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THE LABOUR PARTY

NORTHERN IRELAND

This document was prepared by the National Committee of the Labour Party Young Socialists, without consultation with the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party. It was adopted at a meeting of the National Committee of the Labour Party Young Socialists on the 19th December, 1970, for presentation to the Young Socialists National Conference to be held in Skegness, Saturday, Sunday and Monday, 10th, 11th and 12th April, 1971.

The document is intended to provide a basis for discussion and is not a statement of Labour Party policy.

Price 5p



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Introduction:

The events in Northern Ireland of the past two years have rudely forced the Tories skeleton from its cupboard. Quite rightly described as the "worst political slum in Europe" the state of Northern Ireland has been ruled for 50 years by a regime based on gerrymandered elections, deliberately fostered religious sectarian hatreds with all the consequent discrimination and brutal terror.

Even now, after mass uprisings in Derry and parts of Belfast, many elementary democratic rights are still denied. For example: one man—one vote is not universal and multiple property votes still exist.

But underlying all this, the terrible social conditions which exist behind the rioting and fighting remain virtually unaltered. Towns like Strabane boast an all-European record for unemployment—over 25 per cent! In the slum areas of cities like Derry, up to one-third are without jobs; and the youth in particular react with anger and violence to their hopeless situation, trapped in appalling housing with no prospects of a job, having to "sign on" every week to collect their weekly pittance of £4 10s.

In general, Protestant youths may have a better chance of getting a job; but wage levels as a whole are low, and conditions on the whole are bad. There are Protestant ghettos every bit as crumbling and miserable as among the Catholics. Young people at work are grossly exploited, irrespective of their religion.

But one fact which really underlines the savagery of oppression in Northern Ireland is that the mass uprising of the Catholic population in Derry in August, 1969, and which ended with the intervention of British troops, was sparked off by the fears of yet another attack by uniformed thugs and "B" Specials. The residents of Creggan Bogside had every reason to fear such an attack. In the months earlier, they had suffered no less than four sustained invasions by the official and semi-official purveyors of "law and order". On the night of 4 January, 1969, police ran amok in the Bogside, smashing every window in the district, terrifying the population, threatening and baton-charging indiscriminately. During another attack in April of the same year, a middle-aged man, Sam Deveney, was beaten and dragged from his home. Later he died of a heart attack. Just recently (November 1970) the official enquiry into his death spoke of a "conspiracy of silence" by the police which made it "impossible" for the Government to apprehend those responsible.

Such incidents are clearly documented, and others on the same lines have occurred numerous times during the past 50 years.

However, the mass movements which have developed in recent years are not only the result of sectarian violence and oppression—that has been the people's lot for decades, if not centuries. Revolts take place not only when conditions are bad, but when people are no longer prepared to tolerate them. Throughout the whole of Ireland, the economic and social changes of the past twenty years have brought about an entirely new situation whereby the new generations are not prepared to be trampled on the same old way. Nor are they prepared to accept the old shibboleths, myths and taboos of their predecessors.

In both North and South the old society is cracking at the seams. Overwhelmingly the students of Queen's University in Belfast, three-quarters of them of Protestant origin, have backed and actively participated in the civil rights movement. In Eire, where perhaps the helter-skelter industrialisation of the last ten years is even more marked, the ancient grip of the Church is greatly weakening, particularly among youth.

Nor is it possible for the capitalist politicians to maintain their rule by maintaining the old polarities of "orange" and "green". It has taken the social explosion surrounding the civil rights movement to do this, but the Unionist Party is shattered in its old form. Sensing the changed situation, Unionists like O'Neill and now Chichester-Clark, who are more in tune with the long term needs of big business, realise that to maintain their rule and to prevent the lid being blown off the whole lot, they must make concessions and eliminate the worst sectarian abuses. The alternative is civil war, destruction of property and a decline in investment, which would make for even greater social problems and upheavals.

In the South there has been an unprecedented growth of struggle on the part of the working class; 1967 saw Eire with the highest rate of strikes in Western Europe. In response to this and to the new social mood, the Irish Labour Party has grown, reflected in the increased affiliation of trade unions (I.T. & C.W.U. and W.U.I. for example) with now 17 affiliates representing hundreds of thousands of workers.

The possibilities which now exist for the working class movement in Ireland both North and South developing along class lines, with socialist ideas to break the old sectarian divisions, are great. The opportunities for the socialist movement, and in particular among the youth, are tremendous.

"Blood and Plunder"

The history of British rule in Ireland is one of ruthless plunder of the nation's wealth, carried out with the most ferocious of methods. The traditional society, based on the collective ownership of the land was annihilated by the forcible seizure of vast tracts of land by the English ruling class and the expulsion of the population. The county of Derry was handed over to the City of London—hence Londonderry.

In Ulster, the Cromwellian settlement of 1649 entailed the driving out of the entire native Irish population and their replacement by settlers mainly of Scottish Presbyterian stock, although the big English landlords and merchants, as ever, got the lion's share; large numbers of the Protestant settlers being reduced to the status of tenants very quickly.

Since then Irish history has been a succession of revolts against British rule; but always every movement has become a social movement, in particular against absentee landlords, mostly English, but also

Irish. At every stage, the small farmers have shown a tendency to unite in action despite the deliberately fostered religious antagonism, against the common oppressor—landlordism and capitalism.

The importance for the British ruling class, until recent times, of maintaining a political, strategic and economic stranglehold over Ireland is indicated by the extent of brutality and terror they were prepared to use to maintain direct rule. Every revolt was met with barbaric repression. The burning of villages, the massacre of whole populations, looting, rape and murder, the sheer terror against the people which accompanied the putting down of every revolt, lasted well into this century, such as the barbarous executions which followed the 1916 uprising, and the unleashing of the "Black and Tans" in 1920. Never has there been any limit to the depths of savagery to which the British rulers would sink in order to preserve their privileges across the Irish Sea.

At the same time, the middle class and capitalist leadership of every national movement has never been prepared to carry the logic of the movement to its conclusion. How could they, when this involved the overthrow of the social system on which they based their position? The Irish capitalists and landlords, interested essentially in their own emancipation, in the end were always prepared to compromise and hold the movement back rather than see capitalist property relations overturned. Connolly described the abject failure of the nationalist leaders at the time of the famines in the "hungry forties" as how the very radical, but nevertheless bourgeois leadership of the "Young Ireland" movement . . . "sacrifice the Irish peasantry on the altar of private property".

It was a glaring example of how any genuine national liberation of the Irish people could only be achieved by action against the rights of private property itself. It was literally a matter of life or death for a whole people. (From 5 million in 1800, the population rose to 8½ million by 1845, to decline in only six years to 6½ million; in fact such was the plunder and destruction of the Irish economy, that it was not until 1961 that the population began to rise once more.)

The history books blame the peasants for their stubborn dependance on the potato for the tragic effects of potato blight which was the first hand "cause" of the famine. They neglect to explain that during the entire period there was more than enough food to feed the population . . . and with better food than potatoes! Grain and cattle which could have fed the population was exported under heavy armed guard. Starving farmers were forced to part with their produce to pay their exorbitant rents.

If it were not for "capitalist economics" and the "laws of the market" not one man, woman or child need have gone hungry. But the British Government expressly forbade famine relief, as it might interfere with the price of grain! A shipload of grain sent by the people of Massachusetts was impounded at the dock.

The revolutionary elements of the time recommended direct action such as: refusal to pay rent, retention of crops, seizure of grain supplies, breaking up railways to prevent the export of food, etc. But the great majority of the nationalist leaders of the time seemed more in favour of landlords' and merchants' rights than the rights of the masses. Such action inevitably would have been the signal for social and national revolt, one interlinked with the other.

"Divide and Rule"

British Imperialism first perfected its methods in Ireland. Later it applied these lessons to vast areas of the world. And its crowning achievement has been the policy of "divide and rule". In Ireland it was the religious issue; in Guyana, race; in India, religion and language; in Malaya, race—and so on in one form or another in each colony, as it was formed.

Although the germs of the present sectarian divide in Ireland are to be found in the 17th century, with the Cromwellian settlement and the 1641 revolt, etc., the Orange Order, so proudly deriving its mythology from the events of the late 17th century, was not founded until one hundred years later. The reason is that its organisation was primarily a conscious move to split the revolutionary forces which at that time seriously threatened the whole basis of British rule in Ireland, drawing together both Catholic and Protestant.

"I have arranged to increase the animosity between the Orangemen and the United Irish. Upon that animosity depends the safety of the centre counties of the North."

General Knox, 1798.

Throughout the 18th century the small farmers organised to fight the evictions and rent increases of the landlords. In the main they were terrorist secret societies such as the Oakboys, who organised the Ulster Protestant farmers, and the Defenders and Whiteboys, who organised in the south. By the end of the century, an organisation based on the unity of all dissident elements, Catholic and Protestant, urban and rural, had sprung up. Under the influence of revolutionary events in America and France, with radical republican ideas, the United Irishmen were born. It is ironic to consider that the hotbed of discontent was in Protestant Belfast and that the majority of leaders of the United Irishmen were Presbyterian!

But once having learned a lesson, the ruling class was to utilise it again and again. It was to be their "trump card" in the Irish situation.

In 1886, when the first possibility of "Home Rule" was mooted, and Gladstone's Liberals were making cautious moves towards a limited form of national independence, that great statesman and sturdy democrat, Lord Randolph Churchill, Tory M.P., for Woodstock, wrote to his friend James Fitzgibbon, Lord Chief Justice of Ireland . . .

"I decided some time ago that if Gladstone went for Home Rule, the Orange card would be the one to play. Please God it may turn out to be the ace of trumps and not the two . . ."

It did. That summer, Belfast was consumed by its worst ever sectarian riots, and the issue of home rule was not fully raised again until 1912.

Partition: 1922-1970

The politics of Ireland for the past 50 years has been overshadowed by "The Border". During all that time the politicians North and South have always tried to use it to divert the social discontents of the workers into relatively safe channels, and away from the social causes.

The partition of Ireland and the present Northern Ireland state derive from the Treaty of 1921-1922, which was a compromise solution arising out of the revolutionary struggles of 1916-1922. The Southern Irish capitalists, represented primarily by the "Sinn Fein" wing of the liberation movement, were fully prepared to accept this solution.

Why Partition?

The Irish economy developed unevenly. By the end of the 19th century, industry of any significance had become concentrated in the North East, around Belfast, the third point of an industrial triangle taking in Merseyside and Clydeside. The remainder of Ireland was industrially undeveloped and largely agricultural.

In the South, the capitalists were more an outgrowth of the particular conditions imposed by the British Empire—predominantly involved in commercial affairs or in the import and export of agricultural goods, packaging and transport, etc. What manufacturing industry existed was very weak and vulnerable, and with little but a local market significance.

During all that period of the movement for "home rule" and "independence", the main object of the Southern capitalists was their own independence from the British manufacturers. They wanted to secure better and more protected conditions for their own growth. Protection of Irish industry was one of its main aims. Arthur Griffiths, leader of Sinn Fein, and first president of the Free State, expressed this clearly when he said . . . "Protection . . . means rendering the native manufacturer equal to meeting foreign competition. If a manufacturer cannot produce as cheaply as an English or other foreigner, only because his foreign competitor has larger resources at his disposal, then it is the first duty of the Irish nation to accord protection to that Irish manufacturer . . ."

From "Sinn Fein Policy", a speech at the national council of S.F. in 1905.

James Connolly, the greatest of all Irish socialists, continually argued that "home rule" was seen by the capitalists in this way; that the interests of the workers were not advanced at all; that the liberation of the Irish people could only come about as the result of social as well as national revolution. The true position of those such as Griffiths was seen when in 1913 he gave total support to the Dublin employers in the six month lockout. This was one of the most bitter and bloody labour disputes in Irish history. Here the capitalists, led by the Dublin millionaire Murphy, organised an attempt to starve the workers into submission, a prelude to smashing the developing Labour movement.

But the aspirations of the Southern capitalists were in direct conflict with those of the North; since the big manufacturers and landowners of Ulster were bound in numerous ways to the big British monopolies. In a "high tariff" protected national market they would be hopelessly stunted and restricted, for the Belfast Industries had never looked to the rest of Ireland for their markets or raw materials, being much more a section of the British economy.

From the start the Ulster bosses threatened a revolt against being incorporated into any sort of independent Ireland. Backed by the Tory Party and almost every section of the British ruling class, Edward Carson threw down the gauntlet and declared . . . "Ulster will fight and Ulster will be right".

Andrew Bonar Law, Tory leader at the time, was openly prepared to advocate mutiny and armed revolt if necessary, rather than submit to the Parliamentary decision. These "democratic" gentlemen were fully prepared to turn their backs on their own sanctimonious utterances about the "sanctity of Parliament" and "democracy" when it proved in their interest. The Liberal Government was faced with a situation where the entire office caste were unreliable, prepared to resign en masse rather than enforce "home rule". A mutiny of sorts, instigated by the officers did break out at the Curragh in 1914.

The tactical use of the "Orange Card" enabled a mass mobilisation of Ulstermen, behind the quite cynical Unionists. Over 100,000 were organised in the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). Significantly, despite the gun running and the munitions supplies available, this militia was never allowed access to guns except under the strict control of the officers. The movement from start to finish was controlled by the ruling class, and the Protestant workers and small farmers were simply pawns. One maxim of the leaders was that production should not be interfered with! On the outbreak of war the crack Volunteer units were "handed over" to the British high command and sent to a certain death in a particularly senseless advance on the Somme.

But it would be quite wrong, as many socialists have done, to see the Unionist movement and the Ulster revolt, in terms of the direct economic interests alone. Social, political and strategical factors intertwined with the economy to play an equally vital role.

A challenge to "the empire" in Ireland would have given a great boost to the revolutionaries in India, Egypt etc. The naval importance of such an island had been recognised as far back as the 12th century and increased during a period when war with Germany seemed more likely each day. That Churchill drew up plans in the second world war to seize Irish naval bases (from a "sovereign" state!) shows again the importance of this factor. Paradoxically it is only with the development of modern methods of destruction that it has now declined in importance.

But above all was the fear that the movement for national independence in the south would not be confined to that, but would spill over into social revolution. Not only would that be a serious blow, but it would inevitably have affected the Protestant workers and the workers in Britain too. This was

what terrified the ruling class more than anything. The partition sealed off the north, and now greatly helped the exacerbation of religious conflicts between the workers.

The tendency throughout this time was towards social revolution: the civil war of 1922, fought against the acceptance of the Treaty, produced a wave of takeovers of big estates, with heavy battles by the workers, which included takeovers and local expropriations. Such was the mood in 1919, when the proclamation of the first Dail set up as a result of the landslide victory of Sinn Fein could speak of . . .

"Ireland's resources belonging to the people of Ireland"

When in 1918 the British Government tried to introduce conscription in Ireland, a General Strike was organised in opposition. Even the craven, John Redmond, official "home ruler" at Westminster had to respond to mass pressure and actually oppose something in action. Having supported the war effort, he did an about turn and called conscription . . .

"a declaration of war against Ireland" and he promptly left to "organise a resistance in Ireland".

An indication of the rapid growth of workers' struggles is the growth of trade unionism: the trade unionism: the membership of the Irish T. & G.W.U. rose from 25,000 in 1916 to 68,000 in 1918 to 110,000 in 1919.

The State of Northern Ireland

From its birth, N.I. was a paramilitary police state. The rule of the capitalists was secured by a policy of blatant sectarianism and physical cowering of the catholic population into submission. The first prime minister Sir James Craig boasted of a "Protestant Government for a Protestant people." In the first few years the Special Powers Act was introduced which effectively abolished "habeas corpus", it gave the police the right of arrest without warrant, and generally put a legal stamp on police state methods.

In the first two years, over 400 were killed. The openly sectarian "B" Specials were formed as a means of keeping the catholic population in a state of paralysed terror, and by 1922 over 50,000 of them were under arms. Andrew Boyd in "Holy War in Belfast" describes some of the atrocities of the time.

"Between 10 and 15 June specials in Belfast killed six catholic men of which one was actually beaten to death. The uniformed men who murdered five members of the McMahon family in Belfast on 23 March, 1922 were never identified but there is little doubt that they too, were members of the special constabulary."

Not satisfied with this, the Unionists doubly secured their rule by the abolition of Proportional Representation in 1922 for local elections and in 1929 for Stormont. This has meant virtually total Unionist domination, and has assisted in the gerrymandering of election boundaries, such as in the city of Derry, where despite a minority of Unionist votes, the Unionists constitute the majority of the council. (Derry Corporation in '68 & '69 changed this).

This has prepared the ground, on which all those conditions have flourished which has given rise to the civil rights movement and sparked off the wave of revolt over the past two years. However, the actual conditions of the people of Ireland and of the catholics in the north are, if anything, better than before the war. Yet it is in these last two years that this movement across the North has been sufficient to completely break up the Unionist party in its old form, and to create an unparalleled crisis within the ruling circles.

Whereas in 1912 the Ulster Unionists were prepared to resort to armed struggle and the instigation of officers' mutiny; to organise on the basis of the most rabid sectarians; to give support to the most violent and extreme protestant demagogues—in 1970 they have to try to find ways of making concessions and to defuse the situation; to gently remind Paisley that at present anyway he is not needed but is instead a bit of an embarrassment, by clapping him in gaol for a few months.

The attitude of the capitalists in Ulster and Britain has not changed, nor have they become more "humane" and "liberal". All that has changed is the tactics of those who have the foresight to understand what is happening below the surface, and the extent to which conditions have changed in Ireland and the world, and which now makes the old form of rule impossible.

Changed Situation

The Unionist Party is split between those who want to counter the civil rights movement with even more repression, and those who see that now the old sectarian "game is up" and that the best way to deal with the present situation is to "defuse it" by granting concessions—in particular on the more basic democratic issues. For one thing has been made clear to big business by the events of the last two years, and that is that Unionism cannot rule in the old way much longer. To follow the advice of those like Craig within, and like Paisley without the party, is a reutterance of the old war cry "No surrender!" To clamp down even more on the catholic population will lead to a continuation of war on the streets, resulting in tremendous damage to property and a drying up of investment. Already Faulkner, a Stormont Minister, is now warning the business community of a "grim outlook" for the economy.

On top of this, the tendency would be for such a continual highly tense and explosive situation to turn towards social and class action, even though it appears to start on religious lines.

In November 1970 the 50 per cent increase in bus fares in Belfast provoked a big opposition, cutting across sectarian lines: N.I.L.P. leaders "sat in" on a Belfast bus and refused to pay their fares; thousands of trade unionists took part in a half day strike and joined a demonstration in the city

which involved the N.I.L.P., the Peoples Democracy, Republican groups and the Shankill Defence Committee.

With the mood of militancy building up in the rest of Britain and in the 26 counties, this will increasingly be the tendency for the workers of both religions in the North.

As referred to in the introduction, the attitude and mood of the new generation is completely different to that before the last war. No longer can the catholic population be terrorised into submission. The fighting spirit of the youth has been demonstrated quite clearly in recent months. To clamp down even more will lead to a greater spirit of defiance and combativity, and make things even worse for the Unionist Government.

Also taking Ireland as a whole, the old economic, political and strategic reasons for the border are mostly gone: the contrast economically between North and South has largely eroded. Particularly in the last ten years, the industrial growth of Eire has been phenomenal: 4 per cent a year on the average, almost the highest in Western Europe. The resulting social changes have been equally marked. Today the working class in the 26 counties is 68 per cent of the population. Similarly in the North, the movement away from the land has been fast. In the past 10 years the numbers of small farmers has fallen from 60,000 to 38,000 (and half those left "exist" on £8 or less a week!) and this social change means that one of the Unionist's most reliable bases among the rural Protestants has been diminished.

The main impetus for economic growth in Eire has come from foreign investment, mainly British, but also American, German and even Japanese.

The significant difference now is that whereas in 1921 the great majority of British investments were in the North, today Eire takes the greater part. Since the end of the last war the Irish capitalists have been forced to face up to the reality of their weak position and to abandon the old pre-war policy of protection, going over to the opposite of actively encouraging foreign investment. The seal was put on this by the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement in 1965. Today more than ever before the economy of the south is an appendage of the British, and is in the grip of the giant monopolies. Sixty-nine per cent of its exports go to Britain and 57 per cent of its imports come from there. The old adage "when Britain sneezes, Ireland catches pneumonia" is truer than ever. Britain devalues, Ireland devalues.

Given this change, the interests of the capitalists North and South have become more and more alike, and the border has become, in economic terms anyway, a hindrance to further development for both. This is highlighted particularly by the application of both Britain and Eire to join the Common Market. It becomes clear that in terms of capitalist economics a "federal solution", a capitalist united Ireland is highly desirable.

In 1967, the first open contact was established between the Governments of Dublin and Belfast, when Sean Lemass slipped over the border for a "friendly chat" with Captain O'Neil; to discuss mutual interests. Short of Paisley meeting the Pope, a meeting more likely to shock orange or green traditionalists cannot be imagined. Nevertheless in terms of the economic situation it was quite understandable.

From all points of view, the ruling circles, backed by their much bigger brothers the British capitalists, are trying to change course. But life, as O'Neil and now Chichester Clark have found out, is not as easy as that. History won't lie down. Having constantly fed the Protestant workers with sectarianism and religious bigotry, and warned of impending doom if concessions were made to the "rentans," it is difficult to just switch it off and hope the thing will go away. The very real fears of the Protestant workers, based in the end on economic insecurities, and competition for jobs etc., won't just go away because of the needs of their bosses to change direction at present.

From the beginning the Northern Ireland State was built on sectarianism, splitting the workers along religious lines. The Unionist Party was a means of duping the working class Protestants into support for their real enemies, paralysing their political activity, and ensuring unbroken rule by the rich.

Now that monolith, purporting to unite Protestants of all classes, is breaking up, splitting in two directions. One towards "loyalism" and intransigence; the "law and order" boys like Craig. The other towards concessions and "liberalism" such as the "New Unionist Movement" and the "Alliance" Party.

This split, in a blurred way, is based on social groupings. As described above, it is primarily the big business interests who are in favour of the new course, while the right wing, with Paisley being only a more extreme expression of this, base themselves on the frustrations and anger of the poorer and more oppressed Protestants, particularly in the country.

Civil Rights

The social injustice and poverty of Northern Ireland, have been shown up, in the full glare of press and TV, by the civil rights movement. This started with the clashes in Derry in October, 1968, and continued up to the insurrection of August, 1969.

The chronic unemployment hovers between seven and eight per cent in the state, and west of the Bann is easily double that. The appalling housing situation has been used by the local Unionists as a blatant means of discrimination and political patronage—between 1967 and 1969 only 20 houses were built by the Derry corporation! Thousands of families are condemned to share miserable slums.

But at the same time as providing a rallying point for the anger and frustrations of the youth and assisting in breaking the catholic workers away from their traditional nationalist leaders, the Civil Rights Movement has in general not only run itself out of steam but markedly failed to make any impression on the Protestant workers. In fact, just the opposite. To the Protestant worker, the whole thing looks like a "Catholic rebellion" which threatens his own position, and of course the actions of the police in containing every action within the catholic areas has quite deliberately assisted this attitude.

For the right wing of the C.R.M. this is all it ever was. These "Green Tory" Catholic businessmen

have fought against any socialist ideas in any form, restricting the movement where they could to the most minimal of "democratic" demands. The demand for "fair allocation of housing" and for "equality of opportunity in employment," unless linked in a definite way to a means of overcoming the overall housing shortage or ridding the country of unemployment, serve as a deceptive blind alley for the Catholic workers and only reinforce the fears and prejudice of the Protestants with the possibility of driving them towards the Paisleyites. The discrimination arises because of the competition for jobs or because the Protestant workers are led to see themselves as privileged (only slightly) in terms of housing allocation.

The basis of the attitudes of the Protestant workers is economic and social, and has to be overcome from this viewpoint. Equality of opportunity in employment for Protestant and Catholics, under the present capitalist system would mean more Protestant unemployed if less Catholic, and so with the allocation of houses in a situation of desperate shortage.

This case has been argued by many Young Socialists and Labour Party members in places like Derry. Only a socialist policy can solve the problems which face the people of both religions. The economic policy of the Unionists, involving enormous investment grants and the highest and juiciest baits to big business to come and build factories in N.I. has totally failed. Despite the enormous handouts of over £100 million a year, the giant monopolies which proportionately get the biggest subsidies in the U.K. in turn provide the lowest living standards and highest unemployment in any area of the U.K. These "gifts" from the taxpayers' pocket certainly don't benefit the 40,000 unemployed or the 30 per cent of men who earn less than £15 a week (in 1969). Such has been the role of "private enterprise" that the number of jobs in manufacturing industry has actually fallen in the last 10 years.

Quite obviously capitalism has failed to solve any of the problems which face the people. But it is not enough just to proclaim that in general as the way to win support for a socialist transformation of society. This has to be translated into a programme which clearly takes up the problems of all the workers and points to the need for socialism. In the same way it is not sufficient as most of the left wing of the civil rights movements such as the People's Democracy have done, to recognise the need for unity of workers across the sectarian lines and to call for the workers to unite. A clear programme around which they can unite, appealing to the Protestant as well as Catholic workers is needed.

For many on the left in N.I. there has been a tacit acceptance of the need for class unity, but a marked pessimism as to its feasibility. It must be remembered that the degree of privilege of the Protestant workers is not great; that Protestant workers suffer under the constant threat of unemployment, from low wages and slum housing; that they will be the target for the Tory attacks on the social services and the trade unions. In short, it is along these lines that a campaign must be organised as already the Young Socialists in Derry and elsewhere have begun to do over the past two or three years. With the prevalence of poverty-level wages, the Labour Movement should campaign for a minimum wage for all workers, for equal pay for men, women and youth; for state direction of industry to the high unemployment areas and nationalisation of the monopolies.

"Workers Unite"

The violence of the reaction, the role of the Paisleyite thugs with their constant attempt to organise attacks on the Catholics, the corresponding hooliganism organised by the right wing "provisionals" of the republican movement, and the intervention of the British Army raise many more vital issues for the workers of all Ireland and of Britain too. These very events raise the question of class unity even more acutely than before.

During the heated events of August, 1969, the question of class unity was posed over and over again. The uprising of the Catholic population was a social movement in the main; a revolt against the social conditions already outlined, sparked off by the threat of yet another attack by the armed thugs.

Liam de Paor, in his book "Divided Ulster," gives a good account of how it was the Young Socialists in Derry who consistently, not only fought courageously, but attempted to turn the movement away from sectarianism towards class unity. They called on the Labour and Trade Union Movement to give a lead in organising the defence of the people against the attacks. They fought for the setting up of workers' defence committees in every area. In the weeks that followed, the people of Bogside showed that they were infinitely more capable of defending their area than the R.U.C.! In fact for over two months, 150,000 workers organised their own "law and order."

Within these areas of "Free Derry" and "Free Belfast," the people began to organise and control the day to day running of their own community; they set up their own courts to deal with law breakers; for a period of weeks the pubs were forced to shut by 8 p.m., as a major precaution against more violent rioting!

There was far less crime, drunkenness and "disorder" than under the "normal" conditions of Northern Ireland justice!

In parts of east Belfast, joint Catholic and Protestant street committees were set up to protect the area from hooligan attacks and to maintain the peace, with the working class residents organising patrols.

In the Belfast shipyards, the shop stewards organised a mass meeting at the height of the fighting, against the will of the management, and appealed to the workers not to get involved in sectarian clashes, above all to keep them out of the workplace. Despite the organised Paisleyite supporters in the yard, who attempted to disrupt the meeting, the overwhelming support for the advice of the stewards was there. Of course it may be true that the award of the M.B.E. to the senior steward underlines the changed "peace keeping" attitude of big business at the moment, nevertheless these actions and the support of the workers for them show that the Protestant workers were prepared to put class organisations and unity above sectarian feelings.

Without doubt, the potential for the Labour movement in N.I., ten times stronger than before the war, was there. A call to all the workers to join together and protect their areas, keeping out the Paisleyites, would have gained a big response from Catholic and Protestant trade unionists. Then taking this as a point of departure for a campaign on issues such as housing, minimum wages and unemployment, a positive, mass socialist movement could have been launched.

However the task of doing this was not taken up by the leaders of the main organisation capable of uniting workers—the N.I.L.P. with its 23 affiliated unions.

Those who claim that there was “no alternative” to the intervention of British troops, ignore the fact that this became the case only by the default of the official Labour movement, and those who argue from a profound pessimism about the potential of the Labour movement.

British Army

British troops went in, ostensibly to “bring peace,” but in reality to get the Stormont Government off the hook. Just as it became finally clear that the Unionist leaders were unable to control the sectarian monster which they had built and nurtured in the past, and the whole situation started getting out of hand, the army intervened to “stabilise” the situation.

The reasons for intervention and the role of the army have proved a formidable stumbling block for many socialists ever since then. We have to be clear that first and foremost it was the need to defend the investments and profits of British Capitalism which was behind it—prior to August, 1969, insurance companies were demanding special “war risk” premiums for investments in N.I. The British army has always been used to safeguard the position of Imperialism wherever it has been. This has been true at every stage of the development of Irish history, and is as true today. Obviously the purpose of the intervention was to “stabilise” the situation. But in whose interests? The people of the areas like the Bogside under direct siege by the hooligan gangs may well have welcomed the troops initially as their saviours; but that attitude has rapidly changed over the past year. It becomes more and more clear that the situation has been “stabilised” in order that the society should be unchanged. The workers rightly ask: what is different in terms of our conditions? What improvement has there been in jobs, wages or housing? Even the promised “democratic” reforms have yet to be implemented.

In setting themselves against the intervention of troops, the YS had to make it absolutely clear that this was not done from any irresponsible viewpoint. On the contrary, they had a concrete alternative to offer—worker's defence committees based on the trade unions. If the labour leaders had been prepared to take this up and campaign from the beginning, events in Northern Ireland would have taken a far different course.

As always, under the white heat of events like those referred to above, the different class groupings show their real colours. The “Green Tory” dominated Citizen's Defence Committee in Derry, incidentally not an elected body, totally opposed any class appeals to the Protestant workers, and made every attempt to prevent the Derry YS and Labour Party from putting forward its ideas. They argued that “class unity” was impossible. Unfortunately this pessimism is shared by many on the left, both in Britain and in Ireland.

Leaving aside the politically and historically ignorant view that the protestant workers are unredeemable “colons”^{*} many have looked doubtfully on the possibilities of unity. But the whole history of the Irish working class speaks differently.

Recent examples have already been given which indicate the potential underlying class unity. The 1913 Dublin Lockout found the Belfast dockers showing solidarity with their comrades in the south (the 1970 dock strike also saw Catholic and Protestant workers taking firm action against attempts to break the blockade by running food produce from Northern Irish ports).

In Belfast of 1906-07, the workers' battles reached such a pitch that the whole Orange Ascendancy was shaken and in danger of collapse. James Larkin organised dockers, carters, shipyard workers, etc., across the religious lines in a whole series of big strikes. At this time a split took place within the Orange Order which developed along class lines, producing the Independent Orange Order which gave full support to the strike movement and was to be a firm ally of Larkin and of working class unity.

The 1930's, a time of utter misery for the workers, saw a number of occasions when the workers came together: unemployed of both religions being forced to fight shoulder to shoulder against the police and “B” specials.

The main lesson for the movement today is this: if it was possible in 1906 and 1913, at a time when sectarianism was deliberately buttressed by the ruling class and the organised labour movement was that much weaker, then under present conditions, with the labour movement so much more powerful and the ruling circles of Ulster split, it is more possible than ever.

One of the major features of post-war capitalist countries, including Ireland no less, has been the growing strength of the organised working class. For a number of reasons, the political wing of the working class in Ireland has not developed apace. But it is now that we are seeing the beginning of such a growth. The spurt forward of the Irish Labour Party and the crisis within Fianna Fail in the south, with the breaking away from traditional nationalism and unionism on the part of the Northern workers, indicate that the traditional allegiance to one form of capitalist party or another is no longer the case.

Over 500,000 workers in 88 unions on both sides of the border are affiliated to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. The National Council of Labour links the N.I.L.P. with the Irish L.P. and did also Republican Labour. And this very movement among the workers and the links which do exist, pose the question of Irish Unity.

^{*}“Colons” were the French settlers in Algeria. Under French rule they had a vastly privileged position in relation to the mass of Arab workers and peasants.

Socialist United Ireland

But to simply raise the demand for a "United Ireland," without linking it to a real change in the conditions of all the workers north and south, can only assist in opening the old sectarian wounds. The protestant workers of the North associate this republicanism with the capitalist regime in the south which has failed to solve the material problems of the workers. In a capitalist united Ireland, the Protestant workers understandably fear that they would be the persecuted minority of some 25 per cent of the population and that the treatment meted out to the northern catholic minority would be turned against them.

Unfortunately none of the republican movements, left or right, offer any way out of this. Talk of "striking a blow for Ireland's destiny" etc., without linking it to a real change in the social conditions, North and South, only serves to reinforce the old prejudices and fears.

The view that the first priority is the "national" struggle, after which may come the question of socialism, totally evades all the class issues which are being raised in Ireland at this moment. It is also a travesty of the whole historical experience of the Irish national struggles. The underlying motive force has always been the social conditions of the workers and peasants, the land question, etc. The basis of the upheavals which are taking place throughout Ireland today are precisely the social conditions of the people.

The failure of the I.R.A. campaign from 1956-62 is explained not only by the impossibility of a purely military defeat of the British army, but by its failure to gain any mass support, limited as it was to the issue of the border. On top such a campaign can only divide the northern working class, driving the protestant workers back to the Unionist bosses who can and have done for 50 years, enlist their support against the "rebels". Even if such a military solution were possible, it would mean terrible clashes with the Protestant population, and "religious civil war."

Without a doubt the Protestant workers would see it as fighting for their very survival; they can see quite clearly that the conditions in the south are if anything worse. A United Ireland on a capitalist basis can have no appeal to them and diminishing appeal to the Catholics. Increasingly they are sceptical about the desirability of exchanging the Tory Government of Chichester-Clark for the Tory Government of Lynch. What does unification mean in terms of jobs, homes, wages?

That in 1969, 38 per cent of male workers in Eire earned less than £11 a week and 75 per cent of women earned less than £9 a week is a real indication of the rottenness of the millionaire-backed Fianna Fail regime. Social benefits (pensions, unemployment pay, etc.) are lower: since 1945, the Stormont Government has in general followed the British Government in social legislation—hence the development of a health and welfare service, on the same basis as the British. In the south today there is no overall social security system, and up until quite recently the church successfully stonewalled the introduction of even minor state incursions into social welfare, as this undermined the "sanctity" of the family (and the churches hold over the women and children!).

The relative cushioning effect of higher welfare benefits in the north cannot be underestimated, although its effects seem now to be spent.

On a capitalist basis, not one problem facing the workers of Ireland can be solved by unification. On the contrary it could open up a whole new period of sectarian strife and disunity. As explained earlier, a socialist campaign, which really takes up the social issues facing all the workers would be successful, leading to a United Socialist Ireland.

Underlying the theories of those who turn their backs on socialist programmes, is the old pessimism and lack of any confidence in the working class movement as a whole to unite and fight. Those advocating the purely military road, without the involvement of the mass of the workers are trying to substitute themselves for the forces of the workers as a whole moving towards the socialist transformation of society.

On the other hand, the motives of the leadership of the right wing of the republican movement are not so honest. The "Provisionals" who split away from the mainstream because of the newly-developed "socialist" leanings of the Sinn Fein, quite clearly aim to "solve" the situation by provoking so much chaos that either the Irish army or the United Nations will be forced to intervene and "unite" the country. Many of the recent sectarian attacks on protestant working class areas can be laid at their door.

Future of Socialism in Ireland

For big business, the commitment is to a policy of concessions and "liberalisation." Against this any right wing takeover by elements of the Unionist party such as Craig or West, or even the Paisleyite group, would almost certainly mean the suspension of the constitution and some sort of "Direct Rule." Craig's threats of a sort of "U.D.I." are laughable. Where would he be without the £100 million a year subsidy?

Now that Catholic and Protestant are to be exploited in equal terms, the capitalists need some sort of "normality," a modern conservative party of big business supported by the business community of both religions. It is still a matter of conjecture whether the Unionist party will be able to reform itself or whether a regroupment will take place around one of the "moderate" alliances which have sprung up.

But as the capitalists have found out, this strategy is both long-term and difficult. Their entire perspective depends on significant economic improvement in the Ulster situation, which seems more and more unlikely given the present economic situation. The logic of the crisis is forcing the Tory Government to cut back on investment grants, etc., to the "development" areas, not to improve them; and if after the last twenty years of the most favourable conditions for economic expansion Northern Ireland is in the position it is, it would seem to be rather too late now.

The Unionists, the Tories, the Liberals have no solution. It will fall heavily on the shoulders of the Labour movement to fight for the only solution which is feasible, the nationalisation of the big monopolies north and south which will provide the basis for a socialist united Ireland.

In the industrial and political struggles which are developing now and will develop rapidly in the near future, with the present Tory Government in Britain, all the possibilities will arise for class unity to wipe out sectarianism. The protest over bus fare increases is just one sign. On the industrial front, there will be a real possibility to mobilise all workers against the Tory legislation, and towards a general campaign for socialist measures. As mentioned, the struggle in the south has already reached a high tempo; not only do the workers of Eire have the highest strike rate in Western Europe but this is against some of the most vicious anti-working class laws. The Criminal Justice Act is only equalled by the Special Powers Act of Ulster. The anti-strike legislation is probably more stringent than Carr's proposals.

Largely through the lack of any alternative many of the Protestant workers turn to Paisley, expressing as he does their social discontent and frustrations. But in the future this will not be enough and the workers will be demanding a real alternative not just religious panaceas. In a similar way at the moment many of the Catholics still gravitate towards the republican movement in one form or another, but that as explained offers no way out and will lead the workers to turn against it in favour of a positive alternative. This will be even more so as the workers become steadily disaffected by the senseless policies of physical clashes with the police and the army.

Under these conditions there will be a wonderful opportunity for the Labour movements both north and south to open fire with a massive campaign for a socialist Ireland, building from a programme of demands such as a minimum wage for all, a crash home building scheme arising from the nationalisation of the building industry, nationalisation and state direction of industry. This is the kind of policy which is being fought for by many of the Labour Party and Young Socialists in Ireland now. The YS here can link up its campaigns; over nationalisation of the monopolies and the banks; for a socialist united Europe.

The new factor in the situation today is the youth and the new generations of workers; without the bitterness of old defeats and cynicism which is the inevitable result, the youth is prepared to fight and to look for new ideas. It is the youth of the movement who hold the key to the future, and it is the youth which rejects all taints of the old sectarianism and moves towards the socialist solutions. Already links are being forged among Young Socialists on both sides of the border, to fight for a United Socialist Ireland, ending the misery and poverty which has been the people's lot for centuries. In this way we in the Young Socialists both in Britain and Ireland can look towards the first real unity, of equals, not of plundered and plunderers, between a socialist Britain and a socialist Ireland.

Printed by
VICTORIA HOUSE PRINTING COMPANY
(T.U. all Depts.)
93 Long Acre, London, W.C.2
VH21161
