



# Socialists, Republicanism and the Armed Struggle

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## Socialists and the IRA

Irish and British politicians have run out of words with which to condemn the IRA. The full resources of the pulpits and the press have been used to demonise them. Where words have not worked to isolate them, a policy of repression has been applied. Assassination of IRA members has become a barely disguised policy of the British government. In the first half of 1991, seven IRA members have been executed by British army hit squads. In the South, any overt sympathy for the IRA is met by systematic harassment by the secret police, the Special Branch. Constant visits to parents and employers and beatings in police cells are used to deter anyone from supporting them.

Our rulers seek support for these policies by proclaiming their opposition to violence. Socialists argue that this is rank hypocrisy. During the Gulf War, for example, the British War Cabinet fulminated against an IRA mortar attack on Downing St, denouncing the 'terrorism', the 'dangers to innocent civilians' etc, etc. Yet these moral guardians of peace murdered over 100,000 Iraqis—many of whom were innocent civilians—in their war for oil profits. On the highway from Kuwait city to Basra, the US and British forces murdered more *retreating* Iraqi soldiers in a massacre that one general labelled 'a turkey shoot' than all the killings the IRA has—or is likely ever likely to—conduct.

## The Loyalist forces

Socialists go further than pointing out the blatant hypocrisy of our rulers. We believe that the IRA cannot simply be equated with loyalist paramilitaries as some on the left seek to do.

The loyalist paramilitaries were established to defend sectarian privilege in Northern Ireland and to resist every attempted gain that the mass of Catholics tried to achieve. Because of this they espouse a clear right wing racist ideology.

The UDA grew out of the Shankill Defence Association. This organisation violently opposed the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in their demand for 'One man, one vote'. It began the policy of driving Catholic families out of their homes in 1969 as a way of punishing those who had taken part in the Civil Rights Association. A report to the Scarman Tribunal showed that in the months of July, August and September 1969, 5 per cent of Catholic families were driven out of their homes in Belfast.

The UDA was formed in 1971 as a reaction to the upsurge in the Catholic ghettos that followed the introduction of internment. A leaflet

at the time claimed that 'the enemies of our Faith and Freedom are determined to destroy the State of Northern Ireland and thereby enslave the people of God'.<sup>2</sup> Fighting for the 'people of God' meant the UDA linking up with both William Craig, the ex Minister for Home Affairs who had ordered the baton charging of the Derry Civil Rights march in October 1968, and the National Front to lay the basis for the fascist Vanguard movement. This movement tried to restore the Stormont regime and was willing to accept an independent Ulster if necessary to achieve it. The NF in Britain provided assistance in the purchase of arms and in securing training grounds for their use.

When this project failed, the UDA turned to the tactic of murdering Catholics at random as a part of a terror strategy designed to cow them down. The *UDA Bulletin* signalled this shift when it printed a letter which stated:

*Why have they (loyalist paramilitaries) not started to hit back in the only way those nationalist bastards understand? That is ruthless, indiscriminate killing... If I had a flame-thrower I would roast the slimy excreta that pass for human beings.'*

The UDA replied: 'without question most Protestants would agree with your sentiments. We do'.<sup>3</sup>

Under its cover name, the Ulster Freedom Fighters it is still pursuing this strategy. Because it views the Catholic community as 'disloyal', it has been willing to attack any of its members as a deliberate political ploy to demoralise and weaken resistance to the British army and RUC.

## How the IRA was born

The IRA, has a very different basis to its politics. The present-day IRA grew out of the contradictions at the heart of the Northern state which the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement exposed. Before the upsurge in Northern Ireland from 1968 onwards, the IRA had existed — but only as a tiny shadow of its former self. Its previous 'border campaign' had ended in 1962 with the announcement that 'the minds of the Irish people were being deliberately distracted from the supreme national issue'.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of the Civil Rights Association had been to reform the Northern State. In 1968 in Northern Ireland, local councils such as Derry were gerrymandered to give an in-built Protestant majority; the allocation of housing and jobs was decided on a sectarian basis; political organisations such as the Republican Clubs were banned. To have achieved simple reforms in these areas would have meant confronting the Orange machine which had tied Protestant workers and employers together since the state was founded. The key problem for those who

wanted some reform was that the Northern state was imbued to its core with Orange sectarianism. This is well illustrated in the remarks of the liberal Unionist leader, Terence O'Neill who at one stage was voted by the Sunday Independent in the South as 'Man of the Year'. After he left office O'Neill explained:

*It is frightfully hard to explain to Protestants that if you give Roman Catholics a good job and a good house they will live like Protestants, because they will see neighbours with cars and television sets.*

*They will refuse to have eighteen children, but if a Roman Catholic is jobless and lives in a ghastly hovel, he will rear eighteen children on National Assistance...*

*If you treat Roman Catholics with due consideration and kindness, they will live like Protestants, in spite of the authoritarian nature of their Church.*<sup>5</sup>

At first it seemed that the British state was willing to drag O'Neill and the Unionist backwoodsmen towards a strategy of reform. By the 1960s, British interests in Ireland had changed since the days when partition was established. The sections of British capital which had a major stake in Northern Ireland were already in decline while the South was becoming more open to British and foreign capital generally. The sectarian structures of the North and even partition itself seemed to make less sense in an era when the British and Irish rulers were growing closer together.

Because of the mass mobilisations of the Civil Rights Association, the British government pushed the Unionist regime to conceding the mild policy of 'One man, one vote'; it forced it to disband the B Specials, a force made up of sectarian thugs; it tried to push through a policy of disarming the RUC. But just as Gorbachev today finds immense difficulties pursuing a policy of reform from above, so too the British government found glaring contradictions in their attempt to dismantle the sectarian structures they had helped to create. Every concession provoked an outcry from that section of the Protestant petty bourgeoisie who had gained from sectarianism and these in turn found a hearing among large sections of Protestant workers. Moreover the very security forces upon which the British state relied to push through their policy of reform were among those who stood to lose most from the reforms.

When the British army arrived in large numbers in the North after August 1969 it originally claimed to stand between an insurgent Catholic community and the RUC and B Specials who were intent on taking revenge on it. But within less than a year it was obvious that the logic of British policy rested on first shoring up the structures of the Northern state by a policy of repression in Catholic areas and only then

weaning Unionism very gradually towards reform. The path to militant confrontation between those Catholics who had begun fighting for reform and the British army was paved by events like the Falls Road curfew of 1970 when three civilians were murdered; internment in August 1971 when hundreds of Catholics were locked up; and Bloody Sunday in Derry in 1972 when 14 civilians were shot in cold blood by the British soldiers. In this situation it became obvious that a fight for democracy in Northern Ireland became a fight against the state itself and the British army who were propping it up.

The IRA grew out of this situation. Despite their turning away from the tradition of mass mobilisation that the civil rights movement embodied, they were a product of that movement. Their age old message that a 32 county republic offered an answer to the problem quite simply connected with those who had first desired reforms. By 1971, the Belfast Brigade of the IRA had well over one thousand members.<sup>6</sup> The IRA at this stage combined the centuries-old political philosophy of Irish republicanism with the most militant communal traditions of those who had organised to defend their areas from sectarian attack.

While conditions may have been favourable to the eventual political dominance of the Provos given the communal nature of the struggle, it was not completely inevitable. The problem lay in the perspective of the Left at the time. Two main strands were evident among socialists. First, the reformists in Official Sinn Fein (later the Workers Party) and the Communist Party (which had a small but significant base in Belfast) argued that the struggle had to be confined to one of reforming the Northern state. The key demand was for a Bill of Rights. They opposed the demand for abolishing Stormont and partition as ultra-left. The reason for this was that they, following Stalinist politics, held to a 'stages approach' where the first stage was defined as the reform of Stormont, the second as the ending of partition, and the third as a socialist Ireland. When those who had begun a fight for civil rights found that they had to fight to smash the Northern state, the Official Sinn Fein was bypassed as it clung rigidly to its stages theory.

Second, the revolutionaries in People's Democracy influenced by the spontaneist politics of 1968 believed that it was sufficient to be the *militants* of the movement. They pushed for *more* confrontation with the police, *more* marches, *more* sit-downs, etc, but there was no real attempt to argue any particular strategy. At the start of the movement, therefore PD was among those who argued most vehemently that partition was not the issue and that the struggle was to unite Catholic and Protestant workers against the Tories, North and South. However, when the movement itself turned into a fight against the British army and the Northern state, PD became uncritical supporters of the Provos, writing off the Protestant working class as semi-fascist and seeing the Catholic ghettos of the North as the vanguard for the Irish revolution.

## The dead end of Nationalist politics

Irish socialists today, therefore, have to deal with a situation where republican politics and the IRA command strong support in the Catholic working class ghettos of Northern Ireland. Our analysis of the struggle in the North differs profoundly from republicans. To put it most briefly: we think that the nationalist politics of Sinn Fein and the IRA refuses to recognise that the fundamental division in Irish society is on *class* lines. Instead they seek to build a pan-nationalist alliance composed of elements that currently support Fianna Fail and the SDLP. This means that Sinn Fein's claim to be a socialist party today is entirely bogus.

We go further, however: not only is Sinn Fein incapable of making any advance towards socialism—it is also unable to reach its own stated goals of uprooting Orange privilege and ending partition. Although it has won the adherence of some of the best fighters in the nationalist ghettos of West Belfast and Derry, its base is still among an oppressed *minority*. Moreover because of decades of discrimination it is a minority that has few hands on the levers of industrial power. To destroy sectarianism, a political organisation needs to both encourage the militancy of the mass of working class Catholics AND advance a strategy whereby they can unite with other sections of workers. The nationalist goals of Sinn Fein mean that they cannot pursue such a strategy.

This is most obvious in the case of Protestant workers. Socialists do not underestimate the difficulties in combating the influence of Loyalist ideas among Protestant workers. Thousands of Protestant workers vote for the far right bigots of the Democratic Unionist Party and the Official Unionist Party. But despite all the promises that Loyalism makes to Protestant workers about being the 'people of God', the actual living conditions of Protestant workers have worsened over the last two decades. Unemployment is on the increase; more families are dependent on state welfare; wage rates have been cut. The Loyalism that dominates the political thinking of many Protestant workers is a Loyalism in crisis.

But all that Sinn Fein offers to those Protestant workers who may become disillusioned with their lot is a capitalist united Ireland where they as workers will make little gains. Few Protestant workers will break from Loyalism if the alternative is simply a 'new Ireland which is inclusive rather than exclusive'.<sup>7</sup> The only small but significant section of Protestant workers who broke from Loyalism did so on the basis of fighting not for a 32 county capitalist Ireland but for a Workers Republic. Arising out of the unemployed struggles of 1932, 500 Protestant workers marched in Bodenstown in 1934 under the banner: 'Break the Connection with Capitalism. Connolly's message our Ideal. On to the Workers Republic.'<sup>8</sup>

Sinn Fein's nationalism also means that the Catholic ghettos of the North cannot link up with the mass of Southern Irish workers. Sinn Fein try to pretend that the South is still a British neo-colony. They claim that nationalism is still relevant to workers because their real oppressors are still the British. In reality, Southern workers find themselves fighting Irish bosses and international capital. Capitalism in the South does not come wrapped in the union Jack. Thus, while nationalism is still strong in the South it no longer has the *active* mobilising power to involve Southern workers in the fight against British domination of the North.

All this means that the struggle in Northern Ireland has come to an impasse. Thousands of ordinary Catholic workers have learnt from their own experience that it is necessary to drive the British army out of Ireland and end partition. But the politics to which their most militant sections look—Irish republicanism—is incapable of taking the fight beyond the oppressed minority.

## Socialists and National Liberation Movements

But although the struggle has reached an impasse and republican politics is unable to get it out of that impasse, there is still a struggle. Socialists have to be able to spell out exactly what their attitude is to that struggle.

Some socialists have reacted to the impasse by hoping that the North will simply go away. Others believe that it is sufficient to simply advance their own particular views and then abstain from any involvement until the mass of workers accept their analysis. The Socialist Workers Movement adopts neither of these approaches.

We start from the view that a socialist is not simply a trade unionist but is, as Lenin once put it, a 'tribune of the people'. By this we mean that socialists should always be to the fore in championing the struggles of the oppressed. We do this not for any moralist reason but because we understand that the working class only becomes a revolutionary class when it develops a set of politics that can rally oppressed elements of society around it. For this reason socialists cannot adopt an attitude of sectarian abstention from struggles of the oppressed. Such an attitude would mean refusing to support oppressed people simply because they have developed politics—often shaped by the boundaries of their oppression—which differ from ours.

The SWM therefore believes that the attitude that socialists should adopt towards the republican-led struggle at the moment is best summed up by the slogan advanced by Lenin in relation to anti-imperialist movements: we are for unconditional but not uncritical

support. Our support is unconditional because we do not first demand that those fighting imperialism have to accept a socialist analysis of the world. We give support because of the FACT that they are fighting imperialism. We support them as a genuine anti-imperialist force—irrespective of their politics. This point is important because it argues that we have no political agreement with republican politics whatsoever.

We supported the republican movement against imperialism when Provisional Sinn Fein in the early 1970s were denouncing 'extreme socialism' 'Red argents' and 'atheistic Marxism'. We did so then because we understood that—whatever their warped and distorted politics—they were born out of a movement that found that the Northern state could not deliver even the small reforms demanded by the Civil Rights Movement. To have denied support for the republican-led struggle against British imperialism then would have meant falling into the trap of verbally attacking them from the left but in reality accommodating to the dominance of British imperialism and the Orange state. Similarly, we regard some of the Provos' more left wing rhetoric today as entirely bogus and irrelevant to our attitude of support towards the republican struggle against imperialism.

But having made it clear where we stand in the fight between the republican led struggle and the British army, it is also necessary to subject the republicans to firm criticism over their politics and tactics. This criticism is made from the standpoint of those who support the struggle against the British army and partition. It has nothing in common with the hypocritical and moralist denunciations of those who support the British army.

Some may find this attitude of 'unconditional but not uncritical support' unsatisfactory. They demand that we either support the republicans and shut up about our criticisms or else denounce the republicans and abstain from the struggle against partition. The experience of the last two decades across the world, however, shows why ours is the absolutely correct attitude.

In the 1960s, many socialists in the West quite rightly supported the Viet Cong against the United States. But many were also completely uncritical in their support and even went to the extent of idolising the Viet Cong leader, Ho Chi Min as an exemplary socialist. Any criticism of the Viet Cong—such as a mention of the fact that they had murdered Trotskyists or that they aimed to set up a state capitalist rather than socialist Vietnam—was seen as a stab in the back.

Yet the harsh reality today is that the uncritical followers of the Viet Cong have moved dramatically to the right when they found that their rosy picture of 'people's communes' in Vietnam was a fairy story. They were shocked to find that 'socialist' Vietnam and 'socialist' China, for example, fought a bloody chauvinist war soon after the Viet Cong

victory. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese people of Chinese background were driven out of their country to suffer a terrible fate as 'boat people'. Only those socialists who understood that it was necessary to be both principled in their opposition to US imperialism and honest in their criticisms of the politics and tactics of the Viet Cong were able to explain these events.

In the 1960s, the dominant tendency on the left was to give uncritical support to anti-imperialist movements. This was often because these movements engaged in left wing rhetoric. Today, however, many groupings who fight against US imperialism have espoused a much more open right wing philosophy. The victory of Khomeini's revolution in Iran has inspired some movements in the Middle East to fight against imperialism under the banner of Islamic fundamentalism. In response to these developments many left wingers now denounce these right wing nationalist movements without giving them any support in their fight against imperialism.

It is again a tragically wrong attitude. In extreme cases it has led some former socialists such as Fred Halliday, an editor of *New Left Review*, to denounce such nationalists as 'fascists' and then to support the US war effort in the Gulf as a great 'anti-fascist war!' In the Middle East itself, the abstention of the left from the struggle against imperialism and its puppets has left the ground open to the right wing nationalists.

Only those socialists who combine full opposition to imperialism with a rejection of the politics and tactics of nationalism can relate the causes of the oppressed to the class struggle.

## The tactic of armed struggle

So far we have shown why we think the politics of the republicans cannot lead the struggle against partition out of its impasse. It is now necessary to look at the major tactic of Irish republicanism—the armed struggle. The complete reliance on this tactic stems from the nationalist politics of Sinn Fein. Because nationalists never look on the working class as a potential power in society but only as *victims* of capitalism they believe that the heroism of the few must substitute for the passivity of the mass of people. The IRA campaign is seen as the heart of the struggle.

The SWM is not a pacifist organisation. We believe that if—as history shows—our rulers are willing to use violence to cling onto power, they must be met with insurrection organised by the working class. But we draw a distinction between such violence that issues from the masses of working people determined on seizing power and a strategy of guerrilla warfare as is conducted by a small grouping such as the IRA.

We oppose the tactic of armed struggle and believe that it has become

counter-productive from the point of view of the working class and the fight against imperialism. Our rejection of the tactic has nothing to do with whether particular actions are productive or not from a republican point of view. The bombing of the Conservative Party conference in Brighton for example, brought a wave of sympathy for the audacity of the IRA. By contrast, the bombing at Enniskillen was disastrous from a republican view point. We are not for more Brightons and less Enniskillens. We are quite simply against the whole tactic and believe it to be counter-productive.

The media, Fianna Failers and all kinds of soft republicans talk about the armed struggle being counter-productive from a nationalist point of view. There are also some left republicans who argue against the armed struggle in this way. They want to replace it with the ballot box claiming that republican politics would be better served in this way.

Our argument, however, has nothing to do with whether or not republicanism would be better off without an armed struggle. We do not see ourselves as advisors to the republicans. Where we intervene in arguments on the armed struggle we do *not* join arguments on the basis that Republicanism, or the Republican movement, would or would not benefit from the armed struggle being called off.

We believe that the armed struggle is rooted in the nature of republican politics, which are both substitutionist and 'all-class'. Republicanism without an armed struggle would continue to be substitutionist and 'all-class'. That is to say, nationalist in terms of political ideology, electoralist in terms of the main tactic it would then be using. At the heart of our politics is the idea that the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself. We are opposed to the armed struggle primarily because it is a substitute for mass mobilisation. It is this which makes the armed struggle counter-productive for the working class.

To see why the tactic is counter-productive, it is necessary to examine some of the lessons of the twenty year fight against partition. The period between 1968 and 1972 represented the highpoint of mass mobilisation against the Orange state. Huge civil rights marches terrified the Unionist establishment. No go areas were established in areas like the Bogside in Derry. Every attempt by the British government to beat the movement down was met by ever wider mobilisation. When internment was introduced for example in August 1971, the Catholic ghettos erupted and in some instances workers took strike action in protest. The murders at Bloody Sunday in 1972 saw the mass mobilisation spread throughout the 32 counties. The British embassy in Dublin was burnt and the Irish Transport and General Workers Union told Jack Lynch, the Fianna Fail Taoiseach, that there had to be a full shut down on industry in a national day of mourning for the victims.

It was precisely because of the level of mobilisation that the British

government were forced down the path of reform. The IRA's campaign had begun in 1970 but, at this stage, it was still seen as part of the mobilisation of masses of people against the Orange state. It was precisely because of this mobilisation—and particularly the manner in which Southern workers were drawn into the struggle—that the British government had to embark on the policy of concessions. The B Specials were disbanded; the Unionist Party lost control over the powers of local government. Most significantly of all, in March 1972, a month after the huge mobilisation around Bloody Sunday the Stormont regime was toppled and Direct Rule was imposed. Of course, many of these concessions were later turned on their head when, for example, the B Specials were replaced by the UDR. But the crucial point was that it was MASS mobilisation and, in particular the growing level of workers action, that forced the concessions.

Since then—except for brief periods around the H Block issue—the struggle has narrowed down into an armed campaign. As a result virtually nothing has been won. Increasingly it finds itself completely devoid of any strategy. In the early 1970s, the IRA argued that its 'economic warfare' of bombing city centre business could both draw away the British army from harassing Catholic ghettos and also impose such a cost on Britain that they would eventually leave. Today these mistaken hopes have evaporated. Now, the armed struggle is described by Gerry Adams as simply 'armed propaganda'. He now claims that 'the armed struggle has become an agent in bringing about change'.<sup>9</sup> But what does bringing about 'change' mean?

The unspoken assumption behind the IRA's campaign since the mid 1970s—when hope of an imminent Year of Victory were given up—was that IRA actions kept Northern Ireland on the agenda and would push the British government into forms of over-reaction which exposed its true face to the mass of Irish people. Unquestionably, the British state has often acted in such a way as to garner major support behind the IRA. The cold brutality of Thatcher during the H Block crisis was one occasion. But it is also the case that actions of the IRA have also given the British state opportunities to go on the offensive. The IRA belief that change can be pushed though mechanically hides the fact that while the pendulum of public mood may swing within certain limits, in reality the overall struggle has not taken the slightest step forward. In fact the particular tactic is revealed as more and more counter-productive. This is the case for three major reasons.

First, the IRA campaign and republican politics has now built up a tradition in the Catholic ghettos that disparages and plays down the possibility of self organisation and mass mobilisation. Trotsky once wrote that the problem with campaigns such as the the IRA's was that:

*It belittles the role of the masses in their own consciousness,*

*reconciles them to their powerlessness, and turns their eyes and hopes towards a great avenger and liberator who some day will come and accomplish his mission'.<sup>10</sup>*

Trotsky developed his conclusion from his practical experience of dealing with the Narodnik movement in Russia. This was the major opposition movement in Russia before socialist ideas became dominant. Trotsky argued that the central feature of Narodnik politics was that it constantly played up 'the weakness and disorganisation of the masses, minimising their conquests and exaggerating their defeat'.<sup>11</sup> It normally sought technical arguments as to why mass struggle had become 'out of date'. In place of this form of struggle it offered the bravery of its individual volunteers. But the result, according to Trotsky was that: 'in place of kindled hopes and artificially aroused excitement come disillusion and apathy'.<sup>12</sup>

It could have been a perfect description of the effects of republican politics. Although the present IRA was, as we argued earlier, born out of the fusion of militancy of the 1968 upsurge with the older traditions of Irish republicanism, it has eaten back into the traditions of mass mobilisation and replaced it with a tradition of passivity. Clearly, the mass of Catholic workers will never accept a return to anything like a Stormont regime. But it is also the case that the determination to mobilise to reach new goals has given way to feelings of 'artificially aroused excitement' when the IRA strikes a major blow followed by longer periods of 'disillusion and apathy' on the prospects of ever winning.

This is not to say that the IRA campaign 'scares' people off the streets. Nor is it to claim that thousands would rush out into the streets the morning after the IRA declared an end to its campaign. It is rather to claim that the IRA campaign has fostered a political tradition that encourages a pessimism about the possibilities of mass mobilisation; about the possibilities of taking the struggle out from the Catholic working class minority to the whole island.

Second, the IRA campaign de-politicises the movement and channels it into military terms. Despite efforts in the 1980s by the republican movement to 'go political', in reality the military organisation remains dominant. Again Trotsky pointed out that 'terrorism is too "absolute" a form of struggle to be content with a limited and subordinated role in the party'.<sup>13</sup> It bursts through any attempt to subordinate it to the political strategies and sets its own agenda. This is because all guerrilla organisations see the primary struggle as being between their command staff and the command staff of the state army.

The effects of this is to exaggerate military considerations completely. The IRA, for example, has undertaken a policy of punishing all those who collaborate with the British army. This has involved attacks on

both workers and employers. From the technical/military perspective of the IRA it makes little difference. But in reality the notion that one can cut off the British army from its supplies in Northern Ireland by the actions of a guerilla army is ludicrous. It makes sense and is pursued despite its political cost to the republicans only because, in the end, military considerations are dominant.

Similarly, the bombing of the Belfast to Dublin railway line has allowed the reformist leadership of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions to mobilise their members against the republicans—rather than against the real cause of violence, the British army. The particular tactic again flows from an overall strategy that sees the military struggle as absolutely primary.

Third, we have already argued that the politics of Sinn Fein have led to the impasse where struggle in Northern Ireland is confined to the minority. But the tactic of armed struggle flows from these politics and has helped to increase the isolation of the Catholic ghettos.

This is obvious in a number of ways. The conditions of Protestant workers have changed over the last twenty years. In the 1970s, the leader of People's Democracy, Michael Farrell, wrongly claimed that Protestant workers were 'labour aristocrats'. Today this claim simply sounds ludicrous. But despite the shift in conditions for Protestant workers and despite the crisis of confidence in loyalist organisations, the anti-imperialist struggle has made no impact among such workers. The armed struggle is clearly not the cause of the divisions between Catholic and Protestant workers but it does nothing to help in winning over those Protestant workers who might become disillusioned with loyalism.

In the South, mobilisation around the national question has become smaller and more and more infrequent. As we have already argued, much of this has to do with the manner in which nationalism no longer operates as an active mobilising force in conditions where the South is no longer a neo-colony. But it is also the case that the tactic of armed struggle has also turned many Southern workers away from support for the struggle. There is a simple reason for this. When you are in Belfast or Derry and see the British army kick down your door, arrest your friends, assassinate your neighbours you can resist all the media propaganda about the 'callous', 'evil' IRA. When you are in Dublin or Limerick isolated from politics that could explain who the real enemy is, the propaganda against the armed struggle is far more powerful.

The result is that support for the particular tactic which now dominates the struggle is confined to areas of militant nationalism in the North. But the isolation of these areas also has its own impact. The confidence to take the struggle forward is diminished and increasingly the biggest mobilisations that take place are ritualistic and take the form of anniversary commemorations. The fact that the biggest marches in the North today are around the 20th and 10th anniversary of major

events is a tragic commentary on the cul de sac of republican politics today.

In reality, the fact that the struggle in the North has reached this impasse reflects an elementary truth that has escaped those who have seen the armed struggle as 'the cutting edge' of anti-imperialism. Whereas conditions in Nicaragua or Vietnam were favourable for the political victory of nationalist forces spearheaded by a guerilla army, the same does not apply in Ireland. The success of many guerilla armies has been the territorial base they have been able to establish amongst a peasantry that has a direct and immediate interest in the solution of the land question or the ravages of a parasitic state. It has been this peasant base which has allowed guerilla armies to grow and eventually surround the cities. Some have concluded from this that a form of national liberation can be achieved that falls well short of socialism. In reality, of course countries such as Vietnam or Nicaragua find themselves trapped within an imperialist world that makes a mockery of their claims to have achieved national liberation.

In Ireland, however, the conditions for achieving political conquest by a guerilla army simply do not exist. There is no peasantry that has a direct interest in a land settlement. The base of the IRA guerillas is in a minority community. While there is always a possibility that our ruling class can re-structure their relationships given that there is no vital material interest at stake, the possibility of uprooting the sectarian structures that are embedded in the Northern state can only occur with a working class revolt.

It may be argued, that given such trenchant criticism of the armed struggle, the SWM should issue its own call for a ceasefire. This would be wrong for two reasons. First, we as socialists never align with the right wing. We believe that the primary source of violence in Northern Ireland is the presence of the British army and the British state. Our efforts are geared to forcing their withdrawal. Our criticism of the IRA campaign and Sinn Fein's politics is entirely based on the grounds that we think that they are incapable of doing just that. Second, we do not see ourselves as advisors of the republicans, as many others on the left have been. We have no confidence, for example, that republican politics in conditions of an IRA truce would offer any greater lead to those who wish to destroy the Northern state. We see ourselves primarily as political rivals to the republican forces. We aim to show that there is a way of fighting that is superior to the present strategy if the IRA/Sinn Fein.

## What is the alternative?

Socialists must fight throughout the working class movement for all out opposition to the presence of the British army in Ireland. Some claim that if they leave there will be a blood bath. But far from the British



army being a peace keeping force, it organises its own assassination squads and concentrates on harassing areas where there is most resistance to the Northern state. By staying in Ireland it offers a prop to the reactionary ideas of loyalism.

The working class have the power to strike terror into the hearts of the British ruling class. Within a month of the mobilisation of thousands after Bloody Sunday they were forced to end the Stormont regime. But to win the working class movement to this position will mean confronting the politics of Labour and the Workers Party which has considerable influence in the top layers of the union movement. For the last twenty years they have hidden behind their condemnations of the violence of the IRA to oppose the Irish labour movement taking an anti-imperialist stance. At times they have claimed that there is no room for such political discussion in the unions. On other occasions they have denounced anyone who has raised the brutality of the British army in Ireland as 'provo-fascist'.

In reality, refusal of the labour leaders to take a position in favour of mass mobilisation against the British army is not just based on opposition to Provo politics. It arises from a fear of where such mass mobilisation would lead. In the late 1960s, the Labour Party supported the withdrawal of the British army from Ireland. Even Conor Cruise O'Brien, then the Labour Party spokesperson on the subject called on the British government to 'consider setting a date for the beginning of the withdrawal of the troops'.<sup>14</sup> But like all reformists they became terrified when masses of people organised to push the British army out. Michael O'Leary, another prominent member of the Labour party at the time said:

*'One consequence of this continued confrontation between the streets and the British Army must be a growing movement away from parliament and free institutions in this part of the country ... In such a situation we will have to consider something like a national government'.<sup>15</sup>*

This call for a national government which arose out of a fear of militancy on the streets helps explain why the Labour Party, after proclaiming in 1969 that 'The seventies would be socialist,' turned around and joined the right wing Fine Gael party in a Coalition government in 1973. Quite simply, the crisis in the North drove the reformist socialists to the right and led them to back naked repression in the South.

In this there is a general lesson for the Southern Irish Labour movement. The plain truth is that the crisis in Northern Ireland cannot be ignored. The poison of sectarianism and repression seeps over the border. Today, the South has one of the highest proportion of police per head of population in Western Europe; its television service is censored;

it has a juryless court which can convict people on the word of a Garda Superintendent. Moreover, as the organised working class does not offer a clear, independent class position on the North, thousands of workers will be pulled towards the occasional nationalist rhetoric of Fianna Fail or the dead end politics of Sinn Fein.

Offering an independent class position is also the only way in which Protestant workers can be broken from loyalism. While opposing the presence of the British army and the continued existence of partition, the working class must also show that it is also opposed to the Southern state. Socialists vigorously oppose the Catholic nationalist culture of the South which bans divorce and prohibits even information on abortion. We are totally opposed to church ownership of schools and hospitals. We are for the complete separation of Church and state. We do not pretend that a united capitalist Ireland can offer much to any section of workers. Today, the South has a quarter of its population living below the poverty line; mass emigration has meant that nearly half a million left it in the 1980s. Extending that type of regime Northwards would only bring increased misery. The only Ireland worth fighting for then is a Workers Republic where every worker stands to gain.

Some claim that this is all a pipe dream—that Southern workers will never take up the question of the North. In conditions of downturn, workers often lack self confidence. It can seem difficult to organise for working class mobilisation on the North when wages are being cut and workers sacked only to be replaced by contract workers. The struggle to win the Southern working class movement to raising the question of the North has to be part of the general fight to re-build the traditions of working class militancy and struggle.

And it can be done. In 1989, on the 20th anniversary of the arrival of the British army in Northern Ireland 13,000 people marched in Dublin in one of the biggest marches of the decade. During the hunger strike crisis in 1981, socialists in the South were able to organise workplace stoppages in protest at the treatment of the prisoners. In Dundalk a workers committee was formed which linked together most of the leading shop stewards of the town. In Waterford, the traditionally militant Waterford Glass workforce were to the fore in organising stoppages in the town. Amongst Corporation workers in Dublin a leaflet was produced which argued that workers had to take action in order to 'Fight against an extreme edge of a system that oppresses us all'.

It is in that tradition that the Socialist Workers Movement stands today. Organising for that type of working class mobilisation is our alternative to the tactic of armed struggle.

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