

THE H-BLOCK DEMANDS HAVE VARIOUSLY BEEN PRESENTED BY SOUTHERN POLITICIANS AS QUESTIONS OF HUMANITARIANISM OR OF PRISON REFORM.

THEY ARE NEITHER.

THIS PAMPHLET SHOWS THAT THE H-BLOCK DEMANDS AND THE CAMPAIGN BUILT AROUND THEM ARE AN INTEGRAL PART OF IRA STRATEGY LEADING TO FULL-SCALE WAR WITH THE PROTESTANT POPULATION OF THE NORTH IN WHICH THEY HOPE THE SOUTH WILL BECOME EMBROILED.

THE PAMPHLET URGES REJECTION OF THE WOOLY-MINDED HUMANITARIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE ISSUE AND RESISTANCE TO A CAMPAIGN WHICH IS RAISING SECTARIAN TENSIONS TO A DANGEROUS NEW LEVEL.

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★ Socialists Against Nationalism

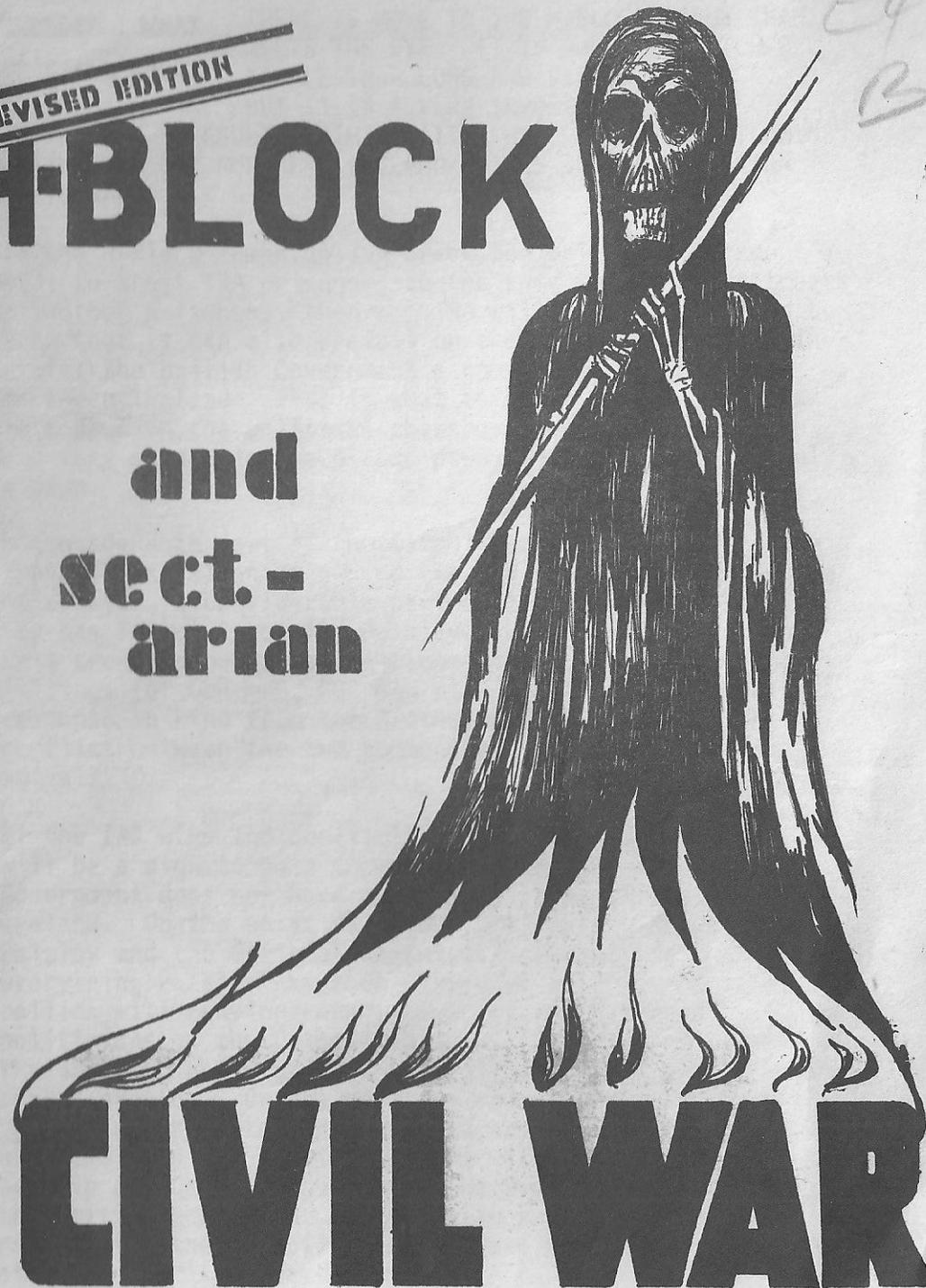
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REVISED EDITION

# H-BLOCK

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**H-BLOCK : WHAT  
IT'S ALL ABOUT** THERE IS MORE TO THE H-BLOCK ISSUE THAN MEETS THE EYE. IT IS ONLY ONE PITCHED BATTLE IN A LONG AND BLOODY CAMPAIGN. BUT IT IS A VERY IMPORTANT PITCHED BATTLE. THE RESULT OF THIS BATTLE WILL PROBABLY DETERMINE WHETHER OR NOT NORTHERN IRELAND SLIDES INTO A SECTARIAN CIVIL WAR.

If the H-Block campaign can break the British Government's will to treat IRA prisoners in the same manner as it treats all other prisoners, then the IRA will have good reason to hope that it can also prevail on the larger point of principle: the British Government's commitment to govern Northern Ireland. *That* is what it's all about. H-Block is a pawn on the political chessboard; a very important and very strategically placed pawn, but nevertheless, only a pawn.

A considerable part of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland has fallen in behind the H-Block campaign. On the other side, a considerable part of the Protestant community has fallen in behind Paisley. How much further can this trend in political development go before the sectarian killings (of UDR men, RUC men etc.) by the IRA produce a response in kind from the Protestant side, and violent conflict between the two communities enters an upward spiral?

If the IRA wins the conflict of wills in H-Block, that will be a sign to both communities that the British Government does not have any firm will to govern Northern Ireland. On the political side, the contest between Paisley and the Official Unionists will end right there - everything Paisley has been saying in his "Carson Trail" rallies will be vindicated. Support for extremist politicians on the Catholic side will also multiply, and the SDLP, which is green enough already, will become several shades greener. On the military side, a resurgence of the UDA and other Protestant paramilitary organisations may be expected, and the Provisional IRA will gain increased membership and Catholic support. The two communities, with the British Government obviously incapable any more of restraining their conflict, will have nowhere to go except at each other's throats.

People who would find all this very gratifying, who can believe that it will lead to a new and better Ireland, have good reason to support the H-Block campaign. But people who do *not* think that Catholic-Protestant polarisation and violence is to be welcomed, have no reason to lend it their support.

## BRITISH WITHDRAWAL AND THE "FIRST NATIONAL AIM"

The Provisionals have used the H-Block campaign to raise sectarian tensions and create a more favourable atmosphere for waging war to achieve a British withdrawal. The IRA are pursuing seriously the "First National Aim" of all southern political parties: the annexation of Northern Ireland, or "the coming together of all Irish people", or any other euphemism you like.

Given the opposition of the majority of people in Northern Ireland to a "united Ireland", a section of the nationalist political establishment, Fianna Fail and the SDLP, have come to openly endorse the aim of the IRA: that Britain should expel Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom against the will of its people.

The present British Government has made it a point of fundamental and constantly acknowledged principle to do no such thing, and it is most unlikely that any future Government will do so, but if a British Government *did* withdraw its army and administration from Northern Ireland, a united Ireland would not result. There would be a sectarian civil war, and after horrific slaughter in Belfast and the clearing of wide areas around the present border, with Catholics being driven southwards and westwards, and Protestants being driven northwards and eastwards, an independent Protestant state would emerge in Northern Ireland controlling a reduced territory.

## SOUTHERN ARMY INVASION ?

There are many Northern Catholics who deny that this would happen if the British withdrew. The Provisional campaign itself is based on a hope that something else

will happen. When the crunch comes, they expect that *the Republic will mobilise on the side of the Catholics and tip the balance in their favour.*

This is the illusion which makes it possible for Catholics in West Belfast to rush in like lemmings behind the H-Block campaign. Whoever encourages them in such an illusion is doing them a very bad service. But what other effect can the nationalism of southern politicians, asserted so frequently and in so many varied ways, have on the Belfast Catholics except to encourage them in their illusions? It is all very well for their country cousins in Crossmaglen; when the crunch comes, *they* can be reasonably sure of coming out winners.

## DANGEROUS DELUSIONS

The political direction now being taken by Northern Catholics is a highly dangerous one. Southern political parties, on whom the Falls Road and the Short Strand have traditionally looked as the national political leadership, must be considered to have a responsibility for their political welfare - namely, to tell them what they can and cannot expect, and to prevent them from behaving like lemmings - rushing to their own destruction.

Does anyone in the South seriously believe that if all hell breaks loose in Belfast that the man-power of the Irish Republic from Cork to Donegal will be mobilised? And supposing for a moment that it *is*, can they believe that it will be capable of sorting out Belfast and the rest of the North? But there *are* people in the Catholic areas of the North who believe as much. It is time to disillusion them, but the behaviour of southern politicians during the H-Block campaign is doing the very opposite.

## H-BLOCK : THE SOUTHERN RESPONSE

The Southern population has kept its distance from the H-Block campaign. Crowds at demonstrations, particularly in Dublin, have been surprisingly small, when not bussed in from the North. Whatever vague and essentially dishonest "humanitarian" support has been whipped up among the general public is mainly passive and aloof, and ever in danger of alienation by over-enthusiastic demonstrations. We believe that this is because people in the

South, at a distance from the hysteria, can sense what is behind it all, who is guiding the campaign and for what purpose.

Much has been made of the election of 2 H-Block TD's in the General election in the Republic. Yet, despite handpicking the constituencies most republican in sympathies, the electoral response *outside the border counties* was not spectacular, and the general swing to Fine Gael could hardly be described as a Republican upsurge. Furthermore, for the first time, a secular socialist candidate who openly rejects the nationalist demand to rule Northern Ireland, has been elected to the Dail. Jim Kemmy, an active member of Socialists Against Nationalism, was elected for Limerick East.

### RESPONSE OF SOUTHERN POLITICIANS

Since the hunger striking began, Southern politicians of all parties have declared the issue to be one of humanitarian prison reform. This is to ignore the prisoners' own stated objectives. The National H-Blocks Committee summed up the reasons for the campaign in a leaflet calling for a "day of action" on December 10th 1980 during the first hunger strike:

*"Seven prisoners are dying on hunger strike.... For four years, they have fought against being treated as common criminals. They are fighting for the restoration of political status."*

And announcing the second hunger strike, a statement from the prisoners said:

*"A number of our comrades, beginning today with Bobby Sands, will hunger strike to the death, unless the British Government abandons its criminalisation policy and meets our demands for political status" (Irish Times 2/3/1981)*

No socialist or progressive would oppose general prison reform, but to suggest, as southern politicians do, that IRA prisoners are struggling to achieve basic dignity in an inhuman prison system is absurd. Conditions in the Maze for conforming prisoners are no worse, and in many respects are a good deal better than conditions in either the Republic or in Britain itself. As regards the five demands, conforming prisoners are entitled to wear their own clothes for about threequarters of the time. During

the remaining time, they are required to wear normal civilian clothing issued by the prison authorities. They are *not* fighting against the indignities of prison uniform, since they are no longer required to wear one at any time.

As regards prison work, it can be avoided by taking an educational course. This would be at the discretion of the authorities, and there would be no courses in bomb-making, but undoubtedly, if the Provisionals chose to work the system as it is, very few of them would have to do prison work.

Given the existing position in relation to the entire five demands as it has been clarified by the Government, if the hunger strikers are dying for these demands *as concrete measures of prison reform*, they must be raving lunatics. If what Haughey, FitzGerald and O'Fiaich say is true: that a "humanitarian solution" is possible, and the IRA-men have starved themselves to death only because the administration in the Maze was not "flexible" enough, then they had taken leave of their senses on the first day they refused food. But there is no good reason to consider them lunatics. They know very well what their aim is - a clear cut-and-dried political victory over the British Government leading to further successes for the organisations to which they belong - the IRA and the INLA.

The "humanitarian concern" of southern politicians allows them to make their contribution to the campaign without having to publicly endorse the demand for political status.

### COALITION RESPONSE

In its first weeks of office, the FitzGerald Government out-Republicaned Haughey to such an extent that their public statements became practically indistinguishable from those of the prisoners. Even Neil Blaney was ecstatic about their performance. Praise indeed!

The initiative begun by the Catholic Church through its Commission for Justice and Peace was the signal for a joint Church-State offensive on behalf of the prisoners. The Commission had already adopted a set of proposals which bore a striking resemblance to the substance of the five demands. They further clarified their role when, during an optimistic phase of their negotiations, they announced

they had won for the prisoners, "90% of their five demands". When the British Government finally baulked at this total surrender, the Commission and the Irish Government accused them of "not seriously seeking a solution" and joined the IRA demand for direct negotiations.

Clearly, the only kind of "solution" envisaged by the Government or the Church was one of more or less total British capitulation. Of course, they claimed to be only concerned with "saving lives", but the IRA could save the lives of the prisoners at any time by ordering them off their hunger strike. Yet, neither the Government nor the Church have put any comparable pressure on the IRA to do so.

### **ABANDONMENT OF POLITICAL STATUS**

The irony is that the first sign of compromise from the prisoners came during the Commission's intervention. In a statement on the 4th of July, the hunger-strikers all but abandoned the demand for political status when they declared themselves only interested in prison reforms which would be extended to all prisoners. This represented a considerable climb-down from their condemnation of the Government's "criminalisation" policy (ie - being treated like ordinary criminals) and their demand to be treated as a distinct group of prisoners of war. Charles Haughey was quick to help them save face by declaring on RTE radio on July 5th that the prisoners "had never at any time demanded political status" (which can only be described as the biggest of the big lies). However, FitzGerald and the Church Delegation took to loudly demanding British capitulation and forced the prisoners to retreat to a hard line position. They could hardly be seen to be less militant in pursuit of their five demands than Fine Gael or the Catholic Church. In fact, FitzGerald staked so much of his credibility on achieving a major British U-turn that a defeat for the Provisionals would have been almost as much a defeat for him. And with the defeat of his own initiative, a defeat for the Provisionals began to look more likely, so he found it prudent to distance himself from the prisoners' cause on the fairly flimsy grounds that the visit to the prison of two government officials met his demand for direct negotiations, and the prisoners should have responded.

### **FITZGERALD'S MOTIVES**

FitzGerald is trying to lay the ghost of the old Fine Gael Blue Shirt image. He has also had the possibility of By-elections in Cavan-Monaghan and Louth on his mind since he took office, and is out to prove his Republican credentials in a way that Haughey would not have needed to. However, FitzGerald is undoubtedly as aware as Haughey was before him of the advantages of nationalist hysteria in bringing about a sense of national unity behind the Government, given its precarious existence, and the disastrous economic situation which will lead to cuts in living standards in the months to come. FitzGerald's behaviour has been highly irresponsible in the circumstances, and the Labour Party - as usual - just drifts in his wake.

### **SECTARIANISM AND REPUBLICANISM**

No clearer illustration of the sectarianism inherent in the H-Block campaign could be found than the totally hypocritical and one-sided "humanitarianism" it evokes. When has Church or State been similarly mobilised to save the lives of the (Protestant) victims of the prisoners and the organisations to which they belong? When has either been involved in comparable diplomatic or political "initiatives" to force the IRA to call off its campaign of murder?

The H-Block campaign itself has indulged in a level of Catholic devotionalism and clericalism unprecedented in political movements in recent years. At one time, there was much talk of non-sectarian Republicanism. In the last few years, the two terms have become increasingly mutually exclusive.

### **THE INEVITABLE ROAD OF THE NATIONALIST SOCIALISTS**

Bernadette McAiskey once claimed to be a non-sectarian socialist. Her degeneration into a straightforward nationalist bigot is typical of many erstwhile non-sectarian republicans, and is paralleled by many who once sought to escape the dead-end movements of Irish politics. At Patsy O'Hara's funeral, she complained that even more priests were not giving their blessing to the H-Block

campaign, and continued:

*"It is tragic that at this time in our history, the Irish people who, for centuries have defended their church and religion, should by and large, be abandoned by it in their hour of greatest need" (Irish Times 26/5/1981)*

We believe increasing numbers of people in the Republic want to break with the dead-end politics of anti-partitionism. We want class politics and secular laws. We do *not* want nationalist mob oratory, populist guff that obscures the economic and social issues, or Catholic-Protestant bigotry in its political or military forms. A sectarian civil war is not our idea of what is needed, either for the people of Northern Ireland or for our own fuller satisfaction.

The H-Block campaign is the past trying to intimidate the future. We must not succumb.

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#### **SOCIALISTS AGAINST NATIONALISM**

- ★ *do not consider the present war in Northern Ireland to be a war of national liberation*
- ★ *do not believe the territorial unity of Ireland to be an essential prerequisite of the development of socialist politics*
- ★ *publish a monthly bulletin Labour Won't Wait.*

*For further information, contact:  
The Secretary, Socialists Against  
Nationalism, 26 Essex Quay, Dublin 8*

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