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Prisoners of Partition



H-BLOCK/ARMAGH

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INTRODUCTION

THE responsibility for the current hunger strike in the H Blocks rests squarely on the shoulders of the British Government. Through a deliberate policy of confrontation with the Republican and socialist political prisoners in the H Blocks and Armagh gaol, the British Government has forced this final showdown.

A defeat for the hunger strikers would not only be disastrous for the prisoners themselves; it would be a massive setback for the struggle of the Irish people for national unity. Conversely, a victory for the prisoners would be the biggest single gain for the anti-imperialist movement since the overthrow of the sectarian Stormont junta in March 1972. The Stormont junta was overthrown by a mass movement of the Irish people, North and South. It reached a high point in the period after the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry in January 1972, when a combination of militant street protests, industrial action and mass self-defence of the Catholic ghettos of the North forced the British Government to 'suspend' Stormont.

People's Democracy believes that a *similar* combination is necessary if the British Government is to be forced to concede political status and bring an end to the horrible suffering endured by the blanket-men and their struggling sisters in Armagh gaol. Full knowledge of what is at stake has prompted People's Democracy to throw the entire resources of our organisation behind the campaign for political status, and to produce this pamphlet containing what we see as the way forward. We do not claim a monopoly of ideas, but we do believe that the strategy we outline must be seriously considered by the activists in the H Block campaign if we are to go forward.

The foundations are laid

Up to March 1976 all prisoners convicted in the Six Counties for offences related to the political situation were automatically granted the right to political status (or 'Special Category Status' as it was called by the British Government). But the foundations for the new H Block system were laid down in the earlier Diplock Report.

Lord Diplock's job was to come up with an alternative to internment. This was being ended not for any moral reason but because it had backfired politically, fuelling the revolt of the Catholic population to even greater heights instead of intimidating them. It was useful now for the British to end internment provided they could replace it with something just as capable of ensuring the jailing of troublesome republicans. A new system would have to be less overtly offensive, given the political atmosphere, while achieving the same high prison population.

In this light it is interesting to look at why Lord Diplock was against trial by jury. After arguing that witnesses and jurors would be intimidated, he concluded that the result would be Protestant juries.

Diplock is correct when he says that in political cases there would be very few Catholics willing to serve on a jury. But is he correct when he says the reason is fear of IRA reprisals? For the sake of argument, let's concede that point. But what exactly would the problem then be with Protestant juries? It is not very likely Diplock was afraid they would be too lenient — looking at it from his pro-British point of view the problem was the *exact opposite*. Protestant juries would be so enthusiastic in convicting republicans they would outrage the Catholic community and *expose the political roots of the violence in the Six Counties*. Something more devious had to be found.

Diplock's answer was a *one-judge juryless court*. However, under existing Judge's Rules, only voluntary statements to the police could be admitted as evidence. Diplock did not see these rules as a 'statutory requirement from which no departure is permissible.' In fact, he stated 'the whole technique of skilled interrogation is to build up an atmosphere in which the initial desire to remain silent is replaced by an urge to confide in the questioner.' This was a torturer's charter.

As Diplock himself admitted, any suspect who was truly 'guilty' would be best advised to stay silent. A suspected person would be absolutely stupid to make a statement convicting him/herself, particularly if the police had no other evidence. Is there anyone who really believes people would voluntarily sign a statement guaranteed to put them in jail for very long stretches of time, ranging as far as life sentence? Of course not. Yet under Diplock Courts system, 70 to 90 per cent of the cases have been decided on the basis of 'voluntary' statements made in police custody.

This brings us to another change in the law, recommended by Diplock. Once again there was a problem with existing legislation because the police were 'only' allowed to hold a person for forty-eight hours under the 1922 Special Powers Act. So in the 1973 Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act, which codified all the changes recommended by Diplock, Section 10 gave the police power to hold someone for 72 hours. However the green light was really given in the 1974 Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) which allowed for the holding of a 'suspect' for seven days. An obvious result of this was to give any police torturers plenty of time to do their dirty work. With the foundations now solidly laid for a new repressive system, the British continued releasing internees, the last ones being set free in December 1975.

Political status was not to be granted to the 'criminals' coming before the Diplock courts. The fact that Section 31 of the Emergency Provisions Act defines terrorism as 'The use of violence for *political ends*' serves to underline the hypocrisy of the British authorities. As they could never have the desire to solve the *political* problems which gave rise to the violence, they were trying to use 'double think' to spirit the political reality away by changing labels. It was now a 'criminal' problem.

The political background: the decline of the mass movement

This strategy was well planned and implemented at just the right time for British imperialism. Looking back today it would be foolish to deny that the British authorities have achieved a certain amount of success. While internment in 1971 was a political disaster fuelling a massive Catholic revolt, the conveyor belt of interrogation and torture at Castlereagh, sentencing in the Diplock Court, and imprisonment in the H Blocks and Armagh Gaol has succeeded *to a certain extent* in depoliticising the conflict.

What are the reasons for this?

In July 1972 the 'No-Go' areas of Belfast and Derry had been overrun in a massive show of strength by the British Army, opening up the ghettos to a sustained and brutal loyalist murder campaign which claimed hundreds of victims and created an atmosphere of hopelessness throughout the nationalist community. Confusion and demoralisation seeped its way into the anti-imperialist movement.

The initiative was being taken away from the mass movement. It was placed in the hands of two groups. One, while still anti-capitalist, saw no need for mass mobilisations and insisted that a military victory was possible. The other, like the SDLP, felt they could reach some cosy

accommodation with imperialism. Events have proved the futility of both approaches.

The lack of clear anti-imperialist leadership allowed the British Government plenty room for manoeuvre. The loyalist murder campaign gave the British the cover they were needed as 'independent arbitrators' or 'peace-keepers' caught in the middle of an 'Irish tribal war'. With the connivance of the SDLP, who had entered into talks in November 1972, and successive Free State governments, the British government under Secretary of State William Whitelaw's direction, were able to place forward towards a 'political solution'.

This reached fruition in September 1973 when the SDLP signed the Sunningdale Agreement with Faulkner's Unionist Party the liberal unionist Alliance Party and the Free State leader Liam Cosgrave. But even the limited power-sharing agreed at Sunningdale and the mere mention of an 'Irish dimension' was too much for the loyalist backwoods people and their supporters in the Protestant working class. They pined for a return to the old days of unbridled Protestant supremacy. The Unionist monolith which had been temporarily torn asunder under the impact of the mass movement, gradually began to regroup around traditional Orange supremacist positions. They were supported by the majority of unionists in their implacable opposition to even the most moderate demands of the minority or to having any sector of the of the Catholic community participate in government.

This was the clear message of the crushing Loyalist election in February 1974, followed by the Ulster Workers Council stoppage in May, and the further Loyalist election victory in October. Even if the British government had had the will to take on these reactionaries (which is very doubtful) they definitely did not have the means. As we now know for certain from Robert Fisk's *The Point of No Return*, the British army top brass told Merlyn Rees (then Secretary of State for 'Northern Ireland') that they would not take action against the strikers.

Encouraged by their success, the Loyalists demanded more action from the British. Merlyn Rees responded by announcing in Autumn 1974 that the local loyalist forces such as the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) and the RUC reserve would be strengthened. At the same time an all-out effort was made to use the Fine Gael/Labour government in the South and the SDLP in the North to give a political cover to this increased repression. The political aim of this was to say to the anti-imperialist population North and South that once the security problems were resolved, the Loyalists could perhaps be persuaded to be more reasonable about reforming the North's governmental structure.

This aim was most clearly spelt out on August 24, 1974 in a leaked Irish Labour Party document written by Conor Cruise O'Brien. He

declared that the coalition government's aim was 'to prevent at all costs a loyalist majority' in the Convention elections scheduled for 1975. Likewise the SDLP made noises about recognising the RUC. But all of this collaboration was fruitless. Loyalism could not be undermined in this way. Its appeal was strengthened among the Unionist population. Rees' move in 1974 to co-opt the demand for a Loyalist 'home guard' by beefing up the RUC and UDR served to hammer this point home. Rather than look like complete imbeciles the SDLP was forced to draw back from 'recognising' the RUC. As if to further demonstrate the futility of reforming the state apparatus in the Six Counties the RUC distinguished itself at this time by describing a growing wave of loyalist assassinations as 'motiveless murders'.

We need now to look at what the major anti-imperialist organisations were doing at this time. For the most part their activities impeded the development of united opposition to British policies. The republican movement made a disastrous blunder with the Birmingham bombings of November 1974; which made it possible for the British government to introduce the Prevention of Terrorism Act. After this the British took further advantage of the republican movement's isolation by involving them directly in negotiations and arranging a 'ceasefire', beginning in February 1975. This also had the very important result of marginalising the SDLP at a time when the British were trying to distance themselves as much as possible from the strategy of power sharing. Rather than use the SDLP to weaken the support of militant anti-imperialists in the Catholic areas, Britain was now directly manoeuvring against the leading anti imperialist organisation and downgrading the role of the SDLP. 'Criminalisation' and 'Ulsterisation' were further pushed along with the first efforts to reintroduce the RUC into the Catholic ghettos.

The Gardiner report published in January 1975 called for the ending of Political Status. Shortly after this feuds broke out amongst the Loyalist paramilitaries followed soon after first by the efforts of the Official IRA to wipe out the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) and second by a campaign against the Officials by the Provisional IRA. All of this was ideal for the propaganda of the British authorities.

Convinced that the Republican movement was on the verge of defeat and that an all-out military victory was now possible, the British government moved swiftly towards 'de-politicising'. British officials talked of having reduced the conflict to 'an acceptable level of violence' which was the work of 'hoodlums' and 'Godfathers' involved in criminal activity. The British Government acted on Gardiner's recommendations, decided to withdraw political status, release the remaining internees, introduce the rigged non-jury court system, designed by Diplock to lock up anti-imperialists for as long as possible.

Through the system, which became known as the 'conveyor belt', hundreds of anti-imperialist youth were processed through the interrogation centres like Castlereagh and forced to sign confessions which were sufficient to have them sentenced to long periods of imprisonment in the courts. A new word was introduced into the English vocabulary, to be 'diplocked' — that is, to put away suspects for as long as possible on the basis of confessions extracted through torture. In a diplomatic manoeuvre reeking of 'double think' the British announced that sentences for 'terrorist type' offences would be doubled and almost simultaneously that prisoners on good behaviour would receive half-remission of sentences. The scene was set for the abolition of political status.

At first there was a development of some mass opposition through the setting up of Relatives Action Committees (RAC's). But the republican movement did not believe a mass campaign was the best way forward. Instead they began to kill prison warders, a policy which had to be called off when the warders retaliated by worsening the prisoners' conditions.

The military campaign of the IRA was going from one disaster to another and alienating Catholic support. The confident declarations that British withdrawal and victory were coming began to look very hollow.

This was underlined by the emergence of the 'Peace People' in August/September 1976. The support this pro-British group clearly received in Catholic areas showed just how deeply the process of depoliticisation had eaten into the Catholic community. At the same time Ciaran Nugent, almost unnoticed by the mass media, became the first person to confront the prison system over political status. The British tied up the loose ends for their new strategy by changing the personnel in charge of security. Kenneth Newman took over from James Flanagan in May 1976, and Roy Mason replaced Merlyn Rees in September. By now, as the talks with the Republican Movement had served their purpose, they were terminated.

II THE TIDE TURNS

The Political Background

However from this point on, objective political conditions began to work against the British. The resistance had dropped to its lowest ebb. Active support and sympathy from the anti-imperialist population of Ireland was at an all-time low. But the issue of the political prisoners was to become a thorn in the side of the British administration which continuously opened up the possibility of the anti-imperialist movement regaining substantial mass support.

More than any other single event, Nugent's decision to oppose criminalisation, soon supported by other prisoners, sowed the seeds from which the anti-imperialist movement began to revitalise.

Slowly a campaign in defence of the political status began to develop, but because the major force within the anti-imperialist movement, the Provisionals, were opposed to a broad based campaign, the newly formed Relatives Action Committees were confined to hardened anti-imperialists within the Northern ghettos. The Provos and the RAC's made it a pre-condition for involvement in the defence of political status, that people should also support the armed struggle. Such a pre-condition hampered and retarded the development of a mass movement in defence of the prisoners. People's Democracy argued consistently against such a conception for building a united campaign.

Meanwhile things started to go wrong for the British authorities. The Peace Movement withered away.

In the South the Coalition tried to use the assassination of British ambassador Ewart-Biggs in July 1976 to ram through seven day detention and a state of emergency. But their hopelessly wrong pronouncements that more repression of republicans would bring peace and isolate the Loyalists were catching up on them. Their shrill pro-British stance was losing credibility. They were forced to dilute the new legislation but arrogantly continued to attack even the aspirations of Irish unity. They were thrown out of office in June 1977. Fianna Fail returned to power with their biggest ever Dail majority. Whereas at the beginning of 1977 Conor Cruise O'Brien was spelling out the Coalition's determination to abolish Articles 2 and 3 of the Southern Constitution which express support for the aspiration of Irish unity, at the end the new Fianna Fail Taoiseach Jack Lynch was ruling out any change. The major political parties once again, felt it was necessary to pay lip-service to the deeply-held aspirations of the Irish people for national unity and British withdrawal.

In the North, 1977 witnessed the disintegration of the Loyalist alliance which had brought down the 1974 power sharing government.

One wing centred around the Westminster MPs of the Official Unionist Party (OUP) negotiated a pact with the Labour minority government. The OUP won a number of concessions from a willing British Labour Party, and in return kept it in power. This deal only finally ran out after legislation ensuring extra Six Counties MPs at Westminster went through in 1979.

The other main component of the Loyalist alliance was Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). His effort to pull off a repeat of the 1974 UWC strike in May 1977 did not succeed. However part of the reason for this was that the British authorities willingly agreed to the strikers' demand for tougher security measures. It was not an accident that official RUC statistics show that immediately after the strike the number of complaints about assaults in police custody shot up*. Showing further contempt for the Catholic population, the British government followed this up by bringing over Elizabeth II, Queen of England, to visit the Six Counties in the anniversary of internment in August.

But whereas the previous August had seen demonstrations over political status followed by the rise of the Peace People, this time there was just a Belfast march against 'Elizabeth II, Queen of Death'. This visit was such an insult that not a single representative of the Catholic community, including the SDLP and the Catholic hierarchy, felt able to meet the British monarch.

The realisation was now sinking in more deeply that continued British rule meant no political stability, the strengthening of the Loyalists, and plenty of terror and torture. The main victims of this terror were the people in the Catholic community most determined to fight British rule. But as the torture and sentencing continued and the H Blocks filled up, it became clear that the Provisional IRA's military campaign was not stemming the tide.

Another more effective way had to be found. The idea of mass action and unity among anti-imperialists started to come to the fore. The Coalisland conference on repression in January 1978 was a big breakthrough on this. It was organised by a group in Coalisland including Bernadette MacAliskey. The attendance was over 500. It was the first real united gathering of the anti-imperialist movement and showed the potential for a united mass campaign. But the main anti-imperialist grouping, the Provisionals, maintained an intransigent position and the real potential of a national campaign against the criminalisation policy and repression was lost. PD argued that it was not possible to build a mass united campaign on the basis of support for the IRA military campaign, and pointed out that such an orientation excluded whole layers from becoming involved.

*See Peter Taylor, 'Beating the Terrorists', Penguin 1980, pp 180-2 and 322-3.

A major military blunder followed in May 1978 — the La Mon bombing in which several civilians died in a Co. Down hotel. The Republican movement itself criticised this action.

But despite this, experience had now taught bigger numbers of Irish people that IRA violence was not the cause of the problem. Publicity was growing about increased British torture. Amnesty International had visited the North in December 1977 and made its report in June 1978 finding the British government guilty of the administrative practice of torture. The statements of the British government describing the allegations of torture as 'Provisional propaganda' now had far less credibility. The veil had been lifted on its dirty work.

These were significant gains. But the anti-imperialist movement was still not uniting in common concrete struggle against the British and their accomplices. In an effort to try and overcome this problem People's Democracy decided to invite many different organisations to participate in a 3-day Burntollet Commemoration March at the start of 1979. The march showed in spite of opposition from the leadership of the republican movement that the basis of a mass movement against repression and in defence of political status existed. A message of support from the H Block prisoners was read out at the end.

Once again in the European elections demonstrated that a large reservoir of support for the prisoners existed despite the Provos obstructions to the campaign.

MacAliskey won 5.9 per cent of the first preference votes (over 33,000), about 20 per cent of the total Catholic vote. John Hume of the SDLP won 25 per cent of the total vote (80 per cent of the Catholic vote). Despite the Sinn Fein call for a boycott, the Catholic share of the vote was one of the highest for any election over the past few years.

Hume's vote showed there was still a long way to go in winning the anti-imperialist population away from the SDLP collaborators. The years of anti-imperialist fragmentation, mistaken reliance on an armed campaign, and irresponsible sectarian political behaviour, which was primarily the responsibility of the republican movement, had taken their toll.

But there was only a thin line in the Catholic population's consciousness between support for the SDLP and the anti-imperialist movement. One indication of this was that although Hume's second preferences were not distributed, many observers at the count noted the high proportion going to Bernadette MacAliskey.

The republican movement was not immune from these developments. After repeated calls from the prisoners for unity they changed their minds about how to campaign for political status. At an October 1979 conference in the Green Briar Hotel, Belfast, they put forward the idea of a single issue campaign in support of the prisoners'

demands. At last there was a real chance to build mass support against Britain's criminalisation policy, which is central to its strategy of returning control in the North to the Loyalist bigots. Since then the campaign has built significant levels of support all over Ireland. One of the most encouraging developments has been the spreading of local groups throughout the South. The wall of silence has been broken.

This has put pressure on a wide range of institutions and individuals to at least be seen to sympathise with the prisoners. Whereas three or four years ago almost every bourgeois politician in the three major parties ganged up with the Catholic Church and the British government to denounce the IRA as the 'cause' of the Northern troubles, they know now that this reasoning is no longer very popular.

These collaborators realise there is a lot at stake in the dispute over political status. They appreciate very well the difference between a fight on this very concrete issue, and sham rhetoric in favour of Irish unity. The last thing they want is to be drawn into conflict with the British over political status. The collaborators also know that the widespread support being given to the prisoners in Ireland on a humanitarian basis stems from something much more fundamental — a growing realisation that the only reason the North's jails are full of political prisoners is that Britain is determined to prop up partition. The prisoners are simply hostages to the injustices and barbarism of partition.

The Way Forward for the Campaign

It is dangerous to see the H Block/Armagh struggle as simply a humanitarian issue. This leads to a conclusion that a solidarity campaign should be built mainly by exposing the degradation and suffering imposed on the prisoners. The campaign would then be reduced to a machine for distributing literature to the general public. The actual fighting on behalf of the prisoners would then be left up to prominent 'humanitarian' individualists such as Cardinal O Fiaich and Tim Pat Coogan.

We have seen how these kind of people 'fight'. The day the prisoners announced their hunger strike the Catholic hierarchy accused the prisoners of inflicting the suffering on themselves and called on them to moderate their demands. Haughey's government, has hypocritically expressed its 'concern' without supporting the prisoners' demands. Clearly a solidarity campaign which contents itself with publicising the case of the prisoners but leaves their fate in the hands of others, endangers its own aims.

To avoid this danger it is necessary to remember that the humanitarian aspect of H Block/Armagh is also political. The

prisoners are suffering because of Britain's political strategy. The policy of 'criminalising' the prisoners is not just Tory vindictiveness gone mad. There is no emotion involved at all — just a cold calculated plan.

The plan was formulated to deal with a specific problem. Despite an ebb in the wave of mass protest which swept through the North in the early 70s, tens of thousands of people in the Catholic ghettos were determined never to passively accept the Northern state again. So long as this layer of people existed, it was always possible that its ideas and activities might act as a lever to mobilise the whole Catholic population again. When power-sharing fell and Britain decided that a return to Loyalist majority-rule was the only viable option for stabilising the North, this 'lever' became all the more dangerous. The Catholic ghettos had to be isolated. A black propaganda campaign was launched to portray the Provos as 'gangsters', 'Godfathers' and 'criminals' and to portray the defiant Catholic communities as arenas of 'lawlessness', 'vandalism' and 'thuggery'.

Taken in proper political context, it is clear that the policy of 'criminalisation' has nothing to do with the alleged 'crimes' of the prisoners. Such 'crimes' did not prevent 'political status' being granted in 1972. The real explanation of H Block/Armagh lies in Britain's plans to restore Loyalist rule in the North.

In this light the effective grounds for humanitarian sympathy with the prisoners is not that they are the victims of mindless British vengeance but the fact that they are pawns in a reactionary strategy. But they are not only pawns. They are the vanguard fighters against this strategy. There can be no doubt that the widespread disaffection — North and South — with Britain's plans to restore Loyalist domination is a key factor in the rapid growth of popular support for the prisoners. The struggle in H Block/Armagh is the anvil on which new and powerful alliances between the militant Catholic ghettos and the Irish people as a whole is being forged.

At the moment the major immediate obstacle to this new unity is Fianna Fail/SDLP, and the Catholic hierarchy. These forces together are therefore the major immediate obstacle to increasing and mobilising support for the political prisoners. Unless their organisational and political stranglehold over the Irish people is unlocked, support for the prisoners cannot be built effectively.

A solidarity campaign for the prisoners which relies mainly on exposing the conditions in H Block/Armagh will not have the necessary thrust to challenge FF/SDLP/Church. It will, in fact, only create sympathy which these collaborators will then channel into a cul-de-sac. The politicians and Bishops have already capitalised in this way on the H Block/Armagh campaign.

Rather than permit the collaborators to utter pious statements — which are really only calls to the prisoners to make concessions — the H Block/Armagh campaign must constantly challenge the politicians and Bishops to put their money where their mouths are.

Haughey claims that more than a year ago his government expressed 'concern' about the plight of the political prisoners to the British government. He expressed his 'concern' against last October. Yet nothing has been done. Haughey remained silent ... but not inactive. He continues to give the British government an air of legitimacy and respectability through negotiations and security collaboration. It must be put to Fianna Fail supporters that if they continue to support Haughey while he refuses to break off all contact with the British, then despite their best intentions — they are helping to dig the graves of the political prisoners.

And what about the Catholic hierarchy? At the height of Britain's black propaganda campaign, the hierarchy joined in fully, branding the Provos as 'worse than animals' and announcing that they had been 'damned to hell'. They thereby opened the anti-imperialist youth of the ghettos to Britain's brutality and victimisation. Now they are engaged in a new act of treachery. On the pretext of befriending those they helped railroad into H Block/Armagh they are trying to pull the trap door and force them to make concessions.

The right of the Catholic hierarchy to negotiate on behalf of the prisoners must be openly questioned. Whose authority have they? And if they feel that the prisoners should make concessions they must explain why. Is it because the prisoners' demands are unreasonable? If so, which of them? Or is the hierarchy call for concessions in order to get the British government off the hook? These are questions which the H Block/Armagh campaign must demand exact and explicit answers to.

There are two common objections to the political strategy we outline for the H Block/Armagh campaign. Firstly, won't it alienate support among the ranks of Fianna Fail/SDLP?

This objection overlooks one of the salient facts of political life in Ireland over the last few years: the ranks of Fianna Fail and the SDLP are already disaffected. In the North sections of the Catholic community have already moved away from the SDLP. The large vote received by Bernadette MacAliskey in the Euro-elections and the growth of the Irish Independence Party is indicative of this trend. In the South, the decline of Fianna Fail vote since the 1977 general election has not benefitted either of the Opposition parties; Fianna Fail supporters are abstaining on a significant scale. In short, both North and South, a new layer of independent-minded, pro-national, people is emerging. This is a development which will greatly help the political

prisoners. But if the H Block/Armagh campaign takes an uncritical attitude to Fianna Fail/SDLP it will only retard this development and cause confusion and demoralisation.

The second objection is often put like this: it is wrong to condemn all talk about making concessions because if the hunger-strike is not successful the prisoners will need room to retreat. It is argued that the Catholic hierarchy's formula for concession leaves this avenue open to the prisoners.

Obviously the prisoners have every right to make whatever concessions they feel are necessary. It is definitely not the prerogative of the H Block/Armagh campaign to say that no concessions can be made. But the prisoners must not be forced to negotiate under duress. The stronger Britain feels, the less possibility there is of any concessions, the more possibility there is of total intransigence and complete defeats for the hunger-strikers. The central task of the H Block/Armagh campaign is to weaken Britain by mobilising the support of the Irish people. The stance of the Catholic hierarchy runs counter to this aim. They are trying to pacify public opinion by propagating the view that the prisoners don't have a completely *bona fide* case. In other words their approach is designed not just to hold out an avenue of retreat to the prisoners; it is first and foremost designed to intimidate the prisoners down that avenue.

Wider Implications of the Political Status struggle

The resistance of the political prisoners has already convinced the majority of the Irish people that the anti-imperialist youth of the North are not 'hooligans' and 'thugs'. The prisoners have demonstrated that they are above all political activists who are fighting against oppression and exploitation. Their only crime was to be born into a repressive and sectarian state. The real criminals are the British and Loyalist politicians, and their Southern accomplices, who defend partition.

In this context, the intransigence towards the prisoners hinges on Britain's need to maintain an overall and coherent political strategy. A victory for the men and women in H Block/Armagh will deprive the British government of one of its most important propaganda weapons for depicting the Catholic ghettos as political slums which require the firm rule of a Loyalist dominated regime. A victory for the prisoners will leave Britain's strategy in ruins. In other words, the question of partition and Irish national unity is being opened again as a real issue, by the political prisoners.

The struggle for 'Political status' therefore will not stand or fall by itself. If it stands the Irish national revolution will enter a higher phase; if it falls Britain will have secured its domination over Ireland for the

time being. The H Block/Armagh protests has a significance reaching far beyond the immediate demands of the prisoners.

The anti-imperialist movement must be conscious of this at all times. Uniting the Irish people behind the H Block/Armagh prisoners cannot be accomplished except by a clash with British imperialism and its allies. It will not be possible to reverse Britain's 'criminalisation policy' unless the mobilisation of the Irish people is sufficiently broad to threaten the existing political framework of imperialist domination.

As soon as people begin to organise and protest in large numbers they will be confronted with a number of immediate problems. Will the political institutions set up under partition enable them to express their point of view adequately? Will these institutions become tickets for action?

The answers to these questions must surely be, *no*. All these institutions, the Dail, the County Councils, even the partitioned structure of the trade union movement, are designed to exclude *mass* participation and to stifle real anti-imperialist action. More importantly, behind these paper-thin institutions stand the actual pillars of partition — the British Army, the RUC/UDR, the Free State army, the Gardai and the Special Branch. A broad mobilisation of the Irish people will therefore come into conflict with, and by-pass these institutions. When the crowds take to the streets they will have to develop their own forms of organisation and their own forms of defence against the harassment and intimidation of the security forces. In effect, the new forms of organisation which are created in the struggle to save the prisoners, will become counterposed to the existing institutions of partition. They will become forums for discussing major political issues, for taking decisions, and for coordinating and facilitating action.

When thinking about the long-term implications of the H Block/Armagh struggle the history of the Civil Rights Movements should not be overlooked. The CRM began as a campaign for modest democratic demands. But the Catholic minority, which was thoroughly fed up with the make-believe 'representation' at Stormont, soon found the CRM to be a vehicle through which it could express its anger and discontent. The British government then unleashed the RUC, B-Specials and Army against it. Instead of facing up to the fact that elementary democratic demands could not be won without challenging the right of the British state to rule in Ireland, the Civil Rights leaders recoiled before the National Struggle. They refused even to demand the withdrawal of British troops much less the withdrawal of British inspired political institutions. Their only answer was to order the Civil Rights Movement off the streets, the dumping of arms for defence which had come from the South, and the ceasing of all acts which might 'provoke' repression. Moreover to achieve these aims the Civil Rights leaders had to curb

democracy in the organisation and launched a witch-hunt against everyone who disagreed with them. In the end the CRM became a dead sect without any mass support.

The lesson of the Civil Rights Movement is clear: the inevitable logic of the struggle for democratic reforms is to challenge the right of Britain to be in Ireland; the only way to develop that logic is through the building of a mass democratic and active campaign for democratic rights.

Within the H Block/Armagh campaign, People's Democracy seeks to build an organisational structure and political perspective which will avoid the mistakes of the Civil Rights Movement. That is why we place so much emphasis on democracy and the need for activity which will facilitate mass involvement. We also agree, with the 'single issue' nature of the campaign i.e. concentrating on the five demands of the prisoners. But we add that this programme must not be subordinated to the dictates of either Fianna Fail/SDLP or the Catholic hierarchy. We stick to the five demands because they provide a common point around which the Irish people can be mobilised. But once the institutions of partition act to halt that mobilisation they must be challenged.

Again we should go back to the lessons of the early civil rights movement. Because the Stormont regime was incapable of granting even modest reforms the civil rights struggle could only continue to operate through expelling the state's forces from the Catholic ghettos. The No-Go areas were born. A solution had to be found to the question of what kind of state could replace the tottering Six Counties state. An answer could only have been found through seeing that the Irish revolution had to have a socialist character. The No-Go areas had to be strengthened and democratised while the southern Irish workers had to be drawn in to the struggle by placing a series of demands on the Dail system most of them still looked to for leadership. But that chance was lost.

Today we must understand that putting pressure on the Dail system and its major political parties, which support the state built out of the defeat inflicted on the national liberation struggle in the Civil War of 1922-23, will only lead to a deep crisis for this system. It will not be able to satisfy the hopes of the people struggling for national unity and British Withdrawal.

Further Reading

There is now a growing range of literature on the political prisoners in the H-Blocks, Long Kesh and Armagh Women's Jail.

One of the best is the report of *Women Against Imperialism* (WAI) on Armagh Jail.

Another excellent description of the issues at stake can be found in *Trade Unions and H Block* produced by the trade union sub-committee of the National H-Block Committee.

On The Blanket by the editor of *The Irish Press* — a Fianna Fail-leaning daily Southern Irish newspaper — Tim Pat Coogan, is fairly sympathetic to the prisoners. It contains much useful information. However the political views of the author are pro-Cardinal O'Fiaich and Fianna Fail, so that he does not unequivocally support the prisoners's demands and calls for "negotiations". It is published by The Ward River Press in Dublin and costs £2.50.

Beating the Terrorists? by Peter Taylor, a British TV reporter who has tried to lift the veil on the dirty work of the RUC tortures, gives an excellent description of how the British government implemented its "criminalisation" policy. It is published by Penguin, and costs £1.50.

For more general reading we would recommend *Northern Ireland — the Orange State* written by a founder-member of People's Democracy, Michael Farrell. This is a full and detailed history of the Six Counties from its bloody origins in the 1920s to the upheavals of the late 1960s and 1970s. This is published by Pluto Press and costs £5.95.

For a general history of Ireland, you should read *The Republic of Ireland*, written by another PD member, D.R. O'Connor Lysaght, published by Mercier Press.

Other PD pamphlets:

Socialism Made Easy. James Connolly. (with an introduction by D.R. O'Connor Lysaght). Cost 15p.

The Limerick Soviet. D.R. O'Connor Lysaght. Cost 40p

H-Block — Irish Revolution on the March Cost 15p

Nuclear Danger Cost 10p.

What is Trotskyism? By Ernest Mandel. Cost 20p.

A People Undefeated. by John MacAnulty. Cost 50p.

Make the Rich Pay — Behind the PAYE Revolt. cost 5p

Irish Nationalism and British Imperialism. By Robert Dorn. Cost 25p.

For more information about Peoples Democracy write to us at

* 38 Clanawley Road, Killester, Dublin 5.

* Connolly Bookshop, Avoca Park, Andersonstown, Belfast 11.

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Contact the National Smash H-Block Campaign at
* 30 Mountjoy Square,
Dublin 2, Tel. 747200.

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Organisation: People's Democracy

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