

THE
IRISH
LEFT



FOR

REVOLUTIONARY
REGROUPMENT

Produced by the I. S. P.

INTRODUCTION

The Regroupment of the Left was written originally as an internal I.S.P. document. The criticisms expressed within it are intended as constructive and fraternal - it is hoped that the named parties and organisations will regard them in this light.

The I.S.P. would be interested to receive comments on this document as it feels that a wider debate on the Regroupment of the Left is not alone possible but necessary.

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"FOR REVOLUTIONARY REGROUPMENT".

Revolutionary Marxism has gained immensely within small sections of the Irish working class during the last ten years. During that time comrades from divergent political backgrounds have groped towards a deeper understanding of marxist doctrine. Ten years of practice in class and anti-imperialist struggles have taught many of us the value of the marxist method in understanding Irish society.

Although many paid lip service to the necessity for building a revolutionary party during that time, little serious effort was made towards that goal. Instead, illusions of grandeur abounded. Individualism, romanticism and heavy doses of ultra-leftism ran riot, seriously hindering advancement towards a revolutionary party. It is important that we look at that period and analyse the mistakes made, in order to benefit from the experience.

The degeneration of the Russian revolution caused a tremendous setback to the international working class and it has only been since the new wave of revolutionary struggles in the 1960's that the world proletariat has begun to re-discover the authentic revolutionary tradition of marxism. The distorted versions of marxism implanted in the class by the stalinised communist parties throughout the world has made the rediscovery doubly difficult. The theoretical gains made by the leaders of marxism had been so grossly distorted, maligned and hidden that the leadership of the new struggles in the sixties, throughout the world, were forced by theoretical inadequacy to respond pragmatically to the developing struggles. Theoretically they had to re-live and re-learn the early mistakes of the marxist movement. To say that is not to criticise - it is to understand.

We in Ireland were no different from the rest of the revolutionary movement in the world. We had an inadequate grasp of marxist methodology, practically no access to the writings of marxists and furthermore had the attractiveness of a revolutionary ideology in Republicanism, which required little intellectual effort and evoked tremendous emotional commitment. Furthermore, through imperialist culture, we were subjected to the ideology of social democracy, which in the sixties - certainly in Britain and Ireland - had a very radical face, culminating in the 1969 Irish Labour Party acceptance of the goal of a Workers' Republic.

The original Irish Workers' Group which folded shortly before the rise of the Northern Catholics was an attempt to create a Bolshevik Leninist type party outside of the Stalinist tradition. Internally, it was riddled with factionalism and had all the worst features of emigré politics (its leadership was mainly London-Irish emigres). Externally its work was geared towards the traditional Labour parties, particularly their Young Socialist sections.

Comrades then involved took from this period then an introduction to marxism through eyes distorted by the experiences of the Irish Workers' Group. The Labour Party work left comrades unable to understand the key dynamic of the national question. The mass audience of '68-'69 so swayed socialists then that we completely misunderstood the needs of the moment. The manner and method by which class questions were injected in the civil rights movement was almost totally wrong and was a clear case of ultra leftism. Similarly, within the left itself, the decision to disband the Young Socialist Alliance was incorrect, as was the arrogance adopted by northern socialists, particularly in the period when the Socialist Labour Alliance was in existence. The continuation of Derry Socialists in the N.I.L.P. until 1971 was also wrong. The inability of comrades then to coalesce and agree to a common strategy particularly when the national question came on the agenda, seriously weakened the forces of marxism and permitted Republicans to establish control over forces partially released by socialists.

P.D.'s North-centricity and obsessive pre-occupation with issues directly connected to the northern conflict, whilst helping to develop a better understanding of the marxist position on the national question, also seriously undermined the ability of socialists to engage in basic class struggle issues. The emergence of the SWM and its concentration on class issues in the South was the reverse side of P.D.'s northern involvement. It is little wonder that epithets like 'provo-tailism' and 'economism' were bandied about. Comrades working in the Republican organisations whilst learning valuable lessons, particularly the uses and limitations of armed methods, continually found themselves unable to challenge successfully the Republican ideology itself.

One cannot build a revolutionary marxist party inside the republican movement, where politics is subordinate to the gun.

For a time of course comrades heavily influenced by Republican successes, were seduced by the romantic shadows of gunmen. The working class became something one acted on behalf of. And so elitism permeated the marxist left, sometimes justified by references to remarks of Lenin, torn out of context. Elitism does not tolerate dissent, Fraternal debate, dialogue and self-education in marxism were never really encouraged. Disagreements became votes of confidence, dissent became disloyalty. Perhaps in a period of upturn such behaviour was modified by seeming success, but in a period of defeats and demoralisation, hysteria ruled the roost. Many comrades became demoralised and left revolutionary politics.

Others retreated into theory to search for the answers in the marxist classics (an example is the period of the I.C.S.P.) but found that theory divorced from practice - also vice versa - leads to sterility. Which leads us to the present state of revolutionary marxists.

First, where are they ?

There are at the moment three main areas where they can be located. 1. The Far Left Groups 2. The Republican Movements 3. The Labour Movements.

The Far Left.

The oldest of these groups is P.D. It contained some of the most experienced and dedicated comrades of the Left. It has a turbulent internal history and an active external one. Recently its parting of the ways with the Red Republicans seriously weakened it numerically but seems to have strengthened it theoretically. It has abandoned its 'loyalist fascist' phase and its involvement in the James Connolly Society shows its belated recognition of the importance of theoretical clarity.

M.S.R.

The Irish Section of the Fourth International (United Secretariat). Originally the R.M.G. it has always worked closely with P.D. Numerically weak in the North, it has in the past tended to tail-end the Provos. It stresses the importance of international links but seems unable to sink roots in the class movement itself in Ireland. It seems destined to impotence, acting only

in joint activity, incapable of acting alone.

S.W.M.

Ma Mainly southern based but more active recently in the North. Capable of independent initiatives it is mainly a class based organisation which recognises the importance of rank and file activity by the working class. Its initiative in the T.U.C.C.A.R. is an important development in linking class and national questions.

The Irish Workers' Group.

A small split off from the SWM it is heavily theoretical and seems to negate its valid critique of other groups by large doses of aggressive sectarianism.

League for a Workers' Republic.

Obscure labour party based group with tiny membership.

The Independent Socialist Party.

Emerged after a split in the IRSP and has the most potential for recruitment of the existing left-wing groups. It works in three areas of (1) Democratic struggles (2) Economic struggles (3) Women's struggles. It has pushed for left unity and developed a Workers' Resource Centre in Belfast which has greatly assisted socialist roots in the working class. It is also the most broadly based, geographically, of the existing groups.

All of these groups can of course justify their existence by reference to their programmes, manifestos, etc. as differentiating themselves from other groups. But existing divisions between at least four of these groups do not in my view justify the existence of separate organisations. Historically, they may have evolved for different reasons and purposes but past differences are no justification for present differences. Serious and fundamental differences of political opinion is the only criteria for separate organisations. Organisational fetishism is most certainly not. The Irish revolution needs one strong revolutionary party of the working class if socialism is to triumph. Small grouplets theoretically weaken the class by diverting its energy into sectarian squabbles to justify each ~~of its~~ own existence.

The Republican Movement.

This is divided organisationally in three separate parts. Because of its historical origins, it has a far greater appeal than marxism within certain sections of the Irish working class. But within the

past fifteen years recognising that the support of the workers was crucial certain ideologists of the Republican movement began to give Republicanism a Left Face. The Left phraseology should fool no one. It is merely an attempt to get working class support for the establishment of a Republic where the working class will not be the dominant force. Whether that Republic be called a 'socialist Republic' or 'Eire Nua' under the Republican ideology the working class will not achieve socialism.

This is not to deny, however, that many potential revolutionary marxists are to be found in the ranks of Republicanism. Its populist ideology and military capacity have an undeniable attraction for radicalised working class youths. But the inability of an independent marxist current to effectively survive in either the Provos, Officials or IRSP seriously points out the futility of enterism with the Republican movement. The attempt by the Derry Left to infiltrate the Officials only lead to marked political instability culminating in almost total demoralisation.

The Provos.

For a long time there has been talk of a left wing within the Provos, particularly within the Belfast Brigade. Prominent Provos are named as having involvement within this wing. The suggestion is that something may come from this left wing. My own belief is that this will happen when the left wing individuals resign, leave en bloc or are expelled from the Provos.

For the practical effect of this 'left wing' within the Provos has, I would suggest, been mainly negative. They have provided a left cover (Republican News) for right wing politics and have had no serious influence on the direction of the armed struggle. Furthermore when the Provos seek co-operation with the left wing groups, it is not out of ideological commitment, but practical necessity to revive working class support for themselves. Having secured sufficient support that left wing will, with all the arrogance typical of military elitists, whether of the right or left variety, proceed to denounce the genuine left wing groups.

Practical cooperation with the Provos on issues of repression and political status, whilst important to the whole anti-imperialist movement, should not be seen as a cop out from criticisms of the allegedly socialist face of the Provos. A continuing marxist critique of the ideas and practices of the left wing Provos in

particular, is important, in the task of winning recruits to revolutionary marxism.

The Officials.

Since the IRSP split the Officials have moved rapidly to the right almost adopting a two nations theory (see Smullens 'The Irish Industrial Revolution'). They seem to have adopted a strategy of winning friends and influencing people within the trade union bureaucracy and the middle management of state enterprises in the South. Their total acceptance of Stalinism renders almost impossible the emergence of a revolutionary marxist trend within their adult ranks. But the I.D.Y.M. should not be neglected. This contains working class youths who are not yet totally 'stalinised'. A revolutionary should not ignore chances of influencing young workers here, by deed and word.

The Irish Republican Socialist Party.

Is an attempt to recreate the Officials of 1971. Politically it is impotent although it attracts the support of some class conscious republicans. Its elitist and populist ideology needs continued criticism, for only in such a way can an alternative be shown to its members. The failure of the marxist element to wage a political struggle inside it prior to resignation of almost half the national executive in November 1975 left a demoralised and confused membership.

The emergence of a strong active revolutionary marxist grouping could act as a pole of attraction for those existing left republicans, as get timid in making the break from the republican ideology.

The Labour Movement.

Basically we have here social democratic organisations. In the North, the pro-loyalist NILP is practically defunct and of no interest to marxists. The Labour & Trade Union Coordinating Group is influenced by the right wing trotskyite Militant group, and here an ideological battle with this pretentious group needs to be joined. The ranks of the trade unions in the North have more potential for marxists and the recent class involvement of marxists in Eastwoods opens up the possibility of serious marxist penetration of trade union ranks.

In the South, the Irish Labour Party and the Independent Labourites like Noel Browne can be expected to turn to the left now that Labour is in opposition.

Where possible we should practically cooperate with these elements, whilst making no concessions to their social democratic ideology. Undoubtedly potential marxists exist both in the Labour Party and the trade union movement generally. Unless the revolutionary left is on the shop floor posing the alternative to social democracy then these potential marxists cannot be won over to the task of building a revolutionary party.

Revolutionary marxists exist in some degree or another in the three areas I have outlined, it is not enough, however, for comrades to proclaim their adherence to the need to build a revolutionary party. Concrete steps need to be taken to bring together revolutionary marxists and begin a regroupment of the left that will have profound effects on the class struggle in Ireland.

In the immediate period the task should be to bring the far left together in one organisation. Even then, numerically we would scarcely have 100 members. But pulling together these comrades could have a tremendous impact on class politics. As it is today we have divided resources, inferior organisations, conflicting activities and inadequate attention to marxist theory. Comrades need to face up to reality. There is no future for the far left as it is today. A qualitative change needs to take place otherwise we will stagnate as left sectarians. I believe that one organisation would provide us with adequate resources and would greatly enhance our theoretical understanding of marxism.

In the initial period, varying tendencies would undoubtedly, and should, exist. As serious tendencies they would raise the level of debate and understanding of all comrades in the fused organisations. Internal debate and dialogue would be in the best traditions of revolutionary organisations and would provide the necessary stimulus to ensure that whatever was the party line would be subjected to the most rigorous scrutiny and assessment. At the same time the far left would be in a strong position to intervene on its own behalf raising class issues in the day to day struggles of the people. Thus marxist ideas could be directly brought into the class.

Comrades may argue that the reasons today for being in separate organisations are political differences and that in one organisation these differences would

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lead to splits, thereby leading to even greater demoralisation of marxist forces. It is true that if comrades want to split it is almost impossible to stop them. But I would deny that political splits between existing marxists today in Ireland are justified. Some comrades talk of programmatic agreement, of the correct strategy and tactics and claim by references to Leninism that unless there is programmatic agreement one cannot have a unified organisation.

The I.W.G. claim indeed that "an incorrect understanding of a revolutionary socialist programme lies at the heart of the failure of marxism in Ireland". According to the I.W.G. the "programme defines the organisation's politics" and "orientates the thinking and direction of the organisation", laying "but the strategic road to socialism". The party programme they state should have the adherence and loyalty of members of the party who fight for its perspectives. These members fully participate in the collective debate of the movement in order to creatively develop the movement's theory and practice, tactics and strategy.

Here there is a non antagonistic contradiction. Loyal acceptance of the programme and yet of freedom to change that programme in collective debate.

Unfortunately the norm has been that where there are disagreements about aspects of the programme to wage a sharp short fight for one's position and, having failed to win the argument, split. Unless comrades accept the discipline required to fight for changes in a party programme, whilst at the same time fighting for the existing programme, then they are not the stuff revolutionaries are made of. If the majorities' response to minorities' criticism is an expulsion reflex then they are not helping the concept of building a revolutionary party either. This is not to say that expulsions and splits are always wrong. In the case of the Red Republicans it was essential if PD was to advance towards marxism.

But with comrades who accept revolutionary marxism and a number of fundamental points which flow from that acceptance, disagreements should not lead to splits. After fourteen years of leading and building the Bolshevik party, Lenin discovered in April, 1917 a fundamental disagreement with the majority of the Bolsheviks leadership. They did not believe in the

possibility of, not call for, a socialist revolution. Thus very severe differences over the programme of the whole party existed. Yet no split took place and Kamenev and Zinoviev who publicly announced their disagreements with the Bolsheviks' plans for an armed rising, were not expelled.

If in the throes of revolution the Bolsheviks could abide by the norms of democratic centralism, is it not possible for marxists in Ireland to act similarly ?

It is true there is no agreed programme which provides a guide to action on most issues (like the manifesto of the IWG). It is also true there is different international perspectives, for example the MSR's acceptance of the 4th. International. There are also differences over the analysis of the USSR (state capitalism or degenerate workers' state). There are day to day differences on the main line marxists should be following (repression work, class work or whatever). Tactical differences undoubtedly exist, leading to the usual accusations amongst the left of economism, ultra leftism and centrism. Strangely enough, all of these isms appeared in one guise or another within the Bolsheviks also.

The resulting debate within the Bolsheviks raised the level of consciousness of all concerned and ideologically equipped them for revolution.

We here in Ireland are good at hurling abuse. We are not so good at engaging in serious debate. It is undoubtedly due to the low level of marxist understanding in the country. But in the past fifteen years there has been some improvement. Perhaps in our organisation, polemical and fraternal debate would raise the appallingly low level of marxist consciousness. Vigorous internal debate will enhance, not weaken, the work of the party, as comrades carry out a policy they actually understand.

POINTS OF AGREEMENT.

1. The necessity for a revolutionary marxist party of the working class, without which no socialist revolution can take place.
2. Democratic centralism is something I believe all four far left groups profess allegiance to.

Accordingly in one organisation it would provide the means by which an ever evolving programme is hammered out. From time to time because practical experience obviously would modify certain aspects of the party's programme. But whilst tendencies and factions would exist it is crucial that their existence in no way hinders or hampers the implementation of the majority line. Attempting to change the majority line is one thing. Disruption of it is something else. Those who would disrupt would be seen for what they are, immature sectarians.

3. The Primary Role of the Working Class in the Irish revolution is yet another point of agreement, and flowing from this are a number of crucial points -
(a) a rejection of republican ideology (b) the development of independent working class activities
(c) the rejection of reformism.
4. An acceptance of uninterrupted revolutions and a rejection of the stages theory.
5. Acceptance of the fact that Ireland is dominated by Imperialism,
6. Agreement that mass political action rather than elitist militarism is the way to defeat imperialism and capitalism.

On these six points I believe the far left agrees and on these we differentiate ourselves from

- (a) the bourgeoisie
- (b) the social democrats
- (c) the republicans
- (d) the stalinists
- (e) the ultra leftists (ie Red Republicans)

We agree on them from no abstract acceptance of marxist classics but from years of accumulated practical and theoretical involvement in politics in Ireland. Fifteen and ten years ago there was no agreement on these issues. How could there be? The far left had scarcely emerged. In its first flush of youth, heavily influenced by the libertarianism of the Paris May Days in 1968 and later by guerillism of Republicanism, the Irish far left initially only used marxist theory to polemicise. One went to read Marx and Engels on the Paris Commune or Lenin's 'State and Revolution' for pragmatic

reasons, the partial ex- tenses of no go areas, or to read Trotsky on Fascism, because of the rise of the U.D.A.

Only as the struggles continued moving into a down- turn and exposing the weaknesses of republicanism and the impossibility of any peculiar Irish road to socialism did the Far Left begin to seriously absorb the totality of the marxist view. Since the failure of the IRSP marxists have begun to look at their own organisations with marxist eyes.

Our theoretical level, whilst low is high compared to the sixties and the quantitative increase in numbers in the seventies has accompanied a qualitative increase in our theoretical level. Any future development will depend upon the willingness of comrades to subordinate organisational pride to political necessity. We in the Far Left have shaken off much of the 'leftism' that existed in the early days, it is now important to ditch the organisation forms that accompanied that 'leftism'.

The emergence of one strong revolutionary group from the present weak Far Left would at this time provide a valuable pole of attraction for workers recently politicised by the world economic crisis, alienated from th the reformism inherent in Republicanism and rejecting the class collaboration of the labour and trade union bureaucracy. At the moment these workers will be attracted by the superficial class consciousness of Sinn Féin (Workers Party).

They will not be attracted to the Far Left because of its weaknesses. We lack credibility in the eyes of many workers because we do not exist in many areas. Our agitation and propaganda is pitifully weak and in many major towns is non-existent. Because of this we are in danger of becoming aloof from many sections of the workers. This could lead to the drying up of recruits from the working class and the Far Left eventually becoming an intellectual pressure group instead of the revolutionary workers party it should become.

The creation of one Far Left organisation would be a major step toward building a revolutionary mass party. It would provide the resources of new interventions in class struggle. It would create

a militant fighting organisation of class conscious workers. It would, by continuous and fruitful debate raise the level of marxism amongst militants.

Comrades, a revolutionary regroupment is not only necessary, it is in my view, also possible.

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