

**THE  
MAKING  
OF THE  
IRISH  
REVOLUTION**

**a short analysis**

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## INTRODUCTION

The following speech was delivered by Tomas MacGiolla, President Sinn Fein to the Boston Irish Forum, August 31st 1975.

The speech analyses the policies and strategies of the Republican Movement from the early sixties up to today.

It sets out clearly what the revolutionary objectives of the Movement were, and are, and of how they can be achieved. Dealing with the past few years he shows how the potential for victory was lost through the activities of the Provisional Alliance and other sectarian organisations. The activities of these groups allowed the opportunist politicians, Catholic and Protestant, to regain the leadership of the working people who have been sickened and terrorised by the bombing campaign and sectarian killings on one hand and by the repression and killings of the British forces on the other.

Tomas MacGiolla shows how a policy of short term demands, even of a reformist nature, can be utilised by the revolutionary movement, to mobilise people and build their confidence in their own strength whilst developing their political and social consciousness.

Ending with the present situation of increasing repression North and South and the ever increasing danger of sectarian civil war, Tomas MacGiolla points out what the priorities are now to secure any progress towards our goal — a Democratic Socialist Republic.

# THE MAKING OF THE IRISH REVOLUTION

## STRATEGIES AND TASKS

by Tomas MacGiolla

The Republican Movement has a unique record of revolutionary struggle by any standards. It can trace its links directly back to Wolfe Tone and the republican revolutionaries of the late 18th century. It has a tradition rooted amongst the workers and small farmers of Ireland and though many times apparently destroyed it has arisen in the next generation with renewed vigour to strike again at the forces of British Imperialism;

A movement with such a long history and tradition can easily become stale and lose its revolutionary vigour by turning inward on itself. It becomes elitist and its traditions become more important than its revolutionary objective. It forgets about the mass of the people who are the real revolutionaries if only they were organised.

This is what happened to the Republican Movement in mid 20th century and by 1962 it found itself once more on the verge of destruction.

The National and local leadership at that time after a great deal of debate, analysis and examination of past failures and successes made a number of fundamental decisions. These decisions, of a revolutionary nature, are the basis for all our present policies and tactics. We began with a clearly defined and stated objective.

- (1) That our objective is to overthrow British imperialism and capitalism in Ireland and place the Irish people in control of the wealth of Ireland.

This statement of objective clarified then many of our tactics and strategies for the future.

- (a) There was more to the struggle than getting rid of British troops. We did not want a 32 County Free State.

- (b) The struggle could not be just confined to the North. Imperialism had to be fought North and South in whatever forms it manifested itself.
  - (c) Therefore the struggle could not and should not be an elitist militarist struggle. It must involve the mass of the people and be led by the working class.
- (2) The purpose of our movement must be to achieve victory, to win through to our objective – not to make a stand, or pass on the torch or just have a campaign to show we can fight as well or better than the previous generation.

This led to a new maturity of thought within the Movement.

- (a) Every action we took must be a progressive one. It must knit us in among the people not divorce us from them.
- (b) We must organise the people to build a revolution and not just build an army to start a campaign.

In pursuance of this changed policy the Republican movement organised mass action of an agitational nature on social and economic issues in the South in 1967 and developed the beginnings of the civil rights struggle in the North in 1968. We saw its possibilities and its dangers. Most members of the movement understood and recognised, in this mass struggle, the beginnings of a revolutionary movement which could not be contained by any repressive forces and which would sweep aside the existing regimes North and South. The main danger we saw was that the momentum was so rapid in the North we would not be ready to fill the vacuum as insufficient contact had been made with Protestant working class and the development of the South was not keeping pace. Unfortunately some of our members were so blinded by pure militarism that they could see no good in anything else and didn't even recognise that in the past Britain had a history of provoking militarism as a method of destroying potential revolution.

The pogroms of August '69 in Belfast provided the ideal opportunity for encouraging the militarist and every advantage was taken of it. Those who fell for this were mainly older traditionalists who had lost all perspective of the meaning of the struggle for freedom in their determination to get another "campaign" started. They therefore split the republican movement and proceeded to split the

Citizens Defence Committees, the Civil Rights Movement and the Prisoners Aid Committees. By 1971 the revolutionary impetus was lost. By 1972 the back of the people's struggle was broken North and South and it was subsequently beaten into the ground.

While the people were united behind coherent realisable objectives all the repressive forces of the Stormont and British governments could not defeat them. Repression only welded them closer together and raised their consciousness as to the true nature of the struggle against imperialism. They could only be split from the inside but once split they were easily scattered and broken. History will judge the splitters harshly but meantime the task of rebuilding the people's unity must go on.

During the past four years the demands and the objectives of the bombers, the sectarian killers and the British terror squads have dominated the scene and have obscured the demands of the masses of people who struggled for justice from 1968 until they were driven from the streets.

The objectives which motivated the mass struggle in 1968/69 and up to 1972 were:

- (a) **Civil Rights and equality of citizenship for all, e.g. ending of discrimination in jobs and housing, ending of repressive laws and reform of police and judiciary — summed up in a demand for a Bill of Rights.**
- (b) **Social Justice, e.g. emergency housing programme and full employment policy including special reliefs for depressed areas.**
- (c) **Political freedom to advocate policies of constitutional change and the outlawing of sectarianism.**

There were two major underlying factors in the struggle:—

- (1) It was recognised that the ultimate responsibility for the lack of democracy and bad social conditions lay with the British government who had jurisdiction over the area. Therefore the demands of the struggle were directed at Westminster.
- (2) It was recognised that the immediate responsibility for the conditions existing lay with the unionist subordinate government at Stormont and that the imposition of democracy by

Westminster would automatically mean the smashing of the totalitarian Orange Unionist system.

The bigoted reactionaries with no understanding of these political realities short circuited the struggle by launching a military campaign on the contradictory slogans -- "*Britain get out*" and "*Abolish Stormont*" -- contradictory because "abolish Stormont" meant "impose British rule".

The campaign halted all progress on the peoples' demands and led to increased repressive forces, increased repressive laws and increased repressive acts. If the military conflict is now ended the opportunity exists to force Britain to undo the repression by withdrawal of troops from the streets, ending of internment and ending of the Emergency Provisions Act. If these demands can be won we would have regained some of the ground lost since 1971.

But we would not have made any advance on the objectives of the people's struggle of 1968. The housing situation is still appalling as shown by the recent report of the Northern Ireland Housing Trust; unemployment in the depressed areas is as bad as in 1968 and now redundancies are increasingly occurring in well established industrial areas; sectarianism has increased to frightening proportions with the constant threat of civil war; there is still no Bill of Rights; the police have been rearmed and are as unacceptable as ever in Republican areas. Furthermore an event of crucial importance to the people of the Six-Counties took place under cover of the din and horror, they were quietly pushed into the EEC without discussion or consultation. This event is at present having a more shattering effect on the livelihood of farmers and workers than all the destruction of the past few years.

Lastly, the republican and socialist objective of a united Irish working class in control of a Democratic Socialist Republic with sovereignty over all Ireland has been pushed back further than it has been for many years. During the late sixties the Civil Rights campaign in the North was paralleled by a mass struggle in the South on housing and other social issues. During this period progressive ideas were in the ascendant North and South. There was a great upsurge and strengthening of left wing forces and the reactionaries in all parts of Ireland were in disarray. The effect of

the past four years of terror and counter-terror by Kitson's forces, the Provisionals and the Loyalist assassins has been to smother all progressive ideas, to weaken the forces of the left and strengthen the right wing parties to the extent that they are now dominant in both North and South.

These have been the results in Ireland of the purely militarist and terrorist campaigns of the past few years. Internationally the results have been just as disastrous. The world wide support which was built up in 1968 and 1969 by the civil rights struggle, came because people all over the world could relate what was happening to their own experience and could understand and support the demands for basic democratic rights and social justice. They can neither understand or support the negatively destructive activities of the Provisionals or Loyalists. The British Labour and Trade Union movement which gave enormous and effective support to the democratic struggle also became confused when the fascists and reactionaries took over the stage.

The recent bombing campaign of the Provisionals in Britain seems to have been designed to ensure that the British working class would be driven into the arms of the Tories and would give no further support to the progressive movement in Ireland.

This continuous downward trend of political development in Ireland during the past four years has led to feelings of frustration and even despair in many quarters. But it only requires an end to the violent conflict to completely reverse the trend. That is why the most progressive and revolutionary demand at this time is for peace. Peace may mean surrender for those engaged in the terror campaigns, for the Provisionals, or for the British forces or for the fascist Loyalists, but for the mass of the people peace only means the opportunity to resume the real struggle, the struggle for basic democratic rights, the struggle for a job or for proper housing, the struggle for ownership of the wealth of their country. All the progressive forces in the country demand peace, all the fascists and sectarian bigots are opposed to it.

The achievement of peace is the prerequisite for progress. Only when people can move about and talk without fear can progressive ideas once more flourish. But the very struggle for peace itself can

be the first upward movement of the progressive forces from the morass in which they find themselves.

At present the peace movement is in the hands of clergy and middle-class do-gooders whose purpose is to suppress all demands for change and equate maintenance of the status quo with peace. This must be changed urgently. Progressives must move to the forefront of the struggle for peace. To this end a conference should be convened of those organisations who have a record of defending and supporting working class interests and in particular the struggle for democracy and basic human rights. Such a conference should be able to agree on a common programme of action:

- (1) To achieve peace;
- (2) To use peace for the people's benefit.

The peace struggle involves three immediate priorities:

- (1) Ending all campaigns of violence;
- (2) Ending internment immediately;
- (3) Withdrawing troops to barracks (including the UDR).

Such peace could not last long however unless it was followed up by:

- (1) Arrangements for amnesty for all political prisoners, North, South and in Britain;
- (2) Reform of the police;
- (3) Abolishing repressive legislation.

Points 2 and 3 immediately draw us into the field of a Bill of Rights which has been sought for over six years by the NICRA supported by many other organisations. In the intervening period the British Government have tried almost every other possible solution but they have consistently refused even to consider the question of a Bill of Rights.

There is no political or other organisation in Ireland which is opposed to a Bill of Rights and most have come out in open support of it. In the past year all the major Loyalist organisations including the UUUC have publicly supported the campaign for a Bill of Rights. Now is the time it is needed. No other legislation is more urgently required from Westminster so all possible pressure, nationally and internationally should be exerted on Britain to legislate such a Bill. In particular both the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the British TUC have supported the call for a Bill of Rights.



Therefore a peace campaign led by the working class in Ireland and Britain, through its Trade Unions and its political organisations, could continue the struggle for democracy by a campaign for a Bill of Rights immediately the three main priority conditions for peace are achieved.

Northern Ireland is at present ruled direct from Westminster. The reality of the situation is that direct rule will continue for a further year at least and more likely two years. The Convention is simply a British holding operation to give her time to work out a political solution which will be in her best interest. It only has powers of discussion and submission of proposals to Westminster. Its importance for Socialists and Republicans is the opportunity it gives for increasing the political awareness of both the Catholic and Protestant workers. But while it is deliberating and while Westminster is then considering its proposals, the people will continue to be ruled direct by the British Government.

This rule is, at present, autocratic to the point of being almost a military dictatorship. Democratic rights, just laws, civilianised police and impartial judiciary must be established by Westminster before any new governmental structures are set up in the Six-Counties. Otherwise any new assembly even if it had the fullest support of all sections of the community would simply be taking over the same repressive laws and police which have been one of the prime causes of so much turmoil for the past six years.

The passing of an effective Bill of Rights would allow normal political development to take place in the Six-County State. Alliances and coalitions could develop which would eliminate sectarian, one party dictatorship and end the power-sharing game. It is in such a situation that working class unity could be developed, first in the North and then throughout Ireland. We in Sinn Fein are convinced that on Social, Democratic, Political and Cultural grounds a united, independent and socialist Ireland would provide the best conditions for raising the living standards of the workers and farmers and give them the health, social welfare and educational facilities they so badly need. If sectarianism, bigotry and hatred are rooted out the working class will unite in brotherhood to throw out the imperialists North and South and claim the wealth of the whole island.

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