

Sinn Fein Debates Changes

An Irish Mass Revolutionary Party?

By Gerry Foley

The dominant theme of the discussion at the Sinn Féin (Official republican) convention December 16-17 in Dublin concerned building a revolutionary party. This objective was set in the keynote speech last year at the June 24 Bodinstown march, the largest annual gathering of republicans, by Seán Garland, the national organizer of Sinn Féin. The December meeting was viewed as preliminary to a special convention next April to discuss a major reorganization of the movement.

To win real national freedom and destroy the direct and indirect influence of foreign business and financial interests, a deepgoing social revolution is required in Ireland. A struggle capable of defeating the political, military, and economic power of British imperialism and its allies requires international ties to be successful.

As they set their sights toward making a socialist revolution, the republican leaders found themselves faced with more and more complex problems and tasks, and it has become evident that a loose organization with vague political positions is not adequate to this work. This realization was spelled out in the *Ard Comhairle* (National Committee) resolution on organization and structure:

"Sinn Fein recognises that its foremost organisational task is the creation of a revolutionary party of the Irish working-class to act as the vanguard in the social and national revolutionary struggle on which we are engaged. The revolutionary vanguard party cannot be an umbrella organisation embracing different ideologies, and we affirm the need to intensify our development towards ideological unity and clarity within our Movement on the basis of our educational programme. This can only be done on the basis of democratic centralism; democratic in that all decisions are taken on the basis of the fullest consultation with and participation of the membership; centralist in that all decisions are implemented from top to

bottom and that minorities accept the view of majorities on all matters of policy. We therefore call upon the incoming *Ard Comhairle* to set up a working committee to examine the organisational structure of the Republican Movement, to produce its draft report within three months."

While these organizational changes were being considered, the level of political discussion rose in the Official republican movement. The convention was unanimous in endorsing the correctness of the basic policy followed in the past period, that is, concentrating on revolutionary political activity and mass organization as opposed to the old apolitical guerrillaist outlook of the Irish Republican Army. At the same time, the formulation of specific policies and demands came under deepgoing criticism.

The Donegal *Comhairle Ceanntair* (District Committee) presented the broadest critique of previous policy. Its resolution dealt with all the major areas of activity. On the North it said:

"This *Ard Fheis* [the convention] must recognise that the policy to date in the North has been misdirected in so far as the Civil Rights and democratisation demands have been presented in isolation rather than as part of the revolutionary process. It should be clearly understood that the call for democracy in itself presents no threat to the capitalist interests in the 6 Counties. While fully supporting democratic demands, revolutionary Socialists must also raise demands which point to the specific interests of the working class throughout Ireland. Therefore more attention must be focused on employment, bad housing, weak Trade Union organisation and other such issues which are common to the working class. While British troops are present in the 6 Counties, we must continue to demand their immediate withdrawal and oppose their presence by all means."

This section of the Donegal CC's resolution, however, illustrates some of the basic weaknesses of the discus-

sion. The implications of the various points were by no means made clear. For instance, no revolutionist could dispute the fact that presenting "Civil Rights" and "democratisation demands" in "isolation from the revolutionary process" has been a gross error, probably the gravest the republican movement has made in its recent history.

But the statement that the "call for democracy in itself presents no threat to the capitalist interests in the 6 Counties" seems to isolate the demand for democratization from the revolutionary process in another way. It is hardly true that the call for democracy in the Northern Ireland context does not threaten capitalism. It has produced the most acute crisis presently faced by any European capitalist regime.

In this context, the call for raising revolutionary "working-class" demands, while axiomatically correct, seems to imply that economic struggle as such is something separate and higher than democratic or political struggle against imperialism. In fact making such a counterposition would destroy the whole meaning of the "revolutionary process" and substitute a static, sectarian schema.

At the same time, the idea that there are some kind of economic demands that appeal equally to all sections of the working class in a sense that democratic demands don't is not only contradicted by the whole experience of the Marxist movement in the period of the general crisis of capitalism, but by the specific experience of the revolutionary movement in Ireland, and this is clearly explained in the work of the greatest Irish socialist thinker, James Connolly.

The point on "international capitalism" in the Donegal CC's resolution also touched on a weakness of republican policy in the past:

"The Republican Movement rightly recognises that international capitalist domination of Ireland is the major obstacle to progress. However, the anti-EEC campaign suggested that there was a possible alternative within an Irish capitalist context. The struggle against international capitalism necessarily brings us up against native capitalism. The movement failed to point out that the only alternative to the Common Market was

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In this sense, the resolution's point
that "our involvement in defence of
small farmers and other oppressed
groups must be designed to raise the
consciousness to the need for Social-
ism" is absolutely correct.

Likewise the point on internal edu-
cation and democracy was very posi-
tive:

"It is essential that the Movement
intensify its internal educational pro-
gramme at central and local level to
develop the political consciousness of
its members. The clandestine history
of the Movement has tended to stifle
internal free expression and discussion
between members of divergent points
of view. The need therefore for internal

democracy is evident. Externally, each
member should speak with the voice
of the majority as expressed through
the Ard Fheis. This could be summed
up as full democracy inside and abso-
lute discipline outside.

"These proposals are presented as
ideas towards a revolutionary pro-
gramme. We call on the incoming Ard
Comhairle to draw up a detailed plan
of action on these proposals. The
movement must now consciously de-
velop a revolutionary programme as
part of the process of becoming a
truly revolutionary organisation."

Despite this general appeal for free
discussion, however, none of the
speakers in the debate commented on
the fact that there was no concrete
discussion of the movement's two main
activities, the campaign against the
EEC and the civil-rights movement.
There was no report by a member of
the leadership responsible for these
areas of activity. What was achieved?
What were the problems? What does
the republican movement project, in
particular, for the Northern Ireland
Civil Rights Association? As a result
of these deficiencies the debate was
rambling and contradictory and noth-
ing was clarified.

These are important questions. The
civil-rights movement has been the
main motor of the struggle in the
North. That organization is now
clearly on the decline.

Moreover, one incident since the *ard
fheis* underlines the importance of
clarity about republican policy in the
civil-rights movement. The January
20 issue of *The Irish People*, the
weekly paper of the American sup-
porters of the Provisional republican
movement, reported:

"Provisional Sinn Fein in Derry have
turned down a request made by Derry
CRA to postpone a march that the
Comhairle Ceanntair had planned.
...

"A spokesman for Derry CRA yes-
terday reaffirmed their stand on any
form of march and warned that a
march could only cause trouble. He
added that they intended going ahead
with their day of commemoration
which includes the following—an all-
night vigil on Saturday, 27th, starting
at 11 p.m. for British people who will
be coming over to take part in the
demonstrations; Requiem Mass at 11
a.m. in St. Mary's Church, Creggan,
on Sunday, January 28th; a wreath-

laying ceremony at 12 noon; a com-
memoration ceremony at Free Derry
Corner at 4 p.m.; and at 8 p.m., a
candlelight vigil in the Free Derry
area."

The Derry CRA's explanation for
its decision was that a march would
stir up sectarian feelings, that is, in-
furiate the Protestants. There could,
of course, be local tactical reasons
for such a course, and the Official
republican position on this is not
clear. But there were two tendencies in
the discussion at the *ard fheis*, each
of which would imply different atti-
tudes on such a question.

One tendency was to stress the ne-
cessity of avoiding Catholic-Protestant
clashes in the North at all cost. An-
other tendency recognized that any
movement that challenged the system
in the North was going to provoke
communal conflict.

If the first tendency is carried to its
logical conclusions, it would mean
abandoning the main slogan that has
been advanced for several months by
the republican movement, "Back to
the Streets." If the Officials accepted
such a position, it would mean the
end, in effect, of their strategy of mo-
bilizing the masses in Northern Ire-
land, since the experience of the past
four years has shown abundantly that
any action by the nationalists to pro-
test against the system is going to up-
set the Protestants. Certainly such an
important change should have been
made very clear at the *ard fheis* and
debated fully. On the other hand, if
the Official republicans oppose such
decisions, then it should be made clear
who is responsible for them; other-
wise the blame will fall on them, since
they are known to be the strongest
political force in the CRA.

At the *ard fheis* a major resolution
on the civil-rights movement was in-
troduced which clarified the policy of
the Official republican movement on
some issues: "The Republican Move-
ment could not under any circum-
stances call for the reestablishment of
a 6 County parliament. To do so
would mean total recognition of Brit-
ain's right to impose a Partitionist
assembly on the Irish people, and
would be in complete conflict with the
Republican and Separatist tradition."
This resolution made it clear that al-
though the Official republican move-
ment favored demanding democratic
rights from the British government

and Northern Irish authorities, it did not accept the context of a Northern statelet. In effect, this resolution rejected the "stages" concept earlier held on one level or another by some of the republican leadership, a concept that envisaged "democratization" of the Six-County state as a precondition for struggling for national liberation.

In particular, the preamble to this resolution represented a major step forward in republican thinking toward a consistent revolutionary perspective. Unfortunately this document was not distributed; but many of those present seemed to be familiar with its contents. The main objection to making it public seemed to be that it contained a characterization of the Communist party as reformist, which was repeated in the open debate by the resolution's sponsor, Seamus Costello.

These remarks were attacked by other delegates as "red-baiting," although it was quite clear that Costello was objecting to the politics of the Communist party and not its right to exist or to take part in the struggle for national and social liberation. It was the protesters in fact who followed the method of red-baiting, that is, using emotional scare words to obscure the political issues. They would have made a more positive contribution to the debate by frankly defending the Communist party of Ireland against the charge of reformism. In the long run this is the only way they will be able to retain the respect of the membership.

The main criticism the preamble made of previous republican policy toward the civil-rights movement was that the Officials had appeared to confine their objectives to the civil-rights demands and not put forward clearly enough their own revolutionary nationalist program. The civil-rights demands alone, according to the preamble, fitted in with the Communist party's perspective of reform rather than revolution.

This was a correct assessment of a very dangerous tendency. But at the same time it was not a well-balanced one. The civil-rights demands were not reformist in effect. Their impact was revolutionary. They produced the most powerful mass mobilization in modern Irish history. What was reformist was the CP's determination to formulate these demands in a way that specifically and

explicitly accepted the framework of bourgeois parliamentary democracy, British control and the partition, in a way that imposed narrow limits on the dynamic of the struggle. Besides failing to put forward its own revolutionary demands in propaganda and agitation, the republican movement did not fight the Communist party politically in the Civil Rights Association itself and thus allowed the movement to be robbed of its revolutionary momentum. This, among other things, is what left the way open for the development of terrorism in the North, which further accelerated the decline of the mass movement.

Thus, while the preamble reasserted and clarified the revolutionary principles of the Official republican movement, it did not come to grips with the concrete form in which reformist influence has manifested itself and has had its most pernicious effects. It did not chart a militant course for the civil-rights movement.

Of course, the December *ard fheis* did not say the last word about republican policies. It was only another step in a deepgoing discussion that has been in progress for some time and has already gone further than the public statements of the movement and its spokesmen would give any reason to hope. But the failure of the preamble to deal directly with the deficiencies of both the civil-rights movement itself and its effective leadership sets a dangerous precedent.

It is all too easy, and many examples have shown this, for a politically broad movement to develop a reluctance to face political struggle on the left, to fear that posing sharp political questions is "sectarian" or "divisive." Newly developing left movements in particular have been anxious to avoid the "old polemics." But whenever new movements have been confronted with profound social crises and political challenges, this attitude has led to abdication of responsibility, turning inwards, and collapse.

This was the case, for example, of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the United States; it was SDS that initiated mass actions against American intervention in Vietnam. But when the fundamental question arose of whether the movement was going to take a principled stand of independence from capitalist politicians and

support for the right of the Vietnamese people to determine their own fate, opposed to the opportunist stand of calling for "negotiations" and supporting liberal capitalist candidates, the SDS leadership backed away. It did not want to, or could not, make a choice between what were clearly two irreconcilable strategies, the latest continuation of the "old" Stalin-Trotsky split that they wanted to avoid.

And since SDS could not lead the movement without making a choice as well as for other reasons, it turned away from trying to mobilize masses of people against the war, which was clearly the main issue radicalizing American society.

This retreat was covered up by a sort of ultraleft and economic rhetoric about "community organizing" or "fighting the war at its root," and by campus revolts that were pictured as miniature Communes. But SDS became more and more disoriented and cut off from reality.

Since there was no clear political focus of activity, there developed a hothouse atmosphere of romantic illusions and posturing that proved an ideal breeding ground for the most destructive kind of sectarianism. The organization was finally torn apart by a free-for-all between competing groups of hysterical ultraleftists trying to outdo each other with super-Stalinist poses.

Ironically, many of the "new" SDS leaders had shifted 180 degrees from a position holding the CP to be revolutionary (while privately admitting that it was reformist) to denouncing the Kremlin bureaucracy and its acolytes as "new imperialism." At no time during their entire evolution did they seriously face up to the problem of the real origin and role of Stalinism.

The fact is that unity on the left is a dialectical process that involves political clarification, and therefore struggle, as well as united action for common goals. Refusal to face political issues that are necessarily divisive leads to throwing up artificial barriers that cause confusion and disorientation and in the long run lead to worse divisions. The republican split is at least partially an example of this. The fact that the stated political programs of both the Officials and Provisionals are almost exactly the same

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has not prevented the most confusing
and destructive kind of factional war-
fare (and physical warfare in some
instances) between the two groups.

At the same time the political un-
clarity and uncertainty of the Official
republican movement has produced
a sectarian, isolationist reaction to the
political threat posed by the Provi-
sionals. This attitude, among other
things, seems to have led the republi-
cans to fear open political conflict with
their Communist party allies in the
civil-rights movement. The result has
been that the militancy and effective-
ness of the movement have declined,
weakening the mass alternative to ter-
rorism and increasing support for the
Provisionals' guerrilla campaign.

Moreover, the dogmatic and emo-
tional reaction to the challenge of the
Provisionals and their incorrect strat-
egies has tended to paralyze thought
and initiative in the Official republican
movement itself, whose only weapon
against the right wing of the Provi-
sionals (which is supported by sec-
tions of the Church and the capitalist
class) is its political understanding
and flexibility. It is ironic in fact that
while the most dogmatic anathema-
tizers of the Provisionals have tended
to be Stalinist trained, the Communist
party of Ireland has been less inhibited
than the Officials in seeking contacts
with the Provisionals (although the
CP attitude may change now that the
Provisionals are isolated and under
attack).

The Official republican movement
cannot, of course, be compared to the
American SDS, but it has shown some
of the same tendencies and it has ab-
sorbed, because of its historical posi-
tion and political looseness, the Irish
expression of the international current
that gave rise to SDS and other such
formations. Therefore, it is legitimate
to fear that it may fall prey to the
same failings.

The civil-rights question is the acid
test for Irish political organizations.
Not only does it remain the central
issue in the North, but the fight against
repression has become the key to the
political situation in the South. Be-
cause of the political and social mech-
anisms of imperialist control in Ire-
land, and because of the revolution-
ary traditions of the Irish people, the
struggle against repression and dis-
crimination is the cutting edge of the
fight against imperialism. In fact, the

civil-rights movement is an anti-impe-
rialist movement in essence, and this
is becoming clearer and clearer as
the British army assumes a more and
more active role in repressing the na-
tionalist people. Economic issues un-
derlie this struggle, and as it develops,
its economic implications will become
even clearer. But the political issues
of democracy and an end to discrim-
ination are the focus.

Nonetheless, there are historical ten-
dencies in the Official republican move-
ment that could deflect it from con-
centrating on this issue. Furthermore,
both ultraleftists and opportunists are
anxious to divert revolutionary republi-
cans from this task. From the stand-
point of the workerist ultralefts, the
civil-rights movement has never been
"revolutionary" enough because it does
not unite Protestant and Catholic
workers and explicitly challenge capi-
talist productive relations. The reform-
ist role of the Communist party in the
CRA leadership gives force to these
arguments.

At the same time, the Communist
party and its supporters would be
happy to see the republicans leave
the "civil-rights side of things" to
"cooler heads," or "more politically ex-
perienced" people, as they picture them-
selves.

There is another reason why it is
important for the Official republican
movement to define its strategy for

the civil-rights movement. It would
be a dangerous and almost certainly
unfruitful policy to try to separate
reorganization of the movement from
clarification of the basic political is-
sues and solution of the concrete polit-
ical problems facing the Official re-
publicans. Democratic centralism can
only function in the context of agree-
ment on the fundamental political
questions. It requires a leadership
elected on the basis of clear political
positions, a leadership that assumes
full responsibility to the ranks for its
political actions. Otherwise, centralism
becomes a straitjacket instead of a
weapon, represses discussion rather
than making it more fruitful and pur-
poseful.

It is unlikely, in fact, given the stage
of the Official movement's political de-
velopment that a real democratic cen-
tralist organization can be set up by
the April conference. But this meeting
can establish structures and proced-
ures conducive to a better discussion
within the movement. And while revo-
lutionists everywhere support all
movements in Ireland fighting against
British imperialism, they cannot help
but feel a special concern about this
most serious attempt in Irish history
to set up a mass revolutionary party.
This is especially so since the chances
for an effective and united struggle
against imperialism hinge to a large
degree on the success of this effort. □

Indictments Issued in Israeli 'Spy' Trial

Four Israeli Arabs and two Jews were
indicted January 25 in the "espionage and
sabotage network" case.

Daoud Turki, Ehud Adiv, Subhi Na-
arani, Dan Vered, Anis Karawi, and Si-
mon Hadad were specifically charged, ac-
cording to the January 26 *Jerusalem Post*,
with "membership in a hostile organiza-
tion, contacts with enemy agents, giving
them information, and aiding the enemy
in the war against Israel."

The government is charging that
although Daoud Turki, an Arab from
Haifa, was the head of the "network,"
it was Ehud Adiv, a former paratrooper
in the Israeli army, who "did the most
damage to the State by passing on vital
military information to the Syrian intel-
ligence." This would indicate that the re-
gime will, in the trial, deliberately focus
on the Jewish defendants in order to in-
tensify the witch-hunt that has been
whipped up around discovery of the al-

leged "network."

The brief *Jerusalem Post* report of the
indictments provides a further indication
of this: "Not on trial but figuring promi-
nently in the charges is the extreme left-
wing Matzpen group, which the prosecu-
tion calls the 'recruiting ground' for the
alleged spy ring. Also mentioned is an
even more extreme splinter group, the
Red Front."

The prosecution has announced that
twenty-four additional persons would
soon be indicted in the case. Several of
those seized have charged the police with
torturing several of the prisoners. (See
Intercontinental Press, January 29, p. 73
for an account of the origin of the case
and the response of the left to the govern-
ment-inspired witch-hunt.)

Judge Emanuel Slonim of the Haifa
District court has set February 11 for
hearing the pleas and February 25 for
the first hearing.

February 5, 1973

11 (4)

Title: Sinn Féin Debates Changes: An Irish Mass Revolutionary Party?

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Date: 1973

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