwellings:

	<i>Unfit</i>	<i>Without internal W.C.</i>	<i>Without fixed bath</i>	<i>Lacking at least one basic amenity</i>	<i>Lacking four basic amenities</i>
Britain (1971)	7.3	11.9	9.5	16.8	7.7
NI (1974)	19.6	24.1	23.5	26.2	22.3

SOURCE: *Housing Condition Survey 1974*



## SMALL BUSINESS EMPLOYMENT IN SHANKILL REDEVELOPMENT AREAS, 1968—81

Type of Employment	Numbers Employed	
	1968	1981
Manufacturing	210	44
Wholesale, Warehouse, Dealers, Builders and Haulage	760	0
Retail	819	142.5
Catering/Consumer Services	225	105
TOTAL	2014	291.5

SOURCE: Shankill Employment Report

## SELECTED INDUSTRIAL CLASSIFICATION BY RELIGION, 1971

	% Catholic	% Protestant	% Not Stated	N
Food/Drink/Tobacco	21.4	60.9	7.7	(25,797)
Engineering (inc. Vehicles)	16.3	75.9	7.8	(37,287)
Shipbuilding	4.8	89.5	5.7	(9,654)
Textiles	23.6	69.1	7.3	(41,701)
Clothing/Footwear	40.1	50.7	9.2	(25,289)

SOURCE: NI Census, Religion Tables (1971)

## PERCENTAGE MALE UNEMPLOYMENT RATES IN SELECTED INDUSTRIAL GROWTH CENTRES, 1971

District Council	Catholic	Protestant
Castlereagh (East Belfast)	15.3	4.6
Lisburn	8.3	4.3
Newtownabbey	11.3	4.7
Antrim	9.0	3.5
Ballymena	10.1	6.2
Carrickfergus	11.8	6.3
Larne	9.6	4.7
Craigavon	14.3	5.1

SOURCE: Fair Employment Agency (FEA), 1979

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