

## Ireland 1968: Anti-Unionist revolt begins

Thu, 02/10/2008 - 11:11

On October 5 1968, a peaceful civil rights march, consciously modelled on the tactics of Martin Luther King's movement in the USA, was savagely attacked by the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The marchers were baton-charged and mercilessly beaten by the forces of "law and order". Amongst the injured was the West Belfast MP Gerry Fitt. The brutal attack including pictures of the bloodied MP was shown on television. 96 people were in need of hospital treatment. This profoundly shocked people in Britain, Ireland and around the world.

It proved the catalyst for a mass struggle by Catholics in the six counties of Northern Ireland for basic civil rights and against discrimination, one that on occasions spilled over into the Irish Republic and eventually turned into a full-scale guerrilla war.

World opinion had now been alerted to a corner of the so-called United Kingdom where the minority nationalist population were denied rights taken for granted in the rest of Britain. The reason for this was simple. The Six Counties of Northern Ireland (or Ulster as Unionists frequently call them) were excluded from the Home Rule granted to the rest of Ireland after the first Irish War of Independence (1919-21). Indeed the war was caused by Britain's refusal to recognise the result of the 1918 the general election, which in Ireland had given the party of independence, Sinn Fein, an overwhelming majority.

The resulting northern statelet was created on the maximum territory that could be retained in the UK while ensuring a majority loyal to the union with Britain (hence Loyalist and Unionist). But the nationalist minority, those wishing a united Ireland, remained a majority in many areas. Regarded as disloyal by the Loyalists, they were systematically excluded from power and influence by a remarkable system of gerrymandering (changing electoral boundaries to influence electoral results), disenfranchisement and terrorising by an armed militia as well as their police (the B Specials).

Another key element of the northern statelet was the Orange Order, a mass social organisation whose aggressive marches through nationalist areas were aimed to keep their inhabitants in a state of intimidation and fear. At the same time illegal organisations like the Ulster Volunteer Force, founded in 1966, used terrorist methods against the minority population.

The northern state was born in bloodshed with ever-present pogroms against Catholic areas or expulsions of Catholic workers from their jobs, like the Catholic shipyard workers at Harland and Wolff and in other engineering works that were driven out in 1920. It was a prison house for Catholics faced with massive local paramilitary and sectarian forces as well as an array of repressive legislation directed at them.

South African Apartheid Minister for Justice Vorster famously commented when introducing a Coercion Bill in the South African Parliament that he would be willing "to exchange all the legislation of that sort for one clause of the Northern Ireland Special Powers Act".

In many ways, outside of the southern states of USA and South Africa, nothing like it existed in a "western

democracy."

Michael Farrell, an early leader of the movement for civil rights, explains "Unionist control of local government even in Nationalist areas, could deprive Catholics of jobs and houses and give local Unionist or Orange bosses a powerful source of patronage to use to keep their Protestant supporters loyal". (Northern Ireland: The Orange State 1976)

The sectarian nature of the Northern state was expressed in many ways but the initial focus for the October march was housing discrimination. Added to this was the restricted franchise for local elections as this was based on property qualifications; hence NICRA's demand "one man one vote". Probably the best example of discrimination of all, where gerrymandering was as clear as day, was in Derry. In 1966 the adult population of Derry was 30,376 with 20,102 Catholics and 10,274 Protestants but the City Corporation was Unionist-controlled.

The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) had already organised protests since its formation in 1966-67. Its call for a march in Derry outraged local Unionists not used to seeing Catholics parading within the walled City. Threats of counter marches by the Orange Order and the Apprentice Boys of Derry provided the Stormont government's excuse to ban all demonstrations.

The moderate NICRA had to be pushed into defying the ban by the more radical Housing Action Committee with Young Socialists like Eamonn McCann involved. On October 5 around 2000 marchers set off and after a short distance were stopped by the RUC and then batoned savagely. A wave of revulsion swept Ireland and indeed the rest of the UK.

In Derry, as a consequence of the RUC raids into the nationalist areas, a few barricades had gone up that night and the first petrol bombs were thrown. A Citizens' Action Committee (CAC) had been set up by middle class elements like John Hume and Ivan Cooper, aiming to defuse the situation. The activists of the Housing Action Committee (HAC) dissolved themselves into this body grudgingly but unfortunately with no tactics to develop independent action and organisation.

### Mass protests spread

Another important development was the setting up of Peoples' Democracy (PD) in Queens University Belfast directly after the Derry march. Early leaders included Michael Farrell and Bernadette Devlin, and around them gathered radical students with an enthusiasm for the direct action they had seen taking place around the world in 1968. They too adopted a civil rights charter with additional demands on house building and jobs but nothing which addressed the national question (the partition of Ireland) and little on the struggle of workers in for higher wages and jobs, let alone socialism.

Mass demonstrations occurred throughout the six counties in the aftermath of Derry. Prime Minister Terence O'Neil, supposedly a liberal and a reformer in Unionist terms, made some concessions like accepting a points system for housing allocation but still made no movement on the local government franchise. Tensions increased as the anti-Catholic loyalist firebrand the Reverend Ian Paisley organised provocative counter marches. NICRA and the Derry CAC controlled and led most marches but called a truce for a period, with no activities planned until 11 January 1969. PD quite rightly ignored this and organised a small march across the six counties from Belfast to Derry.

By the time the marchers had arrived in Derry on Jan 4 they had been battered and bloodied by loyalist ambushes with RUC connivance with a particularly bloody assault at Burntollet bridge. The rousing welcome from the people of Derry gave way to a police invasion of the Bogside, the principle nationalist

area, where doors and windows were smashed. The Bogsideers were furious, barricades were built to exclude the RUC, and "Free Derry" was born. The police were kept out for a week! Eventually the moderate CAC persuaded people to take down the barricades.

Mass mobilisations continued in the early months of 1969 for housing and electoral reform and for an end to increasing state repression. In the Stormont general election in February civil rights campaigners including PD received good votes with old style Nationalist Party candidates doing badly. On the Unionist side hard liners were increasing their support as against O'Neil's supporters. The Unionist monolith was cracking!

On 17 April, 22 year old student and PD activist Bernadette Devlin won a by-election for the Westminster parliament seat for Mid-Ulster. On 22 April O'Neil had accepted "one man one vote". Within a week he had resigned as prime minister. As James Chichester-Clark took over from him, NICRA once again emphasised conciliation above direct action, appealing to the minority population to give the new government "a chance".

### **Battle of Bogside**

The new prime minister enjoyed the briefest of honeymoons. Soon the clashes between nationalists and the hated RUC resumed. Loyalist marches take place in their hundreds every year and have always been "supremacist" in that they celebrate and flaunt their power over Catholics and even insist on provocatively marching through nationalist areas. The Apprentice Boys parade in Derry on 12 August was no different and widely viewed as a potentially decisive clash.

At the end of July the Derry Republican Club convened a "Derry Citizens' Defence Association" (DCDA) to protect the area against attack. On 12 August, after skirmishes between nationalist youths and loyalists, the RUC moved into the Bogside in force. The ensuing battle raged for three days. Petrol bombs hurled from High Flats in Rossville Street made it impossible for the police to get by.

The police were eventually exhausted, defeated and demoralised. The notorious B-Specials were mobilised but the British Labour government decided against their use and British troops moved in as "peacekeepers". The troops kept their distance and the DCDA presided over a no go area. The fighting stopped and the Bogsideers knew they had won for now.

### **Belfast burns**

Enraged by their defeat in Derry the Northern state's forces and their paramilitary gangs launched a sustained attack on Belfast's Catholic areas. Barricades were rapidly built as the nationalist communities faced a far more dangerous situation than in Derry, given their minority position within the city. On 14 August loyalist mobs surged towards the Falls Road area attacking and burning houses. Their aim was clearly what today would be called "ethnic cleansing" or in older terminology a pogrom. The fully armed B-Specials were among the attackers. The RUC with their armoured cars fitted with Browning heavy machine guns fired into the Divis Flats killing a nine year old.

By the time British troops were called out around 1800 people had fled their homes, 80 per cent of them Catholic, over 200 Catholic homes had been burnt down and 8 Catholics had been killed. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) of the time had a small number of members and few weapons, but they did drive off loyalist mobs, killing one Protestant. In Belfast the Central Citizens Defence Committee took over the task of defending Catholic areas with republicans playing a prominent part but soon to be eclipsed by clergy and businessmen. Barricades were then pulled down and no-go areas reclaimed by the state, as in

Derry.

Thus within a year of the civil rights march in Derry, NICRA and CAC had been overtaken by events. The call for elementary democratic rights and equality had been met by the iron fist of the northern state. Effectively Loyalism, through its state, had said: "you will not take away our privileges without a full-scale war". And so it was to be.

The burning need for self-defence and the inability to secure real reforms had moved the struggle on. The long dormant volcano of the unresolved national question had erupted with a violence that took everybody, not least the civil rights movement and the IRA, by complete surprise. The northern state had been founded on systematic repression of a minority on the basis of their nationality, their identification with an Irish republic. Any serious struggle against the state therefore was bound to provoke a national struggle.

### **From armed revolt to sell out**

The subsequent history of this struggle is mainly characterised by a war between the Provisional IRA and the forces of British imperialism which lasted throughout the 1970s, 80s and early 90s. The Provisionals split from the Official IRA, ostensibly about whether to participate in elections to or take seats in parliaments which "recognised the 1922 partition." But it soon developed into a question of which was willing to use armed force, to wage an urban guerrilla war against the RUC and then the British Army. The Officials, having come under the influence of Irish Stalinism rejected this. The more militant Provisionals soon overtook them.

Events like Bloody Sunday in Derry on 30 January 1972, when British paratroopers murdered 13 unarmed marchers, half of them teenagers, and the Hunger Strike resulting in the death of 27-year old Bobby Sands, elected as a Westminster MP during the strike, repeatedly swung mass support behind the Provisional IRA. However the concentration on the bombing campaign and the failure to build on the periods of large scale mass actions around such incidents, led eventually to failure as far as the revolutionary aims of the IRA were concerned (a united Ireland).

The Good Friday Peace Agreement was signed in 1998 and led the way for Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party to share government. This was an enormous climb down for Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, from its historic goals.

Although this was dressed up as a step nearer to a united Ireland in fact it was an explicit recognition that while Unionism has a majority in the six counties then there can be no change. It was also a recognition that the armed campaign had failed: the IRA's arms have now been decommissioned. For Sinn Fein there has been no promise of a united Ireland, even less to do with socialism and now an acceptance of the sectarian police force with a presence in Her Majesty's government at Stormont.

Northern Ireland is still a sectarian state. Most of the overt political abuses have gone (proving once more that reform is the by-product of revolutionary struggles) but social inequality and covert discrimination still prevails. The police and security services are overwhelmingly Unionist dominated; they still have a monopoly on violence. The essential democratic demand that the people of Ireland as a whole determine its future, including that of the six counties, is still being denied.

The task facing socialists in Northern Ireland remains as it was in 1968 to smash that state and replace it with a workers' republic based on workers' councils and a workers' militia. History has proven yet again that restricting this fight to just a united capitalist Ireland as a first stage is inadequate. The fight against capitalism cannot be postponed until a Republic materialises. A strategy for permanent revolution requires

a linking of the fight against the sectarian state with improvements in workers' pay, housing and conditions throughout the island. The working class is the only class that has an interest in defeating imperialism and abolishing capitalism. A revolutionary party based on that perspective is urgently required if a Workers Republic is to be brought any nearer.

## **Lessons of 1968**

What role should the small but well placed forces of the left have played during these early events? Could the young activists have risen to the leadership of the anti-unionist revolt?

In Derry after the October 5 march Eamonn McCann and his Young Socialist comrades needed to have fought the CAC leadership by calling it to account by constantly arguing for open democratic public meetings to determine the programme of action and elect a recallable leadership.

They needed to argue for workers' strike action. A key task was to fight for an Action Council which could have organised and trained detachments of youth and workers as defence militias. The left needed to fight for delegates and flying pickets to be sent to workers across the province and throughout the south for solidarity action.

The Irish Workers Group, (IWG) co-thinkers of Workers Power from the mid-seventies to the early 2000s, argued for just such a course. In its paper Class Struggle (Nov 1988) it argues for the need to raise class demands. In addition to "one person, one vote", abolition of emergency laws, etc it was necessary to "fight for a massive scheme of public works to create jobs for all the unemployed under trade union control, including the building of houses for all. Similarly for the opening of the books of the Councils and all its committees to delegates of working class organisations."

Even after the Battle of the Bogside in 1969 the Derry Citizens' Defence Association only drew in street representatives and had no orientation to the workplaces. In fact it had no link ups with defence organisations in Belfast! Despite Bernadette Devlin's warning the DCDA made no call for troops to get out. This was a very serious weakness. The troops were not peacekeepers; they were defenders of the sectarian state. But with the Hunt Report recommending the abolition of the B Specials and the disarming of the police, many Catholics smelt victory in the air. (The International Socialists, the predecessor of today's Socialist Workers Party, also failed to call for their withdrawal at the time.)

PD had a crucial role to play in inspiring radical initiatives and exposing the irreformable Orange state. But it resolutely ignored the national question thus ceding leadership of this central question to the Provisionals. It did not fight for organised democratic mass defence of the minority areas, like the HAC activists in Derry.

The IWG return to this theme of class action, "an action programme to chart a way forward should have included the fight for immediate indefinite strike action by nationalist workers... for the barricading of the entire nationalist areas, for the sending of pickets and delegates throughout the country and Britain to win solidarity strike action. In the south.... for all out indefinite strike action, the seizure of British owned factories and banks and their occupation, for the organising of material aid for the anti-Unionist communities."

The inability of the left to channel the combativity of the youth in these early days left the field open to the growth of the provisional IRA with their stunningly simple answer, smash Stormont, unite Ireland! Of course as Workers Power and the IWG argued from the 1970s onwards Stormont could not be smashed by car bombs and Ireland could not be united by a guerrilla struggle in the North alone.

A revolutionary socialist perspective of working class action north and south including armed democratically controlled mass defence, with the strategy of an uninterrupted struggle from democratic and national demands, to the Workers' Republic talked of by James Connolly, could have avoided the surrender of of Sinn Fein/IRA to British imperialism.

---

**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/ireland-1968-anti-unionist-revolt-begins>