

## The Issues in the Split

### 'Officials' Turn Against Their Own Past

By Gerry Foley

[Second of a series]

While many of the issues in the split in the "Official" republican movement remain obscure, it is clear that at least one fundamental question is involved.

In an article entitled "I.R.S.P. Split Explained," the January issue of the "Official" organ, the *United Irishman*, said: "It is clear now that the Provisionals were a right wing split from the Republican Movement, they are now balanced by an ultra-left instant revolutionary organisation, the members of which have forgotten the fundamental premise on which Republicanism was founded, the unity of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter."

This view was spelled out more clearly in the December/January issue of *Rosc Catha*, the organ of Clann na h-Eireann, the "Official" organization in Britain:

"There is today only one kind of unity possible in Ireland—class unity. It is a unity rejected by Provos and Free State politicians alike, it is a unity that is also rejected by the bulk of Orange militants and their organisations.

"In such a situation there is little Republicans can do in the South except plod on, trying to create unity by example of involvement in grass roots working class issues.

"The decision of some members of the Movement, a small handful, to leave and with some ex-members form a new party, the Irish Republican Socialist Party, was due to their rejection of this reality, and their belief that short-cuts are possible. Whether they agree among themselves on what the short-cut is, remains to be seen but, like the Provos before them, they will only demonstrate that founding yet another 'revolutionary party' may help them work off frustrations and escape for a short while from the real political situation, but it cannot help make the revolution and that is what it is all supposed to be about.

"Those of us who didn't bolt after the Provo/Fianna Fail New Ireland, or fall for the romantic magic formulas of Saor Eire are not very impressed by this new political animal—we know its pedigree."

Thus, the basic argument of the "Official" organs is that the new party has broken from the concept that "class unity" between Catholic and Protestant Workers must come before any deepgoing social struggles can be undertaken in Ireland. This conception is also coupled with the idea that the only way to achieve such

unity is through a long-range strategy of involving Protestant and Catholic workers together in economic actions so elementary and piecemeal that they will not raise "divisive" political questions. Those unwilling to "plod on" in this gradualist perspective are simply "ultraleftists"—the same kind of "political animal" as Provisional militarists or the tiny band of adventurers that assumed a Guevarist veneer and the name of Saor Eire.

The IRSP has apparently rejected the gradualist, narrowly economic strategy recommended by the "Officials" as the only way to "make the revolution." In a speech January 1 in the Ardoyne Catholic ghetto in Belfast, one of the main leaders of the new group, Séamus Costello, said:

"We want protestant and catholic unity—but on the basis of a principled political approach. That is unity on the basis of the effects of imperialist policy: There is absolutely no point in approaching the protestants on the 'ring road' only to have them a week later reject our position on the national question. . . . Social and economic grievances do exist on the Shankill Road [the main poor Protestant area facing the Catholic ghettos along the Falls Road in Belfast]. However, at present it is impossible to talk to protestants about these things in the right context. We must stand firm on the national question and put our class policies from there. . . . We recognise the importance of the present struggles, but the long term solution will have to be a socialist republic. Working class people will have to control the wealth. There is no future in a political solution short of this objective. . . . We do not want a 32 county free state. We do not want a border. We do not want capitalist rule. . . . We do not want to hinder unity. We want to unite on a broad front against imperialism. We issue a call for unity to individuals and organisations on short term demands such as these: end internment, British troops out, amnesty for all political prisoners and an end to bad debts accrued during the rent and rates strikes. . . . But our long term aim remains a socialist republic."

#### 'Misunderstood Nationalists'?

The idea that the Protestants must not be "alienated" at any cost and must be catered to as misunderstood nationalists has been a traditional article of faith in republican circles.

This precept has been interpreted in various ways. Pádraig Pearse, one of the leaders of the 1916 rising, welcomed the Protestant militias that were formed to oppose implementation of the Home Rule Bill, believing that any group of Irishmen who took up arms against British policy were nationalists in fact and would come to make a common cause with other nationalists. This view was expressed with a fervent revolutionary idealism. But the hard fact is that such Protestant militias have maintained imperialist rule in one-fifth of Ireland for more than fifty years and subjected the nationalist-minded people to a regime of racist-like subjugation.

When the republican movement made a turn toward socialism in the 1960s, it adopted a "left" version of this principle, stressing the common "working-class" character of the majority of both the Catholic and Protestant population. In actual fact, this did not represent much of an advance. The bourgeois nationalist Fianna Fáil party has shown itself capable of explaining the need for unity and understanding between the poor of both communities. It has not been loath to turn the argument against nationalist militants, claiming that they were "alienating the Protestant working people."

Likewise, commentators in the bourgeois press anxious to avoid taking a stand in defense of the oppressed people have been quick to discover that "working-class unity" on economic questions is the solution and to deplore the stupidity of both sides for not seeing this.

However, if the republican movement in 1916 and 1918-22 had consistently followed the precept that Catholic-Protestant unity was the precondition for beginning the struggle against imperialist rule, it would have had to adopt a basically passive role, the role that was adopted in fact by the reformist Labour party.

Moreover, if the republican movement of the 1960s had followed this principle consistently, it would not have built the civil-rights movement. The most consistent advocate of this conception of Protestant-Catholic unity, Roy Johnston, the Stalinist political adviser of the "Official" republican leadership, realized this and said so when he resigned from the movement in 1972 to return to the Communist party. In an article in the March 31, 1972, issue of *Hibernia*, he wrote:

"In retrospect, I am now convinced that the timing was wrong [in starting the civil-rights movement]. We know that the mixture was explosive, but we underestimated, seriously, the difficulty of controlling the magnitude and direction of the blast.

"If the republican clubs had had a chance to find their feet, get engaged in local political activity, draw a few conclusions

for themselves, establish some links with the students, etc., the idea of a civil rights movement would have emerged naturally.

"This was beginning to happen. By 1966 the Belfast republicans were beginning to be interested in tenants associations; there had been successful agitations about pedestrian crossings, etc."

This appears to be the same point made by the editors of *Rosc Catha* when they wrote about the need to "plod on, trying to create unity by example of involvement in grass roots working class issues." Johnston's "apologia" indicates the real meaning of this. Back to "agitations about pedestrian crossings."

### Influence of Stalinism

In fact, the idea that Protestant-Catholic unity must be achieved before beginning a fight for fundamental change is a result of the victory of Stalinist politics at the 1974 national convention of the "Official" republican movement and the apparent capitulation of the more left elements in the anti-Costello bloc to Stalinism.

It cannot be assumed that this line will be, or can be, carried to its ultimate conclusion, or that the present leadership and membership will swallow Stalinist politics and all that goes with it. But in the publications of the movement and in public statements, representatives of the "Officials" have already carried the logic of this turn quite far.

In its public line, since the dissidents were driven out, the "Official" republican movement has come full circle from the positive role it played in building and defending the mass civil-rights movement. It has come over in fact to the positions of its ultraleft critics in 1969 and 1970.

It is unfortunate that the editors of the *United Irishman* and *Rosc Catha* seem to have forgotten that adventurism is not the only form of ultraleftism. There is also a sectarian, or dogmatic, side to it, which consists of rejecting real struggles in the name of abstract schemas.

How far the "Officials" have come from the days of the civil-rights struggle is indicated by this passage in the February issue of the *United Irishman*:

"The outrageous and totally false statement that the leadership has over the past four years been deceiving members is easily refuted: The present leadership is basically the same group who innovated the changes in the early sixties, who developed the agitational tactics of the Movement, who turned the organisation from a narrow, nationalist, chauvinist organisation to a conscious, socialist, revolutionary organisation. . . ."

Thus, this representative of the "Official" movement has come to reject as "chauvinist" the past ideals of the move-

## 'Officials' Accused of Killing IRSP Member

A nineteen-year-old local leader of the Irish Republican Socialist party, Hugh Ferguson, was shot dead in Belfast on February 20. The national executive committee of the organization announced in Dublin that the assassins had been "positively identified" as members of the "Official" republican movement.

Ferguson was one of the leaders of the Whiterock club of the IRSP. According to the new party's statements, he had not been involved in any clashes with the "Officials" before.

Ferguson was apparently the "19-year-old construction worker" referred to in a February 20 dispatch to the *New York Times*, which reported:

"The dead man, a Roman Catholic, was singled out by gunmen from a group of workmen in the Catholic Ballymurphy area of West Belfast."

The *New York Times* included the shooting in a report of a series of attacks attributed to "Protestant extremists." This is an indication of the confusion that could result if an armed conflict developed between the republican organizations. No one could be sure who was carrying out the assassinations, and the repressive forces and Orange terrorists would have a perfect cover for opening a hunting season on nationalist militants. It is to be hoped that

the accusations of the IRSP are carefully investigated by the organizations in the Catholic community. Even a suspicion of a gang war among the nationalist organizations could constitute a serious danger to the Catholic community as a whole.

In particular, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and the Communist party of Ireland, which have been closely associated with the "Official" republicans, have an obligation to investigate this claim and condemn such an action if it proves to be, as the IRSP says, a political murder. The "Official" leadership would certainly take their opinion very seriously. And the Civil Rights Association did not hesitate to criticize actions by the "Officials" in the past that it thought were wrong, such as the Aldershot bombing.

On the other hand, the IRSP response to the shooting has not been the most effective. The party has called on members of the "Official" organization to resign in protest. This puts the ranks of the rival group in a position of having to disavow political positions in which they believe in order to oppose an act, which if the IRSP claim is true, they will nearly all oppose.

It is necessary to build the maximum unity against any actions that may endanger the militant organizations and the Catholic community as a whole.

ment and the struggle that led it to socialist conclusions. This statement in fact accepts the accusation that was raised against the movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s by ultraleft sectarians. The flipflop came not because the leadership of the movement continued to evolve toward the left but because it could not carry forward the revolutionary dynamic that it unleashed, and because it decided in effect to retreat.

In order to be able to carry out such a retreat, the leadership has begun promulgating a set of dogmas that promise to turn the political life of the organization into a hothouse of malignant sectarianism and the organization itself into a dying sect. The organization is in danger of turning into its opposite in the ugliest way possible. And that is symbolized by its slandering of its own past.

On the other hand, the Stalinist bent of some of the "Official" republican leadership that was fostered by the Stalinist agents from the beginning has finally emerged in a virulent form, so that this line and its fruits can be clearly judged.

Since the beginning of the mass civil-rights movement, the leadership has wavered between the influence of Stalinism and the attractiveness of mass action, which is

in harmony with the revolutionary ideals of the movement. Now at last it has clearly opted for one alternative, and although it has chosen the wrong one, this at least offers Irish revolutionists an opportunity to draw some basic political lessons and to settle accounts with some false ideas they have dragged along from the past. At last, the "Official" leadership has adopted a "consistent" position of counterposing a utopian concept of Catholic-Protestant unity to the struggle of the Catholics against caste oppression.

### The Protestant Problem

Although not "alienating" the Protestants had been a principle of the movement, it was not consistently followed.

The republican leadership was even forced to wage a political struggle for an entire period against ultraleft sectarians who criticized them, with formal correctness, for their inconsistency on this question.

The sectarians argued that organizing the Catholics against their special oppression alienated the Protestant workers by threatening to deprive them of what they

had in order to redress the injustice to the historically oppressed section of the population.

The sectarians maintained that a struggle against the oppression and the greater exploitation of one section of the working class would only divide the workers. What was needed, they said, was a struggle against the exploitation of workers in general as a class. They denounced the "Official" republicans for polarizing the community on the basis of historic national identifications—for "petty-bourgeois nationalism."

The fight for Catholic emancipation, for civil rights, did polarize the Northern Irish population. But at the same time, the left sectarians found that the Catholic population moved toward the left and that in the process the hold of the Catholic church tended to be weakened rather than reinforced. At the same time, the Protestant workers would not listen to the most sympathetic chats about their immediate economic problems unless they were wholly convinced that the people doing the talking were "sound" on the question of union with Britain and preserving the Protestant ascendancy.

The "Officials" had the most extensive experience in this respect, among other things because of their guerrilla tradition. They were convinced that the Protestant paramilitary gangs, which engaged in activities similar to theirs and to a certain extent suffered the same penalties, had to have a revolutionary dynamic. There had to be something revolutionary about groups that were plebeian, or even working-class, in their social composition and engaged in violence "from below."

Some of the Protestant paramilitary groups did develop radical-sounding language that no doubt reflected distorted class feelings in the poor Protestant neighborhoods. However, the context and limitations of this were revealed in a striking way by two liberal Unionist journalists who shared the basic point of view of the members of the Protestant paramilitary groups, although naturally they deplored these groups' random murders of Catholics.

Not surprisingly, these journalists, Martin Dillon and Denis Lehane, indicate that the "left" group that most appealed to the "antiestablishment" element among the Protestant gunmen was the one that most consistently justified the attitude of the defenders of Protestant ascendancy.

In their book *Political Murder in Northern Ireland*, they quote the revelations of Dave Fogel, a former leader of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), on the development of "left" ideas in one section of this paramilitary gang. After he fled to England to avoid assassination by his former associates, Fogel wrote in the London *Sunday Times*:

"My men will be surprised to learn that the late Ernie Elliot [who was assassinated, presumably by another faction] and I were engaged in talks with Two Nations [that is, the British and Irish Communist Organisation (BICO), an ultra-Stalinist sect whose prime tenet is that the Protestants are a nation and that therefore their struggle to maintain the Six-County state represents "democratic" resistance to Dublin imperialism]. This is the only Marxist group that recognizes Ulster. It wants Catholics to come out categorically for the continuation of the border. It's this which keeps the Catholics and Prod working class apart. Once the Prods lose their fear of Dublin then the way is open to a united working class. Well, these fellows came up from Dublin, one with a big black beard, and we had a couple of meetings in my house. Tommy Herron met them and was quite interested."

Dillon and Lehane thought such attitudes represented a real hope.

"Fogel's views are very interesting. Though they may appear fairly tame to the outsider, they are quite extraordinary in the context of Northern Ireland at this time. His views on social conditions in both communities and his hostility to the Unionist Party are identical to the Official IRA's. So too is his attitude to a united Ulster working class."

Furthermore, Dillon and Lehane argued, this "class approach" produced some important positive results. The UDA ordered an end, on January 3, 1973, to the random murders of Catholics. The two liberal Unionist journalists held that this was a first step toward "class unity."

"The decision to call off the Protestant assassins was at least in part prompted by contacts the existing leadership of the UDA had had with the Official IRA. This is not to say that there was any 'deal' involved. But it is to say that the decision to call the killers off the Roman Catholic community was a conscious response by people in the UDA inner council to the belief that there was a common ground of social discontent and genuine grievances that was shared by both the Catholic and Protestant working classes in Ulster."

However, the truce was short-lived. The same villains, who, according to many republican scenarios, have blocked the "natural tendency" of the Protestant workers to unite with their Catholic class comrades, were still active. That is, the right-wing Unionists once again snatched the Protestant workers back at the last moment before the long awaited union could be consummated.

"But Harding Smith was opposed to this ideology, and he was a formidable opponent. He was appalled by the signs of an accommodation between the Official IRA and the UDA. He saw this as another sign

of the decline and degeneracy in the ranks of the organization he had helped to build. He set himself to eradicate the malignancy, in all its forms, that had set in while he was away, and introduce a rigorous discipline throughout the Association. The lawlessness and racketeering would be curbed, and so too would the dangerous flirtation with the other side.

"Herron remained in East Belfast [where there is only a small Catholic community], but under pressure. Within the UDA as a whole, he was isolated and out-flanked by Harding Smith and the hard men in the West [where large neighborhoods of poor Catholics and poor Protestants face each other], who were backed by the UVF [Ulster Volunteer Force]. He was not strong enough to resist Harding Smith on his own. He agreed to a compromise. He accepted Harding Smith's takeover of the UDA's central structure. In return he retained the vice-chairmanship and his control in the East and he agreed to reduce the level of extortion in his areas to an acceptable level.

"The hard men in the West had been champing at the bit of enforced inaction. At the end of January, they were unleashed. On Monday 29 January with the killings of 14-year-old Peter Waterson, and James Trainor, 22, both Catholics, they showed that they were in business again. Twelve people were to die in the next seven days as the assassins, idle for four weeks, returned to their task."

On the other hand, the right-wing Unionists were not the only ones to blame for the breakdown of "class unity." The Catholic "sectarians" bore at least a share of the guilt, the two journalists argued. To back this up, they quoted the UDA statement ending the truce:

"We cannot control Protestant extremists in the face of IRA killings of UDR [Ulster Defence Regiment, the Northern Irish Home Guard] men, policemen, and civilian Protestants, and in the face of the attitude of Republican MPs who are not happy unless they are talking about oppression and injustice.

"Only four weeks ago we made an effort—we said the killing must stop and it did. But now the bombings by republican rebels have provoked them." Dillon and Lehane drew this conclusion:

"The message was clear. The 'moderate' element in the UDA had tried to achieve peace. It had made a gesture—at considerable personal risk to those behind it—to the Catholic working class by calling off the assassins. The only response from the Catholics had been for the Provisionals to step up the campaign of bombings and killings of members of the security forces.

"One should not undervalue the significance of what had happened. The olive branch was there, if only someone on the Catholic side had clasped it. Just as the

Provisional IRA had been given an opening in June 1972 by the British government, so, too, in January 1973 the Officials were given a chance by the UDA. It was not enough for the UDA to call off the assassins. It required a *quid pro quo*."

### The Main Point for the UDA

Once again, the "Officials" were being criticized for their lack of consistency. Not only were they too slow to make the moves that followed logically from their position, however; they were clumsy enough to make a politically unacceptable overture to the UDA:

"Immediately after the announcement by Herron that the killings would stop, the executive of the Republican Clubs—a front for the Official IRA—issued an invitation to the UDA to take part in joint patrols to stamp out the killings. A spokesman said that he had always been confident that the UDA was representative of the Protestant working class. The offer was tersely rejected by the UDA which said in a statement: 'Under no circumstances will we meet the IRA. These people can praise us all they like, but we will never meet the IRA.'

"The Officials had made a blunder, and their offer can hardly have helped Herron and his followers in the power-struggle. The UDA needed no help from the Officials in keeping the assassins quiet. What it did need, however, was a similar move by the Officials to keep the Provisionals inactive. The response that the moderates in the UDA wanted was quite simple. They could hold back the hard men on their side if the Officials could stop the Provisionals' campaign of bombings and shootings."

The difference between the UDA murders and the Provisional terrorist campaign escaped Dillon and Lehane. The problem, as they saw it, was "sectarianism," that is, the traditional religious antagonism. Obviously, it takes two sides to create and maintain "sectarianism," and in order to oppose it, the "extremists" on both sides must be blamed. Dillon and Lehane could not see the distinction between racist-like terror against a subject population on the one hand, and, on the other, commando group attacks against the repressive forces of the state, attacks that, while they did not have the full force of the oppressed community behind them and certainly did not help to mobilize it, did express its feelings to a considerable extent.

Thus, these two journalists failed to notice that the UDA statement blamed not only the Provisional military actions but also "Republican MPs... talking about oppression and injustice."

The plain fact was that the most fundamental thing for these Protestant activists was to maintain the Protestant ascendancy. They focused on the Provisional military

actions only because these were the type of attack on this system against which it was easiest to arouse public opinion. They might have some social and economic aspirations. But the fundamental thing was the ascendancy. And they would not accept an alliance with anyone who was not prepared to join with them in the defense of this.

### Which Is Fighting Oppression?

It is not necessary to equate Orangeism with fascism to think that the purge of the "left" in the UDA has much in common with the "Night of the Long Knives" in Germany, when Hitler liquidated the "left" wing of the Nazi movement. Any mass-based reactionary movement will have such contradictions. However, as long as its political basis is reactionary the right will have little difficulty in the long run in maintaining its control.

In this case, the fact that the Catholics continued to fight oppression, despite an offer of "peace," was sufficient cause in the eyes of this Protestant "left" element to justify wanton killing of ordinary Catholic workers, and even children, as well as subordination to the most retrograde forces. This is an illustration of the fact that the Protestant workers cannot win independence as a class without crossing the communal line and joining the struggle of the Catholics against Orangeism and all its institutions, including the border.

Whatever reactionary features derive from their religious identification, the struggle of the Catholics as Catholics in Ireland is progressive and leads in the direction of working-class consciousness and action. The actions of Protestants as Protestants in Ireland are reactionary and lead in the direction of repression and racist-like terror. Thus, "sectarianism" as such is an altogether secondary aspect of the conflict in Northern Ireland. What is

fundamental is the conflict between the oppressed Catholic population and its oppressors—imperialism and the Protestant caste.

Concessions to the Protestant caste mentality do not help Protestant workers cross the crucial dividing line. This remains true even when such concessions are approached by the "left" route of talking about opposing "all bosses both Catholic and Protestant" and agreeing with Protestant workers about the reactionary nature of the Dublin regime. The effect rather is to lead any elements that make this type of overture to compromise with Orangeism and imperialist rule.

The logic of putting Catholic-Protestant unity ahead of the struggle against the oppression of the Catholic population was very clearly expressed at the 1972 national convention of the "Officials" by Desmond O'Hagan, the member of the present leadership who seems to have gained most in prominence in the past year and a half. He said that the Provisionals were worse enemies than the British army.

The clear implication of this is that it is more important to fight the mere nationalists in the Catholic community, who "alienate the Protestant workers," than it is to fight imperialism itself.

Whether the "Official" leadership will follow this logic to the end, or whether the leadership will allow itself to be led to such a conclusion, remains to be seen. But the newspaper of the movement, the *United Irishman*, has already openly disavowed the nationalist past of the republican movement. And it is certain that some of those still in the "Official" leadership would have been horrified and disbelieving if anyone had told them two years ago where their course would lead them.

There is worse ahead if they continue on this path. □

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