

Revolutionary Nationalism, Class Struggle, and Problems of Party Building in Ireland

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"Gerry Foley's analysis of the 1972 Official Sinn Fein Ard Fheis (conference) is nothing more or less than a eulogy of nationalism as a solution to Ireland's economic and social problems.

"Writing in two issues of the Pabloite Unified [sic] Secretariat's 'Intercontinental Press', he argues for a new unity between Officials, Provisionals and civil righters in a revolutionary party using mass action on the streets as its number one tactic."

This was the assessment of my three articles on the Official Sinn Fein *ard fheis*¹ made by Ian Yeats, the Irish expert of the Socialist Labour League, an English sectarian formation headed by Gerry Healy. Yeats's review appeared in the March 22 issue of *Workers Press*, the organ of the SLL.

Dogmatic denunciation of opponents of the SLL is one of the distinguishing features of the *Workers Press*. Denunciation, in fact, is such a prime consideration that it often overrides the need to keep in touch with reality. An example from Yeats's article is his explanation of the source of division among Ulster workers:

"... if Ulster workers are divided it is precisely because revisionists like Foley, and indeed all those organizations affiliated to the Unified [sic] Secretariat, have actively applauded and fostered sectarian demands and movements as a substitute for building a Marxist revolutionary consciousness and organization capable of uniting them."

Since the Trotskyist groups are the most immediate competitors of the SLL (which claims to be Trotskyist), they are obviously to blame for any setbacks in revolutionary upsurges around the world. From the Healyite point of view they must be agents of the capitalist system. And, of course, the capitalists are interested in fostering these alleged agents. Thus when the British government felt compelled to concede the right to demonstrate, after it had tried for months to end active mass protest in Northern Ireland, the SLL interpreted this as follows:

"It seems the authorities were keen to allow yesterday's protest against internment to enable 'left' and 'radical' leaders to regain some credibility with the Catholic community." (*Workers Press*, January 3, 1971.)

In other words, the concession gained through mass struggle (in which the SLL did not participate) were part

of a plot to keep the masses away from the SLL and its program.

Yeats's attack, while hewing to the usual Healyite requirements, has several unusual features. The most important is that his real target was not that bête noire of the SLL, the "Pabloites," and his purpose was not simply to reassure the faithful. Yeats had in mind a political process taking place in another organization.

The Healyite reporter evidently wanted to impress the most dogmatic and workerist fringe of the Official republican movement, whose attempt to build a mass revolutionary party in Ireland has tended to get bogged down in various types of sectarianism. The fact that he indicated this interest in the Officials confirms the nature of some of the problems this group has been experiencing.

Because of their unique historical advantages, the fact that their organization is known and respected for its heroic past and includes among its activists most of the politically conscious vanguard of the Irish people, the Official republicans tend to think that they cannot fall victim to deviations of the kind affecting some of the smaller left groups. Unfortunately, as the last year in particular has shown, this is not true. In fact, as a result of the all-inclusive political character of the Official republican movement, the disputes of the far-left tendencies have been reflected in its ranks. This process will inevitably continue and deepen as it has in similar organizations elsewhere.

The smaller left groups promulgate various conceptions of party building and revolutionary action. They tend to carry these ideas to their logical conclusion and can thus serve to some extent as laboratory specimens. It would be especially useful for the republicans to study these examples, because if they are to build a revolutionary party as they hope, a party that by necessity will be built on a political program, on ideas, they will have to accustom themselves to thinking in terms of the long-range implications of certain concepts and the way these can become distorted in the complexities of real struggle. However absurd the smaller groups may be, and the SLL certainly ranks high in absurdity, objective processes have produced them; and real political problems, usually very difficult ones to solve, lie at their root.

Moreover, it is not only small organizations that can act in extremely sectarian ways. In its ultraleft phase of 1927-33, the German Communist party, which had a following of millions, displayed aberrations that would

1. See *Intercontinental Press*, January 22, February 5, and February 12, 1973.

put even the strangest of British sects in the shade. The result of this sectarianism was a world-historic tragedy, the victory of Nazism. On the other hand, the British far-left groups have a certain value in that they represent a wide range of errors to avoid in trying to build a revolutionary alternative to the reformist parties.

The Official republicans have learned to some extent how difficult this is. The Communist party's history as a semioutlaw in Irish Catholic society has not made it revolutionary. Nor has the revolutionary daring of the republicans made them proof against the reformist ideas of the CP and the varieties of Stalinism. In fact, as their political situation has worsened, it has become apparent that the Officials, however unwillingly, have been drawn more and more into the train of these reformist concepts—moreover at the very time they are seeing how useless the CP apparatus is for any revolutionary purpose. In fact, reformist ideas are deeply rooted in capitalist society and in the mentality of broad layers of workers under capitalism.

It is also true that the pressures of capitalist society tend to turn ideas and political groups into their opposites. Thus, many Irish rebels of 1916-21 become counterrevolutionists in 1922. The dynamics of this process are illustrated not only by the small groups but also by the disputes that now seem to be developing in the Official republican movement. The fact that the SLL, which claims to be the paragon of Trotskyist orthodoxy, ends up, as we shall see, echoing the arguments of the Irish Stalinists is an example of such an outcome. Another is that, despite an evidently growing antagonism, the basic approach of the workerist ultralefts in the republican movement tends to coincide for all practical purposes with that of the Stalinist-trained reformists.

So, it seems useful to take up Yeats's article in detail, since it illustrates not only the level of the SLL's degeneration but the problems facing the Official republican leaders and some dangerous errors they have made in trying to deal with them.

The Problem of Party Building

As the historic revolutionary organization of the Irish people, the republican movement could pride itself on being a significant factor in the politics of the country, deeply rooted in the society and possessing leaders who had proved their courage, cool-headedness, and devotion in the most difficult situations—eminently practical men and women. But building a revolutionary political party with a consistent program and practice, a party that can challenge the basic structures of imperialism in Ireland, was to all intents and purposes a completely new concept in Irish politics. There was very little in the republican tradition that could serve as a guide for building a party based on a consistent and thoroughgoing critique of society. This is a very different task from building a broad nationalist formation on a program simply of organizing guerrilla struggle against a foreign oppressor and the surface manifestations of colonial subservience.

The style of leadership that has grown up out of nationalist experience is to seek consensus, to avoid sharp political debates, to conciliate and balance off different groupings and individuals with fundamentally different

ideas of the kind of Ireland they want. There is little understanding of the need to struggle to clarify political principles and develop tactics in accordance with these principles.

Thus, the inevitable tendency has been to attempt to maintain a politically heterogeneous coalition around a kind of minimum program. For most of modern Irish history, this minimum program in effect has been to prepare a military uprising against foreign rule. Within this framework, revolutionists like James Stephens could work together, however uneasily, with conservatives like Thomas Clarke Luby and even monarchists like John O'Leary.

A revolutionary party also must strive to achieve the broadest possible unity behind democratic and revolutionary-socialist goals. But its method of accomplishing this is completely different from that of vaguely defined formations.

A revolutionary party is built on two foundations: clear political principles, and a constructive and objective approach of working with other groups and tendencies capable to some extent, despite their backwardness and confusion, of participating in the struggle for national and social liberation. United fronts in action with such reformist or eclectic groups are fundamentally a means of reaching out to those layers of the people and the working class that do not yet understand the need for a socialist revolution and must be convinced in practice that socialists are the best fighters for their objectives and that Marxism offers the best practical guide for their struggle.

Trying to put together broad organizational combinations by avoiding or fuzzing over key questions of program is fatal in the long run to both principle and unity. This approach makes it impossible to educate either the vanguard or the masses in any consistent way. Inevitably, policy is decided by back-room compromises. It is neither discussed fully nor tested in action. The result is a tendency toward competition of organizations and personalities instead of programs and methods of work. Rival combinations try to build themselves at the expense of the mass movement, rather than strive to lead it by winning the masses to their ideas and example.

This law seems to be at the root of many of the basic problems the Official republican movement has encountered over the past nine months in particular. Instead of trying to win the Provisionals over to their political program by seeking to work with them on common objectives, the Officials have tried to anathematize them. They have tended, moreover, to develop the idea that it was possible to participate in united-front work without trying to involve the Provisionals. As a result, among other things, the Civil Rights Association, of which the Officials are the major component, has become more and more sectarian and less and less able to mobilize large numbers of people.

At the same time, apparently in order to hold on to their only allies in the North, the Communist party, the Officials accepted a right-wing program at the NICRA convention in February that called for an "impartial peace-keeping force" and a calling in of "illegal weapons." By implicitly offering confidence to a liberal capitalist and Unionist regime, these planks contradicted fundamental republican as well as revolutionary Marxist principles.

The Civil Rights Struggle

The effect of such positions, if they become the program of the movement in practice, will be to transform the Civil Rights Association into the opposite of what it was during the mass marches. At that time the struggle developed around slogans that struck at the essence of the partition and the counterrevolutionary settlement of the Irish war of national liberation, and at the same time seemed immediate and reasonable demands to the masses of the oppressed Catholic population, who were not ready to fight for a united Ireland as such. It is quite unlikely in fact that any large section of the population will take up a fight against an entire system as such. Revolutions generally begin as struggles for concrete demands that the system cannot meet.

Because of its revolutionary dynamic, the civil-rights struggle united large masses of the oppressed population in action behind radical opponents of the partition and the imperialist system. In this context, concessions granted under the pressure of direct action by the people only lent more momentum and raised the aspirations of the masses.

However, if the civil-rights movement now takes the approach of saying right from the start that the government and the ruling class have nothing to worry about, that it will keep its followers from going too far, that it is really the best defender of bourgeois-democratic "law and order," the authorities have no reason to make any concessions. The masses of the oppressed population, whose hatred of the system is constantly fired by the intimidation and brutality of the British troops, have no reason to follow it. And what is worse, calls by a respected organization like NICRA for "impartial peacekeepers" and disarming the people strengthen illusions that the government can play a legitimate role as peacemaker, which not only weakens the resistance of the masses to the inevitable attempts to beat them back into passivity but also makes it more difficult to focus international public opinion against the British and proimperialist repressive forces.

Whereas in the period of the big marches the civil-rights movement had a radical democratic impact, encouraging the masses of the oppressed population to act directly to press their demands, an explicitly reformist civil-rights organization will inevitably tend to shift its focus toward lobbying, becoming incorporated into the game of bourgeois politics that demobilizes and divides the people. In this way, "unity of the left" on a reformist program results in disunity of the really important forces, the forces that can make a revolution.

Role of Stalinism

As for the Stalinists in particular, it is not sufficient to regard them simply as "part of the left." Because of the twists and turns of the Soviet and Chinese bureaucracies to which they are bound and because of the general interest of these privileged groupings in preserving the world status quo, the Communist parties can find themselves in positions to the right of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois democrats and nationalists.

This was the case, for example, in Argentina during

and immediately following the second world war when, in the name of unity between the Soviet Union and the West in the war against the Axis, the Communist party opposed the anti-imperialist movement led by Perón. As usually happens when a Communist party is forced to go against the current because of larger opportunistic aims of the bureaucracy, the Argentine CP adopted a sectarian position opposing the driving force of what at the time was the greatest popular movement in the history of the country. As a result it was not only isolated by the Peronist leadership and rendered unable to do anything to wrest control of the movement from the national-bourgeois leadership but it itself divided and weakened the workers movement and the anti-imperialist forces.

In Northern Ireland also the Communist party cut itself off from the main anti-imperialist current owing to the needs of the Soviet alliance with Britain and the United States in the second world war. It remains isolated from the nationalist-minded population because of its integration into the Unionist and British patriotic left and its fear of any violent upset in the heart of the imperialist "sphere of influence." Thus, in the long run an alliance with the Communist party on a reformist and Unionist program means putting "unity of the left" in place of unity of the nationalist-minded population, which is far more important and has revolutionary potential. Subjective reactions to nationalist groups using violence against the left in their own community should not be permitted to obscure this. It should be recalled that where they have had the strength, the Stalinists' record on this score has been far worse than anything alleged against the right-wing Provisionals.

Yeats Puts in His Oar

The Healyite reporter Yeats seems completely oblivious of the real problems of Official republican strategy in the civil-rights movement. For instance, he writes:

"The Ard Fheis was distinguished by an almost complete move away from backing the on-the-streets reformist militancy of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement and the Communist Party of Ireland to the concept of building a new revolutionary nationalist party."

The real problem is the "off-the-streets" reformism of the Communist party. Although the NICRA convention was held in February, Yeats does not mention in his March 22 article that while Official representation on the executive board was reinforced, the program of the organization shifted to the right. This was the fruit of the "move away from backing the . . . reformist militancy of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement and the Communist Party of Ireland." Moreover, the new executive board included republicans whose courage and militancy are unimpeachable.

How were these leaders, who daily risk their lives and liberties for their convictions, cajoled into compromising their principles by taking responsibility for a probourgeois law-and-order program? The most likely explanation is that they were misled by ultraleft and workerist notions that the civil-rights movement was not important, that it was reformist by nature and that revolutionary politics belonged to another sphere. For example, one of the members of the NICRA executive elected in the last convention, Malachy McGurran, told me in an interview December 26, 1972:

"The Civil Rights Association is quite clearly not the mass movement of the people that it once was, the movement that mobilized primarily large sections of the Catholic people. Its impetus as a mass movement is on the wane. As a strong pressure group with a fairly large membership, it is still reasonably effective. But there are other forces in the field, which have to be taken into consideration. The forces of sectarianism, for example, negate an awful lot of the potential of the civil-rights movement."²

There can be no question about McGurran's revolutionary ideals, his dedication, or his dislike of Stalinist reformism. But at the same time it is clear that his perspective for the Civil Rights Association parallels that of the Stalinists; that is, he views it essentially as a liberal lobby.

This correspondence between the approach of subjectively revolutionary but non-Marxist republicans and that of the Stalinists and Stalinist-trained reformists and centrists is precisely the most dangerous tendency in the Official movement. I explained this in my article in the February 5 issue of *Intercontinental Press*:

"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. Because of the *political* and *social* mechanisms of imperialist control in Ireland, and because of the revolutionary traditions of the Irish people, the struggle against repression and discrimination is the cutting edge of the fight against imperialism. In fact, the civil-rights movement is an anti-imperialist movement in essence, and this is becoming clearer and clearer as the British army assumes a more and more active role in repressing the nationalist people. Economic issues underlie this struggle, and as it develops, its economic implications will become even clearer. But the *political* issues of democracy and an end to discrimination are the focus.

"Nonetheless, there are historical tendencies in the Official republican movement that could deflect it from concentrating on this issue. Furthermore, both ultraleftists and opportunists are anxious to divert revolutionary republicans from this task. From the standpoint of workerist ultralefts, the civil-rights movement has never been 'revolutionary' enough because it does not unite Protestant and Catholic workers and explicitly challenge capitalist productive relations. . . .

"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 experienced' people, as they picture themselves."

I also referred to this problem in the preceding article on the Official *ard fheis* in the January 22 issue of *Intercontinental Press*, in connection with the attitude of the Officials toward more conservative and traditional nationalists:

"The Official leadership has seen how harmful the growth of dogmatism can be, as manifested by, among other things, the reaction of its own members to the excesses that appeared for a while in the *United Irishman* [under

the editorship of a romantic young Stalinoid]. Whatever the role of individuals or groups in fostering dogmatism, it was facilitated by the atmosphere of hysteria created, in essence, by the Officials' failure to deal politically with the problem of the Provisionals.

"One of the most ominous aspects of this problem was the tendency of a de facto combination to develop between young republicans influenced by ultraleft currents, opposed in principle to any cooperation with 'middle-class nationalists,' and romanticizers of the 'tough' methods of Stalinism, whose concept of political struggle consisted of issuing denunciations and lurid threats. The Stalinoid romantic posturing in particular was unpleasantly reminiscent of the attitude of the German Communist party in its ultraleft period, when it threatened to 'liquidate' the Social Democratic workers at the very time the fascists were preparing in fact to liquidate both the CP and the Social Democrats."

'Utterly Non-Marxist'

This analysis stirred my Healyite critic to say the following:

"Not only is Foley's approach to nationalism utterly non-Marxist, but so, too, is his approach to class. Indeed, in his second article [it was actually my first], slating those who foster 'dogmatism', Foley condemns 'the tendency of a *de facto* combination to develop between young Republicans influenced by ultra-left currents, opposed in principle to any co-operation with "middle-class nationalists"

"He goes on, quite wrongly, to say the Stalinists adopt the same line and concludes even more outrageously wrongly that such opposition is 'unpleasantly reminiscent of the attitude of the German Communist Party in its ultra-left period when it threatened to liquidate the Social Democratic workers at the very time the fascists were preparing in fact to liquidate both the CP and the Social Democrats.'

"It hardly needs saying that the German Social Democrats have nothing in common with the bourgeois-nationalists of Sinn Féin."

This "righteous" denunciation skates over the fact that the editor of the *United Irishman* responsible for the hysterical attacks on the Provisionals is a self-proclaimed "Stalinist" and tried to use his diatribes against the Officials' rivals as a means of anathematizing Trotskyism in general. Of course, his version of Stalinism is highly romanticized, and it is not clear how consistently he reflects the views of any Stalinist formation. Nonetheless, a very dogmatic "stages" theory was also pushed in the notorious "Provo/Trof" articles, and so it seems evident that he is at least a purveyor of some key Stalinist concepts and methods.

Moreover, in the *ard fheis*, Desmond O'Hagan, now the educational director of Official Sinn Féin, called the Provisionals a "worse enemy than the British troops." O'Hagan has reasons to resent the traditionalist nationalists and can rightly claim that their policies of random bombings and shootings have been disastrous for the national and left movement. But the fact remains that the Provisionals lead the largest section of militant anti-imperialists in the North. Thus, such a statement has a pernicious logic. Of course, it might not have been

2. "Under the British Occupation," *Intercontinental Press*, January 15, 1973, p. 25.

more considered than other remarks O'Hagan made at the *ard fheis*. But it must be taken seriously since it would be a reasonable conclusion from the line of the *United Irishman* for a whole period.

Moreover, while O'Hagan has taken an extremely rigid attitude toward the traditional nationalists, he has taken quite a moderate tone in other circumstances. For example, he was one of the speakers at a peace conference in Northern Ireland on March 3 that was convened by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. The meeting was described by the March 5 *Irish Times* as "probably the most representative of its kind to be held in the North since the outbreak of the present conflict. About 400 representatives from over 100 trade unions, community associations, statutory bodies, the churches, moderate pressure groups and political parties, attended the conference.

"Telegrams of support were received from the Northern Ireland Secretary, Mr. Whitelaw, the British Labour and Liberal parties and the Trade Union Congress.

"The new committee, Citizens United for Reconciliation and Equality (C. U. R. E.), met the Minister of State, Lord Windlesham later on Saturday."

The Provisionals were not represented at the conference but O'Hagan referred to them indirectly:

"I don't think I should reject this society, nor be lumped on the side of the bombers and wreckers and those who are trying to bring down formal social institutions."

Of course, the "peace" conference was called by the trade-union movement and had the aim of achieving "unity" between the two communities. Thus, it seems quite likely that from O'Hagan's standpoint these remarks were in line with the highest revolutionary principles.

The Officials' director of education laid out his approach quite clearly in his speech April 22 at the Easter rising commemoration in Dublin: O'Hagan called on his audience to dispense with "a current myth which states that a national liberation struggle is in progress, and that therefore the need of the hour is to build an all-class alliance to complete that struggle."

O'Hagan went on to say: "In a relatively urbanised and proletarianised society, it is nonsense to talk of a national liberation struggle in which the working class is not playing the leading and dominating role through their party and kindred organisations.

"It is dangerous nonsense to suggest that the Republican Movement should ally itself with those who have been, and still are, the enemies of the Republic, or who fail to see that the primary struggle in the North is for democracy and against sectarianism.

"The role of the British Army is clearly one of oppression, and must be resisted by the mobilisation of the people in every way possible. But we republicans would be betraying our class, our principles and our goal, if we were to surrender our movement to the Taca men and their friends in the North.³

"Those who have misguidedly followed the Provisional Alliance, and are suffering in Long Kesh and Crumlin Road, along with our own comrades, will soon see how the hack politicians will sell them out on the question

of internment and Special Powers . . . as they rush to divide the spoils and take their seats in the new Assembly.

"An all-class alliance is a return to the 'Labour must wait' position of 1919, and the Irish proletariat have suffered ever since; the Republican Movement cannot and will not ignore the lessons of our history, nor will we betray the class we represent.

"In spite of repression in the North and the denial of fundamental human rights in the South, we must seek to build a unity of the Left, a unity of all organisations which accept that the Republican programme is the programme for national liberation, and the reconquest of Ireland."

O'Hagan said that "abroad we must follow in the honourable international tradition of Tone, Connolly, and Frank Ryan [who fought in the Spanish civil war], in solidarity with those who fight against imperialism, and seeking support from those socialist countries which have won the battle. For these and only these can be our allies."

So, there can be no doubt that O'Hagan also says some revolutionary-sounding things and makes some points that are quite correct. But what is the overall effect of this contradictory mélange?

Theory of Permanent Revolution

It is clear, first of all, that he divides the struggle for "civil rights" from the fight for national liberation. The unity of these movements is the main "myth" he polemicalizes against. Surely this should alert the Healyites, who claim to be the chief repositories of the Trotskyist program, that something is fishy here. In fact, the right of national self-determination is part of the historic democratic program. The whole system of repression in the northern statelet was erected to thwart the Irish national revolution. Thus, the mobilization of the oppressed Catholic minority for democratic rights, regardless of the consciousness of the participants, has clearly had an anti-imperialist and nationalist thrust.

The entire history of the Northern Irish struggle has confirmed the theory of the permanent revolution, that is, that in the age of imperialism mass struggles for democratic rights take on a revolutionary dynamic, since they cannot succeed without overturning the capitalist system itself.

Whatever democratic concessions can be won in the context of an increasingly reactionary world capitalist system are temporary by nature and essentially the by-products of confrontations that challenge the essential underpinnings of bourgeois rule in this period. The importance of such concessions is that they stimulate the hopes of the masses and instill in them the confidence that they have the power to change society.

Unless the leaderships of such struggles are politically prepared to face revolutionary battles, they will become paralyzed in the face of the unforeseen violence of the confrontations, allowing the mass movement to become disoriented and impotent. In order to maintain their advance, mass democratic movements more and more must attack the bases of capitalism and bourgeois society as such and at a certain point must make a decisive turn to transform the society as a whole, becoming the basis of a new kind of state and social order.

3. Taca is the fund-raising organization for Fianna Fail, the historically more nationalistic of the two bourgeois parties, and has been blamed for splitting the republican movement by feeding money to the Provisionals.

It is this process that O'Hagan is most anxious to deny, and it is clear that there is a "stages" concept underlying his remarks. The only difference from the usual schema is that instead of the customary two stages—national liberation first and then socialist revolution—a third stage has been added, the stage of winning civil rights. This conforms to the program of the Communist party of Ireland, which has created a third stage to avoid the revolutionary dynamic of Irish nationalism and to preserve its positions in the British patriotic trade-union movement.

The 'Workerist' Point of View

Similarly, workerists who can see only the economic side of the class struggle—the fight over jobs, wages, and conditions—also deny the national struggle in Northern Ireland.

Both the Protestant and Catholic communities are poor and exploited. And since the only real struggle is supposed to be on economic or "class" issues, the workerist assumes that the one actually taking place must be a product of false consciousness, a fundamentally perverted and sterile conflict. Unlike the Stalinists, who rule out revolution in the foreseeable future, the workerists often have revolutionary aspirations. They tend to think that they can unite the Protestant and Catholic workers through socialist propaganda that avoids the national issues dividing the two communities.

The problem is that the workerist positions tend to converge in actual practice with the Stalinists' outlook. The workerists also regard the threat of clashes between the nationalist and proimperialist popular strata as the ultimate disaster that must be avoided at all costs. As a result, they tend toward a conservative and pessimistic attitude regarding the process going on. And, in making working-class unity their immediate focus, they tend also to try to redirect the nationalist-minded population into the train of the proimperialist trade-union movement.

The workerists and O'Hagan have pointed to some important features in the Irish situation, namely that Ireland is much more integrated into the economy of the imperialist metropolis than the nationally oppressed countries where liberation struggles have taken place in the postwar period. Moreover, the Twenty-Six County state is an old neocolonialist regime, and disillusionment with formal political independence is quite widespread among the working class in particular.

There are various conclusions that must be drawn from this. The most obvious is that the notions of some neo-Maoist dilettantes in the Dublin Official Sinn Féin that there can be a national liberation struggle in Ireland (in a future "stage" of course) like the one in Vietnam are completely divorced from reality. The most important conclusion is that the success of any mass combat in Ireland will be largely dependent on effective support from the international left and working-class movement. O'Hagan's claim that the "only allies" of the Irish people are a vaguely defined category of anti-imperialists and the "socialist" countries who have "won the battle" against imperialism is not only false; it is directly damaging to the Irish revolutionary movement.

By and large, the organized Irish working class has a standard of living closer to that of the workers in the

imperialist centers than to that of the workers and peasants of the colonial world. The conditions in the Stalinized workers states have little or no attraction for them. The unqualified claim that these countries have "won the battle" against imperialism does nothing to make the prospect of revolution appealing to the Irish people and a great deal to make it repellent.

It is hard to see how anything less than the hope of revolution in the advanced capitalist countries—where the chances are better for avoiding bureaucratic degeneration and for achieving direct workers democracy that could guarantee efficient administration of the economy, maximum benefits for the most disadvantaged, and more rather than less personal freedom—can inspire the exertions and sacrifices needed to start up a struggle against the worldwide imperialist system on their small, divided island.

Furthermore, unless the Irish revolution aroused broad support in the advanced countries themselves, it would be doomed to collapse in short order. It seems extremely unlikely in view of the evidence of decades that any of the bureaucratized workers states would defend a revolution in the heart of the capitalist world against the determined attempts of the imperialists to destroy it. Even in Vietnam, on the outermost perimeter of world capitalism, where one of the belligerents is an actual member of the "socialist" bloc, the Soviet Union has doled out aid with an eyedropper. And it has forced the Vietnamese, in return for this, to compromise with Nixon. Moreover, it has given more aid to capitalist Egypt, which does not threaten the fundamental interests of world imperialism, than it has to the Vietnamese revolutionists.

The Soviet policy of aiding regimes in the underdeveloped world is part of its policy of peaceful coexistence. The objective is to build a neutral buffer. Even the aid to Cuba was begun with this aim in mind. Supporting a revolutionary regime is quite another matter. The Cuban process took both Moscow and Washington by surprise. We are not likely to see a duplicate. Furthermore, the Irish economy is far more complex than Cuba's. Far more would be needed to sustain it. As for China, its policy is at least as opportunistic as the Soviet Union's. For example, it supports Common Market integration as a counterweight to U. S. imperialism.

An Explosive Combination

On the other hand, it is equally clear that the driving force of radicalization in Ireland is the national issue, which at its peak has tended to go over into extremely advanced forms of economic struggle, such as the general strike after the Bloody Sunday massacre. Although there has been significant economic unrest in Ireland, one of the episodes involved has touched off a general crisis. The greatest explosions in the recent period, however, have resulted from a combination of national and economic aspirations—for example, the demand for a fair allotment of housing that sparked the first civil-rights march. In every case, it has been the national question fundamentally that has given these upsurges their revolutionary force.

So, while it is essential to get the British working class to oppose the repression that its imperialist government

is carrying out in Ireland, to make the Irish struggle subordinate to British trade unionism would mean sacrificing the fundamental revolutionary dynamic. If the support of the British unions for the democratic demands of the Irish people is made conditional on toning down the national struggle or on the "good" behavior of the nationalists, it is worthless. If the struggle in Ireland were brought down to the level of British trade-unionism in order to "unite" British and Irish workers, this would eliminate one of the main factors undermining the stability of British capitalism and preparing the way for a working-class radicalization that could effectively aid the Irish people.

Furthermore, conditional support for "democracy" in Ireland does nothing to educate the British workers to respect the Irish people's right of self-determination. Only a campaign demanding unconditional recognition of the right of the Irish people to determine their own destiny can make inroads into the social chauvinism of the British trade-union movement.

The concept of conditional support for the victims of imperialist repression is also fatal in Ireland. In his Easter commemoration speech, O'Hagan made a strong point warning the imprisoned Provisionals that the conservative elements among their ranks and supporters would betray them if they got a chance to make an advantageous deal with British imperialism. But the fact that the Civil Rights Association (CRA), of which the Officials are the major component, seems to be taking a turn that at least borders on betrayal of the fighters is likely to obscure this lesson for the traditional nationalists.

"The C. R. A. has subtly altered its views on internment, meanwhile," the *Irish Times* reported April 12, "and although still opposed to it on principle, recognises that there is no longer a massive outcry from the minority population. In consequence, Mrs. Edwina Stewart [of the Communist party], the C. R. A. honorary chairman, said at a press conference yesterday that for a successful anti-internment campaign to be mounted the Provisional I. R. A. would have to call off its campaign of violence."

No matter how you interpret this, unless the *Irish Times* fabricated its report—which is unlikely—such an attitude means placing partial blame for the repression on the Provisionals. The tactical errors of misguided combatants can, of course, make it easier for a capitalist government to carry out a program of repression. But when a people have been as oppressed as the nationalist people of Northern Ireland, and for as long, it is inevitable that there will be irrational outbursts. It is impossible to defend the oppressed people effectively without making it absolutely clear that the entire blame for the violence rests with the system and those who support and maintain it. The only way the setbacks caused by the wrong tactics of the Provisionals can be overcome is by offering an effective alternative. But the new NICRA policy tends in the direction of surrender.

Furthermore, there is no way any self-proclaimed revolutionary leadership can get the most militant strata of the nationalist-minded population to follow in the train of British trade-unionism. Only the vanguard, the most politically advanced sections of the population, dazzled by abstractions about "working-class unity," can be diverted by such a concept, with serious results both for

the left and for the struggle as a whole.

The Bloody Sunday commemoration in Derry was an example of this. Before the event, the British Labour left was congratulating the Official republicans with unwonted fulsomeness for its determination to avoid any "sectarian incidents." The fact that the Civil Rights Association had been able to persuade British trade-union and liberal figures to come to Derry to show their support for democracy, it was confidently declared, had thrown the Provisionals into consternation.

But what happened was that the NICRA action turned into a kind of humanitarian prayer meeting that met with general indifference, a certain amount of amusement and some hostility from the local population. On the other hand, the Provisionals' march to demand the end of imperialist repression drew a crowd estimated as high as 20,000 persons, a number comparing favorably with the largest civil-rights demonstrations.

Danger of Reformist Orientation

The tendency of the Official leadership to think that the struggle in progress is entirely the wrong kind of fight has apparently led them in a more and more reformist direction. The natural outcome of this kind of thinking is that the only thing the movement can do is try to outlast the Provisionals' terrorist campaign. When the adventurists become discredited, which is supposed to be inevitable, then the Officials can resume their economic agitations. Since the main thing is just to survive, the arguments of the reformists seem more and more practical, as revolutionary perspectives appear more and more remote and unreal.

This process, moreover, tends to become self-accelerating. While the Provisionals' reliance on forms of struggle carried out by small armed units divorced from the masses has led to increasing isolation of the militants and to a fading of international support for the struggle of the oppressed people, it is also true that the mass civil-rights movement produced such a deepgoing upheaval that spontaneous outbursts of violence can persist for a long time and continue to inspire substantial sympathy from the most oppressed strata of the population. These disorganizing forms of activity may, in fact, continue as long as none of the groups present offers a mass revolutionary alternative. And this is precisely what Stalinist and ultra-left workerist influences have hindered the Official republicans from doing.

Instead of showing how socialist ideas could point the way forward to victory for the national struggle, the Officials have more and more counterposed general socialist slogans to the real fight. They have invoked socialist ideas to convince the people that nothing fundamental could be won in the present "stage."

Not only is it impossible to win the masses of people to socialism by such a method, it is impossible to educate revolutionary militants or build a revolutionary organization in this way. Pessimism, resignation, pacifism, and reformism are the inevitable result of such a course. The organization settles into a rut of routine and repetitive propaganda, becoming less and less able to see beyond a few narrow preconceptions, unable to readjust to a changing reality, or to intervene in a bold

and decisive way in the class struggle as new opportunities arise.

In the last stage of degeneration, principles become mere abstractions and daily practice is guided in fact by petty opportunistic considerations. This is the stage reached by the SLL. And it seems to be the development of such sectarian tendencies on the part of elements in the Official republican movement that has attracted the attention of the Healyite "raiders."

The SLL View Vs. Reality

Just as the Official leaders have clung to their abstract concept of "working-class unity" for almost four years, despite all the blows of reality, the SLL leaders began by believing that they were defending vitally important principles against a whole array of enemies and betrayers. They did in fact argue for some fundamentally correct and crucial concepts, such as the principle that only a revolution can solve the problems of the working class and only a revolutionary party can lead the workers to victory.

But the revolutionary process did not proceed as expected. The working class in the advanced countries was pacified for a whole period by the postwar boom. The axis of the world revolution shifted at the same time to the underdeveloped countries where it combined with the national revolution in unforeseen forms. The reaction of the Healyites was to deny both aspects of the historic detour. Every scattered spark of working-class militancy was puffed up into a revolutionary upsurge, every recession into an impending cataclysm. This tendency reached its ultimate absurdity when they refused to recognize that a revolution had taken place in Cuba because there was no revolutionary party. Following this concept, moreover, they supported the Stalinist Anibal Escalante against the Castro-Guevara leadership. Escalante, after all, represented a "workers party" while Castro and company were "petty-bourgeois nationalists."

The Healyite reporter Yeats seems to be following the same line of reasoning in his denigration of Séamus Costello, the only one of the Official leaders, to my knowledge, who has openly opposed the Communist party on a basic political point in front of the entire republican cadre:

"With this responsibility upon him [that is, dividing the Northern Irish working class], Foley can still describe his mysterious resolution [on a new orientation to the civil-rights movement] as 'symptomatic of a lot of new thinking going on in the Republican leadership'.

"Foley's quotation continues: 'Correct or not, but the feeling is abroad that a lot of people in the country and many of our members have the idea that we are not in favour of the "National Struggle" or the ending of this "Struggle".

"This is one reason why the Provos are still a force today and why they will not fade away for a long time yet.

"We must begin to show people and demonstrate clearly to all that our objectives are National Unity and Independence and the Socialist Republic."

Yeats commented: "This is a frank and blatant appeal

for unity between the Officials and the Provisionals.

"The device used to bring this about is to suggest that the Provisionals can be divided into a left and right wing, permitting him to argue the prospect of an alliance between the anti-bomb-and-bullet followers of Kevin Street [the Provisionals] and the Officials' right wing, led by Costello."

The Need for a United Front

The dishonesty and destructive intent of this argument are apparent to anyone not blinded by dogma or fear. In the first place there is no reference whatever to "unity" between the Provisionals and Officials. This passage simply points out that errors on the national question have prevented the Officials from meeting the challenge of the Provisionals effectively, and it suggests a readjustment to improve the position of the authors' organization.

Furthermore, in my article I did not advocate "unity" in the sense of fusion but only a united front on specific issues and an end to the political sectarianism that had been growing in the Officials, affecting not just their relations with the Provisionals but all of their work. The need for this, moreover, is felt not just by the "Costello right wing" but by many Official leaders. For example, Malachy McGurran said in his December 26 interview:

"In regard to united fronts with the Provisionals, we would have to define the meaning of the word 'front' very carefully. In the Twenty-Six Counties we are faced with open, naked repression, with laws that go beyond even Franco or Salazar. The fact that they have not been used widely so far is only an indication of the Dublin government's cautious strategy of repression. Within this context I could see a united front not in the terms of burying one's own identity and one's own principles and one's own policies, but unity in terms of opposing and exposing the repression, even the injustice of the arrest and farce of a trial of Seán Mac Stiofáin. . . .

". . . On these issues, and on these issues alone, there could be areas of joint action and joint activity with the Provisionals, with the Communist party of Ireland, with the Irish section of the Fourth International, with other radical, progressive, and even liberal forces."

McGurran, a veteran republican, seems to understand the concrete tactic of the united front, a vital part of the strategy of the revolutionary party, better than the Healyite defenders of the abstract concept.

Furthermore, according to Yeats, who is suggesting unity between sections of the Officials and Provisionals? Yeats's slippery prose makes this completely unclear.

The reason for this slipperiness seems evident. Yeats wants to kill two birds with one stone. He wants to suggest that the supporters of the United Secretariat are "Provisional lovers" and he wants the SLL to benefit from the hysteria whipped up by the "Provo/Trot" amalgam of the Stalinoid ex-editor of the *United Irishman*. More significantly, he wants to attract some ultraleft and sectarian members of the Officials who have come to fear that any letup in the denunciations of the Provisionals might mean an abandonment of "socialist principles."

Yeats at Work in Derry

Yeats has been trying his hand at this technique for

some time. Over the summer and fall of 1972, he did a series of interviews with figures in Northern Ireland, using them as foils for his organization's dogmatic arguments. He showed a special interest in Derry, which has had a more complex political history than other sections of the republican movement. The local Officials group has its own nationally circulated paper, the *Starry Plough*, a monthly that has been by far the most effective propaganda weapon of the Official republican movement. Although it did not go beyond the sectarianism of the Officials on the national question, it at least published good general socialist propaganda in contrast to the *United Irishman* in the "Provo/Trot" period, which appealed neither to any genuine nationalist feelings of the Irish people nor to the socialist aspirations of the young activists.

Yeats talked to the editor and the leading reporter of the *Starry Plough* and then wrote an article in the December 8, 1972, *Workers Press*, which said, among other things:

"Catholics always knew that the Provos had nothing to offer but the gun. But since 'Operation Motorman' [the British occupation of the Derry ghettos] they have been driven to the understandable conclusion that the craven reformism of the official IRA is a blind alley too. . . .

"Joe Sweeney and Jackie Ward who edit the paper reflect a wide layer of local opinion when they talk of breaking from the Officials and using the Republican Clubs as the basis for a new revolutionary organization."

It was an open secret that pro-Stalinist elements in the Official IRA wanted to make an "example" of the Derry group, as a precedent for curbing all forms of "leftism." Yeats thus had every reason to think that he could provoke a dispute by reporting that the Derry "Trotskyites" were planning a split. It is hard to imagine how he could have more blatantly abused the tolerance of the individuals who agreed to talk to him.

The "happy" result of such a provocation, we must assume, would have been to fan bitterness and suspicion that would have enabled the SLL to pick up a few people on the rebound.

This way of recruiting is part and parcel of the SLL's unprincipled and opportunistic way of relating to other organizations. It is particularly criminal in the case of the Official IRA.

Because of the absence of mass revolutionary parties, centrist organizations have sprung up in many countries. Some have sought to move in a revolutionary direction. The Official republican movement has been one of the best of these. Among other things, it has a historic revolutionary achievement to its credit: the development of the Northern Irish civil-rights struggle. Faced with dramatic pressures, it ran into serious problems. With the development of the crisis in Northern Ireland, the republican movement underwent a politically confused and debilitating split. A political debate was touched off. Although some very fundamental questions of revolutionary organization and action are involved, the debate has been unclear. There is a strong antagonism between the pro-Stalinists and the ultraleft workerists. The "Trotskyist" workerists oppose the civil-rights movement on the grounds that it is neither a specifically working-class nor a socialist movement. The pro-Stalinists furiously denounce the workerists as sectarians, while they themselves

propose limiting the civil-rights movement to such a narrow framework that it would in fact become an impotent sectarian front organization.

There is no important practical difference between the two lines. Correct points and abysmal errors are hopelessly tangled. There is, however, an underlying difference in attitude. The best of the workerists reflect revolutionary moods. The Stalinist-trained types have generally been inoculated against all real revolutionary processes. Their instinct is to clamp down on anything that does not fit the "stage" as they define it or is not tightly controlled by some kind of "Marxist" mandarin. The tragedy of such a debate is that the workerists have no real alternative to the pro-Stalinists. In fact, they are led by their economism to converge with the pro-Stalinists in all practical respects, and so the natural tendency is to try to differentiate themselves by demanding more "radical" slogans and actions while staying in the same general framework. Thus, they simply look impractical, idealistic, and adventurist. The Stalinists, on the other hand, who base themselves on the resignation and cynicism of the conservatized sections of the workers' vanguard, seem nothing if not "practical," and "realistic."

Healyite 'Clarification'

The first duty of a revolutionary Marxist is to help sort out the real issues in this debate. In particular, revolutionists in other countries could offer some of the experience of the international socialist struggle to a movement that has suffered unduly from national isolation. The Healyite reporter does the opposite. In fact, his opportunistic twistings and turnings seem designed to avoid reaching definite political conclusions. His December 19, 1972, article on the *ard fheis* was entitled "Official IRA Continues Its Rightward Turn." In his March 22 article, he says:

"The Ard Fheis was distinguished by an almost complete move away from backing the on-the-streets reformist militancy of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement and the Communist Party of Ireland to a concept of building a new revolutionary nationalist party."

Was this part of the "rightward turn" or not? If it was, why does Yeats approve of it, since he says also in the March 22 article:

"But since direct rule the Officials have been working towards the realization that there is no future in a policy of 'back to the streets'. Their present turn of parliamentary politics and local elections illustrates this.

"They also realize that in the north civil rights demands for the 'nationalist population' are sectarian, undermining all prospect of the triumph of Republicanism."

Even more explicitly, Yeats says:

"Casting around for a whipping boy, Foley slates 'workerist ultra-lefts' for distracting the Officials' attention from the importance of civil rights. He blames them for characterizing the movement as sectarian and as one which failed to 'explicitly challenge capitalist productive relations'.

"Yet everything that has happened since direct rule, including the growth of Protestant organizations and the decline of all reformist and terrorist groups, suggests the critics were right."

If the republicans were "realizing" one of the Healyites' main contentions, why not give them credit for making some progress toward the SLL line, which Yeats apparently thinks is located in a far leftward direction? Otherwise, surely some explanation is needed as to how the republicans can be moving in a "rightward" direction and at the same time be "realizing" what the SLL sees as a key point.

What, moreover, did the turn to the right entail? Yeats mentioned in the December 19, 1972, *Workers Press* the exclusion from the conference of Bernadette Devlin, which he held was "consistent with the leadership's new anti-'left' line." But no adult could claim that this by itself necessarily represented a profound programmatic shift. In fact, in stressing this confused incident, Yeats seemed merely to be fishing in troubled waters.

The main thing, Yeats said, was that ". . . There has been no formal break with the Civil Rights movement but the Ard Feish [sic] passed almost unanimously an amendment shifting the emphasis firmly back to traditional Irish nationalism." Was this the rightward turn? If so, Yeats should have discussed it.

Even in his March 22 article he does nothing more than repeat some broad general principles, quoting Trotsky to the effect that "the completion of the socialist revolution within nationalist limits is impossible." This is a concept that in principle would not be disputed by either the pro-Stalinists or the "Trotskyist" ultralefts in the Officials. The question is, What is the role of the national question in the process that is going on now?

Moreover, how could Yeats analyze the "traditional nationalism" of the republicans when he cannot even honestly take up what I said about the role of the national question in Ireland? He claims, for instance, that my article was "nothing more or less than a eulogy of nationalism as a solution to Ireland's economic and social problems."

If Yeats is serious about this accusation and it is not intended simply to impress the ignorant, it would certainly be very important to prove it. That would constitute final confirmation of the unregenerate "Pabloism," and worse, of the nefarious Foley. But the truth is something of an obstacle to him. For example, in my pamphlet *Ireland in Rebellion*, published in October 1971, I said:

"The history of modern Ireland shows that the Irish nation cannot be finally restored except within the context of a totally different world order in which the great economic forces serve humanity instead of dominating it. Whatever the subjective political beliefs of the martyrs of Irish freedom, their vision of an Irish Ireland can only be fulfilled within the framework of a world socialist revolution" (p. 19). This pamphlet is sold by the Official republican book service and has circulated rather widely in their milieu.

In the February 5 article, which Yeats specifically referred to, I wrote:

"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."

How does this differ fundamentally from the second and third paragraphs of Yeats's quotation from Trotsky:

"The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena and it is completed on the world arena.

"Socialist construction is conceivable only on the foundations of the class struggle, on a national and international scale."

Characteristically, the Healyite reporter seems to have forgotten where the revolution is supposed to "begin," because it has become a mere abstraction for him, divorced from all the real processes. Or perhaps his concept of the "national arena" is different from mine. He says, for instance, at the end of his March 22 article:

"The first step in the fight back is to forge unity between British and Irish workers in the campaign to force the Tories to resign. . . ."

If the Healyites believe that Britain and Ireland form one national whole, however, they should explain this, since the implications for the Irish struggle would not be unimportant.

But maybe the return to "traditional nationalism" was not the main thing in the "rightward turn" at the *ard fheis*. In his March 22 article, Yeats discovered something else.

"The one 'step forward' at the December Ard Fheis which went completely over Foley's head was the decisive trend to regard elections as the new revolutionary weapon—a trend verified by the appearance of Sinn Fein candidates in the Eire [sic]⁴ nomination lists.

"This is how the Officials' leadership already sees the new revolutionary party working and how sections of the Provisionals may come to see it too, in time."

This "step forward" must have gone over Yeats's head initially, since he did not mention it in his December 19 article on the *ard fheis*. But now he draws rather drastic conclusions from the fact that I did not take up the question of the Officials' electoral orientation in my articles on the same event.

"Foley sets out to cover up this descent into the worst kind of reformism."

The charge of reformism, let alone the "worst kind," is a serious indictment. The Official republicans include many individuals and leaders who have proved their devotion to their own conception of revolutionary principles by great personal sacrifices. Even those influenced by Stalinism are not yet generally hopelessly hardened reformists. If these dedicated fighters are falling into reformism, it is certainly the duty of Marxists to point out precisely where they are going wrong. There is no other way to do this than to analyze specific cases, showing concretely what reformism leads to. But the Healyite expert makes general denunciations that in the context of Irish politics today are most likely to be interpreted as branding electoral activity per se as reformist.

Why Not Fight in Electoral Arena, Too?

Yeats even introduces the argument in a dishonest way. Why attribute so much importance, for example, to my not taking up the electoral orientation put forward at the

4. Eire is the Gaelic word for all of Ireland but is used by some chauvinistic English to refer to the Twenty-Six Counties alone.

ard fheis? If participating in elections is by nature reformist, Yeats could have "exposed" my position much more effectively by quoting articles where I specifically recommend entering the electoral arena. An example can be cited from my pamphlet *Problems of the Irish Revolution*:

"In particular, challenging the ban on political activity in the North and gaining recognition as a legal party in the South offer the possibility for effective revolutionary propaganda campaigns. By demanding the right to engage in legal political activity, the republicans can defend themselves in the most effective way against repression and at the same time consolidate solid gains. This, of course, does not mean that a 'democratic phase' is opening up. All democratic freedoms are precarious in this epoch and especially so in Ireland. But the system can be forced to grant a certain room for maneuver at times, which must be used to advantage. . . .

"Elaborate schemes for reforming local government, education, etc., are not very useful for revolutionary agitation, especially given the resources of the republican movement. A few simple themes are needed on which all the propaganda of the movement can be focused, that is, transitional demands. Such demands should seem reasonable to the people they are intended to appeal to and at the same time should expose the contradictions of the system. In a period of general crisis, moreover, local and piecemeal economic agitation stand in secondary place for a revolutionary party. The most important thing is to give political direction and to wage a concentrated campaign against the enemy class, which itself is highly centralized and conscious of its general interests."

Since there has long been confusion in Ireland over the question of revolutionists participating in elections, this is a subject that must be discussed as concretely as possible. As a result of using a fundamentally nonmaterialist method, Irish republicans have traditionally considered that to engage in parliamentary politics is unprincipled. The effects of this stand have been anything but revolutionary.

The inevitable outcome was that the republicans ended up in fact giving unofficial support to bourgeois politicians such as De Valera. In fact, a sort of symbiotic relationship grew up between what was in reality a kind of armed pressure group and bourgeois parliamentary nationalists. As long as the republicans made it a principle not to challenge the politicians in the generally accepted political arena, questions of program simply did not arise.

In this sense, the move of the Official republicans toward a materialistic view of the relation between tactics and principle was a fundamental advance. Once out of the straitjacket of traditionalism, the Officials can of course move in a "normal" reformist direction. If such an evolution becomes definitively established, the result will be to reinforce the sterile old attitudes. The Officials as a whole, and even the leadership, are still a long way from Marxism. There seems on occasion even to be some truth in the Provisionals' claims that when the Officials cast off the bounds of traditionalism, they were left without any firm principles whatsoever. The deeper truth is probably that they have so far replaced one set of abstract principles for another only slightly less abstract set. But the only way the Marxist concept of principle can be explained is by relating principles concretely to the actual problems

of political work, pointing the way toward achieving real unity of theory and action. It is hard to do this from three thousand miles away. The Healyites are in a much better geographical position to make concrete criticisms of the Officials' electoral work. But evidently they are not interested in this.

Instead, these sectarians seem to have in mind only a petty raiding maneuver. After the split, sufficient abstentionist sentiment still remained in the Official republican organization to serve as a pole for an opposition grouping. Such a banner could attract serious militants repelled by real reformist mistakes and reformist concepts held by some elements of the leadership. It could also rally ultraleftists and traditionalist adventurers. It could not serve as the basis for developing a Marxist tendency. The only result of a fight over abstention as a principle would be to perpetuate confusion and to waste valuable revolutionary forces. In the process, of course, the SLL could probably pick up a few recruits by raising the banner of abstract principle higher than anybody else. There are after all few restraints on the "ascent" of a purely propagandistic sect.

The way to win sincerely revolutionary republicans to Marxism is the opposite of the SLL's method. The most important thing is to instill the concept that principles are a guide to practical revolutionary activity. The test of principle is the real effect of a policy—whether it advances or retards the process of the masses learning the real nature of society so that they can transform it in accordance with their own real interests. For materialists, moreover, experience is a vital aspect of learning. Whenever principle becomes divorced from reality, even if the letter is kept sacrosanct, the actual result is opportunism in practice. The history of Irish republicanism shows this. The history of the SLL also confirms it. In fact the SLL's formal adherence to Marxist doctrine makes it an excellent example of what happens when principles first become separated from reality and then start to replace it. For this reason primarily, it is worth following the ins and outs of the Healyite line on the Irish struggle.

In the Tradition of Lenin and Trotsky

But first the question of principle in electoral policy should be made clear. While boycotting elections and parliament is a possible tactic in specific cases, the leaders of the Russian revolution fought a decisive battle to convince ultraleftists that intervening in elections and parliamentary struggles is essential for a revolutionary party. One of Lenin's major works, *"Left-Wing" Communism, an Infantile Disorder*, was largely devoted to this. Trotsky also set forth the revolutionary Marxist position on this again and again and in particular in a speech to the Executive Committee of the Communist International on November 24, 1920:

"Comrade Gorter thinks that if he keeps a kilometer away from the buildings of parliament that thereby the workers' slavish worship of parliamentarianism will be weakened or destroyed. Such a tactic rests on idealistic superstitions and not on realities. The Communist point of view approaches parliamentarianism in its connection with all other political relations, without turning parliamentarianism into a fetish either in a positive or negative

sense. The parliament is the instrumentality whereby the masses are politically deceived and benumbed, whereby prejudices are spread and illusions of political democracy maintained, and so on and so forth. No one disputes all this. But does the parliament stand secluded by itself in this respect? Isn't petty-bourgeois poison being spread by the columns of the daily newspapers, and, first and foremost, by the Social-Democratic dailies? And oughtn't we perhaps on this account refrain from utilizing the press as an instrument of extending Communist influence among the masses? Or does the mere fact that Comrade Gorter's group turns its back upon the parliament suffice to discredit parliamentarianism? Were this the case it would signify that the idea of the Communist revolution, as represented by Comrade Gorter's group, is cherished by the masses above everything else. But in that case the

proletariat would naturally disperse the parliament without much ado and take power into its own hands. But such is not the case. Comrade Gorter himself, far from denying, on the contrary grotesquely exaggerates the masses' respect and slavish worship of parliamentarianism. Yet what conclusion does he draw? That it is necessary to preserve the 'purity' of his own group, *i.e.*, sect. In the final analysis Comrade Gorter's arguments against parliamentarianism can be leveled against all forms and methods of the proletarian class struggle, inasmuch as all of these forms and methods have been deeply infected with opportunism, reformism and nationalism."⁵

(To be continued.)

5. Leon Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol. I, Pioneer Publishers, New York, 1945, p. 146.

Title: Revolutionary Nationalism, Class Struggle, and Problems of Party Building in Ireland

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