

# H-BLOCK STRUGGLE

# Irish Revolution



# On the March

A Peoples Democracy Pamphlet 15p

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## INTRODUCTION

Peoples Democracy has always fought for a broad-based campaign on the question of H Block. From the moment Britain withdrew political status we took the initiative in trying to win mass support for the prisoners. We were active from the beginning in building the RACs. We took the initiative in bringing together a broad spectrum of political forces at the 1978 Coalisland Conference which paved the way for the current H Block campaign. Subsequently we organised the Burntollet Commemoration March around the H Block issue in order to create greater public awareness of the prisoners' plight. Later we were centrally involved in the McAuliskey election campaign which was organised in support of the H Block demands and drew 35,000 votes.

Our persistent efforts to build broad support for the H Block prisoners drew heated criticism from both Sinn Fein and the Left. The Provos claimed that we were selling-out the National struggle while the Left denounced us for wanting an alliance with bourgeois individuals and parties. Neither accusation was true and by participating themselves in the National Smash H Block Committee our critics have in practice come to recognise this.

Today no one can doubt the merit of a broad-based campaign. The H Block Committee's list of success is impressive. The conspiracy of silence has been breached and tens of thousands of people have received first hand information about the conditions in Long Kesh and Armagh. Thousands of people have heard ex-prisoners and relatives explain the reasons for the struggle. Hundreds of activists have been organised to make sure the campaign grows.

Peoples Democracy has been involved throughout Ireland in this campaign. We are active in Belfast, Dublin, Limerick and Cork. We have been to the forefront of the Armagh Prisoners Solidarity Committee and have been active in the trade unions and the student movement. In this pamphlet we explain the reason for our involvement in the campaign and how we see it developing in the overall context of the National struggle and the fight for socialism. The success of the campaign to date is clear. But it is also clear that we have reached a plateau in our activity. If we are going to take the struggle forward we must know where we are headed. We hope by taking a long-term view of the struggle we can pin-point some of the important opportunities to be availed of now.

## H-BLOCK: IRISH REVOLUTION ON THE MARCH

The H-Block/Armagh struggle has gained impressive momentum over the past year. While bringing the struggle to new heights it has now seemed to level out at a plateau. The publicity campaign of leafleting, picketing, marching has created an enhanced awareness of the hellish conditions in H-Block/Armagh and a great deal of sympathy with the prisoners brave fight. But the campaign cannot remain at this level indefinitely or else it will begin to fade. A concerted effort to actively organise the new mass awareness and sympathy is needed in the form of a structured movement.

It is at the level of building an actual organisation that the campaign has been weakest. Certainly there are technical problems at the root of this but the ultimate source of weakness is a political one - we need a clear answer to the following questions:

- What social forces are going to actively support the prisoners?
- What political forces must be involved in the campaign?

Only when we have given a definite reply to these questions will we be clear about the type and structure of the organisation we need.

## POLITICS

This where the whole debate about whether or not the campaign should be based purely, or mainly, on "humanitarian grounds" comes in. The humanitarian aspect of the campaign is indeed a vital aspect. But it does not mean that the H-Block campaign can be divorced from politics or that those who do not aspire to national liberation can become a major component of it. To imagine otherwise is to fly in the face of the facts. The very reason for the H-Block struggle is Britain's attempt to pretend that the resistance in the North has no political rationale. By branding its opponents as "criminals" Britain hopes to avoid responsibility for its own political crimes. Only so long as Britain can hide the political nature of the conflict in the North can it hope to restrict popular support for the H-Block/Armagh prisoners. To place an embargo on "politics" is to play into the hands of Thatcher, Atkins and Co..

Experience has also shown us that the liberals, intellectuals and others who do not recognise, even in a historic sense, the need for national liberation, have not flocked to the H-Block campaign. The active campaigners have been those who supported the national liberation struggle over the past decade. The broad, popular, base of the campaign has been comprised of those who, while being neither Socialist or Republican, retain a long term hope for complete national independence.

### HUMANITARIANISM

At the same time it would be wrong to dismiss the humanitarian aspect of the H-Block struggle. It has played an important role in mobilising support, but this is precisely because the humanitarian instincts of the Irish people are linked to their political traditions. These humanitarian instincts have been fashioned out of a ceaseless struggle against oppression. The compassion felt by ordinary people for the political prisoner is born of an ingrained historic experience which tells them that it is basically Britain which is the aggressor and not the Republicans. Even if only in an instinctive way the prisoners' struggle is respected because they are seen as victims of Imperialist domination.

Recognition of the humanitarian appeal of the H-Block struggle can in no way justify a relegation of the National struggle. On the contrary we should be aware that as humanitarian solidarity with the prisoners grows, the whole question of Britain's domination of Ireland will be posed all the more concretely in the minds of the Irish people.

Does this mean that the H-Block / Armagh campaign should immediately broaden its programme beyond the programme of the prisoners? NO because because a general solution to the national problem is not yet posed concretely in the minds of the majority of the people. But it does mean that our present tactics must flow from the logical thrust of the H-Block struggle (towards making the problems of partition and independence a more tangible reality) and not simply from the current, rudimentary humanitarian consciousness of the people.

### FIANNA FAIL AND THE SDLP

If we attempt to restrict the campaign to an artificial humanitarian framework we will end up in a cul de sac. We have to take into account the political framework in which we are operating. The salient feature of the existing political situation is the deepening popular discontent following Britain's failure to concede any reforms together with its return to open reliance on the loyalists. This popular discontent is reflected in the pervasive conflict that has dogged Fianna Fail and the SDLP. The mass following of these parties are disillusioned with the collaborationist policies of their leaders - hence the sacking of Lynch and the renegade status of Fitt. There is now an acceptance that only firm opposition to British repression and domination can pave the way forward.

There is still a major obstacle, however, to a resumption of mass struggle for National Liberation. The problem is that there are still widespread illusions in the new leaderships of the SDLP and Fianna Fail. The

National H-Block Campaign has been feeling the reality of this. On the one hand we have found enormous good-will towards the prisoners; on the other hand it has proved difficult to translate this into a massive show of strength on the streets. Many people don't appreciate the need for a show of strength because they think Haughey et al are going to challenge the Brits.

If we are going to convince ordinary people to become active in a practical way on the H-Block issue we must make a concerted effort to expose the spinelessness of the Fianna Fail and SDLP leaders. This can only be done through an open campaign to force the contradictions in these parties to the fore. And of course it is not only the contradictions in these parties that need to be unveiled but also the double dealings of the Independence Party, the Blaneyites and the Church hierarchy, whose words are not matched by deeds.

### EXPERIENCE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Some people in the campaign believe that if we move in this direction we will be going beyond the humanitarian basis of the H-Block/Armagh issue and will thereby alienate the rank and file supporters of the SDLP and FF. Reasoning such as this is reminiscent of the thinking which paralysed the Civil Rights Movement and delivered it over bound hand and foot to the SDLP. The Civil Rights leaders wanted to keep the movement "non-political"; they wanted to confine its brief to purely "democratic issues" and at all costs avoid "conflict". They obstinately refused to take up new issues as they arose. Above all, when it became clear to everyone that Britain was unwilling to concede reforms, they refused to take the next logical step - challenge the right of Britain to be in Ireland in the first place. As a result the CRM degenerated into a talk-shop and became irrelevant. In short the fundamental error of the Civil Rights Movement leaders was their inability to recognise that "democratic" and "human rights" demands are inextricably bound up with the National Question, and that the struggle for even limited democratic reforms inevitably comes into collision with those who want to retain links with Britain.

We don't want to make the same mistake with the H-Block Campaign. True, the demands of the prisoners are modest enough. But the brutality being inflicted on them is the spear head of an attempt to subdue the Northern minority and enable Britain to put power back firmly in the hands of the loyalists. It is because Haughey and Co have no intention of breaking with British Imperialism and don't want to rock the boat that they remain silent about H-Block.

The problem therefore is not that we will alienate support by putting pressure on the leaders of the SDLP and FF. The real problem is that if we don't confront the collaborators, the anti-imperialist population who have illusions in them, will be led up a blind ally. Apathy and indifference will be the inevitable outcome. The potential of the H-Block struggle will then have been undermined in the same way as the civil rights struggle.

#### WINNING MASS SUPPORT

If we are clear that the H-Block struggle is not just "another issue" but a prelude to a resumption of the National struggle on a mass scale which will challenge the hold of the SDLP and FF over the majority of the Irish people, then this will guide us on how we should, here and now, organise our activities.

In the first place when we talk of supporters of FF and the SDLP we are talking about the workers and small farmers of Ireland. As individuals they are subject to the manipulation and demagoguery of the collaborators. But when they organise as a class or in ways which seek to give them more control of their lives the story is different. In their trade unions, women's, youth, cultural, sporting, organisations they display independence and flexibility of thought. If we really intend to win the active support of workers and small-farmers then a vague "propaganda" campaign aimed indiscriminately at the general population will not suffice. We will instead have to direct our rallying call into the mass organisations.

The National H-Block Committee has already recognised the necessity of this by appointing a special organiser in charge of trade union work. But this activity must be carried out more systematically and in as many mass organisations as possible. Such work is not just a useful option but an absolute necessity.

#### THE TRADE UNIONS

A campaign within the trade unions must be made a high priority. Over the past year the unions, especially in the South, have demonstrated their capacity to mobilise workers on issues which directly concern them. The scale of these mobilisations has created a fermentation among the rank and file who are now more confident in challenging the government on a variety of fronts. This can be seen by the growing number of Unions and Trades Councils supporting the H-Block/Armagh prisoners. As the struggle of the workers intensify and reveal Ireland's economic subordination to Britain and other Imperialist Powers we can expect an even more favourable response from the unions on the question of H-Block and Armagh.

However we cannot simply wait on the economic crises to sharpen workers appreciation of the National struggle. Trades unionists will not relate to Anti-Imperialism if it is put across to them on a purely propaganda basis. Not words and resolutions, but a real struggle, will awaken their consciousness. It is up to the National H-Block Committee to ensure that there is a practical struggle they can identify with and participate in.

For this reason it would be a mistake to sit back and hope that the cause of the prisoners will be taken up independently in the trade unions. We have seen that the response from the unions so far has been generated largely by the credibility of the National H-Block Committee's own campaign. If we want to extend this success of the National Committee we must continue to take direct responsibility for trade union work and seek to mobilise working class support under its own name.

Those who say that a Trade Union H-Block campaign independent of the H-Block Committee would be more flexible and produce better results are either deluding themselves or being less than honest. The latter is the case with the Communist Party. They want an "independent" trade union campaign because, as they have stated, they don't want to be identified with the Provo "terrorists". But since most of the prisoners are Provos and since the main body of the activists on the H-Block issue identify with the Provos it is plain to see that the C.P.'s "independent" campaign would be little more than an inactive rump.

Unfortunately sections of the "far-left" also put forward the idea of an independent trade union campaign. They argue that the prisoners cause will get more support if it is linked to questions of repression which directly affect workers eg anti-trade union legislation, eviction laws etc. The logic here is schematic and dubious. The fact is that, at the moment, workers struggles, by and large, are not being directly repressed by the state. It is hard to see how the majority of workers who do not experience state repression against their struggles would automatically identify with resistance to the repression in the H-Blocks and Armagh.

Of course in the future it is certain that workers struggles will be subjected to state repression. But are we to wait till then? Anyway resistance to "economic repression" is no guarantee of sympathy with H-Block/Armagh. What links the two issues together is not the general category of repression but the fact both types of struggle have the same practical effect - the necessity of smashing of imperialist domination in Ireland.

The problem with most of the "far-left" is that they do not accept that the economic struggle will have to pass through a political struggle to smash British-Imperialism. On the contrary, the GWM for example, believes that the tasks of the anti-imperialist struggle (eg democratic rights, partition; national independence, etc.) will be accomplished as a "by product" (to use their phrase) of an economic struggle for socialism. Accordingly they see the National Question as of only marginal interest to workers. Because they imagine that national-democratic issues are so secondary they think that workers will be motivated to take them up only if they are directly related to economic issues. In reality, the apparently "revolutionary" idea of tagging on economic demands to national demands stems from a reformist misunderstanding of the potential in the anti-imperialist struggle. In the end it has merely a propaganda value which cannot lead to action.

By contrast Peoples' Democracy starts from the revolutionary Marxist perspective of Permanent Revolution, -- the view that the National struggle grows over into socialism. We believe that Imperialism creates and guarantees the framework for economic exploitation. Only by confronting and abolishing the political structures which Britain has imposed on Ireland can the economic liberation of the workers be assured. For us therefore the National Question is a question of fundamental importance for workers. It cannot be left in the background to be solved at a later date when workers have solved their economic problems, as they will not solve them without challenging imperialism. That is why we are convinced that a campaign on an issue like H-Block should begin now even if a majority of workers do not see its relevance. For the same reason we reject an artificial linking of national-democratic demands to economic issues. A campaign around such a combination of issues would only attract the converted; we would spend our time trying to explain the connection. Workers, however will not respond to "explanations" -- they will respond to action. At the moment the National H-Block Committee is the only credible focus for carrying out this activity. No H-Block campaign in the trade unions will be successful independent of it.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

The fact that there are over thirty women political prisoners in Armagh Jail is a reflection that women are involved in the national liberation struggle at all levels. Like their sisters in other oppressed nations, (for example in Vietnam), the demands of the struggle have required thousands of nationalist women in the North to go beyond their traditionally defined roles of housewives and mothers. They have become the core of the resistance -- organising in the communities; not only doing welfare work for the prisoners, but in building the political status campaign, making speeches, etc., and participating directly in the armed campaign. At the same time they have borne much of the weight of maintaining day-to-day life in their homes and communities, under all the difficulties created by the war situation. By being actively involved in the political struggle against Imperialism, these women have gained experience and confidence in themselves that can never be taken away from them. By fighting for the self-determination of their nation they have begun to fight for control of their own lives -- and learned the methods of struggle by which both can be achieved.

The imperialist oppressors are well aware of the threat that the resistance of the nationalist women poses to their domination. They have a well-worked out strategy of using the specific oppression of women and their location in the family to try and break the community-based struggle -- wrecking of homes, sexual assault and harassment, victimising children, etc. And of course the women prisoners are subjected to repression and ill treatment which is specifically intended to degrade them as women: lack of sanitary facilities, sexual abuse, having their children put into 'care'.

The severity of the repression against the nationalist women of the North and their heroic struggle against it has inspired feminists and other women in many countries, particularly Britain, to actively involve themselves in solidarity work. They easily identify the fight of Irish women for self-determination with their own efforts to take control over their own lives; even though many of the women in the nationalist struggle would not consider themselves 'women's liberationists'.

In the South of Ireland, however, many of the women who are part of the feminist movement do not understand the connection. Even many of those who are most politicised on many other questions do not see the link between their campaigns and the national liberation struggle. They do not recognise that they cannot achieve their liberation as women in a state that labours under the yoke of imperialist domination.

Meanwhile the overwhelming majority of women in the 26 Counties, many of whom are in sympathy with their sisters in the North, do not identify with the women's movement and remain inactive, and the feminists remain isolated.

The campaign around the Armagh prisoners provides an opportunity to bring many more Irish women into activity -- activity which will give them the ability to transform their own lives. Those women who are politicised and organised have a responsibility to take up the defence of the Armagh prisoners who are struggling for political status. They must come to realise that their struggle for women's liberation cannot be separated from the struggle for national liberation. It is not a matter of national liberation coming 'first', then dealing with 'women's' issues -- rather that by the very fact of women becoming politicised and organised they will begin to take an equal place in the struggle, and the new society that will come after the defeat of imperialism. However if the struggle of the prisoners is defeated and there is a victory of imperialism, the gains that have been made, however minimal, for democratic rights for women will also be lost.

The national liberation struggle cannot be won if the population of the South -- or even half of it -- remains passive observers.

The best way to build the campaign is within the framework of the National Smash H-Block Committee, as the broadest possible campaign around the demands of the prisoners. While it is important to structure the Armagh campaign in such a way as to encourage the participation of women (ie emphasis on women's meetings, provision of child-care at major events, raising the specific treatment of the women prisoners, etc), it should not be seen as something separate and apart from the political status campaign of all the prisoners. In order to achieve the greatest success, the Armagh campaign needs solid links with the activity being done for the men in H-Block.

We must bring into the campaign as many women as we can, and this can best be facilitated by having a distinct sub-committee which would be oriented to women and organised primarily by women. But whether women support the campaign because they see it as a women's issue, for humanitarian reasons, or whatever -- and we make no restrictions on who can participate so long as they support the demands of the prisoners -- we must work to win them to an understanding and support of the political status protest and the struggle that has brought it about.

### YOUTH AND H-BLOCK

It is important for the H Block/Armagh campaign to reach out to young people. In the South well over half the population is under the age of twenty-five and the situation is similar among the minority in the North. The burden of imperialist domination falls heaviest on youth. They are the ones who pay most in terms of unemployment and living conditions. They also pay a high price in terms of the social and cultural stultification which seeps from the pores of a neo-colonial system. It is no wonder they are attracted to the movement for national liberation. They are constantly seeking a direction for their own idealism and enthusiasm. The fact that youth are now such a significant section of the population makes a potential political force to be reckoned with.

The H Block/Armagh campaign can provide an excellent focus for the radicalisation of youth. Not only is it part of the National struggle, but it also has a direct appeal for youth in that most of the prisoners are themselves young people. A casual observation of meetings and demonstrations shows that youth are already an important component of the campaign. We must do more to gain from the potential.

Because young people are ignored or harassed by society, they are largely unorganised. Even in the H Block/Armagh campaign they have been left unorganised -- a fact that has occasionally led to friction between them and stewards. We should change this immediately. Publicity material directed specifically at youth is a vital necessity.

Apart from making an appeal to youth in general we should make an effort to reach them where they have some minimal organisation -- in trade unions, colleges, schools, youth and sporting clubs, etc. To do this effectively we will have to consider the possibility of a specific organisational structure for youth work within the National Smash H Block Committee.

### A FIGHTING ORGANISATION

The people we want to get involved in the H Block campaign are mostly the oppressed and exploited people of Ireland -- workers and small farmers; women and youth. They are also the people who, while not directly identifying with Republicans and Socialists, recognise that National freedom and democracy is an integral part of securing progress in Ireland. These two factors will determine how we structure and develop the H Block/Armagh campaign.

We must recognise the limits placed by capitalism on the time and energy of working class people. There is no way they can participate in the

H Block campaign directly at every level and on a day-to-day basis. Yet they will be the backbone of any successful campaign. It is necessary to strive consciously to reconcile this contradiction.

In the first place this will require the building of committees in local areas and in the mass organisations. We are already well on the way to establishing a network of local committees. But these cannot develop their full potential unless their work is properly coordinated. To help this along we need a national leadership, not of 'notable individuals', but of activists who are rooted firmly in the localities. It is not simply a matter of achieving a good geographical balance; more importantly it is a matter of ensuring that the people around the country who are willing to build the campaign are given the responsibility and opportunity to do so. In addition we urgently need a national organisational centre with a full time worker which can give the national leadership professional backup.

To ensure that the local committees attract the maximum number of people they should be as open and democratic as possible. The question of democracy is central. A proper representation and delegate structure is the only guarantee that the ideas and decisions of the local activists will filter through the entire campaign. If we don't endeavour to build along these lines we will squander our human resources. There has been a practice in the campaign to date of activists taking an important responsibility of their own accord. While this ensures that the work gets done it weakens the campaign in the long run. In particular it encourages indifference among the majority of supporters who end up as passive spectators.

The question of structures is not merely an organisational one. The type of structure proposed above is adapted to the type of social forces we wish to see involved and to the overall political thrust of the campaign. Workers, who have to spend most of their time earning a living need to be able to share out and delegate their authority to permit real participation in a movement. More than that the tasks on the national struggle will not be accomplished through the existing 'democratic' structures which have been built in fact to prevent the culmination of the National struggle. New types of democratic structures will have to be built in the course of the resistance to British imperialism. It is above all, for these reasons that Peoples Democracy considers it important to cultivate working-class democracy in struggles such as the H Block/Armagh one. It is only on this basis of democratic structures that we will be able to progress to a higher and more comprehensive confrontation with the undemocratic organs of Britain's puppet system in Ireland.

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