
STRIKE BULLETIN

NO. 1

The radio and television commentators have been doing their best to to confuse and obscure the causes of the political general strike, What are those causes? They are three-fold: 1. *The political bungling of Merlyn Rees and Stanley Orme at the Northern Ireland Office*; 2. *The responsibility of the Dublin Government in pressing for the immediate establishment of a Council of Ireland*; and 3. *The failure of the Executive to deal tactfully with the popular feeling against the Council of Ireland, and its tactless power politics in relying on its mechanical voting majority in Stormont - a majority which has long been unrepresentative of popular feeling.*

This crisis could easily have been averted. David Bleakley, the only Northern Ireland Labour Party member in the Assembly, made a proposal which would have averted it. But the Executive insisted on pressing ahead with its confrontation with the Loyalists. It was made abundantly clear by the General Election in February that the Loyalist viewpoint on the Council of Ireland was the majority viewpoint, and that the Coalition's voting majority in the Assembly had become unrepresentative.

Bleakley proposed a motion welcoming *"the success of power sharing, but taking note of "the difficulties that have arisen over the meaning of the Sunningdale Agreement, particularly the ruling in the Dublin High Court that it is not possible under the present Constitution to give full recognition to Northern Ireland"*, and proposing that until such time as the Dublin Government is able to drop its claim to sovereignty over the North the Sunningdale Agreement should not be signed.

That was a reasonable, democratic and statesmanlike proposal. It separated the question of power sharing from the question of a Council of Ireland, which it was urgently necessary to do. Power-sharing has been shown to work. The Council of Ireland is not necessary to power-sharing, and is in fact the main danger to power-sharing. If the Council were shelved support for power-sharing would increase rapidly in the Protestant community. And the Northern Catholic community is not primarily concerned about the Council. Catholics who cease to support the Republicans see power-sharing as the real alternative, and no half-baked Council is needed to placate them,

The real purpose of the Council is to provide a fig-leaf for the

Dublin Government which enables them to represent Sunningdale as an anti-Partitionist victory, and a step towards a united Ireland.

The case against the Council is unanswerable. The Constitution of the Republic asserts its sovereignty over the North. The Southern government has not the authority to delete those clauses from the Constitution, and is afraid to call a referendum on the question. It pleaded in the High Court that its de facto recognition of the right of the people of Northern Ireland to decide their own destiny did not prejudice the de jure right of the Southern state to extend its rule over the North by force. And how can there be equal relations between North and South in a Council, while the South claims sovereignty over the North?

Dublin pleads that its intentions are good, and it will not enforce "*the claim*". And that is true - for the time being. But the profound scepticism with which the words of the Dublin government are received by a large part of the Northern people is grounded in long and bitter experience. It is only a few years since the last Dublin government, while uttering fair words, was actively involved in setting-up, financing, arming, and providing a safe hinterland for the Provisional IRA. A change of intention needs to be demonstrated in action in order to be convincing: let the Dublin government call a referendum for the deletion of Articles 2 & 3 before it again calls for the establishment of the Council of Ireland. (And, in view of the controversy that has been caused, the Council should not be established without a prior referendum in the North, no matter what the South may do in future.)

The bungling of Merlyn Rees and Stanley Orme has been the major factor in precipitating the crisis. They have been behaving like arrogant, pompous, and badly informed colonial administrators ever since they came to Northern Ireland. Ulster is nobody's colony, and the sooner Messrs. Rees and Orme realise that, the better for them and all concerned. William Whitelaw worked out the agreements and set up the structures in which conflict in Ulster can be resolved. It needed only an understanding of the situation and a certain amount of political diplomacy to ensure that the Whitelaw solution worked out in practice. Rees and Orme have taken no trouble to understand the situation. They brought with them a headful of false preconceptions. They have been aggravating things ever since they came. It seems as if they, and people like Roy Mason in Westminster, have been deliberately trying to provoke the Protestant working class, and to convince them that the Provo propaganda - that Westminster is preparing to ditch Northern Ireland as if it were a redundant colony - is true. We do not say they have been doing it deliberately. We believe it to be

political bungling. But it is bungling of criminal proportions.

This provocative bungling is well illustrated by Rees's attempt in recent days to equate the industrial strike with the bombing campaign. How long is Harold Wilson going to refuse to recognise that Rees and Orme have made a dangerous mess of things? It was a mistake to have sent them here. They were well known to be strongly biased against the Unionist community. They should be recalled before they can do any more damage, and replaced by somebody more capable, and less prejudiced against the Protestant community.

Protestants and Catholics are now beginning to sort out their differences on a democratic basis. There is every prospect that this development will continue. If Westminster politicians are incapable of actively helping it, (and that has unfortunately been the case with the Labour Government), they should at least try to stop hindering it.

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Political bungling caused the present strike. The issue that is forced into the forefront of politics might have been avoided with a bit of political tact. Since it has not been avoided it must be dealt with.

When the Executive took office Brian Faulkner acknowledged that new Assembly elections would be needed to sanction it. So many changes had been made since the elections of summer 1973 that the mandate needed to be renewed. But, he said, it would be best if people had had the opportunity to see the Executive functioning for five or six months before new elections were called. That was 5 months ago. So how has it suddenly become such an unreasonable thing to call for new elections?

The Executive and the Northern Ireland Office are now resorting to power politics pure and simple. They have decided not to call an election until the prospect of a Loyalist majority recedes. But power politics require great political tact and skill to be successful in a situation like this: and that tact and skill has been sadly lacking for the past couple of months. Power politics have come to grief in a spectacular fashion. The Government might think it knows best what is good for the people. But it has failed to secure the passive consent of the people for what it is doing, and it must bear the consequences of that failure by naming a date within the year for Assembly elections.

Rees has said he will make no compromises with a political strike.

It isn't long since Ted Heath was saying the same thing to the miners. Everybody knows that there was a strong political element in the miners' strike, which aimed to break Phase 3 and force an election. It is absurd that Rees, a beneficiary of that successful political strike should now be making pompous declarations of principle against political strikes. He should try to control his obsessive hostility to the protestant working class.

William Craig said that when Len Murray spoke about Northern Ireland he didn't know what he was talking about. That, unfortunately, is only too true. If Len Murray wants to diminish William Craig's influence he should either keep quiet about N. Ireland, or else find out something about it.

It has been made blatantly obvious that the official trade union leadership does not represent the working class in this matter. It is useless to talk of intimidation. A certain amount of intimidation takes place in many strikes: but no strike gets off the ground purely through intimidation, or lasts without a strong core of popular support.

In political matters the Ulster working class falls into a Limbo between the British TUC and the Dublin based Irish TUC. The ICTU is strongly anti-Partitionist in politics and leading Southern trade unionists have financed Provos). The Northern Committee of the ICTU avoids overt politics, but there is a grossly disproportionate anti-Partitionist sentiment in it. The Belfast Trades Council, run autocratically by Betty Sinclair, is notoriously unrepresentative of the political view of Belfast trade unionists. This strike, and the impotence of the official trade union Leadership, should finally make the British TUC aware of these circumstances,

Workers' Association

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