'Irish Republican Socialist Party' Formed

'Officials' Split Over Stalinist Power Play

By Gerry Foley

[*First of a series*]

The "Official" republican ard-fheis (national convention) held last November 30-December 1 in Dublin formally concluded a struggle that surfaced in the late spring of 1972 and moved into its final stage one year later.

In a closed session, the ard-fheis voted by 197 votes to 15 to confirm the expulsion of Seamus Costello, a Wicklow County councillor and formerly one of the central figures in the top "Official" leadership.

However, it quickly became clear that the expulsion of Costello and certain of his supporters did not solve the problem that he apparently represented for his former associates in the "Official" leadership. Instead, the struggle broke out into the open, where it seemed to create much greater difficulties for this leadership than it had at the ard-fheis or in the internal battle that preceded it. Nor did the relationship of forces seem as uneven as the vote that confirmed Costello's expulsion.

At the end of the week, on December 7, the *Irish Times* reported:

"At a meeting in Dublin yesterday which was attended by 80 delegates from Dublin, Wicklow, Limerick, Tipperary, Clare, Cork, Belfast, Derry City, and county Armagh and Donegal, a decision was made to form a new political party, the Irish Republican Socialist Party."

The founders of the IRSP included a number of prominent figures who had left the "Official" republican organization during 1974 or who had been expelled. Signers of the initial statement of principles and aims included Seamus Costello as well as a number of former leading members of the Derry Republican Club, who had been dissidents within the organization for some time—Terry Robson, Seamus O'Kane, and Joe Sweeney. Bernadette (Devlin) McAliskey, who has never been a member of the "Official" republicans, although she has supported some of their campaigns, also signed the statement.

The following reasons were given for the formation of the new party:

"A) The refusal of the Sinn Fein Ard Comhairle [National Executive] to implement the democratically decided policies on the National Question as laid down at the 1972 and 1973 Ard Fheiseanna.

"B) The lack of internal democracy within Sinn Fein. This became particularly noticeable during the course of the past year when many dedicated members were purged from the organisation because they dared to question the reformist approach of the Ard Comhairle on many vital questions. This purge culminated in attempts by members of the Ard Comhairle to intimidate delegates to the recent Ard Fheis, when many of them were threatened with expulsion if they did not vote in accordance with the wishes of the Leadership.

"C) The decision of the Ard Comhairle to contest the Six County Assembly Elections, when it was perfectly obvious that the elections were clearly designed to re-establish a British-Controlled puppet Parliament for the Six Counties. In our view this particular decision was indicative of the reformist and counter revolutionary attitudes which prevail at Ard Comhairle Level in Sinn Fein, Gardiner Place.

"D) The unprincipled betrayal of the internees arising from the decision to take seats on local councils in the North. This decision was made despite the fact that the Ard Comhairle had made repeated statements attacking the treachery of the S.D.L.P. [Social Democratic and Labour party, the bourgeois nationalists] for taking their seats."

The first two points seem to be the fundamental ones. The others deal with tactical questions around which general dissatisfaction with the course of the organization had tended to crystallize.

The Gardiner Place leadership responded by saying that the new group represented only a handful of ultraleftists. As in previous republican splits, the real issues were not brought out.

Sharp Shift in Line

However, a noticeable change occurred in the line of the "Official" organ, the monthly *United Irishman*, following the conclusion of the fight with Costello inside the organization. The December issue published the first of a series of articles on the "socialist countries." It dealt with the "economic miracle in the East," the German Democratic Republic. The second one took up "The Hungarian People's Republic," and the third, Poland.

The article on Hungary included particularly aggressive Stalinist propaganda:

"The present socialist state in Hungary is the conclusion of hundreds of years of human struggle for dignity and freedom. The difficulties did not end with the assumption of power by the workers in 1949. For a while the leadership of the Hungarian Working Peoples Party fell under the control of a power-hungry group headed by Rakosi which imprisoned and executed innocent working people. This group was defeated and expelled from the HWSP and from power. The western press and bourgeois politicians tried to use these events to justify the counter-revolution in 1956. This attack on the working people was the last-ditch stand of the fascist and right-wing elements who tried to turn back the clock of history. They assassinated socialists and took over buildings and fired on workers killing many of them. The government asked for the intervention of Soviet Troops who assisted in defeating the counter-revolution. The former fascist leader, Horthy, by now safely ensconced in Portugal called on the U.S. to invade Hungary. But the U.S. which had irresponsibly egged on the right-wing elements realised that they would be faced by the whole socialist power of the workers of Eastern Europe and drew back at the last minute."

There were other Stalinist articles in the same issue. In fact, the issue was Stalinist from beginning to end. This line has now been carried for three successive issues.

Use of Physical Violence

This turn toward open Stalinism in the "Official" organ has been accompanied by a campaign to enforce rigid conformity within the organization and by a series of physical attacks on supporters of the new party.

On January 15, the IRSP issued a statement saying that in the past four weeks four of its members or supporters in the Belfast area had been kidnapped and assaulted. Two members had been shot and seriously wounded. It accused the "Officials" of trying to assassinate one of its leaders, Ronald Bunting.

"When they found that Mr. Bunting was not at home," the statement said, "they attempted to kill his wife and 18 month old daughter instead, by firing shots into the house when she refused to open the door."

The IRSP "hereby restates its determination to continue with the organisation of a party structure despite these murderous attempts on it, its members and supporters. . . ."

The statement appealed to the "Official" membership to demand an end to the campaign of intimidation. "We are confident that the vast majority of rank and file members of the Officials still support the principles on which the civil rights struggle was organised, and that they reject the terrorist activities being carried out in their name."

In fact, the Donegal organization of the "Officials" passed a resolution calling on the national leadership to end the at-

tion three years ago was held in Boston, whereas the last two have been in New York, where the number of stray radicals is many times larger.

The fact is, the "Official" organization in North America, never strong, has become moribund on the national level in the last two years. It is totally isolated from the Irish community and unable to give the Provisionals any competition anywhere except in one or two isolated places.

The republican leadership in Ireland knows that. It is obvious in their loss of interest in the American organization. It is obvious to the members. No one in the demoralized and querulous little gathering that was described with such cynical bureaucratic sycophancy in the *United Irishman* could feel inspired upon reading that their organization had "gone from strength to strength." On the other hand, it is unfortunate that the "Official" membership in Ireland does not know the real situation in its American affiliate.

There can be no democracy in an organization without elementary truthfulness to the membership. This type of cynical dishonesty hopelessly convicts the Gardiner Place leadership when they claim that Costello was ousted in a "democratic" process.

If Costello was expelled for rejecting the "democratic" decisions of the majority, significant numbers of the members would not leave the organization or join his party. There would be no need to intimidate his supporters with physical violence. Nor would many members bedemoralized by the split.

Another explanation of the split was given by the Gardiner Place press secretary Sean O Cionnaith in the letters column of the Dublin biweekly *Hibernia* of January 10. He was objecting to an article on the split by Brian Trench, a leader of the Irish affiliate of the International Socialists, a British state-capitalist group that claims to identify with Trotskyism on some issues.

O Cionnaith wrote: "That Ard Fheis [the 1973 one] saw an attempt by some of his [Trench's] own colleagues of the Internationalist [*sic*] Socialists and their fellow-travellers who had infiltrated Sinn Fein, to cause dissension on a spurious issue about the 'National Question'. They also attempted to gain some seats on the Ard Comhairle but were decisively defeated.

"As a result of their decisive defeat those elements saw little advantage in remaining in a movement in which they never believed particularly now that they had so clearly exposed themselves. . . ."

The "Official" press secretary went on to say that these "Internationalist Socialists" really want to drag the movement into a guerrilla war in the North:

"We are quite pleased that the International Socialists have now set up their own party and are no longer attempting to use Sinn Fein for their own disruptive ends. We are not the slightest bit worried about them as a rival for recruits as they are quite welcome to the type of recruit who would be swayed by their policies and ideas. They have spent the past couple of years trying to divert Sinn Fein into supporting a military campaign in the North and in trying to persuade the IRA to break its ceasefire of May 1972. At a time when the whole of Ireland is calling for peace and when that call has forced the Provisionals to call a truce there is little hope for a party of dissidents whose primary objective seems to be to start some kind of military campaign in the North."

The least that can be said about this fulmination over "Internationalist Socialist infiltration" is that it shows ignorance. The International Socialists do not support guerrilla warfare in the North, whatever other errors they may make. And their line on the "National Question" is unfortunately not different from that of the Communist party, any number of British economist sects, and still more unfortunately, the "Official" republican movement.

Foreign Aid From Manic Ultralefts

Similar paranoid references to infiltration and nefarious outside influences were also contained in the *United Irishman*'s "explanation" of the split that appeared in the January issue. The life of the IRSP would be brief, the statement said, "unless foreign aid is received. There are sufficient ultra-left, manic organisations in Europe and the USA to ensure them of some support." The writer of this, however, was not so foolhardy as O Cionnaith. He did not indicate what groups were being referred to.

But how could any thinking member of the "Official" movement take this kind of charge seriously when the same issue of the *United Irishman* pushed a Stalinist line that the majority of the membership do not believe and do not support? Where did that line come from? And are the only foreign influences those emanating from "ultra-left, manic organisations"?

There are in fact many ultraleft groups with false and dangerous ideas in Europe and the United States, as in all other areas of the world, including Ireland. But isn't it a little out of proportion to see them as the main threat to the independence and principles of the republican movement?

Which of these groups can grant republican leaders and delegations the privileges and illusion of importance that goes with being "official dignitaries"? Which of these groups has the capacity to corrupt by using material wealth and power? The ultraleft groups can gain influence among the revolutionary-minded youth only by their arguments and their example; and only if the "Official" leadership is weaker in this field.

On the other hand, if the "Official" leadership endorses the bureaucratic betrayers of revolutions and copies their methods, it is obvious that they are going to lose the support of those looking for a revolutionary party.

The "Officials" have experienced ultraleft splits before. But none has ever damaged them. It is already clear that more than a simple splitoff of ultraleftists or adventurists is involved here.

First IRSP Meeting

The first public meeting of the IRSP in Dublin, according to the February 14 *Irish Times*, drew 500 persons. The main speakers were Costello and Bernadette (Devlin) McAliskey. Both stressed the national question.

Costello said, according to the *Irish Times*'s summary: "Another Left-wing organisation was necessary because no other understood, or had a comprehensive programme based on, a correct analysis of the relationship between the national and the class question. There were people claiming to be socialist who divorced themselves from the anti-imperialist struggle, others who were prepared to accept an army of occupation and repressive and anti-working class legislation."

McAliskey's critique of the economist position on the national question went furthest. It was summarized this way:

"Because of the failure of the Left to raise the demands relating anti-imperialism with the class struggle, they lost relevance and the initiative passed to the people who, though they had confused politics or none, seemed to know what they were doing. The initiative passed to the Provisional I.R.A. and no-one on the Left could criticise the Provisionals without criticising themselves."

She said: "It was our failure which created the need for a liberation struggle devoid of class content." And she pointed out:

"The fight against the Brits, against internment and oppression is part of the same fight to survive in your place of work."

The fact is that the "Officials" have failed to make an effective link between the national and the class question. Their dogmatic insistence that Catholic and Protestant workers had to be united before any revolutionary perspective was possible has reduced them to impotence and isolation. For five years responsible Trotskyists have warned them what this would lead to.

All the projections made by the "Officials" of a development toward socialism among the "militant" Protestant groups have proven to be fantasies. That is one

cause of the split.

It is possible, even likely, that the IRSP includes adventuristic elements. But the role of the Stalinists and reformists in the Gardiner Place leadership also assures that many members who are looking for a real revolutionary alternative may be attracted to the IRSP.

Need for Political Discussion

If the leaders and the ranks of the "Officials" want to defeat adventurism, the most effective way is to speak out against Stalinism, reformism, and bureaucratism in their own organization. According to the concept of "democratic centralism" that is being pushed, discussion is now supposed to be ended. But the "democratic" decisions of the ard-fheis have not prevented the editors of the *United Irishman* from trying to impose a line that the majority does not support and that casts discredit on every member of the movement. As a result, the leadership has lost all "democratic" authority to restrain discussion.

It is obvious by now that "discipline" has not solved the problems of the "Officials." The attempt to impose untenable dogmas and build a Chinese wall against what the leadership apparently regards as dangerous criticism has brought the organization to the brink of disaster and disgrace.

If the Gardiner Place leadership continues to combat the threat represented by the new party in the way they have up till now, they run the risk of provoking a process that will be far more destructive to their organization and the struggle of the Irish people than any adventure they might rightly fear.

Because of their inability to find their way forward to a consistent revolutionary perspective, the "Officials" are no longer a major force in Irish politics. They no longer include anything like a majority of socialist-minded activists. However, since the most extensive political experience of the last six years has taken place in their ranks, how they handle a political dispute in their orbit can have considerable power of example.

It does not take much imagination to foresee what will happen if they try to eliminate a political opposition by excommunications and strong-arm methods. This is especially true if politics comes to the fore in the next period as they predict. This will almost inevitably involve the formation of a number of groupings in the general republican orbit. If the differences cannot be resolved by political discussion and normal political process, these groupings will take the form of armed cliques, if only out of the necessity of self-defense. Principles will be lost. And the practical consequences and possible results of such a development are all too obvious.

The Gardiner Place leaders themselves have said that republicans had to come to the brink of extinction before they began to think. The time has come for some rethinking. Let them open up an all-inclusive, honest discussion. If the IRSP has no policies, that can be shown in debate. If it is not a revolutionary-socialist alternative, let Gardiner Place offer a realistic revolutionary policy — although they cannot get this from Stalinism or from the Stalinists.

If there are principled revolutionists in the "Officials" who have been dragged into an untenable position by the pressures of struggle in a militaristic organization with little conception of how to conduct a political debate, let them show before it is too late that they have something better to offer rebel youth than Stalinism. If they cannot do this, they will share the blame for any adventures that ensue.

The Gardiner Place leadership still includes persons who have devoted their lives to their principles as they saw them. They claimed to believe in political honesty. They know what Stalinism is, and they don't want it in Ireland. They must speak out now and offer an alternative to both Stalinism and adventurism. □

Amendment Seeks to Increase Restrictions

600 Protest Threat to British Abortion Law

By Phyllis Hamilton and Bridget Lux

London

More than 600 persons demonstrated here February 7 against a bill amending the liberal 1967 abortion law. The demonstration, called by the Working Women's Charter, was supported by the Abortion Law Reform Association. The demonstrators called for "A Woman's Right to Choose," and for every mother to be a willing mother, every child a wanted child.

In 1967, abortions became available to women on medical and social grounds, although the final decision about a termination still lies with doctors and not with the woman herself.

Since then, the anti-abortion forces, especially the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child and the Society of Innocents (supported by the Roman Catholic church), have mounted annual protests against the abortion law. But until the bill presented by James White, Labour Member of Parliament for Glasgow-Pollock, the threat to the law did not appear serious.

White introduced a Private Member's Bill to amend the law by restricting the grounds for an abortion to cases in which there was "grave risk to the life or physical health of the mother." His amendment would reduce the time limit for an abortion from twenty-eight weeks to twenty weeks and require that a woman would have to be a resident of Britain for twenty weeks before she would be eligible for an abortion.

The main points of the amendment were covered up by White's attacks on "abuses" of the abortion law. He claimed that women from other countries, unable to obtain abortions at home, were flocking to Britain and obtaining abortions at private clinics. These clinics, he said, were making "excess profits" and may even involve "criminal gangs."

The actual facts, however, have already been presented by the Lane Committee, which reported on the abortion law in April 1974 after a three-year study. The committee argued that the law had succeeded in cutting down the number of illegal abortions. It found that the main flaws of the act lay not in the influx of women from other countries nor in the private clinics, but in the inadequacy of the facilities provided by the National Health Service. In some areas of the North of England and Scotland, women are still forced to go to expensive private clinics or to obtain illegal abortions because certain doctors object on "moral" grounds to performing abortions.

The Labour government refused to take a stand in opposition to the White amendment, which was sponsored by two Labour MPs. As Margaret Coulson pointed out in the February 6 *Red Weekly*, "the anti-abortion organisations must be very pleased that this Bill has a Labour Sponsor — for this reinforces their efforts to portray their fight as a non-party, non-class question." The government did not exert any pressure on MPs to vote against the bill, and the minister for health, Dr. David Owen, even apologized for "abuses" of the abortion law by the private sector and promised to introduce legislation to end them. He did not promise to provide adequate abortion facilities under the National Health Service.

The amendment was carried by a vote of 203 to 88, but it is not being proceeded with at present. A government rec-

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