

An Interview With Séamas Costello

The Need to End the Feud Between 'Officials' and IRSP

[The following interview was given to Gerry Foley May 16 in Dublin by Séamas Costello, one of the most prominent leaders of the Irish Republican Socialist party. The IRSP is a grouping formed in December 1974, primarily by former members of the "Official" Irish Republican Movement.

[Conflict developed between the IRSP and the "Officials" in Belfast soon after the formation of the new group and led to armed incidents beginning in February. A truce was declared in April, which broke down in a short time. After an escalation of incidents following the April 28 shooting of Billy McMillen, the "Official" commander in Belfast, new truce negotiations began in mid-May. There has been a decline in reported incidents since that time.]

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Question. What happened to the truce that was in effect the last time I was here, in early April?

Answer. What the truce consisted of was our people staying "offside," not staying at home, not going to work, or not going to the Labour Exchange if they were unemployed. We decided and the Belfast Regional Executive decided that the members would return to their homes and their jobs and resume party activity on a certain date, and we issued a public statement to that effect. The night that they returned, one of them was shot—five bullets—by the "Officials" in the Andersonstown area. So, that effectively ended the truce.

Q. What are the reasons for the escalation of the conflict since then?

A. It has escalated because the "Officials" chose to escalate it. They have consistently ignored every single attempt at mediation made by people outside of both organizations. We have consistently called for mediation and indicated our willingness to accept the various mediators who offered their services. But the "Officials" refused, and this is the reason why it has got worse.

Q. You said earlier that it was the policy of the "Officials" to physically smash the IRSP. Do you think that is still their policy?

A. At the moment I could not answer that question, since attempts at mediation are under way again. A few days ago, Tomás Mac Giolla [the president of "Official" Sinn Féin, the political arm of the movement]

issued a public statement calling for mediation.

This was the first declaration by any leader of the "Official" movement that in any way indicated that they were interested in peace. And it came four days after the attempted assassination of myself in Waterford. There's no doubt this caused a lot of support to be lost by the "Officials." People were very critical of it in many parts of the country. This may have had something to do with the statement by Tomás Mac Giolla. Since last Monday we have been in touch with mediators and it seems at the moment that there is some kind of intention to engage in peace discussions.

Q. To what extent do you think that the "Official" IRA leadership is in control of the situation that has arisen? To what extent are these incidents the result of conscious decisions by the leadership?

A. That's a difficult question to answer. You have to understand the situation here. Basically what you have to understand is that the "Official" leadership is completely in control of the situation. They initiated the campaign against the IRSP by a conscious decision of their Army Council. And they can call off the campaign by a decision of their Army Council. I've no doubt they can make that decision stick.

But as for the individual acts that have been committed in keeping with this policy, the Army Council wouldn't necessarily have control of those. The control at that level would rest with the local OC [Officer Commanding] in Belfast; up to his death, that was Billy McMillen.

Q. Do you have any ideas about who killed Billy McMillen?

A. No, we've no idea. We have opinions about it. Two days before Billy McMillen was killed, discussions had been taking place in Belfast between some of our people and Billy McMillen's brother Art. We had been led to believe by Art McMillen that the "Officials" were going to issue a statement the following Monday or Tuesday, which would have the effect of ending the conflict. We weren't too sure what that meant but we assumed the "Officials" were going to issue a public statement saying that they were calling off their offensive against the IRSP.

Some of this information was relayed over various telephones that happened to be tapped. The Cyprus Street [the "Official" Republican Clubs headquarters in Belfast]

telephone was used, the telephone of one of our members was used. A telephone in Dublin was used. All three telephones are known to be tapped. So, there's no doubt in our mind that at least two security services knew of the possibility of peace two days before Billy McMillen's death. Obviously one possibility that has to be considered is that the killer was an agent provocateur acting on behalf of the Southern, Northern, or British administration.

Q. How large a part in the conflict do you think agents provocateurs have played?

A. I would think the British must be very happy with the conflict that has arisen, that they must consider it one of the most encouraging developments. One of the principal effects of the conflict between the two organizations has been to discredit the anti-imperialist forces in general; not just the "Officials" and the IRSP, but all radical, left, and anti-imperialist organizations have suffered from it. From that point of view, I think the British have a vested interest in the promotion of the conflict. So, also, have the administration here in the South. The political issues between the two organizations have become increasingly clouded, as the conflict developed.

Q. The "Officials" say that a shadowy military organization linked to the IRSP has carried out attacks on their members. They draw two different conclusions from this. Some say that you don't control it. Others say that you are trying to use it as your assassination squad without taking responsibility for what it does. What is the relationship between the IRSP and the military groupings that have expressed support for it in the conflict with the "Officials"?

A. Well, the relationship with the PLA [People's Liberation Army] and the other armed groups that have acted in this way is as follows: The PLA and other groups that haven't chosen to say publicly what their names are offered to assist us in defending our members against the "Officials." This followed the death of one of our members in Belfast. The Belfast Regional Executive accepted that offer. The basis of this acceptance was that as long as the "Officials" attacked IRSP members, these groups would defend IRSP members against such actions and retaliate for such actions.

It's true to say that we don't control the

individual actions carried out in pursuit of this policy, any more than the Army Council of the "Official" IRA controls the individual actions of members of its organization. But we are quite satisfied that as soon as agreement is reached between the IRSP and the "Official" IRA and as soon as we have some concrete indication that the "Officials" are going to call off its campaign, there will be no difficulty whatsoever about ensuring that there are no attacks on members or supporters of the "Official" IRA.

Q. The "Officials" say that they had to defend themselves against persons associated with the IRSP and that they don't know who to negotiate with, the IRSP or the PLA.

A. They have no basis for saying that. They launched a campaign against the IRSP and carried it out in a vicious way. There was absolutely no retaliation against the "Officials" until one of our members was killed. There is no reason for them to negotiate with the PLA. The dispute is with the IRSP.

Q. The "Officials" claim that these armed groups are just irresponsible, criminal cliques looking for a political cover for thuggery. There is a pattern of gang activity in the Catholic ghetto. How can you be sure that you can control these groups?

A. The Belfast Regional Executive knows the leadership of these groups. They are quite satisfied that there won't be any difficulty in ensuring that there is a halt to their activities. The Ard Comhairle [National Executive] of the IRSP accepts their judgment of the situation.

Q. What is the political character of these groups?

A. They're broadly republican, radical republican groups. None of them are very large. They have a certain amount of arms at their disposal, like hundreds of other people in the Belfast area. They would be broadly sympathetic to the political position of the IRSP, and are certainly very opposed to any attempt to deny the IRSP the right of organizing, or the right of expression. They are also people who have been involved in activities against the British army.

Q. What about the claims that these groups are a magnet for "extremists" from both the "Officials" and Provisionals?

A. It would be true to say that they come from diverse origins. I personally don't know many of the individuals involved, but I understand that some of them may have

been involved with the "Officials," the Provisionals, the People's Democracy, or other organizations.



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SEAMAS COSTELLO

Q. Were any of them connected with Saor Eire [a terrorist grouplet with an ultraleftist rhetoric]?

A. Not that I know of.

Q. Do you see a danger of spreading Catholic-Protestant warfare in the North? How do these groups fit into that context? Are they able to defend the Catholic ghettos, or are they organizing people to defend the Catholic ghettos?

A. The indications are at the moment that we could have a serious outbreak of sectarian [communal] warfare this summer, particularly after the results of the Convention elections. [The ultraright proimperialist group won an overwhelming majority of the Protestant vote; a substantial percentage of the nationalist-minded population boycotted the elections to the Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention—G.F.]

I don't think any individual organization is going to be able to protect the Catholic ghettos against this form of attack. I don't think the "Official" IRA can do it, I don't think the Provisional IRA could do it on their own, I don't think any other armed group on its own could effectively fulfill this function.

I would take the view that what's required in that situation is some form of coordinated defensive measures. Previous

experience unfortunately has shown that such coordination probably won't come about until the attacks become a reality.

Q. You say coordination, that is, coordination of the armed groups of various political tendencies. But what about the formation of a united defense force that would include representatives of all the tendencies present but represent the community as a whole and be under the control of a united community organization?

A. Well, I think you have the problem there of established organizations wanting to preserve their own identity. I can't see the Provisional IRA, or the "Official" IRA, or any other armed organization willingly abandoning its identity within the framework of such an organization. I think that realistically the best that can be hoped for is some kind of umbrella organization, which would encompass the various organizations and would deal specifically with defensive measures.

This form of organization has existed on a couple of occasions between the "Officials" and the Provisionals on a local level in different areas of Belfast. It's more than likely that something similar will arise again. But unfortunately it'll probably happen at the last minute, and for that reason will be rather haphazard and maybe ineffective.

Q. What about the lack of community control over these armed groups? Do you see that as a problem, and if you do, how do you propose to solve it?

A. Well, of course it's a problem. I think that what's required to solve it is something more than just coordination on defensive measures. I think some form of coordinated political approach is also required. We would like to see the emergence of a broad anti-imperialist front in the situation that's developing in the North.

But to have this we have to have cooperation among the principal revolutionary organizations. And it has to be cooperation on the basis of a principled anti-imperialist stand. That's a political question, and it's a question that goes side by side with the military aspect. And it's going to prove equally difficult to achieve.

Q. Is there any political debate between you and the "Officials" at this stage?

A. No, there's absolutely no political debate, and no communication at all between us and the "Officials," other than the current peace discussions that I mentioned earlier.

Q. If the current round of peace discus-

sions fails, how do you think the conflict can be stopped?

A. If these peace discussions fail, the only way I can see the conflict being stopped is through exhaustion, exhaustion on the part of both organizations.

Q. You don't think it can be stopped by political pressure?

A. Well, certainly political pressure would help. There has been a considerable amount of political pressure to date. I think the results of the Convention elections were a form of political pressure on the "Officials." Their vote was absolutely disastrous measured against the results of recent elections. This may have contributed in some way to bringing about the present indications from the "Officials" that they are willing to engage in peace discussions.

We would certainly welcome any form of political pressure to end this conflict. We have encouraged such pressures from the beginning and will continue to do so. But it's difficult to know what the reactions of the "Officials" will be to such pressure. It may be that they have already decided that there is absolutely nothing that they can gain politically in the present situation and

that they have decided to continue the conflict irrespective of the political costs.

They may decide that it's of more benefit to them simply to preserve an organizational structure, even if that structure has no popular appeal in the short term. If they do that, then they're obviously going to be immune to political pressure.

Q. In that context, what attitude do you think revolutionary groups in other countries should take toward the conflict between you and the "Officials"?

A. I think the first thing they should do is examine the situation for themselves on the ground. And, having done so, I think that they should make whatever political criticisms they think are justified. I think that they have to understand that there is a clear difference between the attitude of the leadership of the "Officials" and the rank and file. Most rank-and-file members don't want this conflict and seem to recognize instinctively that it's bad in republican terms, and they want it ended. The problem is the leadership. And any pressure that's exerted should be brought to bear directly on the leadership, without putting the blame on the entire membership of the "Official" organization.

I think that support groups abroad that have supported the "Officials" during the last four or five years have a part to play as well. They can indicate that they're going to withhold their support until this conflict is ended. And they can demand that the "Officials" bring the conflict to an end by engaging in discussions. As far as we're concerned, it's quite easy to end the conflict. All that is needed to end it is for each organization to agree to leave the other organization alone and allow them to pursue their political policies without interference. It's not very complicated to end it; it is quite simple.

Q. How much of this conflict can be attributed to Stalinism in the "Officials"?

A. I would say it's a factor insofar as some members of the "Official" leadership are concerned. But I wouldn't classify the entire leadership of the "Officials" as Stalinists. There are, as I said, some individuals there whom I would put into this particular category.

Q. What role does the Stalinist training of some elements in the leadership play in the conflict?

A. Well, I would say that the role it plays is that certain elements in the "Officials" have reached the conclusion that the primary objective is to maintain their organizational structure. And they're willing to do virtually anything to maintain

that structure, apart of course from engaging in political debate and discussion. They're not willing to do that, because they recognize the weakness of their political position. So, they adopt this extreme hard-line attitude, and resort to arms and thuggery to wipe out a group that has a different political viewpoint from theirs. I think this is one of the concrete effects of this particular attitude.

Q. You mean that their Stalinist training led them to make a fetish of the apparatus as such?

A. Yes. That appears to be the case. Billy McMillen told our members who were kidnapped on December 12 in the first wave of kidnappings of our members that the object of the exercise was to smash the IRSP. And, if they didn't get out of the IRSP, that he would smash them. Now, I'm not saying that Billy McMillen was a Stalinist. I don't think he was. But certainly he was influenced by people who have a Stalinist approach, and I think the remarks he made on that occasion were indicative of this attitude.

Q. You don't think that this could derive from some of the negative aspects of the republican tradition?

A. It can be partly explained in those terms. But in the context of this dispute, I don't think it can be explained solely in those terms.

Q. Worship of the apparatus is not part of the republican tradition?

A. It is a part of the republican tradition. But I have never known this to lead to such acts before in the republican tradition. There have been splits and divisions in republicanism before and nobody felt sufficiently strongly about them to go around killing people over the preservation of the apparatus. But in this particular case, they seem to have adopted that attitude.

Q. In other words, this Stalinist training injected an element of political fanaticism foreign to the republican tradition?

A. I believe it did, yes.

Q. How did this fanaticism come into the organization? Does it lie mainly in the middle cadres trained by Stalinist "educators" or is it in the top leadership?

A. I would say that it's primarily at national leadership level. There may be a few isolated cases where it's also visible at local leadership level. But primarily it's at national level. □



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