

Fifty years of the struggle against the Orange state

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Fifty years ago, on October 5, 1968, a peaceful civil rights march was savagely beaten off the streets of Derry by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). The RUC riot was flashed over TV screens throughout Ireland and Britain that evening. Among the defenceless marchers was Gerry Fitt MP, blood streaming down his face after being truncheoned, one of 96 people needing hospital treatment.

The events that day caused widespread anger within the nationalist community throughout Northern Ireland. It also caused not a little curiosity from people in Britain unaware that their commonly accepted civil rights might not exist in another part of the United Kingdom. The main consequence of the events in Derry though was the start of a year of mass protest action from the nationalist community which was to throw the northern Unionist state into a major crisis and herald thirty years of war against the British presence.

The Orange state, established in 1921, was a repressive and vicious sectarian state from birth, created by carving out territory that guaranteed a majority for the mainly Protestant Unionists. For the minority, who identified as Irish nationalists, mainly Catholics, it meant widespread discrimination, especially in housing and jobs. There was gerrymandering of local government boundaries to safeguard Unionist control of councils where they were in a minority. Ratepayers voted but not lodgers, company directors got extra votes in local elections. Hence the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) demand for 'one man, one vote'.

The Special Powers Act, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the infamous 'B' Specials (Ulster Special Constabulary) ensured a prison house for Catholics which often descended into pogroms of Catholic areas by loyalists and state forces. In short, there was a 'Protestant Parliament and a Protestant state' as Lord Craigavon, the first prime minister of Northern Ireland, proudly called it.

CIVIL RIGHTS

NICRA was founded in 1967, modelled on the Black civil rights movement in the USA. Its aim was to peacefully lobby for a limited programme of civil liberties and it was supported by the Communist Party of Ireland, Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP), Republican Labour and the Republican Movement. Its demands included reform of the electoral system, the abolition of the Special Powers Act and of the B-Specials.

NICRA, in truth a very moderate, cross class body, was hurled into the spotlight as it tapped into the pent up anger and frustration of the oppressed nationalist community. When Home Affairs minister Craig tried to ban the march in Derry, NICRA was reluctantly forced by the more radical Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC) to go ahead. DHAC comprised local NILP activists like Eamon McCann, later charged

with two others for organising the march.

In the aftermath of the march, the Citizens' Action Committee (CAC) in Derry was also formed by Catholic middle class elements headed by Ivan Cooper and John Hume, basically to dampen down the spirit of revolt. The left dissolved into this respectable body.

After the Derry march, Peoples' Democracy (PD) was formed in Queen's University, Belfast. Comprised mainly of student radicals, PD adopted a Civil Rights charter with additional demands on house building, jobs and farm co-operatives. They were the most dynamic and radical force around at the time, often incurring the wrath of NICRA leaders, and organised mass protests in Belfast.

PD led a four day civil rights march from Belfast to Derry which was repeatedly attacked and harassed by loyalist thugs with police connivance. The ambush at Burntollet Bridge was particularly vicious as eighty marchers were bombarded with bricks and bottles by club wielding loyalists. The RUC were complicit in leading the marchers into this trap.

Bloodied and weary, the marchers successfully made it to Derry where they received a rapturous welcome. In revenge, the RUC ran amok in the Catholic Bogside later that evening. Barricades went up, the RUC were banished from the area for a week and 'Free Derry' was born.

NICRA continued to centre their campaign around 'one man, one vote' with even Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson pleading for universal franchise. But the Unionist prime minister of Northern Ireland, Captain O'Neil, was unable to deliver it as he increasingly became the object of hard line Unionist intransigence. His apparent 'softness' led to his downfall and Wilson's threat of Westminster intervention was shown to be mere bluff as the government melted before loyalist resistance.

STRUGGLE ESCALATES

It was increasingly clear to the nationalist community that serious reform was not forthcoming. NICRA had no strategy to deal with this as their marches and supporters came under the cosh of loyalists and state forces. So, when a large scale RUC incursion into the Bogside in Derry was launched in 1969, nationalists drove out the police with petrol bombs and bricks, forcing Labour's Home Secretary, James Callaghan to send in British troops. Alongside the Battle of the Bogside there were also serious clashes in Belfast as loyalists, often aided and abetted by the RUC, sought to drive out Catholic families.

An initial welcome for Callaghan and the troops soon disappeared as meaningful reforms failed to materialise and street clashes subsequently broke out between troops and nationalists. With NICRA's demands being ignored by the Unionist state and its British backers, nationalists began to look elsewhere, towards direct action, to pursue their interests.

The pogroms on Catholic areas confirmed a traditional Republican historical truism for nationalists, that they could not rely on the state for protection. There followed the growth of Citizen Defence Committees and then the rise of the Provisional IRA as the main, though not the only, armed force. A struggle to reform the state had grown over into a struggle to 'Smash Stormont' and get rid of the border. British rule itself was now recognised as the problem; without it there would be no border.

The Ballymurphy Massacre in 1971 and then the slaying of 14 Derry protesters on Bloody Sunday, 1972, by the Parachute Regiment had escalated the armed struggle against Britain and alienated a whole community. The slaughter in Derry happened under the Tories but there was no protest from the Labour Party. The Parliamentary Labour Party actually voted to accept the Widgery Report on Bloody Sunday which declared the British Army innocent, a ruling only overturned many years later in 2010 by the Saville

Inquiry.

ORANGE STATE: STILL A SECTARIAN ENDEAVOUR

So, the initial year of mass revolt gave way to a republican armed guerilla campaign which, despite thirty years of struggle, was unable to expel the British from the north. The political wing of this movement, Sinn Fein, sued for peace and the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was agreed in 1998. The hallmark of this deal was a devolved Assembly and a power sharing government. Sinn Fein dropped its militant opposition to the state. It decommissioned its weapons, recognised the police and accepted a Unionist veto over a united Ireland.

Twenty years on and the Good Friday Agreement now lies in tatters with no Assembly or power sharing executive but the peace does hold. Indeed, some of the more blatant forms of discrimination have been whittled away thanks to thirty years of resistance. But the northern Orange state has not been smashed and still remains a sectarian endeavour.

The GFA has not decreased sectarianism, sectarian tensions remain as high as ever. The Assembly was based on a sectarian headcount and a sectarian hand out of resources to benefit politicians and middle class elements in both communities. Any opponents of the GFA are still hounded and repressed. Internment without trial or, rather, internment on remand, strip searching of republican prisoners and even the non jury Diplock Courts remain. The state is still a sectarian bulwark of the union.

The indelible birth mark of the Orange state was that it was founded upon a systematic social oppression of the minority on the basis of their nationality, their identification with Irish nationalism and for a united Ireland. In that sense, the question of religious differences was always secondary. Discrimination was so widespread and entrenched that a few reforms could never guarantee social justice. The abolition of the state and its border was a prerequisite for uplifting the minority from their second class status.

Sinn Fein's years of eating humble pie since the GFA have not progressed their goal of peace with justice let alone a united Ireland one jot. Even elementary rights which they have supported, like the Irish Language Act and same-sex marriage, have been sabotaged by Unionist bigotry. The Unionist veto on just about everything still rules. In fact, it has taken the threat of Brexit and its likely disastrous consequences on the economy of the north and south to raise the border question once more, not the GFA's peace process!

LESSONS OF 1968

A key lesson of the 1968-69 mass revolt is that a determined struggle to end discrimination would inevitably pose the question of a national struggle. Partition, established in 1921, was itself part of a deal which defeated the objectives of the Irish national revolution for a free independent 32 county republic. The northern state could only survive with heavy doses of repression of nationalists and marginal privileges for loyalists.

The pacifist leaders of the Civil Rights movement were petrified by the forces of mass revolt now unleashed. The motley collection of Stalinists, liberals and nationalists were comfortable in their criticisms of PD. The Provisional Republicans, who became the main force on the ground because they addressed the national question and defence, condemned the Civil Rights perspective of reforming Stormont from within.

The legacy of Stalinism, typified by the Official Republican Movement's stages theory of first a reformed Stormont, then a united Ireland and, at some distant point, socialism, accorded well with the civil rights

leaders. The Provos? early ?Smash Stormont? perspective saw the mass movement replaced by a guerilla campaign which inevitably ran into a cul-de-sac because it was unable to match superior British firepower and repression. The end result was a peace deal which reneged on their previous political positions.

The legacy of the small forces of the left is not much better. PD, Eamon McCann and the Derry activists despite their clear radical edge were also unable to build a revolutionary socialist alternative to the failed nationalist and reformist strategies on offer. An alternative socialist strategy had to recognise that agitation for civil rights in the north had to take account of the national aspirations for a United Ireland. That meant fighting for a working class and socialist leadership in the revolutionary democratic struggle that had opened up.

So, alongside the demands against discrimination, abolishing the Special Powers Act and Stormont, socialists should have formulated an action programme including the following;

The need to agitate for action within the factories and workplaces. All out strike action was vital.

The need to challenge the self appointed CAC leadership in Derry by calling for open democratic public meetings to decide future action and to fight for an Action Council to coordinate workers? strike action.

In response to loyalist and state attacks, it was imperative for action councils to organise and train detachments of youth and workers as defence militias. In the absence of democratic militias, militant youth were often diverted into a constant round of street fights with the police.

The left urgently needed to raise class demands alongside the democratic ones. For a massive scheme of public works to create jobs and build houses for all. Opening up the books of the Councils to delegates of working class organisations. Real equality could not be realised without fighting to end the common exploitation of both Catholic and Protestant workers, this was crucial in appealing to advanced Protestant workers.

There had to be an orientation to southern workers and, indeed, British workers, for solidarity action. Agitation amongst soldiers in the south - demands to refuse to seal the border and to open the arsenals for defence of barricaded areas would have been necessary.

This approach would, at the very least, have become a real focus for militants in developing an all Ireland revolutionary socialist organisation and a counterweight to the failing strategies of Stalinism and pure republicanism. This would have been a legacy that could put the revolutionary democratic struggle on the road to permanent revolution and the Workers? Republic.

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