

# **Building an Irish Solidarity Movement**



**TEXT OF THE SPEECH GIVEN BY  
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## **BUILDING AN IRISH SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT**

Meetings like this are often accused of being gatherings of the 'converted' speaking to themselves. If 'converted' means those who unconditionally support the right of the Irish people to self-determination, then we must hope that this is true of this meeting. This has to be our starting point. For it is only those who do, in fact, support the right of the Irish people to self-determination who are capable of building an Irish solidarity movement in this country which can win the 'unconverted' to that position. So that the issues before us today are: what does self-determination for the Irish people mean? And how do we build a movement in Britain in support of it?

These questions can only be answered by an honest examination of the real history of British imperialism's relation to Ireland, in particular, over the last thirteen years. There is no better place to start than last year's hunger strike and the political lessons to be drawn from it.

### **DEFEAT OF THE HUNGER STRIKE AND ITS POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES**

In their statement announcing the end of the hunger strike in October 1981 the political prisoners in the H-Blocks drew out a number of important political lessons. The first was that the prisoner campaign confirmed the necessity for revolutionary violence in the national liberation struggle.

'Despite the electoral successes, despite the hundreds of thousands at hunger strikers' funerals, despite massive and unprecedented displays of community support and solidarity, the British government adhered rigidly to the precept that "might is right" and set about hammering home the point that nothing has really changed since the fall of Stormont or from the inception of this state. That is, that nationalist Ireland must always be subjected to the British and loyalist veto.'

From this the prisoners concluded that 'nationalist pacifism in the Northern Ireland context' would condemn the nationalist population to subservency, perpetuate partition and undermine the struggle for a just and lasting peace in Ireland.

The second lesson was the exposure of the real face of the Irish establishment. In the words of the political prisoners, the 'shallow unprincipled nature of the Irish partitionist bloc' was exposed for all to see. Not only do the Dublin governments, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael/Irish Labour Party, the SDLP and the Catholic hierarchy come under this category but also the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Everything they did was designed to undermine the hunger strike at critical points. This 'bloc' acted throughout directly and indirectly in collaboration with British imperialism.

Although the hunger strike was defeated and the political prisoners did not achieve the 'five demands', the statement, nevertheless, claimed a 'massive political victory'. This was because the courage and example of the hunger strikers had 'politicised a very substantial section of the Irish nation' and exposed the 'shallow, unprincipled nature of the Irish partitionist bloc'. A claim that one year later was vindicated by the remarkable political gains made by Sinn Fein at the expense of the SDLP in the Assembly elections of October 1982. Sinn Fein fought the election on a 'Break the British connection! Smash Stormont!' platform pledging itself to boycott the proposed Assembly.

A decisive political factor in the defeat of the hunger strike was the fact that no political pressure was placed on the Thatcher government in Britain itself. While demonstrations, pickets, protests and even street fighting took place in Europe, Asia, America and Australia, the



British Labour and trade union movement not only remained passive and silent but actually collaborated with the British government. The most despicable example of this was the Labour MP Don Concannon visiting Bobby Sands – close to death – in order to tell him that the Labour Party did not support him.

Demonstrations in Britain in support of the political prisoners were tiny and got smaller as the hunger strike proceeded. By the end, only a very small number of Republicans, anti-imperialists and communists were still fighting to build a campaign. The major strategy of the main organisations of the British left at the beginning of the hunger strike, if they were active at all, was to seek an alliance with a section of the Labour Party and trade union movement. To do this they adopted the demand 'Don't let Irish prisoners die'. However throughout both hunger strikes no section of the Labour Party or trade union movement did anything to oppose Thatcher's murderous policies in Ireland. In fact the parliamentary Labour Party officially supported the Thatcher government throughout. Faced with this reality the main left organisations involved in the hunger strike campaign refused to demand anything of the Labour and trade union movement and eventually were forced into a position themselves of doing nothing at all. To understand why this was so we need to know why the prisoners' issue is so crucial.

The denial of political status for Irish political prisoners is central to British imperialism's overall strategy of 'Ulsterisation' adopted soon after the fall of the 1974 'power-sharing' Executive. A whole apparatus of emergency legislation, arrest, systematic torture in police cells, forced 'confessions', long remands, Diplock (non-jury) courts, imprisonment and torture in specially built concentration camps, the H-Blocks, has been set up to deny political legitimacy to the national liberation struggle to free Ireland from British rule and 'criminalise' Irish Republicans. So critical is this 'criminalisation' policy for Britain's continued domination over Ireland that the British ruling class was prepared to slowly murder 10 Irish political prisoners and risk undermining the stability of British rule not only in the Six Counties but over Ireland as a whole.

A victory for the prisoners in the struggle for political status would strike at the heart of British domination over Ireland. This is equally true of Irish POWs in British gaols. To recognise the legitimacy of the prison struggle is to acknowledge the legitimacy of the revolutionary struggle of the IRA to drive British imperialism out of Ireland. Such recognition would also have important consequences in Britain. It would legitimise the use of revolutionary force against British imperialism. It would give strength and example to the developing forces of revolution in Britain. Finally it would not only expose the reactionary and brutal character of British imperialism but also of the British Labour Party and official trade union movement which gave, and still gives, British imperialism consistent support in the oppression of the Irish people. Such a development is not one the British ruling class could accept. It is in this context that the failure of the campaign to win the 'five demands' was a defeat for the political prisoners and a setback for the national liberation struggle.

The defeat of the hunger strike also represented a defeat for the democratic and socialist movement in Britain. The most reactionary Tory government since the Second World War was considerably strengthened by the defeat of the prison struggle in Ireland. It gave that government increased confidence to continue with the attacks on working class living standards and with the gradual destruction of the 'welfare' state. It meant that the Thatcher government had no serious opposition in Britain to its reactionary war in the Malvinas/Falkland Islands. It encouraged the government to press on with legislation directed against fundamental trade union rights, action aimed at increasing police powers (emphasised by the appointment of Kenneth Newman, torturer-in-chief in the Six Counties of Ireland, as head of the Metropolitan Police) and racist legislation directed at the rights of immigrants and their families. All these developments are taking place with little or no opposition from the British Labour and trade union movement.

Finally in both Ireland and Britain the real allies of the Irish revolution began to emerge. In the Six Counties of Ireland behind the prisoners were the relatives, the Republican Movement and the nationalist working class – particularly the youth who came out on to the streets and fought the British army/RUC with stones and petrol bombs. In the 26 Counties the Republican Movement gained the support of new sections of the Irish working class and, most important of all, new supporters of the political prisoners, the dispossessed youth of Dublin, came out on the streets after the murder of Bobby Sands. In Britain while a small number of communists and

anti-imperialists were fully behind the political prisoners, the most significant development was not directly related to the hunger strike. This was the uprisings of black and white youth in the major cities of Britain. These youth, taking their example from the revolutionary nationalist youth in the Six Counties, took to the streets to fight the repressive forces of the British imperialist state. These will be the new forces of revolution in Britain and therefore potential allies of the Irish revolution.

The events of the hunger strike and its outcome confirm once again the main lessons of the national liberation struggle to free Ireland from British rule. At this stage it is important to summarise those lessons and what they mean for building an anti-imperialist movement in Britain today.

## **BRITISH IMPERIALISM CANNOT PLAY A PROGRESSIVE ROLE IN IRELAND**

First, British imperialism cannot play a progressive role in Ireland. Imperialism will never voluntarily relinquish political control over an oppressed nation because such control enormously strengthens its ability to economically exploit that nation. Any movement by British imperialism to make concessions to the demands of the Irish people has, therefore, only been brought about by revolutionary force. On a number of occasions it took an insurrection or a direct threat to the stability of British rule over Ireland to force the British ruling class to move. Peaceful and constitutional methods of protest have always been ignored. Time and again British imperialism has resorted to outright terror to retain its domination over Ireland.

This can be seen throughout the events of the Easter Rising 1916 through the war of independence 1919-21, to the signing of the partition Treaty and the establishment of the reactionary loyalist police state in the Six Counties of Ireland 1921/2.

Prior to the Easter Rising, British imperialism offered Home Rule, a limited form of self-government, itself a concession resulting from the revolutionary land war at the end of the nineteenth century. The Easter Rising 1916 saw the armed proclamation of an independent Irish Republic. British imperialism attempted to drown it in blood with the execution of the leaders of the Rising. However, mass popular support rapidly built up for an independent Irish Republic. This support was overwhelmingly confirmed in the December 1918 General Election, organised by British imperialism under its own rules. Sinn Fein won 70% of the vote in Ireland and 73 of the 105 seats. Acting on this clear democratic mandate Sinn Fein set up Dail Eireann as the government of the independent Irish Republic. British imperialism again attempted to drown it in blood. It banned Dail Eireann and unleashed thousands of British mercenary troops on Ireland in an attempt to drive the Irish people into submission. It was not until the Irish people led by their revolutionary army, the IRA, had fought British imperialism to a standstill that the British government was forced to make concessions to the Irish demand for self-determination.

Britain however retained its control over Ireland by signing a deal with a section of the national movement which was prepared to compromise the interests of the Irish people for limited self-government. To do this it partitioned Ireland and created and consolidated a reactionary loyalist police state in the Six Counties of Ireland. A totally reactionary, viciously repressive loyalist statelet became the medium through which British imperialism exerted its political and, therefore, economic domination over Ireland as a whole. This deal was imposed under the threat of 'immediate and terrible war' which was carried out against the anti-Treaty forces during the civil war which followed the signing of the Treaty.

In partitioning Ireland and establishing a neo-colonial 26 Counties 'Free State' in the South and a loyalist statelet in the North, British imperialism had the support of the Irish capitalist class. The Irish capitalist class, North and South of the border, had no real interest in fighting for a united Ireland. The partition of Ireland had divided the Irish working class and severely weakened the opposition to capitalist rule in Ireland which had developed during the war of independence. The Irish capitalist class was quite prepared to play a subservient role to the British ruling class as long as it could have a share of the profits arising from imperialist exploitation of Ireland as a whole.

The artificial statelet created by British imperialism in the Six Counties of Ireland was designed to maintain loyalist dominance in that part of Ireland. The loyalist (Protestant) working class in the Six Counties was among British imperialism's most resolute supporters in the

partitioning of Ireland. The loyalist workers were, and still are, a privileged section of the working class and the maintenance of their privileges (higher wages, jobs, housing etc) depended on the union with Britain. For this reason they were, and still are, the most implacable enemies of a united Ireland. And for this reason they were, and still are, opposed to any improvement in the conditions of the nationalist (Catholic) working class in the Six Counties. For any improvement in these conditions, any reform of the reactionary loyalist statelet was, and is, regarded as a direct threat to their own interests.

In the late 1960s the inherently reactionary character of the loyalist statelet was exposed for the world to see when sections of the nationalist minority took to the streets demanding basic democratic rights and were battered, beaten and shot at by the paramilitary forces of the loyalist state. Once again British imperialism, through its loyalist agents, sought to drown in blood a peaceful campaign by the nationalist people for basic democratic rights. This response demonstrated beyond doubt that the Six Counties statelet could not be reformed. Faced with this brutality and intransigence, the nationalist people of Derry staged an insurrection in August 1969 and drove the loyalist forces out of their area. It was only at this stage that the British Labour government intervened. On 14 August 1969 British troops were sent into the Six Counties of Ireland to aid the 'civil power'. This action was designed to have one and only one effect – to support loyalist supremacy, the basis of British imperialism's rule in Ireland. By this action, the truth was exposed. Behind the RUC stood the British army. Behind the loyalist state stood British imperialism.

It now became increasingly clear that basic democratic rights for the nationalist minority could only be achieved by destroying the loyalist state, ending partition and driving British imperialism out of Ireland. The nationalist population once again was to turn to those forces which had kept alive the revolutionary struggle to reunite Ireland – the revolutionary wing of the national movement and its armed vanguard, the IRA. The British troops were necessary precisely because the state was unreformable and the nationalist minority could not be bought off. However it took the rise of the Provisional IRA, an effective modern guerrilla army with growing support amongst the nationalist minority to force the British government to abolish Stormont and replace it with direct rule from Westminster nearly two-and-a-half years after the troops were sent in. The British government had no choice after the institutionalised terror of internment without trial (August 1971) and the Bloody Sunday massacres (January 1972) not only had failed to undermine support for the Provisional IRA but had driven hundreds of nationalist youth into its ranks. After Bloody Sunday, nationalist Ireland exploded and the British Embassy in Dublin was burned down. The Six Counties became rapidly ungovernable. The British government suspended Stormont in March 1972. No-one could have any doubts that it was the Provisional IRA which brought it down. After 50 years' existence of the loyalist statelet it was the revolutionary force of the national liberation movement which destroyed Stormont.

British imperialism had some room for manoeuvre after the suspension of Stormont. The Dublin government, the SDLP and the Catholic Church welcomed direct rule from Westminster and the British government used the opportunity to try to undermine the unity of the nationalist minority and draw support away from the Provisional IRA. The period 1973-5 saw the rise and fall of the power-sharing Executive. The 'carrot' of power-sharing with the Unionists was offered to the Catholic middle-class in return for them giving legitimacy to a new Stormont Assembly and accepting, for the time being, 'the status of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom'. The SDLP took the bait.

The whole venture came to the inevitable sticky end after loyalist opposition to the Executive, in the form of the Ulster Workers Council strike, brought the Six Counties to a standstill in May 1974. The British Labour government refused to intervene to guarantee essential services. The UWC strike had forcefully reminded it that the price of 'loyalty' to British imperialism was the preservation of loyalist privileges and loyalist supremacy in the Six Counties of Ireland. It was a price that the British Labour government was quite prepared to pay. Loyalist ascendancy, after all, was, and is, the key to British domination over Ireland as a whole.

After the fall of the power-sharing Executive the British state resorted to outright repression in a new attempt to defeat the real threat to its interests in Ireland – that from the nationalist masses led by their revolutionary army, the Provisional IRA. It took almost two years to prepare the way for this new regime of terror in the Six Counties of Ireland. The new policy was called



'Ulsterisation'. It involved the 'primacy of the police' in fighting the IRA and the 'criminalisation' of the revolutionary national struggle to free Ireland from British rule. The fundamental feature of this new period of terror was judicial internment – the 'conveyor belt' process of arrest, systematic torture in police cells, forced 'confessions', long remands, Diplock (non-jury) courts and imprisonment in specially built concentration camps in the H-Blocks. This process demanded the torture and brutalisation of political prisoners in interrogation centres and in the specially built prisons. It was to culminate in the slow and brutal murder of ten Irish political prisoners who had gone on hunger strike to demand their rights to be treated as political prisoners.

The history of the last 13 years, like the history of the period 1916-22, conclusively proves that British imperialism cannot play a progressive role in Ireland. That British imperialism has only made any concessions at all in the face of mass revolutionary force. That the Irish people can only be free if British imperialism is driven out of Ireland. That is why to fight in this country for the right of the Irish people to self-determination means to fight for the defeat of British imperialism in Ireland. That is why we call for Victory to the Irish people and Troops Out Now!

## **IRELAND IS THE KEY TO THE BRITISH REVOLUTION**

The second major lesson to be drawn from the Irish national liberation struggle is that Ireland is the key to the British revolution. Therefore an Irish solidarity movement in Britain will be supported by those in Britain whose interests lie in the overthrow of British imperialism and will be opposed by those whose interests lie in the continued existence of British imperialism.

Over 100 years ago Marx and Engels first established that the question of Irish self-determination stands at the heart of the British revolution. Before 1848, Marx and Engels thought Ireland would be liberated as a result of the victory of the working class movement in Britain. Deeper study, however, convinced them that the opposite was true. The British working class would never accomplish anything until it had got rid of its present connection with Ireland. Ireland is the key to the British revolution.

They reached their new position on the basis of a concrete analysis of the relationship between Britain and Ireland. That relationship significantly changed over a twenty year period. The national liberation movement in Ireland assumed revolutionary forms with the rise of the Fenian movement – a 'lower orders' movement based on the land. The working class movement in Britain not only lost its revolutionary drive with the defeat of the Chartist movement in 1848 but also fell under the influence of the liberal bourgeoisie for a long period of time.

The British ruling class was divided into two main sections – the old landed aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Ireland was not only a bastion of power and wealth for the old landed aristocracy but it was a point of unity of both sections of the British ruling class. For the bourgeoisie also benefited from British domination over Ireland. Ireland was not only a source of cheap food and raw materials for British capitalists but also the impoverished Irish peasantry driven off the land and forced to emigrate to England was a source of cheap labour. This forced emigration of Irish people divided the working class in Britain into two hostile camps. It allowed the ruling class to provide a relatively superior position for British workers as against the Irish and so support and nourish the hostility between these two sections of the working class. This antagonism between British and Irish workers, argued Marx and Engels, 'is the secret of the impotence of the English working class despite its organisation'. For the oppression of Ireland united the ruling class and divided the working class.

The British ruling class was most vulnerable in Ireland where the power of the landed aristocracy was being challenged by a revolutionary national movement based on the land. A defeat for the British ruling class in Ireland would open the way for the British revolution. Provided, of course, that the British working class made common cause with the Irish. The national emancipation of Ireland is the first condition for the victory of the British revolution. And unless the British working class 'made common cause with the Irish', the British working class would never accomplish anything. This is the sense in which Marx and Engels argued that Ireland is the key to the British revolution.

In defending their stand on the Irish question in the First International, Marx and Engels came up against the opportunist leaders of the British Labour movement who at that time were moving closer to Gladstone and the leaders of the liberal bourgeoisie. They were forced to deal

with political attacks on the Irish liberation movement which have recurred ever since. These included those of the 'English would-be liberators' who thought Fenianism was 'not altogether wrong' but wanted the Irish movement to use the 'legal means of meetings and demonstrations...' by which the English movement conducted its struggles. Supporters of Marx and Engels argued that the Irish had every right to use force since force was used to deny them their freedom. When Marx, in supporting the call for an amnesty for Irish political prisoners, accused Gladstone 'of deliberately insulting the Irish Nation' and attacked the conduct of his government, there were those who thought he went too far. Marx's reply is a political guideline for today: 'it is more important to make a concession to the Irish people than to Gladstone'. Finally Marx and Engels faced defenders of British rule over Ireland who argued that Ireland could not be independent because it would undermine the security of Britain. That the International was able to build a demonstration of nearly 100,000 people in support of the demand for an amnesty for Irish political prisoners was mainly due to the political fight Marx and Engels conducted in support of Irish self-determination in the First International.

What was true of the relationship of Britain and Ireland in the later part of the nineteenth century was mirrored all over the world with the development of imperialism as a world system. By the turn of the century capitalism had entered its imperialist phase – a world-wide system of colonial oppression and financial domination of the overwhelming majority of the world by a small number of imperialist countries. Imperialism divides the world into oppressed and oppressor nations. It also divides the working class. A handful of imperialist countries obtain high monopoly profits out of the brutal exploitation of oppressed peoples world-wide. Out of these 'super-profits' imperialism is able to create and sustain a small privileged and influential layer of the working class in the imperialist countries whose conditions of life isolate it from the suffering, poverty and temper of the mass of the working class. This privileged layer has a material interest in the continuation of imperialism for it is the source of its economic and political privileges. Such workers, a labour aristocracy, constitute the social base of opportunism in the working class movement. So critical was this development for the working class movement and so great the damage done to the interests of the working class as a result of the activities of these opportunist layers that Lenin, at the Second Congress of the Communist International (1920), said that opportunism is the principal enemy.

'Opportunism is our principal enemy. Opportunism in the upper ranks of the working class is not proletarian socialism but bourgeois socialism. Practice has shown that the active people in the working class movement who adhere to this opportunist trend are better defenders of the bourgeoisie than the bourgeoisie itself. Without their leadership of the workers, the bourgeoisie could not remain in power.'

Marx and Engels had already come into conflict with the opportunist layers of the working class movement in Britain especially in relation to Ireland. These opportunists argued in exactly the same way as their successors in today's Labour Party and trade union movement. The developments in Britain towards the end of the nineteenth century in fact proved to be the forerunner of developments worldwide. So that by building on the political experience of Marx and Engels on the Irish question, Lenin was able to formulate the revolutionary position in relation to national oppression in the epoch of imperialism. In particular, he was able to make clear the attitude the working class of an imperialist nation should adopt towards national movements.

The mass of the working class in the imperialist countries cannot liberate itself without uniting with the movement of oppressed peoples to destroy imperialism. Only such an alliance will make it possible to wage a united fight against the imperialist powers, the imperialist bourgeoisie and its bought off agents in the working class. The unity of all forces fighting imperialism can only be achieved on the basis of the internationalist principle 'No nation can be free if it oppresses other nations'. And this is expressed through the demand of the right of nations to self-determination. Far from being counterposed to the socialist revolution, this demand must be insisted upon precisely in order to promote the socialist revolution. For unless imperialism is fatally weakened and opportunism defeated, the socialist revolution cannot succeed.

This standpoint demands that the working class in the imperialist nation 'make common cause' with the oppressed peoples fighting imperialism. And, as Lenin argued, socialists could not, without ceasing to be socialists, reject such a struggle right down to an uprising or war. For the working class to side with its own ruling class, or not actively oppose it, in the imperialist



domination of the oppressed peoples necessarily means to strengthen the domination of opportunist forces over itself. Further, it undermines the unity of the working class in the oppressed and oppressor nations and hence the possibility of defeating imperialism and beginning the socialist revolution.

Since the rise of the Fenian movement in the 1860s up to today, the most critical revolutionary challenge to British imperialism has come from Ireland. The dominance of opportunist forces in the British working class movement however has not only held back the working class struggle in Britain but has also limited support for the Irish revolution. The failure of the working class movement in Britain to rid itself of its opportunist leadership and 'make common cause' with the Irish revolution has meant a severe set-back for the socialist revolution in both Ireland and Britain. Ireland is undoubtedly still the key to the British revolution.

When the revolutionary workers of Dublin led by the ITGWU challenged Irish capitalism and its British imperialist backers during the Dublin strike and lock-out of 1913/14 the leadership of the British Labour and trade union movement did everything it could to undermine real solidarity action from British workers. The ITGWU was a revolutionary union. It organised the most oppressed workers in Ireland. It was born out of bitter struggles against the capitalist class, and in 1913 it was led by two revolutionary socialists, James Larkin and James Connolly. It spurned the tradition of 'moderation' and 'compromise' of the official British trade union movement. It was a fighting organisation with a political programme which included the demand for Irish self-determination. A victory for that union against the Dublin employers would have struck a mighty blow not only against the Irish capitalists but against British imperialism as well.

The British working class had been involved in a whole series of bitter strikes in 1911 and 1912 but it failed to rise to the revolutionary challenge of the Dublin workers. It proved unable to prevent its leaders, including those like Ben Tillett, previously associated with militant trade unionism, from selling out the revolutionary workers of Dublin. As a result these same leaders were able to draw the British working class into support for the first imperialist war and so lead it to political defeat.

Just before the first imperialist war the Liberals announced an amendment to the Irish Home Rule Bill to exclude part of Ireland from the operation of Home Rule. Ireland was to be partitioned to preserve British rule. The national movement was split. The Irish Party, representing the interests of the Irish capitalist class, accepted partition. The revolutionary wing of the national movement supported by Irish Labour was against partition. Once again the British Labour movement was faced with a choice. And it chose to support partition and stand with the Irish bourgeoisie and British imperialism against the Irish working class. Having betrayed the revolutionary unionism of Larkin and Connolly during the Dublin lock-out, the British Labour movement betrayed the revolutionary nationalism of the Irish masses. The British Labour and trade union movement went on to oppose the Easter Rising 1916 and applaud the judicial murder of its leaders, including the revolutionary socialist James Connolly. Arthur Henderson, the Labour MP, was in the War Cabinet which brutally crushed the Easter Rising and ordered Connolly's execution.

During the imperialist war the Irish Party organised recruiting meetings up and down the country in defence of Britain and its Empire. But British imperialism was prevented from introducing conscription into Ireland. For Irish Labour and the revolutionary wing of the national movement united in a successful mass campaign against the attempt of Lloyd George to introduce conscription into Ireland in 1918. Ireland saw the only general strike against the imperialist war in any Western European country.

After the Irish people had overwhelmingly voted for an Irish Republic, had set up Dail Eireann and been forced to wage a revolutionary war to win its fundamental right to self-determination, the British Labour Party and trade union movement still refused to give it support. Trade union leaders in Britain did everything they could to prevent workers in Britain taking strike action in support of the Irish war – eg refusing to load munitions bound for Ireland. When the British government signed the Treaty with a section of the national movement prepared to sell out the interests of the Irish masses, and partitioned Ireland, it received the wholehearted support of the British Labour movement. Only the small British Communist Party took a principled stand opposing the Treaty and supporting the revolutionary national wing of the IRA in the civil war.

At every stage in this period the British Labour movement refused to 'make common cause'



with the Irish. As a result the British working class found itself dominated by the same opportunist leaders who betrayed its struggles right up to the defeat of the General Strike in 1926. Marx and Engels were right. By refusing to 'make common cause' with the Irish the British working class accomplished nothing.

Since the insurrection in Derry in August 1969 the direct revolutionary challenge to British imperialism is once again coming from Ireland. Throughout the last thirteen years the British Labour Party backed by the official trade union movement has played a *direct* role in oppressing and terrorising the nationalist minority in the Six Counties of Ireland. In 1969 the British Labour government sent troops into the Six Counties of Ireland to support loyalist supremacy, the basis of British imperialism's rule in Ireland. In 1974 a Labour government introduced the racist, anti-Irish Prevention of Terrorism Act designed to provide a legal cover for the systematic harassment of the Irish community in Britain in general, and for all, in particular, who were prepared to fight for a United Ireland. Finally, nothing has exposed the moral and political bankruptcy of the British Labour and trade union movement more sharply than its collaboration with the regime of terror and torture administered by the British Labour government in the Six Counties of Ireland from 1976-1979. It is of little surprise that the British Labour movement not only remained passive and silent but actually collaborated with the British government in the slow and brutal murder of 10 Irish political prisoners on hunger strike during 1981. Far from 'making common cause' with the Irish people in their struggle for freedom, the British Labour Party and official trade union movement has become the zealous servant of their oppressor, British imperialism.

During the last 13 years, at crucial moments of rising revolutionary struggle against British rule in Ireland, the Labour Party and official trade union movement have come forward as the best defenders of British imperialist rule. In doing so they only confirm Lenin's description of these elements: 'they are better defenders of the bourgeoisie than the bourgeoisie itself'. Without their influence over the working class British imperialism would already be defeated in Ireland. Far from being potential allies of the Irish people, the British Labour Party and official trade union movement have proved to be their most treacherous enemies. This has however not stopped all the major organisations of the British left active on the Irish question from trying to find some section of the imperialist Labour Party prepared to play a 'progressive' role on Ireland.

The main vehicle for the British left's 'solidarity' work on the Irish question, if it has been carried out at all, has been the Troops Out Movement (TOM). From the very beginning TOM's activities have been directed to building an alliance with the left of the imperialist Labour Party, thus holding to the position that British imperialism can be made to play a progressive role in Ireland. For this reason TOM has never carried out any political campaign in solidarity with the national liberation struggle led by the IRA. Nor has TOM called for the defeat of British imperialism in Ireland.

To sustain its alliance with a section of the imperialist Labour Party, TOM soon dropped the anti-imperialist demand Troops Out Now! as a campaigning slogan. It refused to give any effective political support to the 1978 anti-imperialist prisoner campaign led by the PAC and supported by Sinn Féin and the RCG, preferring to conduct an innocuous and ineffective International Tribunal on Britain's Presence in Ireland instead. By the end of the second hunger strike TOM was barely active. Faced with the fact that the so-called 'left' of the Labour Party simply refused to take any effective action on the 'five demands', TOM in alliance with various left groups took all the pressure off them by hardly campaigning at all. The hunger strike showed that the whole strategy of TOM had completely failed – the imperialist Labour Party could not be moved.

Whilst TOM's strategy has repeatedly failed to build any movement, whenever a serious attempt to build a solidarity movement on an anti-imperialist basis has been made, it has shown what is possible. In 1978 a campaign was launched by the PAC and supported by Sinn Féin (Britain), RCG and supporters of Hands Off Ireland!. It called for POW status for Irish political prisoners and an amnesty for Irish POWs pending complete British withdrawal from Ireland. The campaign organised two demonstrations on Ireland, up to that time the biggest in Britain since Bloody Sunday 1972. The first march on 9 July 1978 was 5,000 strong, drawing in a large Irish contingent, a large Hands Off Ireland! contingent, most of the major British left groups including TOM and ten trade union contingents, including Hackney and Edinburgh

Trades Councils. This was already positive proof that an anti-imperialist campaign could win significant support on the streets and secondly could win support within the trade union movement. The second march on 26 November 1978 was even more successful. 6-7,000 took part with an even larger Irish contingent, a larger Hands Off Ireland! contingent and 15 trade union contingents including five Trades Councils. There were also a number of Labour Party banners. This campaign was based on an alliance of Republicans, anti-imperialists and communists. Its success proved beyond doubt the potential which exists for an anti-imperialist movement on Ireland.

Further evidence that this is the case was shown during the hunger strikes. The only really positive development in the hunger strike campaign occurred in Scotland. On 20 December 1980, two days after the ending of the first hunger strike, 1,000 people, predominantly workers, marched through Glasgow in support of the prisoners. The march initiated by the Scottish Hunger Strike Action Committee was built mainly by Sinn Fein and the RCG around the slogans 'Victory to the Hunger Strikers! Political Status Now!'. This success was built on during the second hunger strike when on 14 February 1981 over 1,500 marched two miles into Glasgow for a rally in the city centre. The march organised by the Glasgow H-Blocks/Armagh Action Committee fended off loyalist attacks to reach the city centre – the first pro-Republican march to go through the city centre for 10 years. The march again mainly built by an alliance of Republicans and communists was supported by TOM and the IMG. The SWP and CPGB refused to support it. So successful were these Glasgow marches that a third march called by the Glasgow Hunger Strike Action Committee for 4 April came under a 3-month ban enforced in the Strathclyde region under the guise of 'loyalist threats'. A huge march of over 3,000 had been expected.

Today a document is circulating in TOM from four leading members. This document draws out the inevitable logic of TOM's position. In arguing for a 'British withdrawal movement' it states

'The question of withdrawal [of British troops] *now* is not a principle but a diversion ...

... a supposedly principled pro-IRA movement is unnecessarily too advanced in its stance and impractical to build ...

... campaigns for example on IRA prisoners in English jails are about the last topic any British withdrawal movement should concern itself with, as their plight is the most difficult and fruitless aspect to take up of the whole Irish question ...'.

There you have it. Something that has always been implicit has now been made explicit. Supporters of TOM have now to make a choice. Are you for the victory of the Irish liberation movement against British imperialism or are you more concerned to build an alliance with the imperialist Labour Party. Which side are you on?

## **DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS IN BRITAIN AND THE IRISH REVOLUTION**

Precisely because the Irish question is at the heart of the British revolution, those campaigning in Britain in solidarity with the Irish national liberation struggle have necessarily to confront the forces of repression of the British imperialist state. After Bloody Sunday 1972 the largest demonstration on Ireland for many years, 20,000 strong, was batoned off the streets of London by the British police and the organisers were arrested. The Prevention of Terrorism Act 1974 has been used as a weapon to deter people, especially the Irish community in Britain, from politically campaigning in support of the Irish revolution. Political organisations have been continually harassed and often prevented from selling their newspapers and conducting street meetings on the question of Ireland.

The Glasgow 2 case is one example of such harassment for selling newspapers. Mike Duffield and Kirstin Crosbie were arrested selling FRFI – an issue containing an interview with an IRA Volunteer – outside Celtic football ground in Glasgow on 9 August 1980. They were charged under the PTA and remanded in prison for one week. A massive campaign drawing in support from many MPs, councillors and political organisations forced the Scottish authorities to drop the PTA charges, although the Glasgow 2 were eventually convicted on a fraudulent charge of breach of the peace. In Scotland too there were three bans on marches during the hunger strike as well as arrests. This police harassment shows that the British state will attempt to prevent a



strong anti-imperialist movement from growing. It shows that those in Britain determined to build a real Irish solidarity movement will play a central role in the defence of democratic rights for all workers in Britain.

It should now be clear firstly that British imperialism cannot play a progressive role in Ireland. It has to be defeated if the Irish people are to be free. Secondly because Ireland is the key to the British revolution, an Irish solidarity movement cannot be based on the Labour Party and official trade union movement. It can only be based on those forces whose interests lie in the overthrow of British imperialism. Do such forces exist in Britain at the present time? The answer is yes.

It is no coincidence that as the revolutionary youth of Derry, Belfast and Dublin fought pitched battles on the streets against the British imperialist forces and their loyalist and 'Free State' puppets, so the unemployed youth – black and white – rose up in 1981 throughout Britain against the British imperialist state.

British imperialism, itself in deep crisis, has nothing but oppression and poverty to offer these youth. They have no illusions in the institutions of British imperialist democracy. They, like the Irish, have been forced to take the revolutionary and insurrectionary road. This reality was recognised by the ruling class media when the first Uprising in 1980 – in St Pauls, Bristol – took place.

'It was like a scene from Belfast without bombs.' (*Daily Mail* 3 April 1980)

'These are things that we have regarded with horror when they happen in Ulster. We never dreamed that in the England of 1980 we could have "no-go" areas like those of Londonderry. It must never, never happen again.' (*Sun* 5 April 1980)

The Uprisings conclusively demonstrated that forces exist in Britain which are capable of the dedication and sacrifice that is necessary in the struggle against British imperialism here at home. These are forces which will risk the arrest, imprisonment and immense hardship which comes through participation in this fight. These are forces which will, by following the courageous lead set by Irish revolutionaries, give a lead to the mass of the British working class.

It is also no coincidence that whenever campaigns have been built on an anti-imperialist basis in this country there has always been a significant mobilisation of Irish workers. This was true in 1972 immediately after Bloody Sunday. It was true in the 1978 anti-imperialist prisoner campaign and it was true in the hunger strike campaign in Scotland. Furthermore, many Irish workers in Britain, recognising the real character of the imperialist Labour Party, refused to vote for that party in the last general election of May 1979. Such Irish workers alongside the oppressed black and white working class youth of Britain will be the driving force in an anti-imperialist Irish solidarity movement. Such a movement united with the Irish people's struggle for national self-determination will not only contribute to the defeat of British imperialist rule in Ireland but will also open the road to the British revolution.

The British ruling class has already recognised, in practice, that, alongside the revolutionary challenge of the national liberation struggle to free Ireland from British rule, a potential revolutionary challenge has emerged in Britain itself from the most oppressed sections of the British working class. The British ruling class already has the Prevention of Terrorism Act which is designed to prevent Irish workers in Britain from political involvement in the struggle against British rule in Ireland. Now, as part of its efforts to contain the growing threat of the oppressed working class in Britain, the ruling class has installed Kenneth Newman as head of the Metropolitan Police and Frank Kitson as head of the UK Land Forces. They have sent chief constables from British cities for training in the Six Counties of Ireland. And they have issued British police with the anti-civilian terror weapon, plastic bullets.

All this demonstrates the real unity of interests between the Irish people and the British working class against the common enemy: British imperialism. In this context an Irish solidarity movement must be based on the two central demands which express support for the right of the Irish people to self-determination, Victory to the Irish People! Troops Out Now! It would give unconditional support to the struggle of Irish POWs in British gaols who have been murdered, brutalised and continually harassed by the British state. It would also campaign on issues such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act, the appointment of Kenneth Newman, the abolition of plastic bullets, the defence of democratic rights such as the freedom to speak out against British rule in Ireland.

This means that while an Irish solidarity movement itself would be based on those forces who fully support the anti-imperialist position on Ireland, it would also work with other organisations and individuals who supported, for example, the abolition of plastic bullets, whether or not they support the two main demands of the Irish solidarity movement. This would include, for example, members of the Labour Party and individual MPs who can and must be made to support such demands as the democratic right to speak out on Ireland. The Irish solidarity movement would, of course, be fighting to win all those it works with, in whatever campaign, to the anti-imperialist position on Ireland without making this a condition for working with them.

This conference represents a new beginning. It is a call for real unity – unity based on the common interests of the Irish people and the British working class in the defeat of British imperialism.

**VICTORY TO THE IRISH PEOPLE!**  
**TROOPS OUT NOW!**  
**BUILD THE IRISH SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT!**

**David Reed**  
November 1982



# FIGHT RACISM! FIGHT IMPERIALISM!

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FRFI stands with all oppressed and exploited people fighting the oppressor: imperialism. FRFI reports on the emerging revolutionary forces in Britain and exposes the role of the Labour Party and organised trade union movement whenever they attempt to betray the real interests of the working class. FRFI fights for the unity of the British working class with the national liberation struggles fighting against imperialism.

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