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Hunger strikers' sacrifice still evokes interest

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There have been many books, countless numbers of articles, several films and plays about the hunger strike of 1981 when 10 republican prisoners died in the H-blocks of Long Kesh.

The names of the hunger strikers are well known. Their heroism and bravery are annually remembered by republicans all over Ireland and in some other parts of the world.

In the pantheon of republican martyrs they have a special place of reverence.

Twenty-seven years later, the sacrifice of the hunger strikers continues to evoke sympathy and interest from a

wide range of people across the country and abroad, especially students.

Historians and republicans regard the hunger strike period as a seminal time of far-reaching change, a departure point in the struggle for independence.

It has been described as this generation's 1916 – by that is meant the brutality of the British government in shooting dead the leaders of the Rising and in our time Margaret Thatcher allowing 10 young men to die on hunger strike.

The comparison has also to do with the political developments that emerged from the executions in 1916 and that led to the independence of the southern state.

Out of the hunger strike of 1981 emerged Sinn Fein's participation in elections, the building of Sinn Fein as a political party, the ending of abstentionism from Leinster House, the intensification of the IRA's armed struggle and the internationalisation of opposition to Britain's occupation of Ireland.

The prison protest for political status saw tens of thousands of people on the streets across Ireland. This popular support elected Bobby Sands as an MP and Kieran Doherty and Paddy Agnew as TDs.

These latter results were highly significant. They ended nearly 50 years of Fianna Fail's dominance as a single party in government. The era of coalition government began – the prisoners and the people's verdict on the Fianna Fail government's failure to stand up to the British government.

The willingness of the hunger strikers to die also inflicted a huge personal defeat on Mrs Thatcher and her self-proclaimed 'iron maiden' persona as well as her attempts to criminalise the struggle for independence and in turn the IRA.

She had bought into the silly notion that she could defeat the IRA by denying a group of defenceless political prisoners political status.

And while publicly this intense struggle was centred on a test of will power and belief between Thatcher and the prisoners there was another group of people less obvious but nonetheless very important – the parents of those on hunger strike.

Their experience and the immense burden they carried while their sons were on hunger strike and then when they died is a story that has not been fully told.

Thus the events of that dark year, 1981, were in the minds of the many hundreds of republicans from all over Ireland who attended the funeral last week of Alfie Doherty, the father of Kieran Doherty.

Kieran Doherty died on August 2 1981 after 73 days on hunger strike. He was the eighth prisoner to die.

Kieran's parents, Alfie and Margaret, gave him an assurance – as requested by him – that they would not intervene should he lapse into a coma before dying.

They honoured that assurance for 73 agonising days.

All those who died on hunger strike requested a similar assurance from their parents and in Joe McDonnell's case from his wife Goretti. In each case their wishes were honoured.

The hunger strike, which began in March and ended in October, lasted more than seven months. From May 5 when Bobby Sands died until August 20 when Mickey Devine died, the parents and relatives of Francis Hughes, Ray McCreesh, Patsy O'Hara, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty and Thomas McElwee lived in a tiny space – the prison hospital at Long Kesh.

This was their world – a hothouse of emotional pressure. They watched the bodies of the hunger strikers being carried from the hospital's prison cells where they died and waited their son's turn.

While they waited they passed those prison cells

every day.

In the recorded annals of Irish history the dedication of this group of prisoners and the devotion of their parents to them have absolutely no precedent.