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Republican Left]

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The Case for the Formation of a Socialist Republican Party. This short paper is intended as a contribution to the conference arguing for the formation of a socialist republican party. Since our departure from the WP we have immersed ourselves in discussion on the way forward. The outcome of this discussion we feel has been two distinct positions as possible ways forward (1) Arguing for the formation of a society and (2) forming a Party. We have attended many meetings where arguments have been eloquently put for both courses of action and we have listened with interest to both positions.

Before we put forward our case for the formation of a political party it must be stated clearly that this debate is not on a fundamental principle of republican socialism, rather it is an important necessary debate on TACTICAL considerations for our organisation and one that you, the membership, must decide. As democrats and socialists who have total respect for the members & leadership of the organisation we will commit ourselves fully to the organisation whatever is decided by the conference. We would also respectfully request that all our members & supporters see fit to do so. We would also ask you to listen carefully to both positions and to recognise that both proposals are by comrades genuinely committed to our organisation and firmly believe that their party or society formation as a tactic is the best for the long term future of the organisation. We agree with parts of both arguments but urge you to vote to form a party in preference to a society.

If we are serious about building a socialist republican alternative to the sectarian Provos and the politically redundant WP, PLC, we must forge a clear political identity for ourselves. This is essential. It will be a slow process and will involve the membership returning to the grassroots where the official republican movement as official Sinn Fein originated. We must go back to the streets. We must be relevant to the working class and we must become part of the day to day struggles. Not offering quick solutions to the realities of life in working class urban areas.

Where we came from. Republicans entered 1956 sure that the campaign would remove the British from the 6 counties and reunite the country. The leadership, at this period under CS Sean Cronin, carried out some spectacular raids including Gough Barracks and Omagh Barracks that grabbed the headlines but ultimately resulted in the movement being no nearer its objective, a united Ireland. Sinn Fein in the South stood 19 candidates in the general election of that year, receiving 65,640 votes and gaining four, abstentionist, TD's solely on the National Question. According to JJ Lee this vote reflected the willingness of SF to consider a radical social policy in a period of economic crisis. In the North SF stood six candidates in 1955 receiving 109,614 votes, resulting in the election of two MP's, both of which were disqualified for refusing to take their seats. In 1959 SF stood twelve candidates and received only 63,415 votes. With twice the candidates they polled only 60% of the previous total.

The 50's campaign failure, in a period of high unemployment and emigration, indicated the movement's inability to harness discontent within the population and transform it into membership/support for SF. The ending of the campaign resulted in a decline in the membership of SF, with many disillusioned or demoralised. Remaining members set about reorganising what was left of SF and the republican movement. The leadership examined the campaign's failure and the result concluded

that the organisation needed to challenge many of its tactics. This was carried out against a background of considerable opposition from conservatives within the movement who wished to avoid any moves to broaden the radical agenda of SF and thus remain focussed on the national question exclusively. The leadership in the 50's embarked on a military campaign that was a total failure. Cahal Gouilding sought to analyse this failure and recognised that the future of armed struggle without politicisation and the involvement of the working class masses, was futile. Influenced by the radical student movement in the 60's and the return of republicans from Britain who had been active in the Communist Party, Gouilding set about devising an alternative strategy, one of involvement of mass agitation's externally, and rigorous political education of members internally.

The late 1960's saw the movement modernise, both North and South. Leading campaigns like the Housing Action Group, Fish-ins, Anti Ground Rent, and the Anti Apartheid Movement attracted many new members who saw it a vehicle for social change and the linking of the struggle for a united Ireland with other class struggles. At this time the Southern Government signed the Free Trade agreement with the British, an admission that they, and the Irish Capitalist Class, had failed to provide adequate employment in a period of global prosperity. In the North the Civil Rights Movement, established, marshalled and directed by the Republican Clubs, were demanding basic human rights for Catholic's like one-man one vote and an end to Gerrymandering. This campaign was met with fierce opposition from right wing Unionism. Scaremongering by conservative Unionists amongst the Protestant working class resulted in heightening sectarian tension and homes of Catholics being torched on a scale unknown since the Second World War. This brought the six counties to the brink of civil war and allowed conservatives within the republican movement to discredit the leadership. By 1970 effectively there were two movements within one and at the Ard Fheis of that year the smaller conservative group staged a walk out resulting in the formation of the provisionals. During the early 1970's the movement was dragged into a short but vicious campaign which was called off in early 1972. Without the consent of the membership this led to disaffection and dissent in the ranks. Disunity caused by the cease-fire surfaced in 1974 when a group centred around Seamus Costello tried to return the movement to armed struggle, stating the Catholic working class were progressive and Protestant working class was reactionary and their must be a civil war for solution to the national question. The leadership, supported by the majority of the rank and file, introduced an internal party structure based on a Marxist Leninist model that succeeded in permitting the leadership to fundamentally change policy without any recourse to its membership and distancing the leadership from the members viewing any disagreement as treason.

We all agree on the fundamental correctness of the positions taken by the ORM in the 70's and it's worth outlining them here. The official republican movement was correct to refuse to allow the organisation become embroiled in sectarian warfare in the 70's. It was correct to call a cease-fire in 1972 and retaining the right to defend itself and working class areas against sectarian attack. It was correct to argue that the unity of Ireland had to be based on the unity of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. It was correct to point out that there was no military solution to the problems of Northern Ireland. They would only be solved by dialogue and, eventually, by the unity of the

working class, Catholic and Protestant. They were correct in arguing for a devolved government as an alternative to direct rule.

Changes in politics & policies. Indeed 1970 to 1980 was a decade of fundamental change, in the outlook and ideology of the Official Republican Movement, at a momentous pace, often changing core principals, usually at leadership levels and rarely with any consultation or democratic debate within the movement (more on this later). The 1980's saw the ORM reject nationalism for state socialism, move from a broad front position to a "go it alone" one. Change from active opposition to foreign multinational companies exploiting Ireland to welcoming multinational companies as the only potential for full employment. and the building of a mass working class. From it's anti imperialist position in the 70's were it highlighted British Imperialism to it's vague references to Anglo American Imperialism in the 1980's. From a position of militaristic of opposition to the 'occupation' in Northern Ireland to a standpoint arguing that the Provos were the real enemy of democracy and sometimes a pro unionist analysis of the political situation in Northern Ireland. From radical student protest politics through universities republican clubs to producing discussion documents arguing for nuclear power, devolved government in Northern Ireland etc. from defending 'The small farmers republic' to welcoming the 'urbanisation of Ireland' and supporting state intervention in agriculture. How did such fundamental change occur in the organisation? There are many factors that influenced change and I will attempt to explain the forces that influenced a radical overhaul of the ORM/OSF/SFWP/WP as a political organisation laying the foundations for what eventually became the WP. However, the core principles of the 70's had mutated to a much different position in the 1980's and somewhere along the line the WP lost the working class.

The Rise and Demise of the Workers Party. The 1980's heralded a new dawn for the Workers Party. Electorally, the party was on the verge of a major breakthrough that many observers, both sympathetic and antagonistic, saw as the realignment of political forces in the republic along class lines. You cannot understand this potential without recognising the groundwork done by Official Sinn Fein in the 70's to raise the profile of the organisation. The Workers Party was forcing both FF & FG to re-evaluate their respective positions finally putting civil war politics to rest in the south. The Labour Party, once the party seen as the natural home of progressive & socialist individuals had reached its lowest ebb and organisationally had no basis in working class areas. Furthermore it had persistently alienated itself from the working class through its participation in coalition governments, passing some of the most anti working class legislation in the history of the state. Traditional FF strongholds in working class North Dublin, Cork, and Waterford were gradually in decline and many unemployed & low paid workers saw for the first time a party that they identified with, 'their party'. New satellite towns such as Tallaght, Blanchardstown, Clondalkin etc. were in their infancy and were blighted with problems, lack of resources & facilities largely because of successive governments failure to plan for the strong influence held by building contractors in both FF & FG. Without overstating the potential for a 'new' political party to make substantial gains, these conditions were partially the most opportune since the foundation of the free State. The future looked full of potential for the Party but internally, at leadership level, it was riddled with factions and cabal's engaged in an ongoing power struggle.

This cannot be tied to one specific factor but by the existence of different factions in the leadership who sometimes operated independently or in alliances of convenience with other factions. Despite the existence of these factions the membership were actively attempting to build the Party and to ensure it successfully became a mass, socialist working class party and, through their efforts had made the organisation the fourth largest party in the Irish republic. However, the Centre could not hold and in the late 80's, electoral success saw the formation of a parliamentary party despite there being no constitutional or organisational basis for it. Then proceeded a struggle between the leadership for absolute power. Head Office was wound down with many staff being made redundant. The social democrats passed a decision at leadership level to change the Party's programme and remove all of its socialist content and changing the Party structure to diminish the power of the Ard Comhairle. The split was only a matter of time. The factions, broken down roughly, were as follows the **Student Princes** this group comprised of students who graduated from university to become officials in the Students Union of Ireland and ended up Trade Union Officials. Many went on to become TD's, the most prominent were Pat Rabbitte, Eamon Gilmore and Mike Jennings. They managed to recruit, from the unions, a number of members who largely saw the Party being in a position to assist them in becoming full time union officials. **The social democrats** this group was made up largely of professionals. People like the McManus's, Eric Byrne, Pat McCartain, Rosheen Callender and Michael White. **The B&ICO** this was a small but extremely influential group within the Party whose origins were in an organisation that had rejected the idea of a united Ireland and propagated the Two Nations Theory. Leading lights in this group would be Henry Patterson, Paul Bew and Ellen Hazelcorn. These three groups formed the basis for the **Democratic Left** after the split.

Then on the other side you had significant groupings. The **socialists/republicans**, consisting of people from the republican tradition like Tomas MacGiolla, Cahal Gouling and Dessi O'Hagan. **The Head Office**, this group was made up of the full time functionaries like Sean Garland, Seamus Harrison, Peter Kane and Gerry Doherty **The Economic Affairs Group** held together by Eamon Smullen and consisting of Brian Brennan, Eoghan Harris, Oliver Donoghue, this group were equally powerful having control of a number of secret branches containing experts in Economic Affairs and a secret Trade Union Section containing over fifty active trade unionists. This group was broken up by a collaboration of the socialist republican group in collaboration with the groupings that went on to become the DL with most of its prominent and powerful members resigning. In general this group remained loyal to the WP and are still in the leadership.

It finally came with a decision of the leadership to re-constitute the Party and stand down all its existing members allowing the social democrats to vet all applicants and remove any opposition from the ranks. This failed and the outcome was a walk out and the formation of DL. After the split the WP had a golden opportunity to re-establish itself as the Party of the working class but failed. The Leadership, after ridding itself of the B&ICO/Social Democrats/Careerists, opted to retain all of the policies that had been developed by the people who had left to form the DL. The leadership, whilst wishing to retain absolute control of the Party, had no commitment to starting again and settled down to concentrating on expelling any dissent among

the membership to ensure its full control. Some decided that the socialist project was utopian and graduated to developing business interests. It didn't take long for members to recognise this and when they decided to take the leadership to task, there were mass expulsions and our group was formed.

Political Bankruptcy Exemplified. The Drugs campaigns of the 1980's in Dublin saw the end of grassroot working class support for the WP. The WP chose to ignore the working class in Dublin when they had decided to 'take on' the dealers who were making peoples' lives a living hell in working class parts of the city. In areas like Hardwicke Street Flats children played with used needles left on stairways by addicts. Community activists were threatened intimidated by dealers when they protested about their activities. The WP opposed genuine grass roots opposition to dealers because the provos were involved. The net result of this position was 1. Large sections of working class communities lost faith in the WP. 2. The anti drugs groups ended up being led by the provos and this gave them a foothold in working class areas that they had little if no traditional support and finally, 3. The provos offered the populist solution of targeting the victims, the addicts rather than applying pressure to state to formulise a comprehensive approach of tougher laws against drug dealers, health care and treatment for addicts & information for youth, parents and communities.

We must become involved with campaigns with working class areas about drugs but we must also try to educate people to the realities of modern Ireland and accept that,

- ◆ Drugs are as acceptable to young people as alcohol.
- ◆ Drug addicts are not people sent from another planet, they are your neighbours and are as much a part of the community as you or I.
- ◆ There are many different forms of drug abuse/misuse from the more serious heroin abuse to the relatively harmless cannabis smoking.

If we are to tackle drug abuse in our communities we must argue for support for addicts, addicts' parents, a campaign against dealers of drugs, applying pressure on the police to act against dealers, a rehabilitation programme for addicts, a health programme for addicts. This comrades, is an example of why we need to organise ourselves into a party. We need to be at the coalface of struggle. We must take a principled position that often may be an unpopular position, we must earn the respect of the working class and we will only succeed in doing so if we are there with the working class in their campaigns & struggles. In my opinion, the Drugs Issue is the most emotive in working class areas at present and it is the issue with the most potential to campaign. Through principled campaign recruit and build the profile of the organisation and finally, because it is one of personal interest as, for me it was the start of the decline of the WP in the 80's in the republic.

This failure of the WP is similar to the position taken in Northern Ireland for many years, refusing to share platforms or even attend events, which provos had been invited to. Who, comrades were the losers in this ridiculous scenario? The WP! Political sectarianism was used as an excuse for the gradual winding down of, any grassroots activity. This point cannot be overstated. The WP leadership now contends

that the Catholic working classes in Northern Ireland are provos and if we are to look at recent election results, you might agree. But, comrades, the question that has to be asked is why do the working class in catholic areas of Northern Ireland support and vote for the Provos? Accepting that some are attracted by the base sectarianism of traditional PSF, you might find that most support the Provo's not because of the armed struggle but because,

1. There is no other 'left' alternative.
2. They are the most community active in working class areas.
3. They are the most responsive to working class demands in catholic working class areas (ie. they are an activist organisation)

This is in no way complimenting the Provo's. The provo's are in essence a catholic militia both pragmatic and populist and their commitment to socialism is doubtful. What I am saying is that the popularity of the Provo's is a damning indictment of the failure of the WP to respond to the struggle of the catholic working classes in a society dominated by the Protestant middle class and propped up by a sectarian state. Comrades, I outlined the above for a specific reason. We have to learn from the mistakes made in the past. We must also recognise that we are going to make mistakes and it is important to do so but more important is to recognise our mistakes and learn from them. With the sole exception of Cahal Goulding, the leadership of the WP refuses to accept the WP has ever been wrong! They have had, within the WP, some of the most intelligent and capable members over the last 30 years. But anyone who has left, resigned or been expelled has had their character assassinated and boycotted by remaining members similar to the treatment of dissidents in Stalin's era in the USSR.

Comrades if we are to seriously wish to have any standing we have to launch ourselves as a political party. The logic of doing so as soon as possible blatant. We have already lost almost a year were we could have launched the Party, activated some campaigns and made our presence felt. You do not have to have thousands of members to do so and some of our members will remember in the 1970's the membership was relatively small, but the impact it made! We have to take this path and the sooner the better. Already the media has decided that we are a mere rump of the WP. We have issued press statements to papers in the south and they have largely been ignored, why? Because we currently have no standing with the press and will never have until we register as a political party.

What are the arguments against such a move?

1. Were not ready. No we are not ready, but when will we be ready? We will only gain the membership we require to be a recognised political force if we initiate campaigns, increase our profile through political activity, have recruitment campaigns and put our principles and policies on paper for people to see what we are about.
2. We will limit our appeal. Why? Unless we hope to build a populist organisation with policies that are dictated by the given mood of the people at any particular time. This is the last thing a principled socialist/republican group wants. We should be taking tough, unpopular decisions that reflect our

ideology, showing genuine leadership to the people and gaining their respect through our honesty and integrity.

3. Were not in a financial position to do so. We agree, but launching a Party is not usually dictated by financial considerations. When in history has an organisation been launched because it was financially prudent to do so? This is putting the cart before the horse. Parties are launched because they have a distinct political agenda to put to the people which is different from the agendas of all other existing political forces. We will never reach a point where we can afford to launch ourselves but being a Party will enable us to fundraise, charge for membership, organise socials, raffles, ballots etc as all other small parties must do.
4. We will remove the potential for negotiation with other progressive political groups. Not so! By being a Party we strengthen our position at any future negotiation table with progressive groups. If we are not a Party we risk being subsumed into any group we may have discussions with, losing our identity and history in the process. This is not arguing against such discussions, negotiations. We recognise that alone, we will find it difficult if not impossible to build a mass party it will probably involve a merger of a number of progressive forces, but if we are to have equal standing at any such development we must be a Party.

We contend these are the core arguments amongst comrades who wish to remain a movement. Comrades, we urge you support the motion to form a Party at the Conference today and take forward the historical struggle for a democratic socialist republic.

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