

Ireland: strategies for solidarity

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Much has happened but little has changed. General elections in Britain and Ireland have come and gone in the past months. Another loyalist marching season has passed. All had a bearing on the political scene in the Six Counties (Northern Ireland) but none of them has altered the basic balance of forces established by the Anglo-Irish Accord of November 1985. Thatcher, the architect of the accord, is safely back in power. Haughey has replaced Fitzgerald in the Republic but in swapping opposition for office he has also exchanged rhetorical sniping at the agreement for support. The unionists, meanwhile, after the early intoxication of mass rebellion against the Accord, have sobered up to the realities of a Tory government determined to face down the resistance of their historic allies.

Nearly two years ago Britain and Ireland embarked on their most serious attempt for twelve years to stabilise their rule in partitioned Ireland as a whole. Continuing electoral successes by Sinn Fein and the IRA's proven ability to wreak havoc on commercial life and unsettle the security forces forced Thatcher to consider a bold initiative. Pressure from US and European imperialisms for a stable environment for their investments moved her from contemplation to action.

The risk involved was that in order to stabilise that rule a period of instability was inevitable. The unionists were bound to resist for two reasons. First, the road to stability involved a recognition that effective repression of the IRA could only be achieved if Dublin was enlisted. Despite the fact that Thatcher and the agreement endorse continued partition, the cosmetic concessions and the institutionalised consultation process which were essential to legitimise the South's role could only inflame the loyalists.

Secondly, the British know that a lasting imperialist peace in the Six Counties needs more than repression. It requires enough minor reforms allied to a measure of devolved power-sharing government to marginalise support for Sinn Fein and entice the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) into taking responsibility for sustaining the sectarian state. Fearing that their privileges and their power of patronage would be fatally eroded in the process, Paisley and Molyneux had to articulate and lead the spontaneous reactionary outcry of the protestant community, lest it channelise itself in other?plebian and anti-constitutional?forms.

It now seems that it is more a question of how long, rather than whether, it will take for loyalism to adjust itself to the new role ascribed to it by British imperialism and its semi-colonial backers in Dublin. Of course, British imperialism cannot solve the national question ?from above? in the manner in which the land question was solved at the end of the last century. It is one thing to create a class of conservative small farmers on the eve of the imperialist epoch and thus remove the revolutionary explosive threat that land hunger posed to British rule. It is quite another to solve the national question this way. Stabilising partition means underwriting discrimination, mass unemployment for the anti-unionist minority; it entails the copper-fastening of the South's semi-colonial decline and its continued crisis racked domination by a coalition of imperialist powers.

But socialists should not be blind to the possibility of further containment and further ?Ulsterisation? in the

Six Counties, even up to the point of British troop withdrawal carried through on the basis of a severe defeat for the republican movement.

Troops Out! But when and how?

Strategies for withdrawal have dominated the activities and debates of the solidarity movement in Britain ever since the Labour government sent the troops in to contain the anti-unionist revolt in 1969. The differences are at least as great as the agreements. The key issues are not really whether British troops should withdraw but when and under what conditions. Given that sections of the ruling class believe that military disengagement is desirable, given that much of the public opinion in Britain for troop withdrawal is based on a chauvinist 'get our boys back, leave the Irish to kill themselves' sentiment, it is obvious that socialists must have a distinctive position, in that withdrawal must be undertaken by methods that strengthen the political independence of the working class, weaken imperialism and promote a progressive outcome to the conflict in the Six Counties.

Yet reformism and centrism in Britain deliberately blur the line that divides progressive from reactionary withdrawal strategies. The most broadly supported Irish solidarity movement in the British labour movement is the Labour Committee on Ireland (LCI). Since its formation in 1981 it has based its whole strategy on changing policy within the party (and more recently the affiliated unions) such as would commit a Labour government to withdrawal from the Six Counties and promote a united Ireland.

We can leave aside the obvious problems that such a strategy presents when Labour has just lost its third general election and its prospects of forming a majority government again are in doubt. The fact remains that the Labour Party policy on Ireland is thoroughly pro-imperialist. It was Labour that sent the troops in; it was Labour that introduced the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) in 1974. In 1985 Kinnock could not wait to proclaim his support for the Anglo-Irish Accord. He refused to use the occasion to publicly support the Labour Party's own conference policies and instead insisted on the usual bi-partisan approach to Ireland, an approach that disgusted many rank and file supporters when it led Labour to endorse Thatcher's murderous policy toward the hunger strikers in 1981.

Within the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and National Executive Committee (NEC) the policy debate on Ireland led in May this year to the publication of a new statement called 'New Rights, New Prosperity and New hope for Northern Ireland. (1) Labour's stated objective is to 'help unite a divided island so that it can achieve and sustain economic prosperity and lasting peace.' (2) Yet unity can only come about 'with the consent of a majority of the people in Northern Ireland.' However, for a majority (i.e. the protestants) the last thing they want is a united Ireland. So how to change their minds? By promoting discussion aimed at eliminating conflict both with the government of the republic and among 'the various interests in Northern Ireland?'. But action speaks louder than words and the unionists have made it transparently clear they are not interested in a united Ireland. And why should they be when it amounts to stripping them of the privileges in employment, housing and local government? And if these are to be left intact then it is a unity not worth having as far as the northern minority or the southern majority are concerned.

The grip that unionist interests have on the Labour Party is a strong one. The direct links between the unionist bourgeoisie and the ruling class in Britain may have been weakened during the last sixty years to the point that Thatcher can confront loyalism. But the ties that bind the Labour Party, the TUC and the Six Counties protestant trade unions are still strong and influential. No doubt it was these pressures that made themselves felt on the PLP/NEC Northern Ireland policy committee. In February 1985 the committee agreed to recommend a position on progress towards a united Ireland, drawn up by Clive Soley, which stressed that progress to this end could only be vetoed by either the British or Dublin governments.

This was too much for Kinnock and his band of loyalists. The committee was wound down and reconstituted with a different brief which excluded the question of re-unification. Hence the new document with the old position.

Of course, the pressure of constituency and union activists and successive conference victories is still to be found in the policy statement. It says that Labour is committed to the 'eventual repeal' of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act, 1978, to an end to strip-searching, to a new code of conduct for the RUC, to three judges instead of one in the Diplock courts and so on. But once progress is subjected to the unionists veto at one level then there can be little doubt that progress on any issue will be subject to the same reactionary pressure.

The Labour Co-Ordinating Committee

The Labour Co-Ordinating Committee (LCC) was instrumental in re-aligning the 'soft left' behind Kinnock's leadership and marginalising the opposition to his witch-hunting, anti-miners strike, anti-Liverpool Council policies. However, in January 1987 at a special conference it held on Ireland the LCC adopted a draft policy document from Peter Hain entitled 'Ireland? Peace and Reconciliation in Our Time?'.(3)

At one level it is an improvement on the PLP/NEC document. We are not just told that partition is 'unjust and undemocratic' but we are informed that 'Britain's presence is the root cause of the problem?'. It hits the nail on the head when it proclaims that while the Labour Party is committed to the goal of a united Ireland it 'has no strategy for achieving it and in practice will allow the unionist veto to prevail?.

But what does the LCC offer instead? It calls for 'British withdrawal in the lifetime of the next Labour Government?' and its replacement by 'a freely negotiated structure for the whole of Ireland in which the rights of each section of the community will be guaranteed?.'

Various interim measures are proposed including the guaranteeing of religious and civil liberties, the right to dual citizenship, the lapsing of the PTA and the EPA, standing down the UDR and replacing the RUC with a new force.

Based upon this the Labour government would call for 'a cessation of all offensive military activity?', that is, for the IRA to give up its armed struggle.

In order to guarantee progress and get around the unionist veto the LCC proposes that it comes to an agreement with the government of the Republic of Ireland to dissolve the Union by the end of the five year term of office whether or not agreement has been reached in Northern Ireland by both sections of the community.

The first defect of the LCC's position is that it has no conception of how it is going to break the Labour Party from its pro-unionism. How is this policy going to be enforced upon the Labour leadership never mind the unionists? Secondly, it is in practice an invitation to both sides to get together and see reason. It believes that in settling the conflict everyone can be a winner and no one need be a loser in the game of Irish unity.

This is utopian. If the question is posed in terms of unification with the present 26 Counties with its bourgeois clerical rule intact and declining economy then the protestants are being asked to give up a form of gerrymandered democracy that gives them all the political power that they want or need. What does guaranteeing their civil rights mean? Their present rights over the minority? No, of course not. Then why should they give them up?

The LCC perhaps recognises this in its proposals to dissolve the union anyway after five years of unsuccessful negotiations. If so, why postpone the inevitable? Why give the unionists five years to arm themselves, to prepare for UDI?

The problem with the LCC's position, just like the Labour Party's official one, is that once you go beyond the question of withdrawing troops and into the question of promoting a united Ireland you are into imposing a British solution to a British-made problem. This is a negation of the idea of self-determination by the whole Irish people of their own political arrangements.

As revolutionary socialists with an international programme we are interested in a united Ireland. But for this to be a progressive unification and one that benefits all sections of the working class north and south it must occur in a manner that not just gets rid of the border but also gets rid of capitalism and the bourgeois clerical rule of the South. Otherwise, we are talking the unity of mass unemployment, high taxation and welfare cuts.

There is no progressive reformist solution to partition. We are in favour of a strategy that wins the bulk of the 32 county workers to this perspective but we are not in favour of an imperialist government doing a deal with the green bourgeoisie of the South that suits them both and their view of what is best for the protestant and anti-unionist working class

The whole experience of British withdrawal from its ex-colonies—from India, Sri Lanka, Aden, etc—is that in order to secure its interests it promotes a divide and rule policy and leaves behind a vast apparatus of repression in the hands of local pro-imperialists. The whole 'Ulsterisation' process over the last ten years is designed to do the same in the Six Counties.

First Things First

It is vitally important then that we in Britain are clear that our main responsibility is to get out of Northern Ireland. The British government is the source of the problem and cannot be part of the solution, even a Labour government. It is for this reason that the solidarity strategy of Troops Out Now, Self-Determination for the Whole Irish People, expresses the most principled and uncompromised position for British socialists and trade unionists.

The LCC paper opposes immediate troop withdrawal on the grounds that it 'is simply impractical and would leave a vacuum in which violence and dissension would continue.'⁽⁴⁾ This is the old 'bloodbath theory' which insists that without the troops they would be at each others throats, there would be civil war etc. What is wrong in this conception? First of all its premise is flawed; namely, that the British troops are 'neutral', are 'keeping the peace'. This view goes back to 1969 and the Labourite myth that the troops went in to keep the sides apart. Wrong. They went in to contain the resistance of the minority and they remain there for the same reason. Who has suffered from internment in 1971, from Bloody Sunday in 1972, from the failure of the British Army to stand up to the loyalists in 1974? Which community is it that has its homes indiscriminately torn apart in searches, whose sons and daughters are lifted in the middle of the night and beaten up? In all cases it is the anti-unionist catholic minority.

We are not naive enough to fail to recognise that immediate troop withdrawal still leaves the protestant community armed, in particular the tens of thousands of part-time UDA members. We fight for their disarming and its disbandment. But we have to recognise that armed protestants police the minority already and removal of the British troops would change little in this regard. The problem would be the same.

Why Troops Out Now?

This demand is not an arbitrary one. It expresses clearly that Britain has no progressive role to play in the Six Counties. Phased withdrawal demands, as we have seen in the case of the LCC, imply that in the interim an imperialist sponsored solution should be undertaken. In fact, it actually undercuts or negates the demand of self-determination for the Irish people as a whole, since such self-determination is contradicted by a British government setting the terms of the discussion over unity, federation or anything else. We reject that approach. The immediate withdrawal of troops is also in the immediate interest of the embattled catholic ghettos, providing them with relief from harassment and intimidation.

A campaign for these demands has still to be built. The history of the solidarity movement has been one of building the movement from the top down with most resources committed to establishing campaigns that are minimalist enough to attract the sponsorship of prominent 'lefts' in the Labour Party or trade unions. This has only served to add a new coat of varnish to their reputations, but has in no way obliged them to mobilise mass forces behind them, which could be the only political justification for organising united front actions around specific issues (plastic bullets, PTA, etc).

A formal commitment to Troops Out Now has always been relegated in practice to a tenth rate question. Always in the last eighteen years, whether in TOM or the LCI, we have been told we cannot run before we can walk. First it was necessary to 'raise Ireland' in any form in order to break the conspiracy of silence. Then it was encouraging the left in the PLP to speak out against bi-partisanship and promoting infringement of civil liberties issues with which they could identify.

More recently, it has been a question of breaking through into the unions. In the past the centrist left refused to take work in the unions seriously. The working class in the unions were deemed to be just one 'community' among others and not the most important one compared to women, black people and the Irish community in Britain. Work was prioritised here because it was said that they understood the nature of oppression by the British state. What this neglected to face up to was that it was the social weight of the organised labour movement, and its potential political power, that needed to be thrown against the government.

More recently it was belatedly recognised that the unions held the key to Labour Party policy making, so they have been getting more attention. But this welcome turn has not been the occasion for serious anti-imperialist propaganda, as we shall see when we look at the campaign around the MacBride Principles.

What the British labour movement needs and what the anti-unionists deserve is a militant anti-imperialist movement built from the ground up, based in the trade unions, that aims to force the British to withdraw without waiting or banking all on the 'next Labour government?'. To achieve it trade union action, including boycotts, demonstrations and strikes are essential. To get them we do not simply need another eighteen years of plastic bullet campaigns in the naive belief that workers' consciousness will evolve spontaneously from outrage at army brutality to a determination to get Britain out of the North.

The demand of Troops Out Now only seems impossible because the left in Britain refuses to prioritise its political resources in this direction. And not only, or mainly, are the small centrist forces in the Labour Party to blame for this situation. The scandalous inactivity of the Socialist Workers Party and the pro-imperialist complacency of the Militant are chief among the culprits. We will never break the working class vanguard from its social-democratic prejudices about the neutrality of the British state, still less arouse the mass of the labour movement from its chauvinist bigotry, if we continue to hide our real intent from them.

The experience of the miners' and printers' strikes showed that as the crisis intensifies so will the struggle

of the Irish intersect more and more with their experiences of the British state. There can be no more excuses. The vast bulk of our energies and imagination needs to be directed at building caucuses in the unions to this end, particularly in those unions?NUR, ASTMS, Nalgo?where there is a record of work, and in those unions such as NUPE which organise in the Six Counties.

The MacBride Principles

At first glance a campaign within the trade unions to highlight the sectarian employment discrimination practices in the Six Counties ought to meet with an unqualified welcome. But the basis of the campaign and the uncritical tailing of it by the leadership of the LCI only confirm that they are further than ever from placing British occupation of the North at the centre of the LCI?s work. Worse, they stand a good chance of deepening the illusions of workers in a section of the liberal bourgeoisie in the process.

The MacBride principles were issued under the name of Sean MacBride in November 1984. They were largely drawn up by New York State council officials sympathetic to the cause of the anti-unionists. They call on companies operating in Northern Ireland to increase employment opportunities for members of under-represented religious groups as well as other anti-discriminatory measures (see box). Some 25 US firms operate in the North with around \$1.2 billion of capital. These firms account for some 11% of the manufacturing working class.

? Increasing the representation of individuals from under-represented religious groups in the workforce including managerial, supervisory, administrative, clerical and technical jobs.

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The MacBride Principles

? Adequate security for the protection of minority employees both at the work place and while travelling to and from work.

? The banning of provocative sectarian or political emblems from the workplace.

? All job openings should be publicly advertised; and special recruitment efforts should be made to attract applicants from under-represented groups.

? Layoff, recall and termination procedures should not in practice favour particular religious groupings.

? The abolition of job reservation, apprenticeship restrictions and differential employment criteria which discriminate on the basis of religion or ethnic origin.

? The development of training programmes that will prepare substantial numbers of minority employees for skilled jobs, including the expansion of existing programmes to train, upgrade and improve the skills of all categories of minority employees.

? The establishment of procedures to assess, identify and actively recruit minority employees with potential for further advancement.

? The appointment of a senior management staff member to oversee the Company?s affirmative action efforts and the setting up of timetables to carry out affirmative action principle.

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Needless to say the British government has fought all the way to impede these nine principles being adopted in various state and city legislatures on the grounds that they are a 'Provo ploy'. But already they have been passed in Connecticut, New York and Massachusetts. There is now a strong campaign in California for them. The new Haughey government in the Republic have lent them its support.

They have had little impact on the actual job discrimination figures in the North but it no doubt helps to explain why managements in firms like Shorts in Belfast have taken action against the loyalist workforce for their provocative displays of unionist regalia. The LCI have completely endorsed not simply the idea of fighting discrimination, but of doing it in this way. They have organised a trade union conference in November 1987 to get the issue taken up here. The conference is a good idea but it will only serve a useful purpose if British trade unionists are presented with an independent strategy on this issue.

For a start we have to ask the question who is going to enforce these measures? There is no question that left to the US multi-nationals any measures taken will be purely tokenistic, if not optional or avoidable. In 1983 when Shorts won a large US airforce contract they did nothing to implement pledges, extracted by US solidarity movements, to bring more Catholics into its 6,500, 95% protestant workforce. Moreover, measures such as providing adequate security for minorities at and to and from work, are not one we entrust the British state or the RUC/UDA to perform.

Whilst we insist that experience has shown that the sectarian state cannot be reformed away we do not draw the conclusion (as often in the past Sinn Fein have) that it is useless to struggle for concrete reforms such as equality in employment. In fact any failure to mobilise against discrimination, especially in jobs, will leave Haughey, Thatcher and Hume unchallenged while they blather on about ending the 'alienation' of the northern minority.

The question is by what methods is the struggle going to be conducted? Petitions and lobbies or the methods of class struggle? Only the latter will hold out the prospect of meaningful reforms or confront the sectarian state itself if and when those reforms are denied.

Finally, we must remember that this is a conference for British trade unionists. Two things flow from this. First, we must aim to commit all those unions which organise in the Six Counties to ensure that their Northern Ireland branches, so often dominated by loyalists, fight for equal job opportunities and freedom from harassment at work. They should also be made to break with the mis-named Fair Employment Agency, which more often than not conspires with the Northern Ireland Office to hide the real facts of discrimination, and establish their own inquiry and monitoring of it.

In addition, it is essential to confront the argument of the British and their unionist backers who say that such proposals imply 'reverse discrimination' and will entail protestant unemployment. They argue that investment and therefore jobs will go if these measures are insisted upon. The only way to deal with the legitimate element in protestant workers' fears on this score is to insist that the British government must pay for a massive expansion of production and public works under workers' control.

Secondly, we have to remind such a conference that the fight for these measures will not lead to the reforming out of existence of the Orange state. Even if we make inroads into the less bigoted sections of the protestant workers, the anti-unionists will still have to contend with the powerful vested interests of the unionist bourgeoisie. In turn, they continue to lean upon the military backing of the British state. It is vital, therefore, that a gathering of British trade unionists must be an occasion for placing immediate troop withdrawal and self-determination for the whole Irish people on the agenda. After eighteen years of shameful inactivity at best, and complicity at worst, from the leadership of the British trade unions we can tolerate no more delays.

Endnotes

1 New Rights, New Prosperity and New Hope for Northern Ireland, Labour Party NEC Working Party on Ireland Report, May 1987

2 Ibid, p2

3 Labour Co-ordinating Committee, 'Ireland?Peace and Reconciliation in Our Time?', published in Labour and Ireland No15, March/April 1987

4 Ibid, p21

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